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READING 5 The Altruistic Personality

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**AS YOU
READ, APPLY
S3QR
AND FOLLOW
DIRECTIONS
IN THE
MARGINS.**

Looking Ahead In this reading from a sociology textbook, the authors try to understand what makes some people willing to put the interests of others before their own.

Word Watch Some of the more difficult words in the reading are defined below. The number in parentheses indicates the paragraph in which the word appears. An asterisk marks its first appearance in the reading. Preview the definitions before you begin reading and watch for the words while you read.

altruistic (2): exhibiting unselfish concern for the welfare of others

genetically (2): related to biological inheritance

empathy (5): understanding of another person's situation or feelings

fraternal twins (5): developed from two separate eggs (identical twins develop from one egg)

heritable (5): capable of being passed by birth from one generation to the next

variables (9): characteristics, events, or things that can change with time or context

pro-social (10): caring about the welfare of others

collectivist (11): valuing the group's well-being over all else

individualist (11): valuing the individual person's well-being over all else

extroversion (11): interest in other people, interest in the world outside one's own mind

Getting Focused The title, "The Altruistic Personality," tells you the topic. But that's just the subject matter. Read to discover what the authors have to say about the altruistic personality. Does it exist? If so, what character traits does it seem to consist of? And what does the research say about the origins of an altruistic personality? Is it inherited or shaped by environment? These are the kinds of questions you should be able to answer once you finish reading.

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TEXTBOOK TIP



As much as or even more than psychology texts, sociology textbooks use research to back up their descriptions of how people function in society. In addition to understanding the details of each study mentioned (e.g., who conducted the study, what they were looking for, and what methods were used), make sure you know *why* the study is present in the text. That means knowing what main idea is explained or supported by the studies. Studies are in a text to prove or illustrate a point. Make sure you know what that point is.

Based on the title, preview, and quotation, what do you think this reading will explore?

"The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to help others."

—Albert Schweitzer¹

- 1 When we think about extreme acts of helping, or of failing to help, or when we think about long-term, well-planned acts of helping such as volunteering at a clinic or shelter or serving as a Big Brother or Big Sister, we tend to wonder about the nature of the people involved.
- 2 Researchers have even tried to identify an *altruistic* personality*, one that distinguishes people who help from those who don't. Some research has focused on whether certain people tend to be more helpful across situations than others. Other research has asked whether and to what extent unselfishness and a willingness to give to others might be genetically* based. Several studies have sought to identify what general personality characteristics and traits comprise the altruistic personality.

Are Some People More Helpful Than Others?

- 3 When Daniel Santos's friends and co-workers learned of his heroics in jumping 150 feet off the Tappan Zee Bridge to save a stranger, they were not surprised. "That's just how he is," said a fellow volunteer firefighter. "If he sees something, he's going to go and try to help out that person." A receptionist at the company where he worked as a mechanic added, "He will help anyone at any place and any time." His sister noted that he leaped into the water even though he's not a strong swimmer. "He has a

As soon as the heading poses a question, start looking for the answer.

good heart," she said (Fitz-Gibbon & Siemaszko, 1996, p. 7).

- 4 Are there people who are generally helpful across all situations? Are there others who are generally unhelpful? Although the specific situation clearly can overwhelm individual differences in influencing helping

[†]Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was a doctor and philosopher, who devoted himself to medical missionary work.

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Remember, if you see a reference to a study, make sure you know both what it proves and what it contributes to the overall main idea.

behaviors, researchers have provided some evidence for individual differences in helping tendencies. These tendencies seem to endure in a variety of settings. People who are more helpful than others in one situation are likely to be more helpful in other situations as well. In addition, a long-term study by Nancy Eisenberg and others (1999) suggests that this individual difference may be relatively stable over time. Specifically, they found that the degree to which preschool children exhibited spontaneous helping behavior predicted how helpful they would be in later childhood and early adulthood.

- 5 According to J. Philippe Rushton and his colleagues (1984), this individual difference in helpfulness is, in part, genetically based. Studies of twins offer some support for Rushton's argument. Genetically identical twins are more similar to each other in their helpful behavioral tendencies and their helping-related emotions and reactions, such as empathy,* than are fraternal twins* who share only a portion of their genetic make-up. These findings suggest that there may be a heritable* component to helpfulness.

What Is the Altruistic Personality?

- 6 Even if we identify some people who help others a lot and other people who don't, we have not addressed the question of what distinguishes people who help from those who don't—other than their helpfulness, of course. What are the various components of the altruistic personality? Can we predict who is likely to be altruistic by looking at people's overall personalities?
- 7 Consider some examples of people who have acted very altruistically. Do they seem to have very similar personality traits and characteristics? Think, for example, about Oskar Schindler† and how he cheated in business and in his marriage. Could anyone have predicted his altruistic actions from his overall personality? It is doubtful.
- 8 What about more contemporary models of altruism? In 1997, Ted Turner, founder of numerous cable stations and owner of professional sports teams, pledged a personal donation of one billion dollars to the United Nations. Not to be outdone, by July 2000 Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates had pledged 22 billion dollars to charity. Actor Paul Newman donated all of the millions of dollars in profits that were generated by his brands of salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, popcorn, and the like to charities, such as his camp for children living with a fatal disease. And until her

What do all the people described in paragraphs 7 and 8 have in common?

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death in 1997, Mother Teresa devoted her life to the poor in India. These four well-known figures seem quite different from each other in overall personality—except for their concern with helping others.

- 9 The quest to discover the altruistic personality has not been an easy one. Much of the research conducted over the years has failed to find consistent, reliable personality characteristics that predict helping behavior across situations. Situational variables* have predicted people's helping behaviors much better than personality variables.
- 10 Some researchers have changed the nature of the quest, however, focusing on personality variables that predict helping in some specific situations rather than across all situations; and their studies have been more successful in identifying traits that predict such behavior (Carlo et al., 1991; Penner et al., 1995). George Knight and his colleagues (1994) have suggested that an interacting group of personality traits influences pro-social* behavior and responses differ depending on the situation. For example, in dangerous emergencies, people who are high in self-confidence and independence are more likely to help than other people, but they are no more likely to help in response to a request to donate money to a charity.
- 11 Personality variables, or traits, that have been associated with greater helpfulness in some contexts include the following: empathy toward others; a tendency to attribute the causes of events to individual control rather than external circumstances; a collectivist* rather than an individualist* orientation; and extroversion,* openness to experience, and agreeableness (Bierhof et al., 1991; Kosek, 1995; Moorman & Blakely, 1995). And whether or not people have the traits associated with pro-social behavior, if they can be convinced or motivated to believe that they are altruistic, their behavior may follow. For example, labeling someone as a helpful person seems to increase that individual's helpful behavior.
- 12 In sum, research provides some insight into the traits and characteristics that may be associated with helpful behavioral tendencies. However, more research is needed before a conclusion can be reached about the make-up of the altruistic personality. The research thus far does point to

The transition "in sum" is a sign to slow down; here's where a key point will be explicitly stated.

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two qualities that seem essential for such a personality: empathy and advanced moral reasoning. (Adapted from Sharon S. Brehm, Saul Kassin, and Steven Fein, *Social Psychology*, 5th ed., © 2002 Cengage Learning.)

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