CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

Few of us have a clear idea of the process that takes place within our mind when we encounter someone in need of help. Why would we anyway; situations in which someone is in need usually require immediate action. In such situations, what matters is to provide adequate help, not to ponder on why we help. Science, on the contrary, has placed this question of why we help in the center of a long philosophical and empirical inquiry. The debate has been especially concerned with whether human beings are ever, to any degree, capable of helping which transcends the bounds of self-benefit, and which is based solely on the genuine concern for the welfare of another. This basic question about our human nature is often referred to as “The Altruism Question”. In the scientific literature, the question why people do and don’t act prosocially has been asked for two different reasons (Batson, 1998): either to reach the practical goal of encouraging prosocial behaviour, or to challenge currently dominant theories of social motivation, which are firmly founded on assumptions of universal egoism (Mansbridge, 1990; Wallach & Wallach, 1983).

The terms “helping behaviour”, “prosocial behaviour” and “altruism” are frequently used interchangeably. However, they can be distinguished for analytical purposes (Bierhoff, 2002). Helping is the broadest term, including all forms of interpersonal support such as the customer service of a salesperson. Prosocial behaviour is narrower, in that it covers all actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself (Batson, 1998), excluding all paid activities in the service sector (Bierhoff, 2002). When a certain act is beneficial to another and is also intended, we call it prosocial. Yet, prosocial behaviour can be either altruistically or egoistically motivated. It can be motivated by internal or external rewards, by the wish to reduce aversive arousal, or by the ultimate goal to try to increase the other's welfare. In this last case, according to most psychologists, the helping is altruistically motivated. Thus, altruism is even narrower than prosocial behaviour, in that it implies the primary and ultimate motive to increase another person’s welfare.

Altruism as a psychological concept is quite different from altruism as a biological concept. Evolutionary biology does not take motives into account, and defines altruism
entirely in terms of survival and reproduction. A behaviour is altruistic when it increases the fitness of others and decreases the fitness of the actor (Sober & Wilson, 1998). A shift from biology, where altruism is deduced from behaviour, to psychology, where altruism is viewed in terms of motives, implies a shift from the behavioural products of evolution to the proximate mechanisms which direct these behaviours. These mechanisms are to be found in the human mind. In general, models on helping and altruism assume either an egoistic or an altruistic motivation behind helping.

Egoistic Motivation

In egoistically motivated helping behaviour, the helper aspires to fulfill the ultimate goal of increasing his own welfare. In other words, egoistically motivated helping uses the instrumental goal of relieving the other's suffering to reach the ultimate goal of receiving self-benefits. One model which explains helping in terms of egoistic motives is the negative state relief model.

Negative State Relief Model. According to Cialdini, Baumann and Kenrick (1981) is prosocial behaviour motivated by the desire to reduce uncomfortable negative emotions and thus improve one's own emotional state. This is known as the negative state relief model. It does not matter whether these negative emotions are already present or whether they are aroused by the encounter with an emergency situation. Either way, one engages in prosocial behaviour to make oneself feel better (Fultz, Schaller, & Cialdini, 1988). Thus, theories based on egoism maintain that the only ultimate goals an individual has are self-directed. Theories based on altruism do not make such a universal claim. Research in this tradition claims that some people, at least some times, have the welfare of others as ends in themselves. Although this seems a very modest claim, it is precisely what advocates of psychological egoism deny, and therefore central to research on the altruism question.

Empathy and Altruistic Motivation

Empathy is an emotional state which is thought to evoke altruistic motivation. Research on empathy has a long tradition in philosophy and since the beginning of the twentieth century also in psychology. Within psychology, the term empathy was first coined by Titchener (1909) as a translation of the German word “Einfühlung”. Titchener (1915) referred to empathy either as the subject’s awareness in imagination of the emotions of another person as well as a kind of social-cognitive bonding. Within a clinical context, empathy was initially viewed as a cognitive process referring to accurately and
dispassionately understanding the client’s point of view concerning his or her situation (Dymond, 1949) or trying to “live the attitudes of the other” (Rogers 1951, p.29). Eventually, definitions shifted from cognition-based to emotion-based (Stotland, 1969; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Coke, Batson & McDavis, 1978; Hoffman, 1987). Empathy became understood as an emotional response referring to either feeling a vicarious emotion, feeling the same emotion as another person feels or feeling a vicarious emotion that is congruent with but not necessarily identical to the emotion of another (Stotland, 1969; Krebs, 1975; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Batson & Coke, 1981). The major explanation of prosocial behaviour in terms of empathy leading to an altruistic motive is the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

**Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis.** According to this hypothesis, at least some prosocial behaviour is motivated entirely by the unselfish desire to help someone who needs help (Batson & Oleson, 1991). This motivation can be even at the expense of oneself or of the group as a whole (Batson, et al. 1995a). The experience of empathy provides information that the helper values the welfare of another person and therefore must want to provide help (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995b). Empathy can be elicited by taking the perspective of the person in need.

