

Understanding the Psychology of Altruism

Atukunda Lucky

Faculty of Business Administration and Management Kampala International University Uganda
Email: lucky.atukunda@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Altruism, defined as selfless concern for the well-being of others, is a phenomenon that has intrigued scholars across disciplines for centuries. This paper explores the psychology of altruism through historical, theoretical, and empirical lenses. It examines its philosophical roots, evolutionary significance, and cultural variations while analyzing key psychological mechanisms that drive altruistic behavior. Factors such as empathy, situational influences, and mental health connections are explored to provide a comprehensive understanding of why people engage in self-sacrificial acts. The role of altruism in crisis situations, its challenges, and notable case studies further highlight the complexity of this behavior. By synthesizing existing literature, this study seeks to offer a nuanced perspective on the motivations and consequences of altruistic actions, emphasizing their significance in fostering social cohesion and well-being.

Keywords: Altruism, empathy, prosocial behavior, evolutionary psychology, cultural influences, mental health, crisis response, social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

Altruism is generally defined as unselfish concern for the well-being of other people, an act of aiding others or acting less selfishly with no apparent gain for oneself. According to another perspective, altruism is 'actions which benefit another but entail a cost to the actor'. Altruistic acts are typically defined in terms of their beneficial outcomes for the recipient, regardless of the intention of the actor. In this perspective, it is necessary to know that all acts are based on actions and observing the actions of individuals. Altruistic behavior has long been of interest to researchers in various fields, but there has been a remarkable surge in the interest in the last few decades. As an aspect of everyday life, helping behavior seems to be a concept that is simple and easy to understand. In the literature, however, the debates raise subtle and complex questions. This is because, like all social behaviors, helping is multifaceted and influenced by a plethora of factors. Answers to questions such as why some people help and others do not, what situations are more likely to evoke altruistic acts, and whether true altruism exists, in turn, have far reaching implications for social psychology and a diverse range of social practices. Altruism is more than merely a helping behavior. Subsequent research has unpicked the idea that helping behavior can be understood as an independent variable, and has instead raised questions such as 'what is an altruistic act?' and 'what makes an act altruistic?'. Further, these questions can be approached from the related but distinct components of motivation and the nature of altruism itself. It is important to clarify that no one act of helping is ever definitively altruistic [1, 2].

Historical Perspectives on Altruism

The debate surrounding altruism is rooted in ethical considerations of 'goodness of man' and 'nature versus nurture'. Auguste Comte coined the term 'altruism' in 1851, describing a doctrine centered on the

welfare of others. While altruism embodies virtue in many religions and philosophies, self-interest has been emphasized by Aristotelian, liberal capitalist, and Darwinian thought. In contrast, concepts of empathy and self-denial are celebrated in Buddhism, Christianity, Quakerism, and thinkers like Kant and Schopenhauer. This dichotomy regarding human nature remains both present and controversial. Foundational religious and philosophical movements, including Christianity, Confucianism, and works by Plato and Aristotle, laid the groundwork for moral systems governing society over two millennia. The notion of 'altruism' as moral conduct benefitting others is prevalent in these traditions. Altruism has been argued as a mechanism underpinning cooperation and a socially beneficial trait. Different types of altruism—reciprocal, kin, group, and full-blown—have been identified, along with critiques positing a hereditary basis for morality and concerns that altruistic governments might be undemocratic. This ongoing discourse highlights the historical context of altruism and its fluctuating perception across different societies and eras. Key events and philosophical discussions reveal the disparity in attitudes toward selflessness, suggesting a complex legacy of altruism that continues to provoke interest and debate today [3, 4].

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks surrounding altruism are rich and diverse. Moreover, because altruism is as much a philosophical and common-sense idea as a scientifically testable concept, its psychological investigation has sprouted manifold models and concepts for multiple angles of analysis. Pursuing all the possible approaches of altruism theories would in itself require a full-length book. However, some of the obvious and influential theories, together with a few not so common ones, deserve at least a cursory review for a comprehensive understanding of the scientific bases of altruism. The principal aim of this paper is to lay down such bases in a manner conducive to the analysis of various kinds of "altruistic" or voluntaristic behavior considered in subsequent paper, where a network of direct and indirect connections between theoretical ideas and empirical research will be drawn. Studied from an evolutionary perspective, altruism emerges as one of the most rewarding topics of psychological inquiry, because of the singularly close ties of most "altruistic" human behaviors with the probable heritability of many biological traits. Indeed, while researchers dispute the actual relevance of the possibility of self-sacrifice advanced by tit-for-tat strategies in the ongoing controversies on the good, the bad, and the ugly of social dilemma thinking, the mere idea that a psychic trait pressuring individuals to deny direct rewards will complement itself with a genetic one facilitating group cohesion, cooperation, and potentially increasing the likelihood that principles of fairness and social justice spread in a community resounds as an awfully attractive rationale unplagued by the typical fallacies usually associated with so-called evolutionary psychology. However, R. Trivers seminal work, seminal although dated, is more complex than too many enthusiasts and detractors of "adaptionism" seem ready to acknowledge. Any meaningful discourse on the evolution of altruism, be it biological, cannot be subsumed under the standard formula reg's-decs resulting from Trivers simulations [5, 6].

