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## Motivate or Reward Altruistic Behavior? A Literature Review of Altruism Theories

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### Abstract

*There is a widespread perception in the public mind that people who practice in helping professions are selfless and altruistic. Even though for what reason do these people pursue a helping profession and why do civilian helpers provide help? Often the helper expects at least mental rewards and some kind of reciprocity for their help. Altruism has a lot of perspectives, its scientific approaches can be found almost in every field. However, its role is emphasized in some disciplines, such as social sciences. This paper highlights the social and economic view of altruism. The aim of this paper is to assess the definition, dimensions, scales, measurement possibilities and background of altruism. A further aim is to highlight hypotheses for further research. In this framework, the study presents a literature review, and analyses the recent applied research related to altruism. This paper concludes that empathy is the basis of altruism. Besides unconditional altruist behaviour, negative external factors (crisis) and positive external (moral reward) and internal factors (happiness) may facilitate altruistic behaviour.*

Keywords: altruism; reciprocal altruism; altruistic behaviour; reinforcement; motivation

### 1. Introduction

There is a widespread perception in the public mind that people who practice helping professions are altruistic. But are we aware of what altruism itself means? For this reason, we would like to present the definition, dimensions, scales, measurement possibilities and background of altruism.

„*We are here on the Earth to help each other. Otherwise what would happen to us?*” (Pressburger, 1998. p.34.). Pressburger (1998) highlights that altruism can be considered as one of the ways and subcategories of assistance. The roots of altruism can be originate in existence. One of its earliest written memory can be found in the Bible and Torah about relief, selflessness, and charity. The scientific explanations of altruism go back to the 19th century. Auguste Comte (1822, in: Comte, 1979) spoke firstly of the concept of altruism by comparing it to two important endpoints, selflessness and selfishness. More specifically, Comte thought that while altruism and selflessness are synonymous with each other, the phenomenon of egoism is the complete opposite of altruism (Comte, 1822, in: Comte, 1979). Even today, several disciplines deal with the altruistic

conception and behaviour, which appears as an act of selfless assistance. It is an interdisciplinary concept that can turn up so often in the field of social psychology and political science, we can read about it so many times in the columns of the literature dealing with economics, socio-biology and genetics. Altruism appears not only in human societies, but is just as common in the animal kingdom (Piliavin and Charng, 1990).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the diverse approaches of altruism focusing on its social and economic relevance. The study assesses the features of altruistic behaviour and the moral and ethical question, whether compensation can be part of altruism. A further interesting question, whether altruism can stand alone or it should be as an altruistic process taken into account in which not only an entity but every actors have their own role.

As for the genetic background, researchers have found that 50% of traits in behaviour are inherited. These are also true for behaviours in which aggression and altruistic traits are observed. The altruistic traits observed in individuals daily behaviour are highly dependent on the inheritance and learning of parental-mediated socialization traits (Teodorescu and Demeter, 2009).

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1. The Theoretical Approach of Altruism**

Considering altruism a general rule is confirmed in the literature: relatives are more likely to help (Hamilton, 1964, Burgess et al. 2004). However, an open-ended question remains, whether compensation can be accepted as part of an altruistic behaviour. However, mental reinforcement is apparently part of the process.

The question may arise whether there is an act that is truly selfless. Many researchers has been trying to find an answer for this question since the 1800s. The following table summarizes these models of altruism.

**Table 1: Models of altruism**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Researcher</b>	<b>Approach</b>
<b>1822</b>	Comte	Goodwill arises from human nature, an instinct contrary to egoism (Comte, 1822 in Comte, 1979)
<b>1964</b>	Hamilton	Theory of relative selection. As a rule, relatives help each other, which can be explained by evolutionary processes (Hamilton, 1964)
<b>1980</b>	Barash	Anyone who provides help should receive an advantage in return for his deed (Barash, 1980)
<b>2003</b>	Berezkei	Combines evolutionary theory with a kind of selection pressure, where the loss caused by a person's altruistic behaviour is lower than the genetic advantage (Berezkei, 2003)
<b>2004</b>	Burgess et al.	It has been shown that relatives take precedence over strangers in providing assistance, and we help those who have been helpful with us (Burgess et al., 2004)
<b>2009</b>	Berezkei	Short-term selfish benefits are pushed into the background behind an effective long-term cooperation (Berezkei, 2009)

