Predictors of Beliefs About Altruism and Willingness to Behave Altruistically

Allison Howard, Donna Nelson, and Merry Sleigh*
Winthrop University

ABSTRACT. We tested the effect of written priming about personal experiences of altruism on college students’ beliefs about altruism. We also examined predictors of participants’ willingness to exhibit helping behavior in a nonurgent situation. They generally had positive beliefs about altruism. Priming did not significantly affect participants’ beliefs about altruism, but did affect participants’ perceptions of the motivations underlying altruistic behavior. Similarly, priming did not significantly influence participants’ willingness to exhibit helping behavior when participants did not expect further personal benefits; however, participants with positive attitudes about altruism exhibited greater willingness to help. The findings suggest that beliefs about altruism may be stable tendencies not easily influenced by brief interventions and also suggest that positive altruistic attitudes predict altruistic behavior in nonurgent situations.

Altruism is a well established concept. Batson (1991) defined it as a motivational state with the ultimate goal of promoting another’s welfare. An important element of altruism is that the helper is not motivated by self interest, but is instead motivated to meet the needs of another person. A recent meta-analysis of research in this domain supports Batson’s (1991) definition, as Haski-Leventhal (2009) found that practically every definition of altruism emphasizes helpful actions toward an abstract or visible “other.” Although researchers agree on a definition of altruism, there is disagreement about whether individuals ever behave in a truly altruistic fashion or whether self interest is always involved (Cialdini et al., 1987; Simmons, 1991). Some researchers argue that true altruistic behavior may occur as a result of empathy. Empathy is defined as the ability to feel what others feel (Ginot, 2009; Krebs, 1975) and may create a sincere desire to relieve the suffering of another person (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). It is also possible that empathy promotes self-interested helping (known as egoism), if the individual identifies with “the other,” feels secondary distress, and helps as a way to alleviate his or her own distress (Ginot, 2009; Haski-Leventhal, 2009). In other words, an action that appears to be altruistic might not be if the underlying motive is self serving in any way.

This question of underlying motivation has fueled the debate as to whether people are capable of altruism or whether all helping behavior is actually self serving (Simmons, 1991). For example, Smith (1981) claimed that positive mood maintenance, negative state relief, or even padding one’s résumé may be the underlying motivation for behaviors that appear to be altruistic. Similarly, Cialdini et al. (1987) argued that almost all helping behaviors reflect egoism, even if the motive is only to increase the helper’s self esteem. Cialdini et al. further claimed that these self-serving motives are subtle and potentially unconscious. The idea that humans always operate with selfish motives is the most pervasive argument against selfless, or true, altruism (which we refer to as altruism throughout our paper). The controversy is difficult to resolve because motives are challenging to identify, sometimes even for the helpers themselves.

Research tends to focus on antecedents or predictors of helping behavior, without being able to establish whether the helping behavior is altruism or egoism. One such predictor of helping behavior is family socialization. Berkowitz and Connor
(1966) found that authoritative parents who modeled helping behavior in the home environment had children who exhibited the social responsibility norm, which is the attitude that individuals should help others who need help, regardless of future returns. The children of parents who modeled low levels of frustration with victims and attributed victims’ dependence to external factors (rather than placing blame on victims) were more likely to believe in altruism and to help others (Berkowitz & Connor, 1966).

Geographic region emerges as another variable linked to helping behavior. Lay, Allen, and Kassirer (1974) found through a retrospective study that individuals reared in rural settings helped more than individuals reared in urban environments. The researchers suggested that perhaps the greater diffusion of responsibility present in crowded urban areas may explain this difference (Lay et al., 1974).

Other literature indicates that sex of the helper is an important variable. Although women offer more help than men overall, men offer more help in emergency situations that involve an immediate threat to the victim and bystanders (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Lay et al., 1974; Levine & Crowther, 2008). Women provide more help in long-term care relationships such as caring for children or aging parents (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Levine & Crowther, 2008).

Religion also predicts helping behavior. Cnaan (2002) found that greater religiosity predicted greater volunteerism. Specifically, individuals who practice helping behavior within the religious institution are more likely to exhibit helping behavior in other contexts. Cnaan argued that one explanation for the link between religiosity and volunteerism may be that almost all religions teach the importance of helping others. Haski-Levanthal’s meta-analysis (2009) found that individuals are more likely to help if the helping behavior matches the norms of their affiliation group, especially if the individuals have internalized those norms.

