



Associates of the Compassionate Mind Foundation

Germany

Hans-Werner Bierhoff is Professor of Psychology at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. A deeper understanding of prosocial behaviour is dependent on the appreciation of motivational and emotional processes which are linked to compassion. I assume that compassion is a function of the person and the situation. Therefore, persons' stable characteristics and situational determinants like incentives and constraints must be taken into account to understand the development and expression of compassion. Two interpersonal motives are of special relevance for the psychology of compassion: empathy and guilt. Stable characteristics which are linked to compassion also include social responsibility, prosocial values and the altruistic personality which all contribute to the likelihood that compassion will be experienced in a given situation.

On the other side, situational factors contribute to the formation of a specific motivation of potential helpers. They may operate as constraints which reduce the options of the potential helper (e.g. by limiting his or her resources for coping with a situation). Or they may determine the difficulty which potential helpers have to overcome before they are able to intervene effectively on behalf of victims. The interaction between situation and stable characteristics of the person leads to the formation of specific action tendencies in a given situation. For example, high similarity between victim and helper may elicit compassion which heightens the likelihood of intervention on behalf of the victim. Or a distancing instruction which puts the potential helper in the role of an objective observer may reduce feelings of compassion.

I am especially interested in the development of compassion in children including the biological and cultural perspective, prosocial self-reinforcement systems, and attributional processes which facilitate altruism. In addition, I am interested to learn more about the role of prosocial personality and attachment styles for compassion. Finally, I am very much interested in the link between compassion and forgiveness.