Thus, contemporary psychology defines two main and interconnected mechanisms for altruistic behaviour; a cognitive mechanism: taking the other’s perspective, and an emotional mechanism: feeling empathy or sympathy. In the present thesis, I will elaborate on both these mechanisms. Specifically, I will investigate how one’s perspective on a person in need, and one’s inclination to compare oneself with others, affect feelings of empathy and distress for that person. I will also determine whether perspective taking has different emotional consequences when the person in need is either a friend or a family member. Eventually, I will turn to the empathy mechanism itself. I will review how empathy is differentially defined and used within psychology and I will suggest that the empathic response consists of at least two distinct dimensions, i.e. sympathy, and tenderheartedness.

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1 In the first two empirical chapters of this dissertation, state empathy is defined and measured in line with the existing tradition within social psychology, as Batson (1991) explains. In chapter 4 and 5 of this dissertation, I redefine empathy in such a way that it opposes the definition as used in the previous chapters. What I label sympathy in those chapters is what I label empathy in chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation. This difference in definitions is maintained to respect the chronological order in which we carried out the research.
Cognitive mechanism: Perspective Taking

A first prerequisite for helping is that the potential helper perceives the need of another person. Our perception of the need of someone else is to an important degree influenced by the perspective from which we consider this need. There are several perspectives from which individuals can approach the situation of another person. I will discuss a number of these perspectives. First, people can imagine how the other perceives the situation and how that person feels as a result (imagine other-perspective). Second, they can imagine how we would perceive the situation ourselves and how they would feel as a result (imagine self-perspective). Third, individuals can try to stay objective, paying attention to the situation itself without focusing on the resulting feelings (objective perspective).

In his pioneering research on empathy, Stotland (1969) found that the two ‘imagine’ perspectives led to more physiological arousal and self-reported emotion than the objective perspective. He also found that the physiological and self-report effects were not the same for the two imagine-perspectives. Indeed, recent functional MRI research has shown that, when witnessing another person in pain, the two imagine perspectives lead to different activation in the parietal cortex, with the self-perspective eliciting higher levels of activity in the left parietal cortex, whereas the other-perspective elicited more activity in the right parietal cortex (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007). The inferior parietal cortex is a multisensory integration area that is ideally suited to detect distinctions between self-generated and external signals. Further neuroimaging results show that the right parietal cortex plays not only a role in imagining a situation from different perspectives, but also in distinguishing actions executed by oneself or actions performed by others (Jackson & Decety, 2004; Blakemore & Frith, 2003), even when the behaviour is only mentally simulated (Ruby & Decety, 2004). Although we now know that different perspectives predominantly activate different brain regions, this research does not inform us about the different emotional consequences of the perspectives.

Within psychology, the differences between the two ‘imagine’ perspectives have long been neglected. Researchers seemed to assume that the emotions evoked by the two perspectives were essentially the same (cf. Lerner, 1980; Davis, 1994). This changed when Batson, Early and Salvarani (1997a) showed that the two perspectives led to differences in the amount of empathy and personal distress participants reported in reaction to a person in need. Empathy is defined as an emotional response, elicited by and congruent with, but not necessarily identical to, the perceived welfare of someone else (Batson 1991). Personal distress is a self-focused negative emotional arousal in reaction to the perceived distress of
the other, which involves feeling alarmed, upset, disturbed and distressed (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Batson et al. (1997) argued that because imagining how a person feels leads to relatively pure empathy this perspective should also lead to relatively pure altruistic motivation. On the contrary, imagining your own feelings in a needy person's situation should lead to a mix of altruistic and egoistic motivation because it evokes a mix of empathy and personal distress (Batson et al., 1997). In such a situation, individuals tend to focus primarily on their own imagined distress in the other's situation, and look for ways to escape or relieve this distress (Cialdini et al., 1987; Batson et al., 1997).

