The Role of Spirituality in Altruistic Behavior

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Abstract

Research on altruism has focused mostly on individuals’ motivations in demonstrating this form of prosocial behavior. Throughout this research, a relationship between altruistic behavior and an individual’s religious beliefs has been determined, as religions provide individuals with ethical principles to follow throughout their daily lives, emphasizing the importance of engaging in prosocial behavior for the benefit of another and without expectation of rewards for these actions. Furthering this research to determine a relationship between altruism and spirituality, in general, the current study hypothesized a positive correlation between altruism and spirituality. The instrument used to determine this relationship was a web survey generated through surveyz.com, which was posted on two Usenet discussion groups that were chosen due to their interest in the topic of study. Although the data collected through the survey did not support the hypothesis, as the correlation between the two variables was statistically insignificant, it yielded interesting information for future research. The majority of respondents felt that they were altruistic, however these respondents did not feel that they were spiritual. Respondents also did not feel that their religion or spirituality influenced their lives or stressed the importance of helping others, as was expected. Spirituality was not shown to be an influence in the respondents’ decision to engage in altruistic behavior. However, for the purposes of future research, the study determined that each individual had their own personal definition of spirituality, which had implications for the data collected and the responses given due to the lack of specification.
The Role of Spirituality in Altruistic Behavior

Throughout history, many social psychologists have been interested in the study of prosocial behavior and in particular, understanding the underlying factors that contribute to these voluntary actions carried out for the benefit of others. Altruism is a form of prosocial behavior, as these acts are voluntary and are beneficial to others. Bar-Tal (1976) expresses that there has been disagreement between psychologists over a comprehensive definition of altruism, however he provides a definition that most would agree with and that encompasses the general ideas of altruism. Altruism, as suggested by Bar-Tal (1976), is “voluntary behavior that is carried out to benefit another without the anticipation of external rewards… and the behavior is done for its own end” (p.4). Using this definition, several research studies have been carried out to further their understanding of individuals' motives in demonstrating altruistic behavior. “In altruistic studies, subjects were placed in situations in which another person was in need of help, and investigators observed the subjects' reactions as to whether or not they would help” (Bar-Tal, p.8). In conducting these studies, researchers found a relationship between an individual's religious background and their willingness to help another person in need. Due to these findings, social scientists have become interested in religion as an underlying factor contributing to altruistic behavior.

Dovidio, Penner, Piliavin, and Schroeder (1995) express that,

The tenets of these religions provide abstract ethical principles that the followers of the faith are expected to interpret and follow. In some cases, concrete rules of behavior are specified that leave little room for misinterpretation or confusion. (p.7)

The universal concern that is observed in most religions is one of care and love for others. This concern can be demonstrated in the principle of regarding others the way that one would like to be regarded. In other words, most religions propose that their followers should treat others with
respect and interact with others in a positive and beneficial manner. Davidio et al. (1995) has found references of this proposal in several religions. For example,

…in the teachings of Confucius, ‘What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others’, Taoism’s Lao-Tze, ‘To those who are good to me, I am good. To those who are not good to me, I am also good. And thus all get to be good.’ (p.8)

Thus, religions provide individuals with tenets to follow throughout their daily lives, emphasizing the importance of engaging in prosocial behavior, giving of oneself to those in need for other’s well being, and not expecting rewards for these actions.

Langford and Langford (1974) reviewed a survey on the relation between church participation and an individual’s perceptions of their engagement in altruistic behavior. The American Institute of Public Opinion conducted this survey in 1973 and the questions posed brought forth interesting findings relating religious participation to altruism. The variables that were measured were church participation, religious affiliation, and altruistic behavior. The question posed about church participation asked, “Did you, yourself, happen to attend church in the last seven days” (Langford & Langford, p.221)? The question that was posed to determine religious affiliation asked, “What is your religious preference – Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Jewish” (Langford & Langford, p.221)? Although this question only specified certain religious denominations, individuals that did not fit into these categories were able to express this in the survey. Lastly, the respondents were asked, “How often do you feel that you follow your religious beliefs and take concrete action on behalf of others… almost always, often, occasionally, seldom, or hardly ever?” in order to determine the degree in which they acted for the benefit of others (Langford & Langford, p.221).