Source: Authors' construction according to the sources indicated above

If we look at the phenomenon of altruism a little through the spectacles of economics, as Monroe (1994) did, we may think that altruistic behaviour is actually due to self-interest. That is, altruistic behaviour also has some kind of gain, no return, the person does not take selfless steps without expecting reciprocity. Socio-biology speaks of altruistic behaviour that is unfavourable to the altruistic person, but profitable to those who receive help. According to the evolutionary approach, altruism is also very closely related to genetics, since if an organism has altruistic behaviour, it means the survival of another organism.

According to social psychology, a difference can be detected in the motivations of altruism. This is because there may be egoistic altruistic motivation in addition to the specific altruistic motivation. In the same way, varieties of altruism can be distinguished not only in terms of motivation but also in terms of intentionality. Similarly, when altruism appears, the emotions that drive it can be important, which can also be multifaceted. According to (Vályi, 2008) the scientific dilemmas related to altruism in diverse scientific fields as follows:

- Etymology searches for the basic unit of selection and for those behaviours that reduce reproductive success;
- Psychology researches the features of altruistic personality, and its motivators;
- Anthropology assesses the equilibrium state of the exchange, and the opportunities for altruistic behaviour.
- Sociology considers the moral considerations, the motivators of supporting others well-being, the indicators of social exclusion and inclusion.

The literature distinguishes three types of altruism: selfish, real, and so-called reciprocal altruism (Leskó, 2010). As its name implies, the selfish altruistic person actually helps to present himself in a better colour, so it is not a matter of real selflessness. The true altruistic person helps in a way that the situation for himself will not be more positive (Leskó, 2010). Reciprocal altruism means that both the caregiver and the person for whom it provides benefits, gains advantage only in time (Leskó, 2010).

There is even a different grouping of altruism. We have already mentioned the three classifications that are the basis above. In addition, the literature separates the types of altruism from other perspectives: there is the so-called “hard-core” type, which includes altruistic suicide (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). The second type is evolutionary altruism, which can be observed in the most dangerous situations as the appearance of an impulsive reaction (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). The third type of altruism is complex altruism, which already involves a longer-term and regular phenomenon (Piliavin and Charng, 1990).

The literature on altruism even deals with the concept of so-called “effective altruism”. According to Gabriel (2017), effective altruism is a philosophical and social movement that aims to revolutionize philanthropy. The main motivating force of the movement is to encourage people to do as much good as possible. This “good” is usually done by contributing money to aid and develop organizations. Criticism has also hit this movement by people claiming effective altruism is insensitive to justice, as it often ignores the value of equality, urgency and rights. Overall, theories related to altruism lie along four dimensions: motivation, cost, volunteering, and alternative persuasion options. The following table includes the criteria for altruistic action along the four dimensions mentioned above (Vályi, 2009):

**Table 2: Criteria of altruistic action**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Altruistic Act</b>	<b>Non Altruistic Act</b>
<b>Motivation of the helper</b>	- Caring for others - Moral judgment - Altruistic values -Adaptation to socially sensitive behaviour	- Material benefit - Praise - Increase in social status
<b>The degree of costs</b>	-It means sacrifices: the helper loses more than invests	-Investment and benefit balance or the benefit is more
<b>The degree of volunteering</b>	-It is done voluntarily by the helper	-Meets a role expectation or other external expectation.
<b>The degree of the possible alternative actions</b>	-There are real possibilities for actions as an alternative.	-There is no other option than help.

Source: Vályi, 2009, pp. 3-4.

We find it important to address even a more detailed explanation of reciprocal altruism. The term is related to the name Trivers (1999) and defines it as an element of human emotion. There are many elements that show selflessness, i.e. altruism; friendliness; suspicion; dislike; trustworthiness; gratitude; trust; guilt; sympathy; moral aggression. Trivers (1999), and Bereczkei (2003) hypothesized that reciprocal altruism can develop most within smaller communities, where people often meet, often see each other. Within such smaller communities, for example, boasting can also develop, which can also be a feature of reciprocal altruism. The consequence of altruistic behaviour will be that the person will gain a reputation in his group and thereby be able to outperform his peers in the hierarchical system (Löwi, 2020).

