Worksheet 8.3

Example answer to practice question 1 (Chapter 8)

This model answer is a guide for students in terms of structure and content. It represents above-average work.

1 Contrast two theories of altruism in humans. [22 marks]

Two theories of altruism in humans are the kin selection hypothesis and the empathy–altruism hypothesis. Both of these theories will be briefly described and then differences will be addressed, specifically focusing on the assumptions underlying them, the extent to which they have empirical support, and their overall validity.

The kin selection hypothesis is an evolutionary psychology theory, based on the assumption of the biological level of analysis that behaviour can be inherited. The theory suggests that altruism is an evolved response that exists in humans now because such prosocial behaviour has in the past provided a survival advantage: specifically that when we help those who are closely related to us and therefore share genes with us, we increase the chance of the family genes being passed on to future generations. The empathy–altruism hypothesis also addresses biological factors, assuming that seeing a person in need sparks an emotional response in humans. A key difference between the two theories is that the empathy–altruism hypothesis then focuses on cognitive factors that determine how the person will respond to the event, arguing that the decision to act depends on factors such as how strong a victim’s need for help seems to be. This means that while one theory focuses only on the biological basis of helping behaviour, the other focuses on the way people process information in a particular situation.

Both theories have been researched, and have empirical support, but there are important differences in the way this research is done and how confident we can be about the researchers’ conclusions. The kin selection hypothesis, as an evolutionary theory, is more difficult to test. Sime (1983) reported that when people fled a burning building, they were more likely to stay together if they were related. There is also evidence from Piliavin et al.’s (1969) bystander intervention experiment in the New York subway that we are more likely to help people who are similar to us. This could be because their physical similarity is a sign of genetic similarity and is therefore preferred. Madsen et al. (2007) studied the theory in the UK and South Africa by asking participants to perform a physically uncomfortable task in order to make a small amount of money for relatives of varying closeness, and found that participants were indeed more willing to suffer for the benefit of the closest relatives. Although this provides valuable cross-cultural support for the kin selection hypothesis, there are possible alternate explanations for the results: the variable of relatedness cannot be manipulated by researchers, limiting them to quasi-experiments, which prevents clear isolation of cause and effect.
Because the empathy–altruism hypothesis, like many cognitive theories, presents ideas that can more easily be tested in true experiments, there is stronger empirical support for the influence of the variables that researchers consider important. For example, when Toi and Batson (1982) manipulated levels of empathy by asking participants to listen to an interview in different ways, it became apparent that the level of empathy was the most important determinant of whether participants would offer to help a person they thought was a fellow student. This means that although kin selection might be an important contributing factor to a decision to help, it does not have as clear a role as empathy. On the other hand, it is very difficult to be sure that results from laboratory experiments like this, which focus on the cognitive level of analysis, have ecological validity: the task and location may affect what people say about how they will act. Research on the kin selection hypothesis can involve more realistic situations and genuine behaviour rather than predictions of behaviour.

With these ideas in mind, we can finally contrast the two theories in terms of their overall validity. Kin selection is a hypothesis that has been tested across cultures, in real situations, and that has good face validity: it sounds logical that we would be genetically inclined to help biological relatives, even if it is difficult to test experimentally. Even if definitions of kin may be broader or narrower in different cultures, the core idea seems appealing. On the other hand, the empathy–altruism hypothesis is less easy to test cross-culturally and it is easy to see how empathy, a concept that is difficult to describe and measure, could be more important in some cultures than others. Bystander intervention research has shown, for example, that situational variables have a very powerful effect on people’s behaviour regardless of their levels of empathy.

The two theories are different in several ways, perhaps most fundamentally in terms of the assumptions underpinning them: it is possible that they both have explanatory power but simply focus on different levels of analysis, which therefore gives them strengths and limitations that are typical of research at their respective levels.