

PSY 1: Introduction to Psychological Science
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January 15, 2021
Term Paper

The Fear Factor by Abigail Marsh: How Altruism Provides Pathways to the Discovery of
Treatments for Impulsivity and Psychopathy

After her almost-deadly experience on a highway, Marsh finds herself puzzled by the life-taking risk her rescuer took to save her. With altruism at its prime, her helper's actions are discrepant to evolutionary rationale. And this unintuitive event sets Marsh into putting the pieces of the evolutionary puzzle together through the use of scientific literature like Milgram's, Batson's, Pinker's, and her own to discover an evolutionary picture that would provide a natural understanding for altruism.

Marsh recognizes that there is altruism just as there is violence. So, looking at psychopathy for what it is, Marsh presents how a dysfunctional amygdala robs psychopaths of the ability to recognize and experience fear. With that understanding, Marsh provides a newly found appreciation of this inability of empathy. Marsh eloquently guides the reader to understand why psychopathy is not the absence of remorse but the absence of a functional amygdala, being a disability of the brain, not a disability of the self. And after diving into the depths of human variation, Marsh shows us that, despite human variability, altruism lies within mostly every one of us.

Natural selection wants us to survive and reproduce. And as a result, we are evolutionarily designed to optimize whatever is given to us and give to our offspring. However, there is only so much mental capacity that understanding the overarching processes to achieve this goal is beyond us. Like a Roomba whose only desire to suck on the floor, we are birds in

boxes that follow evolution's choice, conditioned to do so (Wegner et al. 273). But through revolutionary tales, Marsh does an extraordinary job at demonstrating the role that altruism plays in our everyday lives by guiding us through a series of logical reasoning and empirical resolutions to support that altruism is imperative for our life to care for one's and others' offspring. Pointing out that humans distribute in a Normal Curve, Marsh allows us to see that humanity is variable, resonating with the idea that randomization in evolution is guaranteed. Those who are extraordinarily altruistic are not surprising by expected. As a result of randomness and predispositions, Natural Selection covers all possibilities by providing these individuals with overdrives that allow them to be more sensible to other's suffering. And Marsh does an outstanding job at using this to help her search the nature of altruism. And considering that psychopaths do recognize anger, disgust, and not fear, it's clear that empathy is not a single entity, but a constitution of diverse committees distributed throughout the brain.

Marsh seems to be a little too optimistic towards the nurturing aspects of humans. Deviating from Milgram's research on authority (Encina), Marsh frames obedience and compassion as different fields of force to add that individuals' variation could help explain true altruism. However, this doesn't take away from how the empowerment of wellness and individualism might increase one's generosity and philanthropic nature. As a result, *The Fear Factor* is more relevant now than before because it begs the question of whether prosperity is the most indicative factor of stranger collaboration and kindness, or if it is struggling, or both. With a more prosperous time at the writing of *The Fear Factor*, looking at today's situation could answer this dilemma.

Additionally, Marsh brings much-needed attention to the neurobiological factors at play in the variability of altruism in humans. There is a path to understanding the brain a little better

and perhaps answer the questions that could help find treatments for disorders like psychopathy.

The amygdala creates an empathic response when it recognizes fear, and what seems like bravery to the naked eye is an oxytocin overload that suppresses the impulses from fear. Since psychopaths have an inactive amygdala, their fear-recognition process and their primitive instinct to help is gone, which props up the question of whether it is purely fear recognition that drives oxytocin. Marsh raises the question of whether it is the hormone that's missing; psychopath's amygdalae might as well be intact. This reasoning inspires questions revolving around topics such as the impact of trauma on sensitivity and perhaps the awareness of fear. Would people with a generalized anxiety disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder be more primitively altruistic? They are more sensitive, but based on this sensitivity and the present hormone of oxytocin, would they still be able to act in a "heroic" way? These questions and more can help scientists find ways to help treat these illnesses. By understanding the neurobiological processes of fear recognition, scientists could find a way to treat those with negative sensitivity.

Lastly, since many people are driven by irrational impulses that might end up in meaningless negative consequential situations, could altruistic people's instincts show a way to help understand others' impulsivity? With stories such as people donating to scammers, it could be easy to believe that altruistic individuals are just as clouded in their frontal lobe when making decisions. However, the mechanisms of altruism might help explain other types of impulses or give means to seek a more neurobiological understanding of them.

Parts of Marsh's book drag a little bit much such as in Chapter 6. However, the clarity one may obtain from reading *The Fear Factor* is invaluable. In *The Fear Factor*, Marsh pulls dozens of revolutionary scientific discoveries to make a narrative that provides rewarding clarity on human impulse and desire to do the right thing. Marsh's remarks, like on how empathy of a

fictional character leads to kindness, hold invaluable practicality for people to enact the self-fulfilling prophecy of living meaningful lives through genuine acts and altruism. *The Fear Factor* might inspire and guide future scientists to discover treatments to provide meaning to those who still can't have them.

Works Cited

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