

# The harmful side of doing good

When caring for others goes too far, the consequences can be disastrous. **Barbara Oakley** and **Guruprasad Madhavan** explain how altruism can be perverted by a lack of objectivity, and how science is not immune

ONE summer night in 2006 Carole Alden, a purportedly kind-hearted artist and doting mother of five, shot and killed her husband in the remote reaches of Utah's Great Basin. Alden claimed he had been charging straight at her, aiming to kill, and that she was simply defending herself.

The autopsy revealed, however, that the first bullet had hit him not square in the chest – as Alden initially told police – but in the back. Investigators learned that a few hours after the killing, Alden slipped over to a friend's house to take a nap, later returning to drag her husband's body out of her home with a rope attached to a jeep. The next morning she spent hours digging a hole for the body.

She made only one miscalculation. She revealed to her friend – who police later determined was her lover – what she had done and asked his help in moving the corpse. Horrified, he refused and told her he was planning to call the police. Only then, some 12 hours after the killing, did Alden herself call the authorities.

As described in the book *Cold-Blooded Kindness*, written by one of us, the evidence is overwhelming that Alden lied about many crucial details when she spoke to police. She went to great lengths to hide the fact that she

had bought the gun on the very day her husband died. Other clues indicate she had been considering killing him for a long time. Furthermore, her portrayal of herself as a helpless victim trapped in the hands of a monster does not add up, since her husband had already left her: she went to find him and bring him back to the house the evening she shot him. Yet Alden, sentenced to prison for up to 15 years after admitting manslaughter, has many vociferous supporters who continue to back her version of events. Why?

In letting their good intentions blind them to the facts, Alden's supporters are displaying what we call "pathological altruism". A pathological altruist is someone who is sincerely motivated to help others, but whose supposedly altruistic acts have harmful consequences. This is not a clinical diagnosis. Rather, it is a less stigmatising way of saying Alden's supporters are gullible: they have been duped by her claim that she is the victim, taking her assertions at face value without examining the other side of the story.

Well-intentioned activities that lead to negative outcomes are all around us. Our comprehensive review of this field – published in October in the book *Pathological Altruism* – shows that many of society's most pernicious troubles arise under the guise of, or as a consequence of, attempts to help others. Pathologies of altruism can result in all kinds of abuses, such as the neglect of children, and can lead to misinformed legislation and the misapplication of science. If we really want to help others, we should recognise that altruism can be dangerous.

Over the past decade, there has been an explosion in research and interest in the positive aspects of altruism. Several



TIANE DOANNA CHAMPASSAKA/AGENCE VU/CORBIS OUTLINE

**Hutus who killed Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide often thought it would protect their own families**

disciplines, in particular neuroscience and genetics, are providing useful new insights. Against this background, even to hint that altruism could have a dark shadow seems sacrilegious to many. What if it causes people to stop trying to help others?

This should not deter us from exploring the issue, given the harm it can cause if left unchallenged. For example, during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many Hutus killed Tutsis because they thought that in doing so they would help to protect their fellow Hutus. In other words, they believed they were benefiting their society, their culture and those most dear to them. And there are many other examples of harmful behaviours that occur within the context of helping those close to us, or our in-group – ranging from suicide attacks to codependency in

## PROFILE

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relationships. Even anorexia may be rooted in pathologies of altruism: some studies have suggested that dealing with anorexics' tendency to sacrifice their own needs and interests can be as helpful as focusing on the eating component of the disorder.

Pathological altruists can be easily manipulated by those who are less altruistic. Hitler, for example, was a master at using people's best traits – their faith, hope, love and willingness to make sacrifices – to his own advantage as he steered his nation to war. The late historian Robert Waite, a perceptive analyst of the Nazi movement, wrote: "The effectiveness of [Hitler's] propaganda lay finally in this – he made it seem that his party's nihilism was idealism, its brutality strength, its vicious 'ideology' altruism."

Many of us imagine that we would never be duped by such an obvious con. But it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking one is doing good when that is not the case.

## **“Researchers, hoping to help others, may conclude that an ineffective drug works”**

Certainly science can become perverted through pathologies of altruism. In 2005 the epidemiologist John Ioannidis claimed – in what has become the most downloaded essay to appear in *PLoS Medicine* – that most published medical research findings are false. How can that be? Often it is because researchers, hoping that their work will be helpful to others, see what they want to see. For example, they will conclude that a drug is effective when it isn't, or that autism is caused by "cold parenting". This is dangerous, for science can lose credibility in the eyes of the public when the truth comes out. Worse, it can lead the public astray if they buy into false or misleading results.

How can we guard against the dark side of

altruism? In any situation where we feel impelled to help others, it is crucial to step out of our comfort zone and examine the arguments from the other side. We must be willing to learn, in as open-minded a fashion as possible, from those with whom we disagree. In some sense, this means applying the scientific method to our lives. Like scientists, we need to play devil's advocate and actively seek ways of disproving a hypothesis, asking ourselves if an act that seems unquestionably altruistic can have broader negative consequences.

Our better nature can lead us to do things that end up harming the very people we are trying to help, or a larger group of people we have not considered. If we are to do good in the world, it is as vital to understand the pathologies of altruism as it is to understand altruism itself. It is time to bring science to bear on the ancient wisdom that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. n