The basic condition for reciprocal altruism is an act of trust between two people. One of the two actors is the victim, also known as the donor. The other actor is the beneficiary, i.e. the recipient. (Bierhoff and Klein, 1988) According to Hámori (2003), reciprocal altruism is a conditional phenomenon. He reports six requirements that help to create altruistic behaviour (Hámori, 2003):

- The first condition is that if we look at the phenomenon in the short term, the recipient’s profit will be higher and the donor’s profit will be smaller.
- The second condition is that the recipient person’s profit will be greater than that of those who do not benefit from the opportunity provided by reciprocal altruism.
- The third and fourth condition for the emergence of reciprocal altruism is that the help is not reciprocated immediately and that the points listed above are provided to both the donor and the recipient, only time differences can occur.

- The fifth condition is that there should be no question of “parasitism” on the part of either party.
- The sixth and final condition is that there can be many, endless possibilities for assistance and its reciprocity.

To some extent, the different definitions of altruism discussed here correspond to different ways of thinking about relevant theories of behavioural and evolutionary conclusions. This is particularly evident from the outline of the definitions. In addition, a number of important questions arise as we delve deeper and deeper into the subject. Do entire groups function as evolutionary units to which benefits can be assigned, or do only individuals benefit? The definitions discussed here also differ in what type of evolutionary processes are required for the development of altruism. Some notions of altruism are very demanding at this point, as there may be a situation in which altruism cannot survive by random group formation. Evolutionary and psychological explanations form categories that include cases where it is certain that the transition to selflessness increases an individual’s aptitude. Thus, the credibility of evolutionary hypotheses about altruism is affected by the definition of altruism used. However, it is also a fact that altruism can be examined not only from a psychological and evolutionary point of view, as similarly issues emerge in economics, social psychology, and anthropology as well (Lówi, 2020).

## **2.2. The Relationship Between Altruism and Mental Health**

As an important concept in social psychology, altruism is valued for its great importance for human evolution and the development of human civilization. Altruism was first defined by Comte as selfless respect for the well-being of others (Comte, 1979) and includes two basic concepts: empathy (altruistic attitude) and prosocial behaviour (altruistic behaviour) (Comte, 1979). The dominant perspective on understanding current altruism suggests that altruists gain immediate or long-term physical and psychological benefits as a result of pursuing altruistic activities. Altruistic behaviour is associated with decreased aggression, better physical and mental health, longer life expectancy, and a greater degree of well-being. Similarly, altruistic behaviour is positively correlated with student happiness, sense of responsibility, and social adaptability. There are three models to explain the relationship between altruism and health. The evolutionary biological model suggests that altruistic behaviour within groups provides a competitive advantage over other groups (Feng, et al. 2020). And the physiological benefit model argues that altruistic emotions gain dominance over anxiety and fear and reduce stress against perceived dangers (Feng et al., 2020). According to the positive emotion model, positive emotions elicited by altruism (e.g., kindness, compassion, and other emotions related to love) enhance health by displacing negative emotions (Post, 2005).

Incentives for altruism, such as increased self-efficacy and increased social value as a community mechanism, may also provide possible explanations for participation in altruistic activities. Empathy can be widely seen as an essential prerequisite for altruistic behaviour. Nevertheless, few studies have examined the psychological outcomes of empathetic altruists when altruistic behaviour cannot be performed under specified conditions. There is no consensus among researchers on the mechanisms of the relationship between altruism and mental health. According to some literature (Frank, 1965; Dulin and Hill, 2003), altruism affects mental health through increased positive mood or decreased negative mood. Some studies suggest that altruism

accelerates elevated positive mood, while other studies suggest that altruism acts as a buffer against negative mood (Feng, et al. 2020).

### 3. Major Research Based on the Theory of Altruism

In their study, Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken (1981) demonstrate that altruistic behaviour shows greater consistency in some situations than non-altruistic behaviour. According to the researchers, there is a trait, which can rightly be defined as a trait of an altruistic personality, that has a major impact on the development of altruistic behaviour. Rushton et al. (1981) called for individual differences in the aforementioned altruistic behaviour to be assessed using a Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRA) that measures altruism.

