

The Formation Mechanism of Altruistic Behavior

Xinlu Zhou*

Morrissey College of Arts and Science, Boston College, Boston, the United States

*Corresponding author: zhouxv@bc.edu

Abstract. Altruism entails the principle and actions of caring about the welfare and joy of fellow humans or animals. Previous studies have been conducted on altruism and altruism, which has been a moral question studied by psychologists for a long time. This paper shows the literature review of many specific aspects of altruism. It presents the definition and basic descriptions of altruism with altruistic behaviors of people, diverse types of altruism with specific examples in our daily life, different explanations about the motivations of people to form altruistic behaviors, current evidence conducted around human infants to support the existence of pure altruism, as well as several researches on the effect of gender difference in the area. The results can inspire the practice and research of altruism. Based on these results, by better understanding altruism, we may apply altruism in our lives in a better way.

Keywords: Altruistic Behavior; Formation Mechanism; Gender Differences.

1. Introduction

Altruism is a heated and controversial topic in the field of psychology. It is not uncommon to see people offer help in our daily lives, but it is considerable why people take this kind of action. Psychologists use the term “Altruism” to summarize people’s altruistic behaviors. Altruism involves the concept and action of caring for the well-being and joy of other individuals, whether they are humans or animals. It can be divided into different types, including group-selected altruism, kin altruism, reluctant altruism, reciprocal altruism, and pure altruism. Each type of altruism has different and diverse forms of revelations of behaviors in our daily lives.

There are diverse types of motivations for people to have altruistic behaviors. Some people are motivated by an altruistic personality that is naturally predisposed. Also, family factors such as parents’ education of their children can influence children’s altruistic behaviors. Based on this, people’s altruistic behaviors can be habit-forming to some extent, and having altruistic behavior at an early age can predict this kind of behavior in adulthood. Also, during the discussion of altruism, two controversial hypotheses are opposed to each other. One is egoism, and another is the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Egoism is the idea that an individual's self is, or should be, the driving force and objective behind their actions. When combined with altruism, it means that the altruistic behaviors of people are motivated by the thoughts and actions of benefiting oneself. Therefore, the benefits of oneself are one motivation and are also considered the ultimate goal under egoism. Nonetheless, the empathy-altruism hypothesis states that empathic concern produces altruistic motivation.

There is a wide range of evidence in the psychological field showing the existence of pure altruism. The experiments on human infants are strong and typical examples demonstrating that altruism can be pure without any reward. Also, gender differences can affect people’s altruistic behaviors based on the following evidence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition and Basic Description of Altruistic Behavior

Altruism entails the principle and actions of caring about the welfare and joy of fellow humans or animals. Altruistic actions, categorized among such behaviors and falling within the realm of prosocial behaviors, typically stem from voluntary intentions by individuals driven by the ultimate aim of enhancing the well-being of others [1].

2.2. Examples and Form of Expression

There are different types of altruism and diverse types of altruistic behavior. For example, one type of altruism is group-selected altruism. Some people (altruists) are willing to help and even forgo their well-being or the opportunity to reproduce in favor of benefiting other members within the group to guarantee the survival of the whole group [2]. Based on this description, this kind of altruism is conditional. They prefer to help people in their group and will not be motivated to help people outside of their group. There are also other types of altruism involving kin or genetic altruism, which is a type of altruism happening when people prefer to help those with blood relationships with them, such as family members, reluctant altruism that describes cooperation to arise when there is a lack of confidence in the willingness of others to offer help [3], and reciprocal altruism that people are motivated to help others and assume at the same time that those people they help would return to help in the future. Pure altruism exists in the world, which means that some people are motivated to offer help to others without any reward, even when it is risky for them.

To illustrate these types of altruism, there are many specific examples of altruistic behaviors for each type described above in our daily lives. First of all, for people of group-selected altruism, for example, they tend to help people in their group by offering help to people with the same cultural background instead of people with different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, people of kin altruism would be more likely to leave the last piece of a cake to their families instead of a stranger. They would try their best to take care of their relatives even though those relatives have chronic diseases. Many would also donate their blood or organs to people they are genetically linked to if necessary.

