

# A LINE ON LIFE

12/31/87

## Sexy Altruism \*

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"*'Tis the season to be jolly*," at least that's the way the song goes. However, the Christmas season is also noted for increased altruism — the selfless giving of time, effort, money and other gifts. Even so, the question is raised about how selfless *any* giving is. Whether it is the Christmas season or not, do supposedly "*altruistic*" givers have any ulterior motives? Might these motives be sexual?

Men tend to help women more than women help men. Does this mean that men are more altruistic than women? There is evidence that differences in a person's level of moral development are related to how much people help others. Perhaps this means that men have higher moral development, and this accounts for the sex difference.

Few, if any, social psychologists would agree with that conclusion. One bit of contradictory evidence is that fifth- and sixth-grade girls are *more* altruistic than boys of the same age. This suggests that adult sex differences in altruism may have some other basis. Beside that, the fundamental concepts underlying morality seem to differ between the sexes. Men's moral behavior seems to be based on the concept of **justice**, while women respond more in terms of **caring**. However, in some situations, another explanation of sex differences in helps seems likely.

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### Some altruistic behavior is not so selfless.

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One situation is helping a motorist in distress (flat tire, stalled car and so on), while another is offering a ride to a hitchhiker. When the person needing help is a woman, passing cars are more likely to stop than for a man or a man-woman pair. To add to this, those who stop are typically young men driving alone. Are these young men motivated purely by an altruistic desire to help? Does sexual attraction play a significant role? Sexual attraction seems to be the answer. For example, aid is more likely to be offered to a woman who is physically attractive than a woman who is unattractive.

In a doctoral dissertation, one social psychologist (Przybyla, 1985) tested these sexual motives directly. The sexual arousal of subjects was manipulated to determine whether aroused individuals would be more likely to help an other-sex stranger. In previous studies, such arousal has been found to lead to positive interpersonal responses — such as looking at and approaching the member of the other sex and expressing feelings of love.

For this doctoral experiment, men and women college students were individually shown a sexually explicit videotape, a nonsexual videotape or no videotape at all. Next — when the experiment was apparently over — as subjects left the laboratory, they had to pass a confederate of the experimenter working at a table. (This confederate was a stranger to the subjects.) Just as subjects passed, the confederate stood up and "*accidentally*" knocked a pile of questionnaires on the floor. The confederate said, "Oh, no!" and bent down to begin picking up the mess. Subjects were observed to see if they helped or not. For those who did help, how much time they spent in helping was recorded.

Similar to studies of helping on the highway, sex influenced helping. On the average, men spent more time helping a woman — over 6 minutes — than women spent helping a man — about 30 seconds. Also, the women as a whole were significantly less helpful than the men.

The effect of being exposed to the videotapes was the major focus of the study. Both men and women reported arousal in their response to the erotic videotape. However, only the men's helping behavior was affected — *and only when the person in need was a woman!* About 90% of men who viewed the erotic video helped the women, but only 50% of men who saw the nonsexual video helped, and only 40% helped her after the no-video condition. The more arousal the men reported, the more time they spent helping the woman confederate. In contrast, when the papers were dropped by a man, arousal and duration of helping for men was not related. For helping men, the proportion of women helping (40%) was about the same in all three conditions. However, with women, greater sexual arousal was associated with *less* time in helping either men or women.

A likely conclusion from this experiment is that men's altruism toward women is, at least in part, due to a desire to interact in a potentially romantic way. Women can feel the same romantic desires. However, in our society, they are much less likely to take the initiative in seeking out a male stranger, so their "*altruism*" is unaffected by their sexual desires.

Of course, initiating any relationship involves an element of risk. (The whole process of living typically involves some risk.) This is also true when offering help to a stranger — or accepting help from a stranger. Each of us has to balance our need for safety with the acceptance of some risk. If the risks of direct helping are too great, you can help indirectly by calling the authorities to have them give aid to a stranded motorist. Likewise, if the risk of accepting direct aid from a stranger is too great for you, you can ask that person to call the authorities for you.

I hope the holiday spirit will lead you to help others — whether your motives are completely altruistic or not. Even stronger are my hopes that you can carry this spirit of helping others with you the whole year around.

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\* Adapted from Robert Baron and Donn Byrne's *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction*, Allyn and Bacon, 1987, pages 268-270.