Research has also indicated age as a positive correlate of perceptions and beliefs associated with altruism. Poulin and Silver (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of over 2,000 participants and found, after controlling for demographics, prior stressful life events, and other potentially confounding variables, that positive perceptions of altruism increased with age. Peterson (1983) similarly noted that ability to help and internalization of prosocial values such as altruism typically increase with age.

Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and King (1979) identified several attitudes related to exhibiting helping behavior. Their study of mother-child interaction demonstrated that attitudes such as valuing social connectedness, justice, and equality predicted greater helping behavior. In addition, mothers who modeled empathy for others in distress had children who were more likely to exhibit willingness to help other children (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979).

Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, and Darley (2002) examined willingness to help as a function of personal accountability. The researchers found that participants primed with the thought of being alone versus with a group pledged significantly more money on a charity giving measure. Participants primed with the thought of being alone also preferred words associated with “accountable” rather than “unaccountable” on a word choice decision task. These findings illustrate that accountability is a predictor of helping behavior and demonstrate the relevancy of unconscious priming in behavior choices. Primes influence individuals’ thought processes and behavior, regardless of whether they are consciously aware of the influence. The potential manipulation of human behavior as the result of a simple prime holds implications for the current research study as well as psychology in general.

Purpose and Hypotheses
The first goal of our study was to examine whether participants believed in altruism (versus egoism) and to identify variables associated with this belief. We hypothesized that a majority of participants would report believing in altruism. We based this expectation on the fact that most of our participants were from a region of the country that is relatively high in religiosity and that is largely rural. Because both of these variables are linked with greater helping behavior, it follows that attitudes about altruism may be relatively positive for the majority of our participants.

The second goal of our study was to determine whether priming participants with past experiences related to helping would impact both beliefs about altruism and willingness to help. We hypothesized that participants primed with positive memories of altruism (i.e., giving or receiving help) would be more likely to report believing in altruism and would be more likely to exhibit willingness to help than participants primed with negative memories of altruism (i.e., being denied help) or the control
Predictors of Beliefs About Altruism | Howard, Nelson, and Sleigh

... group who experienced no prime.

The third goal was to examine how beliefs about altruism differed between participants willing to help and those participants unwilling to help. We hypothesized that participants who exhibited helping behavior when no personal benefits were offered would be more likely to believe in altruism compared to participants who did not help. Previous research had not combined a measurement of beliefs in altruism with a measurement of willingness to help.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample for this exploratory study was composed of 95 undergraduates (33 men, 62 women) recruited from courses at a mid-sized southern university. The majority of participants (58%) were Caucasian, 26% were African American, and 16% identified themselves as “other.” The mean age was 20.75 (SD = 5.47), with a range of 18 to 43. Forty-one percent of the participants were freshmen, 21% were sophomores, 15% were juniors, and 20% were seniors. The mean GPA was 3.06 (SD = 0.56), with a range of 1.0 to 4.0. Participants ranked religion as somewhat important in their everyday lives, M = 3.64 (SD = 1.33), on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Participants received a small amount of extra course credit in exchange for their participation.

**Materials**

We created four versions of the survey. Three versions contained priming conditions and one version served as a control condition. The three priming conditions involved a short reflective writing exercise. We asked participants to reflect on a time in their lives and then write about it. We modeled the priming procedure after previous research that employed written primes (Garcia et al. 2002); however, we developed the specific wording to match the focus of our study. We designed Condition 1 to prime participants to think of a time when they had exhibited altruism (giving help condition). Condition 2 primed participants to think of a time when they had received the benefits of an altruistic act (receiving help condition). Condition 3 primed participants to think of a time when they were either ignored or denied help (denied help condition). The control condition contained no prime.