The SRA is an easy-to-take and complete questionnaire with 20 statements, and the respondent should provide the most typical response from the following options, thus assessing their own frequency of altruistic behaviour: “Never,” “Once,” “More than once,” “Often” and “Very often” (Rushton et al. 1981). An initial analysis of data collected from two separate samples of students at the University of Western Ontario showed that the SRA scale was psychometrically stable. The conducted two samples yielded consistent similar results. The researchers found the discriminatory validity of the scale to be good. Knowing a person’s score on a behavioural item or a self-report questionnaire can better predict that person’s behaviour in other test situations. Overall, the researchers concluded that individual differences in altruistic behaviour can be directly measured using SRA (Rushton et al. 1981).

The study by Kuswoyo, Tentama, and Muhopilah (2020) aimed to test the validity and reliability of the construct on an altruism scale, as well as to examine the aspects and indicators that may constitute this variable. Selflessness is defined by three aspects: empathy, volunteering, and willingness to help. Based on the results of 142 survey data analysis, the aspects and indicators that make up the altruism variable were declared valid and reliable by the researchers. The most dominant aspect that reflects selflessness is empathy, and the weakest aspect that reflects the variable is the willingness to help. This shows that all aspects and indicators are able to reflect and shape the variables of altruism (Kuswoyo et al. 2020). The aspect of empathy is illustrated by students’ ability to feel the feelings of others, try to understand the situation of others, and care about the difficulties experienced by others. Valid and reliable indicators also show that students are sad and anxious when they see other people in a difficult situation, in the difficulties experienced by both known and unfamiliar people. However, this feeling of empathy did not manifest itself in the form of behaviour. For example, students do not want to help their friends with disabilities. Previous findings from Batson and Ahmad (2001) and Andreoni and Rao (2011) suggest that high empathy may induce altruism. (Batson and Ahmad, 2001) When empathy intensifies and is accompanied by good interaction skills, selflessness appears (Andreoni and Rao, 2011). Empathy is the driving force of morality, thus it is also related to good deeds. Empathy drives the individual to do something to improve the well-being of others (Kuswoyo et al. 2020). The motivation to act in order to support or protect someone is related to cultural features. This is also applied in environmentally protective consumer (Fodor et al., 2015).

As we mentioned above, there is both a cognitive and an affective side of altruism. In this regard, Kinnunen and Windmann (2013) conducted a study that examined the relationship between rational cognitive and emotional-intuitive thinking in the context of prosocial behaviour. They

focused separately on state and trait processing styles, as well as three different types of altruistic behaviour, namely, divisive and helpful behaviour, altruistic punishment, and moral courage. The most valuable result of the research was that the generally preferred thinking style of the emotional-intuitive was associated with altruistic punishment and some form of divisive behaviour, while the need for cognition was associated with moral courage (Kinnunen and Windmann, 2013).

Situational or trait thinking style was manipulated with experimental instructions to either decide by intuition or consider their response before responding. This kind of manipulation seemed to work. Nevertheless, no significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of sharing / helping, altruistic punishment, moral courage. The effects on economic games were too small to be significant, so they failed to replicate. Those who were prompted to respond quickly and intuitively behaved more cooperatively in economic games than those who were instructed to consult on their decisions. One reason for this may be the relatively small sample size, which may have kept the significance of the differences too low. Another reason may be that the amount of money that participants could receive in this study was small. The maximum amount of € 80 proved to be significant, especially for students whose purpose and decisions were felt to be real with real consequences, and real effects. Overall, Kinnunen and Windmann (2013) found that a subjectively preferred, trait-like style of thinking can influence the decision to share under observation or altruistically punish and volunteer in a situation that requires moral courage. Intuition facilitated the first two behaviours and the third was cognition.