Langford and Langford (1974) found that, regardless of religious preference, those who attended church in the seven days preceding the survey were more likely than nonattenders to perceive themselves as taking ‘concrete action on behalf of others.’ For those who did not attend church their responses to the question about acting on behalf of others were
This study supports the idea that there is a relationship between religious affiliation and acting in an altruistic manner towards others, as those regularly participating in church activity were more likely than those not participating in church activity, to act towards the benefit of others.

Batson (1989) conducted a study that looked at the relationship between religion and altruism even further than the Langford and Langford (1974) study. The study’s premise was to find out what motivates religious individuals to be altruistic. The question being answered in the study was whether motivation was for the true benefit of the other person (altruistic) or whether it was for their own benefit (egoistic). Batson (1989) began with a distinction between altruistic and egoistic motivations, expressing that, “ egoistic motivations consisted of helping others for the acquisition of awards and recognition or to avoid shame from others” (p.873).

Two separate studies were conducted to measure the individual’s motivations. The studies consisted of a person in need and a justification to not help this person. For each study, students were told that there would be a specific standard set for completing the task and their altruism was measured by the efforts that they put into the task. This measurement would also determine the individual’s motivations. “ The researchers expected that if people were truly altruistic in wanting to help another person in need, they would work as hard as they could to reach the standard that was set and complete the task” (p.). In order to compare the measures of altruism with religion, Batson (1989) prepared a questionnaire that assessed the respondents’ religious background.

The findings provided that those with an extrinsic end orientation were motivated to help others because they wanted to avoid shame and the social stigma held by others. Those with an intrinsic end orientation were shown to have egoistic motivations, as they wanted to be rewarded for their actions and did not put out all the effort necessary. Lastly, the findings demonstrated that those with a quest religious orientation had altruistic motivations, as they upheld moral principles and portrayed these in their interactions. This study shed light on the
research that had been previously conducted on religion and altruism, demonstrating that a specific way in which one is religious can determine their altruistic motivations.

As it has been determined through several studies that religious communities have the tendency to help others in need, a study was conducted by Schwartz (2003) to illustrate if altruistic behavior by religious individuals had an effect on their mental and physical health. “The present work sought to evaluate whether helping others was more beneficial than receiving help in a secondary analysis of a large sample of Presbyterian Church members, elders, and pastors” (Schwartz, p.779).

The study was conducted using questionnaires that were mailed to individuals in the different congregations asking them about their own altruistic behaviors, the help that they may have received from others in the church, their health, and the ways in which they dealt with issues in their lives. Through a statistical analysis of these variables, the findings illustrated that giving help to others was most significantly associated with mental health than receiving help. More specifically, the research findings demonstrated that individuals that were more likely to help others in need “were older and female and tended to be church elders; they also practiced more prayer activities, reported more satisfaction with prayer life, and engaged in positive religious coping” (Schwartz, p.783). These findings suggest that a more involved religious life contributed to a display of altruistic behavior, along with the position that one holds in the congregation. An elder in the congregation, for example, is in a position of authority and is expected to adhere to the religion’s tenets and care for others in the church community.

Secondly, Schwartz (2003) found through the analysis of data, that “the act of giving to someone else may have mental health benefits because the very nature of focusing outside the self counters the self-focused nature of anxiety or depression” (p.783). Although this study was limited due to the research design used and the specific sample selected, it has supported past research suggesting that religious individuals are likely to be altruistic and it has also explored an idea that was not researched before. This study has set up a starting point for future research on the subject of altruism and its possible health benefits.
Hypothesis

Past research has suggested that there is a relationship between religion and altruistic behavior, as religious tenets provide individuals with ways to live their daily lives, through the engagement in prosocial behavior for the benefit of others. As most of the past research that has been done on this subject has involved specific religious groups and respondents that have a religious affiliation, I am interested in finding out what role spirituality, in general, has in engaging in altruistic behavior. In replicating and modifying the study that was conducted on church participation and self-perceived altruism by the American Institute of Public Opinion, I hypothesize that there will be a positive correlation between spirituality and altruism. Those that are spiritual will be more likely to be altruistic, as they have learned through their beliefs to act on the behalf of others and for the goodwill of all.