We asked participants to also respond to a 34-item survey. Based on previous research on altruism, we developed 19 items designed to tap beliefs and perceptions about altruism. For example, Haski-Leventhal (2009) found that the ability to help others without expecting anything in return related to altruism. Thus, we developed an item asking participants for their level of agreement with the statement, “An individual can help someone without expecting anything in return.” These statements included perceptions about the importance of helping strangers, perceptions about whether human nature is inherently selfish, and beliefs about whether altruism exists. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

We designed one question to assess perceptions about the mechanisms underlying altruistic actions. Participants ranked five possible motives for why people “do good things”: individuals’ personality, determination, experience, God, or peer pressure. We used Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski’s (2001) single item self-esteem measure. We asked participants how easily they are able to “feel what others are feeling,” a measure intended to assess empathy as Ginot (2009) described. Twelve items assessed demographic variables, including questions about gender, age, the extent to which religion was important in participants’ lives, and levels of volunteer involvement.

At the end of the survey, participants read a set of instructions asking them if they would like to volunteer to participate in an additional aspect of the research study. The instructions stated that no additional extra credit would be offered and participants were instructed to ask the researcher for the room number where the researcher was holding the additional research study if the participants decided to volunteer. We created this behavioral measure to test whether participants were willing to offer additional help to the experimenter without receiving personal benefits, to exhibit altruism (helping behavior).

**Procedure**

The study took place in undergraduate classrooms. Participants received at random a survey that contained one of the three priming conditions or the control condition (Condition 1: n = 24; Condition 2: n = 24; Condition 3: n = 24; Control condition: n = 23). We gave participants 3 min for the written prime and then instructed them to continue the survey. If participants chose to help with the optional second part of the survey (helping behavior), the researcher made a check mark on the survey and instructed the participant to...
see a confederate down the hall. The confederate handed the participant the debriefing form and explained that there was no second part to the research. The researcher kept count of the number of participants who volunteered to help, and the confederate kept count of the participants who approached him or her in order to ensure that all the participants who volunteered followed through with the commitment to help. If participants chose not to participate, the researcher handed the participants the debriefing form in the original classroom.

**Results**

To test participants’ beliefs about altruism, we computed an “Altruism Beliefs” score (AB) for each participant by calculating the mean of the responses to the 19 relevant questions. The mean AB score across all four conditions was 3.85 (SD = .41), indicating that participants had positive beliefs about altruism.

To test the prediction that being primed with previous experiences with altruism would impact beliefs about altruism, we examined AB scores as a function of the four priming conditions using ANOVA. Contrary to predictions, the priming conditions did not lead to different AB scores, $F(3, 90) = .014, p = .998, ns$.

The priming exercise significantly influenced a pattern of responses linked to the motivations underlying altruistic behavior. Participants in the “giving help” condition rated peer pressure as a weaker motivation for altruistic behavior than participants in the “receiving help” condition, $F(3, 90) = 2.74, p = .048, \eta^2 = .08$. Participants in the “giving help” condition rated personality as a stronger motivation for altruistic behavior than participants in the “receiving help” condition or in the “denied help” condition, $F(3, 90) = 4.28, p = .007, \eta^2 = .12$. Post hoc analyses revealed no other significant group differences, as shown in Table 1.

We explored whether the priming conditions impacted helping behavior. Contrary to predictions, priming did not have a significant effect on participants’ willingness to help, $F(3, 91) = .449, p = .719, ns$. Fifty percent of participants in the receiving help priming condition exhibited helping behavior. Thirty-eight percent of participants in the giving help condition, 38% of participants in the denied help condition, and 35% of participants in the control condition exhibited helping behavior.

Because our priming exercise did not affect participants’ responses to the questions connected to their overall AB score, we were able to examine the data set as a whole as we explored our other hypotheses. We compared participants who exhibited helping behavior and participants who did not on multiple variables using an independent $t$ test. As expected, participants who exhibited helping behavior were more likely to report positive beliefs regarding altruism as indicated by their higher AB scores, $t(92) = 2.65, p = .010, d = .54$ (helped mean = 3.99, did not help mean = 3.76); this finding is a moderate effect size. Participants who exhibited helping behavior also rated religiosity as less important in their everyday lives than those participants who did not help, $t(90) = -2.59, p = .011, d = .59$ (helped mean = 3.22, did not help mean = 3.93), also indicating a moderate effect size. Participants who exhibited helping behavior also agreed more that they find it easy to feel what others are feeling, $t(93) = 1.97, p = .05, d = .42$ (helped mean = 4.11, did not help mean = 3.81), a small effect size.