Factors Influencing Altruistic Behavior

Altruism, a genuine concern for the welfare of others, offers some of the best aspects of human social behavior. Due to its effects on both the giver and the receiver, there exists an extensive body of literature on the topic of altruism in the social science field. Generally speaking, there is an extreme amount of complexity in defining and predicting this behavior in an individual. However, research has often investigated the effects that personality, empathy, emotional state, and situational factors have on the likelihood of helping another. Past research on this issue has been mixed, and many questions continue to be raised. The goal of this study is to add to the understanding of altruism by conducting an analysis of a variety of variables that may influence whether a person will help a stranger. Altruistic behavior has been assessed, in some studies, by conducting an experiment involving a staged event in which a confederate apparently needs help. Although there are methodological issues unique to such laboratory studies, they have often successfully identified variables related to how likely a person is to help. These experiments typically test the effect of some type of intervention on helping behavior or measure the frequency of helping in relation to different variables. A concern with such laboratory measures of altruism is that, although versatile, they are often devoid of the typical aspects of real situations. However, it is rare for a person to be in a situation in which the nature of the help needed and the actions required are unambiguous. Deciding to help another individual is often a complex decision involving many factors. Even when a person decides to help, he or she must decide what type of help to give. The complexity of

natural situations makes any single experimental manipulation overly simplistic. More sophisticated manipulations and complex studies are needed in order to increase the understanding of which individuals are likely to help [7, 8].

Altruism In Different Cultures

The concept of altruism covers a broad range of behavior and so it is not surprising that it takes many different forms in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, the manifestation of altruism is likely to be influenced by each culture's beliefs and values. An action regarded as self-sacrificing and therefore of great virtue in one culture may be considered not particularly noteworthy or even as foolish and reckless in another culture. On the other hand, helping or sharing behavior may follow widely different practices but involve similar levels of benefit gained. Hence, when one culture is compared with another, the expectation is that a mix of universal and unique behaviors should emerge. Another important line of investigation assesses how practices within a culture socialize individuals to perform or inhibit altruistic acts under different conditions. Research has produced examples of similar socialization practices that lead children to help their mothers across different cultures alongside examples of divergent practices, such as the Punjabi preference for cooperative play versus the Cochin Jewish emphasis on caregiving [9, 10].

Psychological Mechanisms Behind Altruism

Altruism is a complex motive-oriented behavior that both harms and helps received others and minimizes risk and maximizes benefit to the actor. There are different types of altruism based on motives (egoistic, helpful) and openness (concealed, open). At least some wraps are helpful altruism, openly performed to family and bonding partners. To the actor, these wraps are "open, helpful, consanguinal," and designed to "display ability with no motive to discrepate cooperator". Conspicuous altruistic wraps help cooperatively assembled deadly weapons defeat competitors, thereby causing group dominance and gene spread. There heuristically designed the psychology of helpful altruism, openly performed, emotional-cognitive driven, to "display ability with no motive to discrepate cooperator". The design features 13 hypotheses and 20 nested corollaries, each unambiguously designated as "H" and "C." Also included are the necessary and redundant predictions necessary to apply the method to any individual and/or group. The model is designed for applied; dual-use research yet ensures scientific transparency. Using contemporary ethnographic and historical evidence, the model accurately predicts the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the James, Brazilian foragers, and Western academics. When properly designed, the psychology of altruism reveals the emotions, cognitions, and behaviors of the actor and the received. By understanding the psychological mechanism, it is possible to reverse-engineer wraps, including those painted on Upper Paleolithic caves [11, 12].

