

by Jason Marsh

In the summer of 2000, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) asked Harvard University researchers Nancy Briton and Jennifer Leaning to analyze some of the most comprehensive data ever collected about human suffering in war. Over the previous year, the ICRC had held thousands of hours of interviews with residents of 12 of the most war-torn areas on earth. The interviews were part of its People on War project, an attempt to

In Search of the Moral Voice



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what makes some
people display
altruism
and
compassion
in the
midst of war?

document the varied human experiences of war in order to build greater support for international humanitarian principles. From Afghanistan to Colombia, combatants, refugees, doctors, housewives, and many others discussed the impact wars had made on their lives. Doctors Briton and Leaning found the interviews almost unbearably powerful.

But they also found something else. Amid heart-wrenching accounts of humiliation and loss were unsolicited expressions of compassion and memories of altruistic acts. This surprised Briton and Leaning, particularly because interviewers for the People on War project didn't ask about experiences of compassion. For the most part, said Briton, the interviewers asked the subjects "about terrible things that happened to them in war," yet some subjects "spontaneously gave examples of people who had helped them." There was the Abkhazian farmer who remembered how his Georgian neighbors had interceded on his behalf, even lying before tanks that approached his village; a Nigerian community leader who recalled how Nigerian and Biafran enemy combatants shared food at the war front.

After months of being immersed in stories of "unending woe," said Leaning, these "little instances of resistance" stood out. By no means did Briton and Leaning think these cases

Photos: Interview subjects of the People on War project, from (left to right) Pakistan, Colombia, Georgia, and (next page) Nigeria, and South Africa.

negated the horrors of warfare, but they did see them as evidence that war doesn't always wipe out moral consciousness.

"There was a cumulative sense of how horrible these events had been for people, how completely their lives had been destroyed and their physical circumstances upended," said Leaning. "We're dealing with popula-

other-centered behavior in wartime conditions." In other words, if their research could indicate why some people exhibit the better qualities of human nature, especially in brutal circumstances, they thought it could help societies deliberately promote altruism and compassion in the future—during war, and potentially in everyday life as well.

enable people on the giving and the receiving end to reclaim their humanity and moral dignity at a time when both are usually obscured by the fog of war. Sometimes, even doing nothing—simply not committing violent acts—can be compassionate, according to Briton and Leaning, who call



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tions that are enmeshed in a terribly ugly social setting for months or for years, and they all are aware of feeling degraded as they continue to be degraded. They're ashamed of what they're doing, but they're still doing it." When people can break free of this violence and degradation, their behavior provides "an indication of what might be called up in greater number, in greater consistency, if we understood its origins," she said.

After completing an initial analysis of the ICRC's data, Briton and Leaning obtained funding for a new analysis from the Fetzer Institute, a private foundation that supports scientific research. They sorted by hand through hundreds of pages of interview transcriptions, looking for mentions of compassion or altruism.

By finding and categorizing these behaviors, Briton and Leaning write in their report on their project, they hoped to suggest "possible ways of encouraging the expression of positive

Briton and Leaning were not the first to examine such questions about altruistic and compassionate behavior; indeed, their project is the latest in a series of research on the topic. (See sidebar on next page.) Perhaps the most notable work on the subject is Samuel and Pearl Oliner's 1988 book, *The Altruistic Personality*, a study of people who rescued Jews from the Nazis during the Holocaust. Occasionally, Briton and Leaning's report highlights similarly heroic deeds that meant the difference between life and death. But for the most part, their project has focused on the significance of everyday acts of altruism in the context of war, not necessarily the heroism of moral exemplars. To them, when one's sense of morality is embedded in a world of hate and murder, some of the simplest acts—sharing a glass of water or temporary shelter with the enemy, for instance—take on extraordinary significance. These altruistic acts

such (non-)actions "compassionate restraint."