We also ran a series of exploratory analyses to examine relations among demographic and individual difference variables, scores on the AB, and willingness to help. Pearson’s correlations revealed that the higher the AB score, the more often participants reported volunteering their time, $r(94) = .32, p < .05, r^2 = .10$; the higher participants’ self-esteem, $r(94) = .31, p = .002, r^2 = .10$; the more participants agreed that it is easy for them to feel what others are feeling, $r(94) = .25, p = .015, r^2 = .06$; and the older the participant, $r(94) = .22, p < .05, r^2 = .05$.

To explore gender differences, we compared men and women on several variables using a series of independent $t$ tests. We found no significant differences on AB or helping behavior. To explore racial ethnic differences, we compared African American and Caucasian participants on several variables using a series of independent $t$ tests. Again, there were no significant differences on AB or helping behavior.

| Statistically Significant Means Across Priming Conditions for Motivations Behind Altruistic Behavior |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priming Condition</th>
<th>Peer Pressure</th>
<th>Individual’s personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Giving help”</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Receiving help”</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Denied help”</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Higher numbers indicate weaker reported influence*
Discussion

We hypothesized that participants would have positive beliefs about altruism, and this hypothesis was supported. Our findings provide a different perspective from recent literature that suggests today’s young adults may be more focused on wealth and personal comfort and see altruism as less important than previous generations (McCrimble, 2011; Ragusa, 2008). For example, Ragusa (2008) asked a group of young adults how they would spend a hypothetical gift of $1,000 and found that participants ranked saving and buying clothes significantly higher than altruistic endeavors. Even if priorities have shifted across generations, our data indicate that young adults still believe that people will unselfishly help others.

We hypothesized that participants primed with altruistic memories associated with giving or receiving help would have more positive beliefs about altruism. This hypothesis was not supported. None of our priming conditions impacted altruism beliefs. However, the priming exercise did influence the motives that participants attributed to altruistic behaviors, an effect that had not been explored in previous research. Participants primed to think of a time when they behaved altruistically credited personality as a motivation for helping others and minimized the influence of peer pressure. In contrast, participants primed to think about receiving help from another person rated peer pressure as a stronger motive and personality as a weaker motive. These findings may be the result of participants crediting the altruistic action to themselves rather than the situation. Participants taking credit for their actions is consistent with self-serving biases whereby individuals tend to attribute desirable behavior to personal rather than situational factors.

We also hypothesized that people primed with positive altruistic memories would be more likely to offer help; however, this hypothesis was not supported. We found that priming did not significantly affect participants’ willingness to help. One possible explanation is that participants’ beliefs and behaviors tied to altruism may be stable tendencies that are not easily influenced by brief interventions such as our priming task. To support this notion, we found that gender, race, religious involvement, and past experience with need did not predict participants’ beliefs about altruism or exhibition of willingness to help. Similarly, Kartner, Keller, and Chaudhary (2010) demonstrated that prosocial attitudes predicted positive attitudes toward altruism and social connectedness predicted helping behavior across cultures and concluded that the likelihood of exhibiting helping behavior may be more stable than previously believed.

A second possibility is that the priming manipulation used in this study was not powerful enough to impact beliefs and actions tied to altruism. One issue that may have weakened our manipulation is that some of the participants wrote about more significant events than others (receiving a new car vs. being given shelter when homeless), and this difference may have lowered the impact of the prime for some participants.

We compared the participants who chose to behave altruistically in the study to participants who did not. We hypothesized that participants with positive beliefs about altruism would be more likely to exhibit helping behavior. This hypothesis was supported. One explanation for this finding is that altruistic beliefs and behaviors truly match. A second possibility is that the pressure of being publicly asked to help with the second part of the study unconsciously shifted participants’ behavior to align with the attitudes they had just expressed.

