Abstract:

An increasing number of scholars are recognizing the importance of scientific research for understanding love. The biological sciences typically are cited in this cutting-edge research. Not much about love is typically heard from those sciences that explore data about which we theoretically know the most: human experience.

In this paper, I address major research pertaining to love by psychologists and sociologists. I examine Ellen Berscheid’s summary essay in, *The Psychology of Love*. Leaning upon Berscheid’s work, I find that psychologists use two major models in their research: what I call the Common Denominator and Classification models.

I explore the work on altruism of sociologist Daniel Batson. His emphasis upon altruism as one primary motivation to help another in need makes it possible for experiments that show the reality of altruism. I consider these experiments a powerful basis for overcoming the claim that some make that all creatures are inherently selfish.

I look at the work of sociologist Samuel Oliner, who interviewed hundreds of rescuers of Jews during the Nazi holocaust. I see these rescuers as poignant examples of humans who act for the good of others at great risk to their own well-being. In this risk, many express love.

Biography:

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Dr. Oord has written and edited a number of books, the most recent being *Science of Love: The Wisdom of Well-Being* (Templeton, 2004) and *Relational Holiness* (Beacon Hill, 2005). His other books include *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love* (Kingswood), *Philosophy of Religion: Essays* (Beacon Hill), and an edited volume on Generation X and religion. His essays have appeared in dozens of journals and books, and he is currently writing a volume that he titles, *The Love-and-Science Symbiosis*. He and his work have been featured in various magazines and newspapers.

Dr. Oord serves on the executive council of several scholarly societies, including the Open and Relational Theologies group (AAR), the Wesleyan Theological Society, and the Wesleyan Philosophical Society. He is president of the Treasure Valley Science-and-Religion Institute. As well as being a professor, writer, and researcher, Dr. Oord also serves his faith tradition as an ordained minister.
Social Science Contributions to the Love-and-Science Symbiosis

The natural place to begin exploring the contribution of science to love research is that collection of sciences examining what we apparently know best: our own experiences. Because psychology and sociology are two scientific domains that take human experience as their primary interest, the experiments, data, and hypotheses in these domains deserve careful attention. In this chapter, we explore representative quantitative and qualitative love research in the social sciences.

A Psychology of Love

A representative introduction to how many psychologists view love is The Psychology of Love, a collection of essays that Robert J. Sternberg and Michael L. Barnes have edited. The book’s final essay provides a critical overview of the field’s recent research. Its author, Ellen Berscheid, says that providing this overview is particularly difficult, because “love is not a single distinct behavioral phenomenon with clearly recognizable outlines and boundaries.” She continues, “love is a huge and motley collection of many different behavior events whose only commonalities are that they take place in a relationship with another person . . . and that they have some sort of positive quality to them.”

Upon surveying the psychological research, Berscheid says that psychologists typically take one of two approaches to studying love. The first approach begins by asking people to describe their thoughts, feelings, and actions toward those whom they ostensibly love. These descriptions are subsequently analyzed to identify their common properties. This approach results in a statistical summary of the properties present in love, according to the descriptions of those polled. For instance, a high percentage of studies find “caring” a foundational quality of love. We might call this general way of studying love the “Common Denominator” approach.

The significance of psychology’s Common Denominator approach to studying love is that it begins with the actual self-reports of lovers. The first approach begins by asking people to describe their thoughts, feelings, and actions toward those whom they ostensibly love. These descriptions are subsequently analyzed to identify their common properties. This approach results in a statistical summary of the properties present in love, according to the descriptions of those polled. For instance, a high percentage of studies find “caring” a foundational quality of love. We might call this general way of studying love the “Common Denominator” approach.

The primary problem of the Common Denominator approach is that the imaginations and preconceptions of the investigator limit it somewhat. Berscheid explains: “What appears in the sample is, naturally, heavily determined by the investigator’s [prior] notion of what love is.” “If ‘caring’ is part of that [pre]conception,” she observes, “one can be certain that respondents will be asked to tell whether they exhibit caring behaviors toward the loved ones.” In other words, the investigator’s survey questions about love arise from the investigator’s own assumptions, and this typically skews the responses received from those surveyed.