On top of that, in reluctant altruism, a straightforward example to illustrate this idea is that an individual agrees to contribute funds to a charitable event hosted by a friend, even though they don't hold a strong personal interest in the cause. Their donation might originate from feelings of obligation due to social norms, social expectations, or a wish to uphold a positive relationship with their friend instead of a heartfelt dedication to the charity's mission. In this scenario, giving reluctantly arises from external effects rather than an internal and sincere passion for the charitable cause. After that, based on the descriptions of reciprocal altruism, there are also many compelling examples in our daily lives. For instance, when people lend money to other people, they assume that those borrowers can return and have the potential ability to loan the money to them in return. They help classmates who previously helped them in other aspects of study with their homework, or they help neighbors fix cars because their neighbors helped them carry heavy furniture before. Last but not least, there are a lot of pure altruistic behaviors in our society. Many people give the homeless money and food without any conditions. Also, many would participate in volunteer activities such as helping older people in nursing homes or accompanying children in orphanages even though they do not have blood connections. Their motivations and interests to offer help to others are internally triggered. These behaviors are naturally motivated instead of being launched by other external factors. Thus, all of these depicted are examples of altruistic behaviors applied in our everyday lives.

2.3. Motivation

The altruistic behavior of some people can be motivated by the altruistic personality, which refers to a collection of innate, unselfish inclinations directed toward the well-being of others [4]. There are several studies on moral exemplars. In Oliner and Oliner's studies in 1988, they interviewed individuals who assisted Jewish people during World War II amidst the Holocaust. They found that the individuals who rescued others share common characteristics, such as a profound commitment to societal well-being, deeply ingrained moral principles centered on caring for others, and empathy for those in more challenging circumstances [5]. Also, psychologists conducted interviews with 23 Americans nominated for their exemplary qualities, aiming to identify their distinctive characteristics [6]. They finally found that they were all individuals who consistently engaged in prosocial behaviors over extended periods, demonstrating enduring traits associated with the personality of altruism.

Family factors can be one of the indispensable factors in motivating people's altruistic behaviors. Children's altruistic values and behaviors can be significantly influenced by their parents. There is a study researching altruistic behavior and the parent-child relationship. The result shows that children's altruistic behaviors are related to their parents' philanthropic values, frequent use of victim-centered discipline techniques, and the frequent use of affection [7]. Therefore, parents serve as a model for children and are possibly able to affect their future altruistic behaviors.

Based on this, people's altruistic behaviors may be motivated by their habits. By examining the data from the United States, psychologists found that if people engage in charitable behaviors when they are young, it could be a strong predictor of their future altruistic behaviors when they become adults [8]. According to this result, if people participate in altruistic activities in their childhood or when they are very young, it is strongly likely that they will reveal altruistic behaviors when they grow up.

C. Daniel Batson proposes a famous hypothesis called the empathy-altruism hypothesis. It asserts that empathic concerns lead to altruistic motivations [9]. Empathic concerns are emotions directed towards and in harmony with the well-being of others in a vulnerable situation. Emotions refer to feelings for others instead of feeling other people's feelings, and congruence represents that people can feel sorry for others who are sad and feel compassion for a victim of a terrible event. Also, it is essential to know that not all empathic emotions produce altruistic motivation, and it is only when another is perceived as in need.

On top of that, the emotions are a collection of emotions involving what other people call sympathy, compassion, distress, and so on. Further, this hypothesis states that the other-oriented emotions, such as compassion and sympathy, and the self-oriented emotions, such as distress and concern, can be felt simultaneously. This hypothesis does not make distinctions under emotion labels. The Altruistic motivations resulting from empathic concerns are the motivational state with an eventual destination of increasing the welfare of other people. The ultimate goal is not only essential in this hypothesis but also in egoism. Their motives are different, revealing that the former benefits others while the latter benefits oneself. However, the empathy-altruism hypothesis expressed that sometimes the self-benefit results can coexist with altruistic behaviors. For example, relieving other people's pain can relieve our own pain produced by seeing the pain, which is finally benefitting us. However, it is essential to know that the self-benefit is an unpurposed result instead of the ultimate goal [9]. Therefore, using the empathy-altruism hypothesis to understand people's altruistic behaviors is helpful.

2.4. Evidence

There is some evidence implying the existence of pure altruism. First, there is an experiment studying acts of selfless food sharing in the infants of humans. In the research study, 24 infants aged 18 months were exposed to ten different scenarios where an adult, a male experimenter, encountered different difficulties in accomplishing a task [10]. For example, in the study, the adult accidentally drops a marker on the floor and observes whether the child will offer help, such as handing the marker to the experimenter. The study showed that babies helped the adult in 6 out of 10 tasks. Therefore, the experiment showed that human toddlers as early as 18 months old cannot only readily understand others' goals but also spontaneously help others attain their objectives without the conditions of reward [10].