We also found that participants who exhibited helping behavior were less religiously involved than participants who did not help. This finding contradicts Cnaan’s (2002) research, which showed that religious involvement and the altruistic values taught by most religions tended to predict helping behavior. One possible explanation is that participants in previous research were asked to provide assistance to others who clearly were in need of help, provoking the helping norm taught by most religions. In our study, the request for help was not urgent and did not convey a sense of strong need on the part of the researcher, thus perhaps failing to evoke the helping norm.

Another possible reason for this contradiction between our study and previous research is that previous researchers measured religion differently than we did. We measured how much religion was an integrated part of participants’ everyday lives. Past researchers tended to focus on religious service attendance and religious affiliation, not necessarily the impact of participants’ religion on their everyday lives (e.g., Bain, 1936; Richards, 1991). Dudycha (1933) found that college students practiced religious observance less frequently than most other age groups. If religion is measured by church attendance as in previous research, college students may score low on a religious measure. In our study, the same college students may have
scored high on our measure of religion if they perceived themselves to be living out their beliefs in nontraditional ways.

Participants who exhibited helping behavior also had higher empathy scores than participants who did not help. To further support the connection between empathy and willingness to exhibit helping behavior, we also found a positive correlation between empathy and AB. This finding is consistent with research on the positive relationship between empathy and altruistic behavior, (e.g., Simmons, 1991; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979). Previous research focused on helping in standard emergency situations, whereas we demonstrated the same finding in a neutral, nonurgent scenario. These combined findings (from our and previous research) suggest that seeing someone in need and feeling empathy may lead to altruistic behavior in a variety of contexts.

We also found that increased volunteerism related to positive beliefs about altruism. One possible explanation for this finding is that individuals who positively view helping people in need donate their time in order to help those individuals. It is also possible that individuals who donate their time to charity may want to perceive their motivations as altruistic, engaging in self-serving bias. In other words, individuals may feel the need to believe altruism exists in order to feel good about their behaviors.

We found that older age related to positive beliefs about altruism, a finding supported by Poulin and Silver’s (2008) recent study. One possible explanation for this finding is that older individuals may have had more life experiences that exposed them to altruistic behaviors. Another possibility comes from Peterson (1983), who found that the ability to help increases with age, through increased resources such as time and money. Being able to engage in altruism may be an important component of believing in altruism.

Gender did not predict helping behavior in our study. Limitations in sample size for men may explain this lack of significant findings. The particular context in which we examined helping behavior may also account for the nonsignificant findings. As previous researchers reported, men tend to exhibit willingness to help when the individual is in immediate distress, whereas women tend to exhibit willingness to help in long-term care relationships (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Lay et al., 1974; Levine & Crowther, 2008). In our study, the request for help was not urgent and the participants did not know the researcher. It is possible, therefore, that because our study did not exemplify either of the situations in which gender roles are most often elicited, gender did not emerge as a significant predictor of exhibiting willingness to help. Race also did not emerge as a significant predictor of helping behavior in our study. This finding is consistent with previous research that has not been able to demonstrate consistent differences between races on willingness to exhibit helping behavior (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1981). It is also possible that demographic factors other than the items surveyed, such as home environment as suggested by Berkowitz and Connor (1966) and parental modeling of consistent altruistic values as suggested by Zahn-Waxler et al. (1979), may have a stronger influence on participants’ willingness to help.

Another remaining question for future researchers is whether altruism can be taught as Zahn-Waxler et al. (1979) have argued. In addition, comparing the effects of visual priming versus written priming should be considered in future research. Visual priming may evoke stronger emotions than written priming, and these stronger emotions could potentially impact participants’ beliefs about altruism. Finally, future research may also want to address how the measurement of religion may impact the relation between religiosity and beliefs in altruism.

The results of our study showed that in general, young adults believed that altruism exists, even after some had been primed to think about a time in their lives when others behaved selfishly towards them. Priming did, however, change the way participants viewed motivations behind helping behavior. In other words, overall perceptions of altruism may be stable, whereas ideas about the mechanisms may be malleable. In addition, positive beliefs about altruism corresponded with participants’ willingness to exhibit helping behavior in a non urgent situation. These results contribute to the growing understanding of this complex and debated concept.

References


Cialdini, R. B., Schaller, M., Houlihan, D., Arps, K., Fultz, J., & Beaman, A. L.
Predictors of Beliefs About Altruism