The second general approach to studying love is more common among psychologists. In it, says Berscheid, “the love theorist mulls over his or her own life
experiences and personal observations of the experiences of others..., attends to their similarities and differences, and comes up with some sort of classification scheme that purports to distinguish among the varieties of love.”

We might call this, the “Classification” approach to studying love.

Examples of the Classification approach to studying love abound in psychology. For example, Abraham Maslow distinguished between “B-love” and “D-love.” B-love is love for the being of the other, and D-love is love driven by one’s own deficiencies. John Alan Lee, a contributor to the Sternberg/Barnes’ collection of essay, distinguishes between *eros*, *ludus*, and *storge*. Lee eventually suggests a typology with eight different love-styles. In his own chapter, co-editor Sternberg suggests a triangular theory of love. The components of the triangle are intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. These components may be combined in various ways, resulting in seven love-type combinations.

The Classification approach to love research is really only a theoretical beginning that guides research. A great deal of additional work needs to be done to determine if the classification actually describes the love phenomena. The Classification approach becomes particularly complicated when the scientist assigns actual expressions of love to particular classes. To correctly classify an act of love, one must determine its prior causes. If the lover’s intentions – which cannot be known well by the outside observer – are necessarily part of any genuine act of love, the scientist’s work of assigning expressions of love to particular classes is by nature a subjective enterprise.

The Common Denominator and Classification approaches to studying love have their advantages and disadvantages. Both have promotion of well-being – in some form or another – as a central aspect of how love should be understood. But both are less clear about the proper role of motives and intentions. The Common Denominator approach relies upon self-reports, which may or may not be reliable with regard to intentions. It believes that clearer insight into the core of love will emerge when collecting a respectable sample. The Classification approach assigns expressions of love to particular classes based upon the classifier’s own experiences. But it does not provide an adequate gauge to assess the motives of those whose love expressions are being observed. Without some indication of an actor’s intent, it becomes difficult to know if an action should be regarded as loving, let alone to classify various loves accurately among themselves.

A Social-Psychological Answer to Altruistic Love

For the most part, the psychologist’s usual ways of studying love – the Common Denominator and Classification approaches – do not rely heavily upon the quantitative research that has long been regarded the bedrock of the scientific enterprise. And these typical approaches do not address well a form love often regarded as quintessential to understanding love: altruism. If quantitative scientific measures could show that some people express altruism at least some of the time, research on love would likely become more widely regarded as a legitimate scientific program.

Altruistic love might be defined roughly as intentional action done for another’s good at some cost to the actor. Although social scientists can speak with relative ease about other expressions of love (e.g., friendship, romance, desire), whether genuine altruism actually exists is hotly debated. Social scientist C. Daniel Batson summarizes
the place of altruism in psychology when he says that “the territory that has been allotted to altruism [since 1970] is no more than a quaint province in an egoistic empire; altruism is spoken of not to reopen the egoism-altruism debate, but to make it go away.” Batson believes, however, that “the question of our capacity for genuine concern for others has not gone away. A small group of contemporary psychologists has begun once again to take seriously the possibility that altruism may be part of human nature.”

Batson’s own work has been at the fore of social scientific research on altruism. His landmark book, The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer, brings together a number of quantitative studies, including his own research. Batson seeks to answer this question: Could it be that we are capable of having another person’s welfare as an ultimate goal and that not all of our efforts are directed toward looking out for ourselves?

One of Batson’s most important contributions to love-and-science research is a clear and defensible definition of altruism. He defines altruism as “a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare.” This definition makes altruism’s measuring stick the actor’s primary motives to increase the welfare of another. If the actor’s ultimate goal is to increase another’s welfare, the actor is altruistic – even if the actor also benefits in some way. Altruism so understood does not require, but may include, self-sacrifice. Moving the discussion from measuring consequences to assessing primary motives allows Batson to engage critics who argue that humans always act with self-interest as their ultimate goal.