What could motivate such acts? Briton and Leaning say it will take much more research on the topic before we know for sure. But they have identified four main factors from the ICRC's data that were associated with altruism and compassion: feelings of self-efficacy, a desire for reciprocity, a sense of group affiliation, and a wish to reclaim one's moral identity.

Examples of self-efficacy can take different forms. The report quotes a Palestinian ambulance driver who said that because of his profession, he would rescue a wounded Israeli soldier, even if that soldier had killed a relative of his. It also cites a Christian Lebanese journalist who used his press ID to rescue Muslims from danger. These stories echo a point made often in psychological literature: people are more likely to try to help someone if they think they're capable of suc-

ceeding. A sense of personal usefulness can trigger altruistic impulses that might otherwise remain dormant.

According to Leaning, this is key to why the ICRC trains soldiers in the principles of international humanitarian law. She said she thinks it is extremely important that governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the ICRC “drill into

a “face saving device”: rather than seeming soft, they could present themselves as tough-minded, pragmatic soldiers, even when their actions were motivated largely by compassion. Other interview subjects explained reciprocity not as a calculated means to be rewarded for positive behavior, but as a way to stop violence by treating others with the kindness they would want to experience themselves. For instance, an Afghani housewife remembered how her father spared the life of a man who had killed her brother, saying that

ties against her Serbian neighbor because their children had grown up together.

Briton said she believes the implications of this finding go far beyond the arena of war. “I think they extend to everyday behavior,” she said. “I think that if anyone can find that thread of similarity with another person, for whatever reason, they’re going to treat them as an ingroup member rather than an outgroup member. They’re little threads, but there are so many that are available to us.”

Finally, there were some people, Briton and Leaning report, who simply seemed sick



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soldiers that there is a moral decision process that they are responsible for.” These tools of moral reasoning usually don’t come instinctively, she said. Instead, soldiers must be made to feel that ethical decision making is a part of their job, and they must receive thorough instruction in making these decisions from the time they are in elementary school—something most governments haven’t been pro-active about, she said.

Those combatants who performed altruistic acts often attributed their behavior to reciprocity—the idea being that they treated their enemies the same way they wanted to be treated in return. Briton admitted that this idea might not sound too “touchy feely.” But she theorized that combatants may have cited reciprocity as their motive as

revenge only causes more bloodshed; a tribal elder in Somalia said he would “treat civilians of my enemies just as I am treating my own civilians. I will be kind to them.”

Subjects’ tendency to exhibit altruism toward members of their own group might not seem surprising. But, as Briton pointed out, “we’re all members of lots of different groups at any given time.” Some people, she and Leaning found, were able to find common ground with people they could have easily dismissed as enemies. They seemed capable of transcending the ethnic or political divisions usually imposed by war: a Somali man said he rejected tribalism, choosing instead to identify with “the party of peace maintenance”; a Bosnian journalist remembered how she could not hold hostili-

ties against her Serbian neighbor because their children had grown up together. The authors found this group especially inspiring. “It’s nice when people can reach back into their psyches, into their pasts, and believe that they are moral beings, and be happier with that than being violent,” said Briton. For instance, one Christian ex-combatant from Lebanon said she never forgot her core values, because she had come from a decent family. When she once encountered a Muslim at a checkpoint, she helped him escape rather than hand him over to certain execution. After a former military official in Cambodia had given a displaced woman half his ration bag of rice, he was struck by her claim that she had never met a “good soldier” like him. He said he never forgot this

statement, and he started to understand the tragedy of what he and other combatants in Cambodia were perpetuating.

But how can people be consistently reminded of their moral identities when they are stuck in the moral vacuum of war? Briton and Leaning said they noticed that the People on War interviews actually served an important function to this end. This is an observation echoed by Gilbert Holleufer, a communication advisor with the ICRC who was instrumental in launching the People on War project and later worked with Briton and Leaning analyzing the data.