**Perspective Taking and Social Comparison**

Some people will experience more distress in response to the situation of the person in need than others. Apparently, individual differences play also a role in such a context. One individual difference of particular interest is social comparison orientation (SCO). In the first part of this dissertation I examine the interplay between taking different perspectives and SCO. People high in SCO have a disposition to compare themselves with others (Gibbons & Buunk; 1999). One of the strongest correlates of SCO is interpersonal orientation, a construct that includes an interest in what makes people tick, as well as a tendency to be influenced by the moods and criticisms of others, and an interest in mutual self-disclosure (Buunk & Gibbons, 2005). Also, SCO is correlated moderately with communal orientation, i.e., a desire to give benefits in response to the perceived needs of others (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Millerg, 1987). At the very least, these correlates suggest that people high in SCO have a strong interest in the experiences and feelings of others surrounding them.

Although little is known about the relationship between SCO and prosocial behaviour, a number of studies have shown that for people high in SCO, particularly downward comparisons (comparisons with people who are doing worse) evoke negative affect (Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons & Ipenburg 2001; Buunk, van der Zee & van Yperen, 2001). This negative affect can be interpreted in two different ways. One might conclude that people high in SCO actually experience negativity after downward comparison, That is, because people high in SCO relate the need of the other to themselves, the situation evokes personal distress which is expressed in negative affect. But this negative affect can also be interpreted as an expression of empathy. Because people high in SCO have a strong interest in the experience of others (as manifest from their interpersonal orientation and communal orientation) they may feel touched by the need of the other which is expressed in their empathy for this person. Thus far, this second explanation has not been
tested; there has not been research offering people high in SCO the opportunity to express empathy after downward comparisons. When relating these ideas to the research on perspective taking mentioned above, it seems likely that empathy should be especially apparent when people high in SCO imagine how this person must feel. Thus, in the present dissertation the hypothesis is tested that people high in SCO, who are induced to take an other perspective (instead of their usual imagine-self perspective), will experience more empathy—and not distress—for a person in need, and will be more willing to help that person than people who are induced to stay objective or people low in SCO.

Different Perspectives for Friends and Family

In the second part of the dissertation I shift my attention from characteristics of the helper to characteristics of the relationship with the person being in need. Specifically, I examine whether friends in need evoke different emotional responses than family in need and whether these responses have different consequences for helping.

Kin selection theory offers an explanation for greater altruism between closer genetic relatives (Hamilton, 1964). According to this theory, individuals behave to maximize their inclusive fitness rather than only their individual fitness by increasing the production of successful offspring by both themselves and their relatives (Hamilton, 1964). To an evolutionist, fitness means reproductive success. While kin selection theory may explain altruism between kin, reciprocal altruism theory offers an explanation for altruism between unrelated individuals (Trivers, 1971). Essentially, reciprocal altruism theory predicts a tendency to act more altruistically toward past or potential benefactors. Indeed, research has found that expected reciprocity is a strong predictor of prosocial behaviour (Kruger, 2003). Much of the psychological research on helping has not been informed by evolutionary theories of altruism; it has remained unclear which of the psychological motives are relevant for which altruistic contexts.

Greater biological relatedness is associated with higher levels of altruism (Stewart Williams, 2007). This relationship between the degree of relatedness and helping behaviour is mediated by psychological mechanisms that rely on various kinship cues such as familiarity and similarity (Park & Schaller, 2005; Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981). In fact, the actual psychological motivator of helping kin is often thought to be empathy (Hoffman, 1981; Krebs, 1987; Schaller, 2003). Research shows that empathy is indeed experienced most powerful for members of one’s own immediate family (e.g. Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). At the same time, other researchers have identified other psychological processes that also appear to underlie altruism between genetic kin.
For instance, one study found that reciprocal exchange—which would appear to be relevant primarily to altruism between nonkin—occurs between siblings as frequently as between unrelated friends (Stewart-Williams, 2007). Also, people expect more assistance from close kin than from friends (Bar-tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg, & Hermon, 1977), and feel more responsibility to provide assistance to family than to non-kin (Miller & Bersoff, 1998). These findings indicate that reciprocity might play a more important role between family members than has been assumed so far.