Batson suggests that three principles should guide researchers as they seek to identify ultimate goals. First, the researcher infers a person’s motives from his or her behavior. The researcher must use inference, because one cannot observe another person’s motives directly. Motives are not data available to an observer’s five senses. Second, if a person’s behavior is directed toward more than one possible ultimate goal (e.g., self-benefit and other-benefit), the researcher will not discern well which goal is actually ultimate. But, third, if the researcher witnesses a person’s behavior in two or more different situations, the researcher can draw reasonable inferences about the person’s ultimate goal. Such inferences can be drawn if these situations provide differing relationships with the ultimate goals apparently at play. Batson explains this crucial third principle in this way:

We must vary the helping situation in a way that disentangles the confounding of the benefit to other[s] and the benefit to self. We might do this by, for example, providing a behavior means of obtaining the self-benefit that does not involve helping [others] and, moreover, is less costly than helping [others]. If we do this and the individual no longer helps [others], then we have reason to believe that his or her ultimate goal was self-benefit . . . . If the individual still helps [others], then we have reason to believe that this self-benefit was not an ultimate goal.

If benefiting others is a person’s ultimate goal, we have good grounds to claim that the helping person’s motive – in the situation observed – is altruistic.

Batson brings a theory to his experiments on altruism. He calls it the “Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis.” At its root, the hypothesis states that altruistic motives are evoked by an emotional reaction of empathy, sympathy, or tenderness toward the person in
need. A person’s unique emotional response to perceived need is the result of adopting the needy person’s perspective. As empathetic feeling increases for a person in need, says Batson, altruistic motivation increases to have that person’s need relieved.

A person who seeks to relieve another’s need, however, is not necessarily acting with ultimate motives that are altruistic. It could be, for instance, that the helper’s ultimate motive is to gain social and/or self rewards. After all, helpers are often praised by others for or engage in self-congratulatory behavior when aiding the needy. It could be that the helper’s ultimate motive is to avoid penalties. Persons may help others with the primary motive of avoiding punishments of various kinds, whether externally or internally inflicted. Finally, it could be that a helper’s ultimate motive is to reduce his or her own feelings of personal distress. If reducing one’s own stress is one’s primary motive, an egoistic rather than altruistic desire fundamentally motivates one’s desire to help others.

The refined version of Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis, therefore, claims “that feeling empathy for the person in need evokes motivation to help in which these benefits to self are not the ultimate goal of helping.” To test this hypothesis, Batson creates situations in which he can manipulate the factors that will indicate whether one’s ultimate motives are egoistic or altruistic. These indicators become the basis for his quantitative research.

To test whether a helper’s ultimate motive in helping is actually reducing his or her own distress, Batson set up a variety of experiments. These experiments vary a potential helper’s ease of escaping exposure to the needy. If those who greatly empathize with a needy person provide help despite being offered an easy out to reduce their own distress, the ultimate motive of these helpers would apparently be altruistic.

In one experiment, undergraduates were told that they would help in testing resiliency to stress. Before the experiment began, participants were given the following introduction:

In this experiment we are studying task performance and impression projection under stressful conditions. We are investigating, as well, whether any inefficiency that might result from working under aversive conditions increases proportionately with the amount of time spent working under such conditions. Since this study requires the assistance of two participants, there will be a drawing to determine which role will be yours. One participant will perform a task (consisting of up to, but not more than, ten trials) under aversive conditions; the aversive conditions will be created by the presentation of electric shock at random intervals during the work period. The other participant will observe the individual working under aversive conditions. This role involves the formation and report of general attitudes towards the “worker” so that we may better assess what effect, if any, working under aversive conditions has upon how that individual is perceived.

After reading the introduction, signing a consent form, and being reminded that they could withdraw at any time, the undergraduate participants drew lots for their role.

Unbeknownst to the participants, Batson rigged the drawing. All participants drew the observer role. As they were escorted to an observation room, participants
learned that they would be watching a young woman named Elaine receive the electric shocks. Participants were told that they would not actually meet Elaine, however. Instead, they would observe her over closed-circuit television as she performed up to ten digit-recall trials, each two minutes in length. At random intervals during each trial, Elaine would receive moderately uncomfortable electric shocks.

The instructions provided to participants varied depending on the number of trials that each expected to observe. In the easy-escape situation, participants were told that they would only need to observe the first two of ten trials. In the difficult-escape condition situation, participants were told that they would observe all of the two to ten trials.