Ali and Bozorgi's (2016) research examined students' empathy, selflessness, and relationship of responsibility to their happiness. According to the research results, there is a significant relationship between altruism and happiness, empathy and happiness, and a sense of responsibility and happiness. Moreover, there are several significant links between altruism, empathy, and a sense of responsibility. To explain these findings, we can mention several reasons that lead to the happiness of altruism. First, happy people may find the help helpful and want to maintain their positive mood because good mood makes people like each other better. Second, happy people may want to share their happiness with others. In fact, a positive mood reminds people of the inner aspects of helping, and as a result, helping others makes us happy. For many people, selflessness is part of the mental reward system. On the other hand, happiness is the trigger for motivation, action, taking responsibility, and trying to succeed. People even struggle with failure for purpose and determination. In addition, learning the lessons taught by failures facilitates their connection to the world around them. Being responsible and diligent leads to success and development in different areas of life and can create a sense of happiness. In addition, happiness results in greater activity, facilitates an individual's social relationships, and establishes selflessness and empathy. Happy people have higher levels of collaboration features and are more satisfied with those who live with them. Happiness, as one of the most fundamental positive feelings, plays a crucial role in creating empathy and selflessness in the individual and in society. Happiness always goes hand in hand with satisfaction, optimism, hope, and confidence; therefore, it has an accelerating role in the development of society.

Recent literature (Feng et al., 2020) links altruism to the COVID-19 pandemic, and hypothetical claims are made about the relationship between the two phenomena. As we know, due to the high mortality rate and widespread infection of COVID-19, defined as the pandemic of the century, there is a continuing global emergency. In response to the health threat of COVID-19, people showed predictable threat reactions, including fear, anxiety, depression, panic shopping,



and xenophobia. That can be caused by the increase of conflict situation in their everyday life and in their work (Kohlhoffer-Mizser and Molnár, 2020). However, it is also a fact that not everyone responds equally to threatened situations. A number of psychological factors shape people's reactions, such as risk perception, personality traits, and social support. Feng et al. (2020) aimed to examine the impact of altruism on negative mental health outcomes. The research revealed the impact of altruism on negative effects and mental health (anxiety and depressive symptoms) during the COVID-19 epidemic while people lived in isolation in China. For the research, university students were recruited to participate in a cross-sectional online survey during the Chinese outbreak of COVID-19. The researchers used the following tools: the person's perceived risk, selflessness, negative effects, anxiety, and depressive symptoms were measured using the SRA mentioned above. The timing of positive and negative effects was measured using a scale called PANAS, and general anxiety disorders were measured using a 7-item anxiety scale developed for this purpose, called GAD 7. While depressive symptoms were measured with PHQ-9. A structural equation model was used to analyse the mediating and moderating effects on mental health. The researchers found that people with high altruism had more negative effects than those with low altruism, which indirectly increased their anxiety and depressive symptoms (Feng et al., 2020)

#### 4. Conclusions and Future Research

The aim of this study was to approach altruism from different perspectives. We can explore overlaps in the definitions. It can be concluded that altruism can appear in many forms, in many ways on the part of caretakers in everyday life. Studying the various formulations and researches, it can be stated that they are based on the relationship between the individual and the group, and none of the theories assumes complete selflessness. The behaviour of the caretaker can be considered ongoing, in some form - gift, reciprocity, cooperation - in the hope of an effective long-term cooperation. However, the authors believe, there exists also selfless unconditional altruistic behaviour.

Empathy is the basis of altruistic behaviour. External and internal, and positive and negative factors, such as a crisis situations or happiness can motivate altruism. In case of a crisis, people might realize the need for help (Csiszárík-Kocsir - Varga, 2016). By creating the conditions for reaching happiness, we may contribute to trigger altruistic behaviour.

Rewarding occurs mainly after the altruistic process by receiving positive verbal or non-verbal reinforcement. This can include direct or indirect feedback. To direct response belongs for example a smile, or a thank. Indirect responses may imply the social value, and the recognition of the work. Apart from this, the caretakers may be motivated only by their personality development. Without any self-development, reinforcement, or feedback, only a few caretaker stand by the recipients, mainly their relatives. This is in line with learning theories, thus, activities extinguish in the absence of confirmation.

According to the literature, the following hypotheses can be recommended to consider for further research:

H1: There is a relationship between empathy and altruistic behaviour.

H2: Negative external impacts contribute to become an altruist.

H3: A positive moral reward is effective in motivating people to become altruistic.

We recommend a further research to explore more deeply the motivation and rewarding tool-kit of altruistic behaviour among helping, altruistic people.

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