To Holleufer, one anecdote sums up the effect of the People on War project. In South Africa, the ICRC conducted an interview with about a dozen members of a paramilitary group—“really dangerous people, violent men,” he said. They trusted the Red Cross enough to do the interview, but kept their weapons at their sides. After a while, they opened up and discussed how they had been swept up in combat, how they had killed

women and children. At the end of the discussion, the group’s leader approached the ICRC delegate, patted him on the back, and told him, “You know, the outside world considers us as wild animals. My hands are stained with blood. But your discussion here has given me back part of my dignity.”

This story resonates deeply with Jennifer Leaning. From reading the People on War interviews, and through her own previous work in war zones, she learned to recognize that “people in these places are grateful for contact with the outside world. It makes them feel like human beings.” She said she feels strongly that one of the greatest services the ICRC and other NGOs can provide is “the external eye of the moral observer.” The mere presence of these groups can remind people of their own humanity, spurring them to recapture their moral identity through acts of compassion and altruism, she said. If people in warfare have lost touch with their own moral voice, she said, “perhaps they’ll have a shock of recognition

when they see someone coming out of a Land Rover and holding a white flag.”

This is one of several hypotheses that Briton and Leaning want to test in a follow-up study. They said their work so far provides a solid platform from which to launch further investigations, but they stressed that they have yet to prove definite connections between any of these factors and altruistic behavior. They’re currently seeking more funding to revisit many of the questions spawned by the People on War project, but want to conduct interviews that ask subjects explicitly about altruistic or compassionate



Harvard University researchers Nancy Briton (left) and Jennifer Leaning.

motivations. Down the line, they said they hope that some of their research will inform intervention efforts.

Though they have no illusions that such research can ever stop wars, they said they think it could at least make conflicts less ugly. The key, said Leaning, lies in finding ways to strengthen people’s “moral musculature” before they ever find themselves in the midst of conflict, an objective she thinks “should be part of a common educational agenda across the world.”

After undertaking this initial project, Nancy Briton said she is optimistic that such a goal can be achieved. “To know that there is just a little glimmer of humanity and of hope even in the most demoralizing, traumatic, horrible situations in the world—it really does give me a bit of hope for the future.”

Jason Marsh is a co-editor of *Greater Good*.

For Further Reading

Nancy Briton and Jennifer Leaning’s project comes after similar research on the roots of compassion and altruism. Here are summaries of several books on the topic.

Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 445 pp.

The Oliners’ landmark study examined a group of people whose actions, they write, “seem to defy what we think we know about human nature.” After extensive interviews with 406 rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, 126 nonrescuers who lived in Nazi Europe, and 150 Holocaust survivors, they conclude that rescuers were not likely motivated by concerns with self, external approval, or achievement. Rather their actions reflected their heightened “capacity for extensive relationships—their stronger sense of attachment to others and their feelings of responsibility for the welfare of others,” which, the Oliners say, had often been instilled in them from the time they were children.

Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 312 pp.

Monroe interviewed members of four groups—entrepreneurs, philanthropists, heroes/heroines, and rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe—in order to understand and explain the origins of altruism. She concludes that traditional explanations of altruism are incomplete. The problem, she says, is that these explanations are constrained by an implicit assumption that self-interest guides most human behavior. At the true heart of altruism, she argues, is an “altruistic perspective,” a common perception among altruists “that they are strongly linked to others through a shared humanity,” which cannot be explained through the lens of self-interest.

Stephen G. Post, Lynn G. Underwood, Jeffrey P. Schloss, and William B. Hurlbut, eds., *Altruism & Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, & Religion in Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 516 pp.

This volume includes the work of preeminent scholars of altruism and related subjects, and the contributions span the disciplines of psychology, evolutionary biology, and religious ethics, among many others. Perhaps as useful as the book’s thoughtful essays, of which there are nearly two dozen, are a broad annotated bibliography of previous altruism research and a concluding summary that suggests future research directions.