Once the undergraduates finished reading these instructions, they were handed Elaine’s 14-item personal values and interest questionnaire. Elaine’s questionnaire used the same format as the questionnaire each observer had completed weeks earlier. The experimenter explained that Elaine’s data would provide information that might help observers in forming an impression. In fact, Elaine’s questionnaire had been prepared so that it reflected values and interests that were either very similar to the undergraduate’s or very dissimilar. Batson believed that similarities would invoke a high degree of empathy and participants very dissimilar to Elaine would feel a low degree.

After participants looked over Elaine’s data, the experimenter turned on a monitor showing a pre-recorded videotape of Elaine. The experimenter left participants alone to observe the shock treatments. As the two trials progressed, Elaine’s facial expression and body movements indicated that she was finding the shocks extremely uncomfortable. By the end of the second trial, her reactions were so strong that the assistant administering the shocks interrupted the procedure to ask Elaine if she was feeling okay.

A (pre-recorded) conversation ensued in which Elaine confessed that as a child she had been thrown from a horse onto an electric fence. A doctor examined her after the incident, and the doctor said that in the future she might react strongly to even mild shocks. Hearing this, the assistant urged Elaine not to continue the shock treatment. Elaine replied that although she found the shocks very unpleasant, she wanted to go on. “I started; I want to finish. I’ll go on,” she said. “I know your experiment is important, and I want to do it.”

At this point, the assistant had an idea. Because the observer watching the shock treatment via closed-circuit television was also an undergraduate participant, the assistant wondered aloud if the observer would help Elaine by taking her place. With a mixture of reluctance and relief, Elaine consented to the assistant checking on this possibility. The assistant said that she would shut off the equipment and talk with the observer. Shortly thereafter, the observer’s video screen went blank.

About 30 seconds later, the assistant entered the participant’s room and said:

I guess you saw, Elaine’s finding the aversive conditions pretty uncomfortable. [The assistant] was wondering if maybe you’d like to help Elaine out by taking her place. Now, before you decide anything, let me explain just what that would involve. First of all, let me say that you’re under no obligation to take Elaine’s place. I mean, if you would like to continue in your role as observer that’s fine; you did happen to draw the observer role.
What the assistant said next varied depending on whether the observer had been given an easy or difficult escape situation. To observers in the easy-escape situation, the assistant said, “If you decide to continue as the observer, you’ve finished observing the two trials. So all you need to do is answer a few questions about your impression of Elaine, and you’ll be free to go.” To participants in the difficult-escape situation, the experimenter said, “If you decide to continue as the observer, I’ll need you to observe Elaine’s remaining eight trials. After you’ve done that and answered a few questions about your impression of Elaine, you’ll be free to go.”

For participants in both escape situations, the assistant concluded by saying, “If you decide to help Elaine by taking her place, what will happen is that she’ll come in here and observe you. You will go in and perform the recall trials while receiving the shocks. Once you have completed the trials, you’ll be free to go. What would you like to do?”

Batson found that most observers who judged themselves very dissimilar to Elaine (based upon their dissimilar questionnaires) took the easy escape option when offered. They escaped the situation presumably because (a) they felt little empathy for Elaine and (b) the least costly way to reduce their personal distress was simply to answer the final questions and leave. When escape was difficult, participants were quite likely to help. They helped presumably because, even though they felt little empathy for Elaine, taking the remaining shocks themselves was less costly than watching Elaine take more.

Batson found that observers who were highly empathetic toward Elaine – an empathy apparently based on similarities evident in the questionnaires – were very likely to help even when escape was easy. Whereas only 18% of low-empathetic observers helped Elaine when given an easy escape, 91% of highly-empathetic observers helped Elaine when given an easy escape. These results gave Batson reason to believe that the primary motive of some people in some situations is altruistic. These people’s primary motives were not the egoistic impulse to reduce personal distress.

Batson cites the results of five other experiments also designed to test if people sometimes act altruistically rather egoistically to reduce personal distress. In five of the six total studies, the results were remarkably consistent: A majority of highly empathetic participants were willing to help at some cost to themselves. In the only study whose results were not consistent with the others, the cost of helping was apparently too high. This atypical study suggests that limits exist to what people will do to help others. At least sometimes, one’s personal distress is apparently less costly than helping others in great need.