Altruism and Mental Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide human suffering far exceeds that of the population of any single community. Observing the suffering brought about by the virus vividly, why do some people still generously perform acts of kindness for those in need? This study used an online questionnaire to collect data on altruism and the mental health of 3,789 Chinese university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to explore the influence of altruism on the mental health of university students during the pandemic. The results showed that altruism among the student participants significantly affected both positive and negative emotions, but that negative emotions moderate the effect of altruism on altruism. Finally, opportunities and suggestions for future research are discussed. Altruism exists in the cultural, as well as in the human, species. To educate altruism, effort was made pertaining to the human aspects of the phenomenon. In this context, altruism in micro-social behavior of university students vis-à-vis neighborhood societies was inquired into. Based on the obtained empirical findings, an incubatory intervention model was developed to promote the everyday altruistic behaviors of university students in Turkish society. Recent research has called for a more comprehensive understanding of how older adult volunteers balance the negative aspects associated with altruistic activity against the positive aspects. To examine the relationships between altruistic activity and positive affect, as well as negative affect, among low-income, older adult service providers. The results suggest that multi-dimensional constructs of negative and positive affect must be taken into account when examining the relationships between older adult service providers' altruistic activities and their mental health [13, 14].

The Role of Empathy

People are connected through a range of emotions like joy, anger, and sadness. Empathy enables individuals to sense and understand others' feelings, sharing them as if they were their own. This connection is innate, nurtured from infancy when babies react to their mothers' gestures. Some individuals grow up retaining this warmth, showcasing significant empathy and concern for others, often helping those in need. This empathy fuels altruism, as people become more compassionate when they encounter heartwarming stories. Through intimate looks and gestures, individuals can foster open communication. Understanding literature or poetry enhances this deep connection, essential for maintaining a harmonious atmosphere that cultivates benevolence. Respected social relationships hinge on empathy, allowing for the generation of goodwill within communities, promoting humility and compassion. Altruism and benevolence are recognized as global values, emphasized by major religions advocating for selfless love. Peaceful nations promote social solidarity and mutual benefit, aligning closely with altruistic values. In contrast, war-torn, impoverished areas demonstrate a lack of empathy, undermining progress. Studies show that both cognitive and emotional empathy positively predict various aspects of perspective-taking during volunteer activities [15, 16].

Altruism In Crisis Situations

Altruism is having regard to the welfare of others even at some cost to oneself. Many instances of altruism can be explained by evolutionary theory in terms of the net benefit it confers to the species. Thus, reciprocal altruism, in which favors are traded, or kin selection, where the altruist has a genetic interest in the success of the beneficiary, are commonplace in nature. Altruism in the absence of direct benefit is harder to explain and is often the subject of social psychological research. Nevertheless, this was the focus of several case studies provided. One explanation of this behavior during disasters is that increased stress can lead to a linear increase in selfish and apathetic behavior. A parallel possibility is that people enter a crisis with strong pre-existing biases. The stranger-stabbing incidents do not provide much support for this hypothesis as all the case studies occurred in countries with highly disparate cultural backgrounds. It is also common after disasters for accounts to emerge of looters being shot or lynch mobs attacking the poor. Their initial response is often, "I can't see anything wrong with that." Rather it is the heroic acts of altruism that people remember and admire, such as of firemen heading up stairs as the twin towers collapsed on September 11, 2001. As the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein pointed out, disasters can breakdown the boundary between inner mental states and external events. Little surprise then that the two events following the collapse of the twin towers were a shopping spree and the abandonment of former doormen in their New York Warsaw ghetto [17, 18].

Case Studies of Altruism

Altruism is defined as an unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others. It refers to a special class of motivations which are focused on the goal of increasing another's welfare, frequently at some cost to oneself. Theories of altruism have proliferated rapidly over the past decade with biologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists each defining the subject in their own way and approaching it with what look to be mutually exclusive methods. Humean altruism and genuine (other regulated) altruism are sharply distinguished from each other. Methodological and empirical shifts are suggested that might render some of the subjects apparently immune to analysis. Biological altruism has a definite theoretical core that allows genuine altruism to be more easily identified. On the individual and developmental levels, it is arguable that genuine altruism is found primarily in the very young or the pathological. A human who encounters a homeless person on the street and despairs, or who feels disgusted by the sight of a beggar and who, seeing such a sight, looks away and walks on can hardly be called "united". Biological altruism is linked to a core, abstract behavioral disposition. That is, biological altruism works off of the kinds of motives and goals that individuals innately, or at least commonly, harbor within them. By this definition, behavior is altruistic if it typically results from such a core disposition in a given species under normal conditions. In this sense, altruism may be based off either internal states, external behaviors, or both. There has been a steady push for two increasingly narrow classes of altruism: biological altruism and psychological altruism. The former is based off of facts about the external behavior of the acting individuals; the latter is based off of facts about the internal psychological states of individuals. This movement has become so entrenched that it is now common to find references to "biological versus psychological altruism." Yet, despite the steadfast focus on these two forms of altruism, it is quite clear that these are not the only forms of altruism in existence [19, 20].