Also, another experiment published in 2020 studied the acts of selfless sharing of food exhibited by human infants [11]. Several 19-month-old Infants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group. In the experimental group, infants oversaw an experimenter dropping fruits onto a tray while trying to reach them. However, in the control group, infants observed the same experimenter purposefully tossing each fruit onto the tray without attempting to reach it. In the end, the result showed that almost 60% of infants were willing to transfer their fruits to the adults if they detected the fruit was accidentally dropped by the adult, who then revealed an attempt to reach it [11]. To more accurately reveal the food-sharing behaviors of infants, psychologists conducted the

second experiment in the study. They increased the time since the baby's last eating and found increased eating behavior, ensuring the babies understood the food was consumable. After that, when they compared the data on the percentage of transferring fruit, they finally discovered that the percentage in the experimental group is still notably higher than in the control group. Therefore, the experiments showed that 19-month-old human infants would be spontaneously willing to transfer their food to a stranger [11]. Therefore, these two studies of infants are examples of evidence, strongly implying that the naturally altruistic behaviors of humans exist in the world.

2.5. Differences of People in Altruism

To begin with, there are several previous findings that gender differences are a factor in affecting altruistic behaviors of people. In the study by James Andreoni and Lise Vesterlund, they examined this type of difference in modified dictator games, eventually finding that men are more likely to offer help if altruism is cheap. At the same time, women tend to be altruistic when the price is high [12]. This study concludes that men tend towards extreme selfishness or complete selflessness, while women tend to prefer equality, striving to share resources evenly [12]. Based on the research above, it has been believed that women are relatively more generous compared to men in many circumstances. In 2018, the journal published by Pablo Brañas-Garza and his colleagues conducted research in this area, which further demonstrated this result even though they started by some recent accounts that challenged this conclusion. They explored the gender differences in altruistic behaviors among Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) as a study sample because even though it can not represent the national sample, it is still more representative than the student sample used by many previous studies [13]. For example, by analyzing more than 3500 Dictator Game donations, they found that women gave 5.7% more than men [13]. As shown in statistics and further demonstrated, it is enormously significant that women tend to display more altruism than men.

Furthermore, the expectations to reveal altruistic behaviors also differ in gender differences. In the same study by Pablo Brañas-Garza described above, the percentage of mean expected modal altruism in men is 23.3%. In comparison, the percentage is 40.5% in women, and the median of the same measure is 10% in men and 50% in women [13]. Therefore, the data shows that women's mean and median expected modal altruism is more significant than men's. Similarly, in the previous study conducted by them in 2016, they discovered that both men and women hold accurate perceptions regarding the extent of altruism among men; however, they tend to overestimate the degree of altruism among women revealed in the data of t-test and z-test. Therefore, according to these results, women exhibit more significant levels of altruism than men and are expected to have this characteristic even though many are not as generous as they are considered.

3. Research Implication

Based on the literature review of existing research shown above, psychologists have already provided sufficient knowledge about altruism. There are different motivations for altruism or altruistic behaviors of humans, such as kin selection, group selection, reciprocal accounts, and so on. However, it is hard to determine which is the exact trigger because many other factors, such as gender differences, age discrepancy, social expectations, education level, and even sex distribution, can impact people's altruistic behaviors. For example, it is possible for some people with altruistic personalities who are more likely to help than others in usual situations not to help under the bystander effect. Also, even though these motivations and current evidence help explain these phenomena, it is still difficult to identify why people have these motivations and where they come from, whether from the angle of evolution and biological bases or social angle. Therefore, there are still many valuable questions for people to conduct studies to figure out. Based on these, by better understanding altruism, we may apply altruism in our lives in a better way. We have already had many activities stemming from altruism, such as volunteering and donations. Suppose we have a deeper

understanding of this topic. In that case, people may develop more and more altruistic activities in our society, which is possible for us to be better off in the future.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, people's altruistic behaviors can be understood and explained by different dimensions. First, there are diverse types of altruism and altruistic behaviors, including group-selected altruism, kin altruism, reluctant altruism, reciprocal altruism, and pure altruism, all of which can be found and have many examples in our lives. On top of that, psychologists have been studying the motivations of altruistic behaviors of humans. Some people are motivated by their altruistic personality, as revealed in the example of moral exemplars. Some people are affected by family factors and their habits. Many supporters of C. Daniel Batson advocate the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which states that altruistic motivation comes from empathic concerns. There is also much evidence supporting the existence of altruism, such that toddlers would be willing to offer help to others even though they would not acquire any reward. The existing research is admirable and fantastic, but if the understanding of altruism can be directed more profoundly, such as finding definite causes or explanations of these motivations by future researchers, we may apply this better in our daily lives.

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