We noted earlier that a helper’s ultimate motive may egoistic even when acting for the benefit of another. In addition to acting to reduce one’s own anxiety or stress, the helper may have as his or her ultimate motive the attempt to gain social and/or self rewards. Or a helper’s ultimate motive may be to avoid penalties and punishments of various kinds.

Batson cites experiments designed to see if altruism can be sufficiently explained away as behavior whose ultimate goal is avoiding punishment or seeking reward. He cites seven studies that show that at least some of the time those who empathize with the needy are not ultimately motivated to avoid punishment. The claim that the altruist’s motivation was “directed toward the egoistic goal of avoiding empathy-specific punishments,” says Batson, “must, it seems, be rejected.” (149) Studies done to discover if altruist’s are always ultimately motivated to gain rewards of various types also revealed
that sometimes altruists act for the good of others despite gaining no reward. Batson concludes by saying that in the approximately 25 empirical studies examined “we find no clear support for any of the three egoistic alternatives to the empathy-altruism hypothesis.” (174) Instead, the studies cited support the hypothesis that those who strongly empathize with a need other will act with the well-being of that other as their ultimate motive.

**Loving Personality and Character Formation**

While Daniel Batson’s scientific approach is to set up experiments wherein the motives of participants are inferred, others suggest that research on love should focus on the kind of person that acts lovingly. In particular, social scientists do well to study those whose behavior emerges from a loving personality or character, because loving persons are the most fitting examples for scientific research.

Sociologist Samuel Oliner and his wife Pearl have collected data and proposed hypotheses related to what they call “the altruistic personality.” The data they use in their research comes from the interviews of those who rescued Jews in Nazi Europe. The Oliners and their assistants interviewed almost 700 persons who lived in several countries in Nazi-occupied Europe. Most interviewees were from Poland, Germany, France, and Holland. Those interviewed included 406 individuals who had rescued Jews, 126 individuals who chosen not to rescue Jews, and 150 Jewish survivors. Most who rescued Jews during the Nazi regime did so for more than two years and up to five. And most rescuers helped individuals of a different culture, ethnicity, and religious persuasion. Nonrescuers were included in the study to address how the attributes rescuers and nonrescuers differ.

For their primary interview subjects, the Oliners chose rescuers who had voluntarily risked their lives in some way and had done so seeking no material gain. Implicit in the various questions asked was deeper question of whether those who rescued Jews possessed, as the Oliners put it, “a relatively enduring disposition to act selflessly on behalf of others.”17 To be as specific as possible, the authors identify altruism as 1) directed towards helping another, 2) involving a high risk or sacrifice to the actor, 3) accompanied by no external reward, 4) and voluntary.18 In this understanding of altruism, the Oliners expected to find both outside influences and self-motivation. “We view an altruistic behavior,” explain the Oliners, “as the outcome of a decision-making process in which the internal characteristics of actors as well as the external environments in which they find themselves influence each other.”19

The Oliners provide numerous first-hand accounts of those who risked their lives rescuing Jews in their book, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. The following account given by a Dutch rescuer serves as an example of these testimonials:

The Germans came and took a look at our house. They told us we had to take in a German couple who were living on the coast. We were worried because they would find out we were keeping Jewish people. They took the living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen upstairs. Slowly they found out the truth.
One day we had soup on the kitchen stove. The German woman came downstairs and lifted the lid to see what was in the pot. Willy – the Jewish guy – saw that. He said, “It’s not ladylike to life the lid from the pot.” I told him, “Be careful what you say; don’t make trouble!”

I had the feeling something would happen. I told my husband, “Let’s go away, let’s find a place,” but he said, “You’re crazy!” But I had a feeling. My husband should have listened to me.

This woman, the German lady, went to the police. She told them we had a Jew in hiding. She said, “I would like to have the Jew taken away from there, but don’t do anything to the people.” She was referring to us. She thought the police were safe. But the guy she spoke to worked for the NSB, the Nazis. She didn’t know that.