For friends, reciprocity has been assumed to be the main psychological motivator of helping. Having a long-term friendship with another person provides a powerful cue that someone will reciprocate in the future (Maner & Gailliott, 2007). Tooby and Cosmides (1996) have argued that friendships cannot be explained by either kin selection theory or reciprocal altruism theory. Rather, friendships involve situations in which people attempt to become irreplaceable to others and align themselves with those who indeed find them irreplaceable. Thus, helping friends may be motivated more by empathy than by expectations about reciprocity. Indeed, close friends are characterized by very high levels of familiarity, similarity and empathy (e.g. Shearn, Spellman, Straley, Meirick & Stryker, 1999). I will test these contradicting hypotheses against each other.

Reconsidering the Concept of Empathy

Finally, I take a closer look at the concept of empathy itself. Although empathy has been extensively researched, little agreement exists on what being empathic precisely consists of, and how this differs from being sympathetic or compassionate. However, virtually all empathy researchers agree that empathy requires making a link between the self and other without confusing the self and other. At a phenomenological level of description, empathy denotes a sense of similarity between the feelings we experience and those expressed by others, without losing sight of whose feelings belong to whom (Decety & Hodges, 2005). Batson (1991 for a review) describes empathy as “an emotional response, elicited by and congruent with, but not necessarily identical to, the perceived welfare of someone else”. The term congruence as used by Batson refers only to a congruence in valence (a positive emotion when the other is in a positive state; a negative emotion when the other is in a negative state), not to a matching of emotions.

One can argue that there is no need to further narrow down the definition of empathy, for it is a complex emotional and cognitive response which can manifest itself in different ways. However, the consequence of keeping the theoretical definition, and with it also the operational definition, too general is that we mistakenly assume that we study the
same process. This hampers the empirical research on altruism. A review of the psychological literature on empathy of the past five decades, combined with nine new datasets collected over the past four years sheds a new light on the theoretical and operational definitions of the concept of empathy. On the basis of factor analyses in these datasets, I propose to split the operational definitions of empathy as proposed by Batson and colleagues (see Batson, 1991 for a review) in two different scales: a sympathy and a tenderheartedness scale.

Overview of the present dissertation

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, the combined influence of perspective taking and social comparison orientation on empathy and distress as well as the willingness to help a person in need is investigated. Study 2.1 introduces a new research paradigm in the form of an interview. This paradigm is based on the earlier paradigm of ‘Katie Banks’ introduced by Batson and colleagues (1997). The Dutch version of this paradigm translates the American need situation (a young woman losing her parents without life-insurance) to a situation more common in Dutch daily life’s (a young woman having a bicycle accident and consequential physical injuries and mental trauma). The combined effects of taking an other-perspective or taking an objective-perspective and social comparison orientation are studied. In Study 2.2, the mediating role of identification is studied by measuring feelings of oneness with the person in need (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992). I also introduce a third perspective: the close-other perspective to experimentally induce feelings of identification.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I test the unique effects of empathy and expected reciprocity as psychological motivators for the willingness to help in different relationship contexts. Competing hypotheses are tested against each other. In Study 3.1, I compare contexts in which the recipient is imagined to be either a close friend or kin. Because Study 3.1 uses university students as subjects—who may have particularly strong friendships and few opportunities to assist kin—we repeat the study with older adults in the community in Study 3.2.
Chapter 4

Chapter 4 focuses entirely on both the theoretical as well as the operational definitions of empathy. First, the definitions of empathy within the existing literature are reviewed, specifically with regard to the use of state empathy within psychology over the past five decades. I will describe how the most commonly used measure of state empathy proposed by Batson has come into existence, what it consists of and how it is used or what its status is within -mainly social- psychological research. Then, I review the operational definitions and measurement of empathy, discussing factor analyses reported in the existing literature. Nine factor analyses conducted on my own datasets are subsequently reported. This results in two new scales measuring sympathy and tenderheartedness. Next, I determine the discriminatory power of the sympathy and tenderheartedness scales to see if they behave differently. Finally, I consider implications and limitations for future research.

Chapter 5

In this final chapter, the results of all studies are summarized and further discussed. An integration of the findings is offered and a new theoretical model of altruism, distinguishing empathy, sympathy, tenderheartedness and compassion is introduced. Furthermore, implications for research on altruism are discussed.