Challenges to Altruism

Altruism, the ideal of self-sacrificial concern for others, faces criticism despite its perceived benevolence. Social psychologists argue that altruistic behavior may stem from intrinsic influences, such as emotive responses or social induction, aimed at enhancing the actor's well-being. Evolutionary psychologists point to reciprocal altruism or kin selection, suggesting that sacrifices benefit carriers of shared genes or those who may reciprocate. Economists criticize altruistic economic policies, claiming acts of apparent altruism often mask egoistic motivations, like securing personal reputation. Challenges to natural altruism include societal distrust and conflicts, limiting genuine disinterested consideration. Practical resource constraints may further blur the line between self-interest and altruism. The human experience is complex; deep drives can clash with perceived essence, leading to unpredictable outcomes. Survival instincts like cowardice and self-interest shape behavior, where past horrors are replaced by financial gain and curated generosity. This reveals a troubling reality: the oppressed may simulate kindness while the wealthy provide mere scraps as evidence of generosity [21, 22].

Promoting Altruism in Society

This paper will consider altruism promotion. Research evidence is presented showing that community engagement, collective education, and optimal policy incentives are possible strategies in fostering altruistic behavior. Some good examples from existing programs and campaigns aimed at fostering altruism in a community are presented. This paper seeks to cover the importance of role models and societal value promotion as an approach to foster altruism. The potential of digital platforms and social networks in promoting and enhancing the outreach of altruistic activities in a community are also discussed. Understanding altruism at different levels of analysis is essential to promote mission-based behavior. Psychological and experimental evidence shows that personal cost and personal benefit can affect pro-social behavior. From a socio-economic point of view, a number of theories have been developed to try to explain the behavior of altruism. The theories include group selection, direct donation, reciprocal altruism, indirect donation, network altruism, learning altruism, altruism-based health and kin theory. However, the data do not support any of the models around the world. It is challenging for policy makers to consider how to sustain altruistic actions. A comprehensive approach to community engagement at the grass-roots level could cover community-based education and training support, a supportive policy environment. More evidence is needed on the effectiveness of such programs and policies, and on how these programs and policies can be promoted and delivered in different contexts [23, 24].

Future Directions in Altruism Research

Research into altruism is vast, spanning the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, economics, and neuroscience, among others. Most of this work has been discipline-based and has therefore been conducted in silos. The pivotal task of the field in the coming years will be to bring together the knowledge and findings of the various disciplines and to coordinate their efforts in mapping out the complex and multidimensional landscape of altruism. Recent attempts to map social networks and to discern patterns of behavior have been informative. The advancement of neuroimaging techniques has brought about a better understanding of the neural activities underlying both the causes and the effects of altruism. Epidemiological and industrial-organizational studies have revealed the repercussions of altruism on public health and workplace dynamics. Despite the successes of these approaches, however, they have been limited to views of isolated areas of the overall phenomena. Geographic maps, for example, may reveal some insights about a certain land, or even multiple lands bounded by water. Rarely, however, do they provide information about the socio-historical attributes of an empire, such as the array of behaviors that foster pro-empire sentiments or the traditions and ideologies that shape and maintain various behaviors. Similarly, research-discipline approaches may reveal mechanisms causing the increase or decrease in certain forms of prosocial behavior, but they often neglect the broader account of how an increased number of such behaviors may exhibit a bizarre or informative pattern of a certain culture. Similar criticism pertains to studies of brain regions, social groups, or genes. Each of these may provide detailed information about some behavior or dynamic, but they fail to present an account that unites altruistic actions across various levels of analysis – from the neural underpinning of a single act of charity, through the complex network of food, arms, and exotic patterns that constitute the imperial acts of benevolence, to more abstract ideological constructs such as the Confucian wisdom or the divine authority of the emperor [25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Altruism is a deeply complex and multifaceted behavior that intertwines biological, psychological, cultural, and social dimensions. While theories from evolutionary psychology suggest a genetic basis for altruistic behavior, social and environmental influences significantly shape how and when individuals choose to help others. Empathy remains a central driving force behind altruistic acts, yet factors such as situational variables and personal psychological well-being influence its expression. Despite challenges such as skepticism, resource limitations, and societal distrust, altruism plays a crucial role in fostering cooperation and strengthening social bonds. By further exploring the psychological and cultural underpinnings of altruism, researchers can develop strategies to encourage prosocial behaviors, ultimately contributing to a more compassionate and cohesive society.

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