It was four o’clock on a clear Sunday afternoon. My husband had just come home from taking our little girl on a sled ride. He was home just ten minutes when the Gestapo came – with a dog. The dog ran upstairs, and there was shooting. My little girl was crying because her Daddy was screaming. I took my little girl and ran out the door. The dog smelled out the hiding place. My husband wouldn’t say anything, so they set the dog on him. It bit off his hand. They shot my husband and one of the Jews.20

This Dutch rescuer and her husband knew the great risk associated with helping Jews. And yet they chose to take this risk – at their own peril.

One altruistic Polish woman took on a Jewish infant at the request of its mother. She tells of her experience protecting the young child:

One time I was arrested on the train. The policeman took my baby and went to examine it. He discovered it was circumcised and said to me, “You are a Jew.” I said, “No, I am not a Jew, but this is my baby.” They took us to jail. I was able to run away when the policeman was distracted by ten pounds of butter. . . I had to move many times. The baby was so emaciated and sickly. He did not have a good diet. When the war ended, I contacted the Red Cross and found out that the mother was alive and lived in Borislaw. In 1945, the mother came. We made contact. We met. I gave her back the child. It is very difficult for me to tell you how I felt then.21

The Oliners exhibit hundreds of stories of altruistic rescuers. The risks these people took for the well-being of others are astounding. These accounts lead naturally to the question, Why did some people in Nazi Europe choose to risk their lives in their effort to help Jews? Or to put the question more generally, Why do some people sometimes act altruistically and others do not?

According to the Oliners, those who consistently act altruistically have an altruistic personality. When the Oliners say that a person has an altruistic personality, however, they do not mean that the person always acts altruistically. Rather, they mean that this person is more likely than others to make altruistic decisions.22

According to the Oliner’s research, a person’s identification with religion was not strongly related to whether or not that person chose to rescue Jews. However, the way in
which one interpreted their religious teaching and commitment did influence their proclivity to help. Those who believed that religion instructed them to care for all humans were more likely to rescue Jewish victims. “For the overwhelming majority (87 percent) of rescuers, helping Jews was motivated by concerns of equity and care.”

Oliners characterize equity as directed toward the welfare of society as a whole and care as concerned with the welfare of people without regard for repayment.

Perhaps the most important characteristics of those with an altruistic personality are that these people were both inclusive of and attached to others. “Inclusiveness—a predisposition to regard all people as equals and to apply similar standards of right and wrong to them without regard to social status or ethnicity – and attachment – a belief in the value of personal relationships and caring for the needy,” write the Oliners. For most rescuers, helping Jews was an expression of ethical principles that extended to all of humanity. Although they were often concerned with equity and justice, the rescuing personality of these altruists was predominately rooted in care. It was the general pattern of relating to others that distinguished rescuers from nonrescuers. The Oliners put it this way: “Those who were inclined toward extensive attachments – feeling committed to and responsible for diverse groups of people – were predisposed to accept feelings of responsibility to Jews, whatever danger to themselves. Conversely, those who were inclined toward constrictedness – detachment and exclusiveness – were particularly unlikely to reject this behavior when doing so might have exposed them to personal threat.”

Although rescuers were often concerned with themselves, it was strong sense of attachment to others -- including those outside their immediate family and community -- that distinguished them from nonrescuers.

As a result of work by Batson, the Oliners, and others, an increasing number of sociologists and psychologists are now skeptical of the claim that humans are inevitably and invariably egoistic. In their literature survey titled, “Altruism: A Review of Recent Theory and Research,” social scientists J. A. Piliavin and H. W. Charng conclude that they “are now seeing a ‘paradigm shift’ away from the assumption that humans are inherently self-interested.” While love is not equivalent with other-interest, this shift in psychological research is significant for what it means for exploring the promotion of well-being in self, the near and dear, and the common good.

2 Ibid., 363.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 364.
9 Ibid., vii.
10 Ibid., 6.
11 Ibid., 65.
12 Ibid., 66.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid., 72.
15 Ibid., 113.
16 Ibid., 115.
18 Ibid., 6.
19 Ibid., 10.
20 Ibid., 74-75.
21 Ibid., 92.
22 Ibid., 12.
23 Ibid., 163.
24 Ibid., 144.
25 Ibid., 170.
26 Ibid., 186.