Method

The instrument that was used for this research was a web survey. In order to get potential respondents for this survey, I engaged in conversations with two different Usenet discussion groups on the Internet: alt.psychology and sci.psychology.misc. For the first introduction to the groups, I identified myself as a student at Sonoma State University in a Computer Applications in Psychology course. I expressed to the groups my interest in the subject of altruism and in particular its relation to spirituality. I inquired of the groups if there was any interest in engaging in dialogue on this subject, mentioning that I was also looking for potential respondents for the survey that was going to be composed and posted to the groups at a later date.

Over a period of several weeks, I engaged in dialogue with individuals in the two groups. I was able to maintain interest on the topic of altruism, gain potential respondents, as well as gather more information on altruism. I received some valuable information and insight
from those that I spoke with in the groups, as some even directed me to specific studies that had been done on altruism and spirituality, furthering my research.

Once I had established that there was a significant amount of interest in the research topic, I created an online survey that would be used to further my understanding and test my hypothesis about the relationship between altruism and spirituality.

The online survey was created through a website called surveyz.com, which is an online service that allows an individual to create a survey and post it on the web to gather responses and analyze the data collected. The service was fairly simple to navigate and provided a wide range of choices for the composer to use to fit their specific questions and provide a unique look-and-feel to the survey.

The survey on altruism consisted of 12 questions, 2 of which were 10-point scale questions, which would later be used to test for a correlation between the two variables of interest in the study. For the survey that I composed, I used a variety of single answer questions, multiple answer questions, and an open-ended question. The survey on altruism was as follows:

1. What is your age? ______
2. What is your gender? _______
3. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all altruistic and 10 is extremely altruistic, please rate how altruistic you are. ___
4. How often do you help others in need?
   never
   sometimes
   often
   always
5. Why do you help others in need? [check all that apply]
   you help because others expect you to do so
   you help because you may be rewarded for doing so
you help because it makes you feel good
you help solely for the benefit of the one in need
other ________________________________

6. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all spiritual and 10 is extremely spiritual, how would you rate your spirituality? ____

7. How often do you attend or participate in religious/spiritual events?
   never
daily
weekly
monthly
yearly
occasionally

8. How often do you engage in prayer?
   never
   sometimes
   often
daily

9. How often do you engage in meditation?
   never
   sometimes
   often
daily

10. To what extent do you feel spirituality and/or religion has influenced your life?
    not at all
    somewhat
    quite a bit
    extremely
11. To what extent does your religion/spirituality stress helping others?
   - not at all
   - somewhat
   - extensively

12. Briefly, what is your personal definition of spirituality?

   Once the survey was completed and posted on the web, the two online discussion groups were notified that a survey on altruism and spirituality had been posted on the Internet. The purposes of this research were explained to the two groups and they were assured as to the confidentiality of their responses. A direct link to the survey on altruism was included in the posting to the newsgroup, to allow for respondents to be able to access the survey easily. The link to the survey was also emailed to a few acquaintances that had expressed interest in participating in the survey to further research on altruism and spirituality. Data from the survey responses were then collected for analysis.

Results

Data collected was taken from the responses of 30 respondents to the survey posted on the web. The demographic breakdown of these respondents is as follows:

Gender Distribution (n=30)

The survey respondents, as demonstrated in the graph above, were composed of 60% males (18 males) and 40% females (12 females). Although it was surprising to have received responses from more males than females, the gender distribution was fairly close and it provided data from both male and female perspectives.
The ages of the survey respondents, unlike the gender distribution, were not very well distributed. There were no respondents between the ages of 1-10, 30% (9 respondents) were between the ages of 11-20, 43% (13 respondents) were between the ages of 21-30, 7% (2 respondents) were between the ages of 31-40, 17% (5 respondents) were between the ages of 41-50, and lastly, 3% (1 respondent) was between the ages of 51-60. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 21-30 and more specifically, half of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 21, which may have had an influence on the results of the survey.

In order to measure our first variable in the study, altruism, several questions were posed to respondents determining how often they provide help to others and the reasons for doing so, in order to determine their motivations for helping. Question #4 on the survey asked respondents how often they help others. Interestingly enough, all respondents express that they do help others with some frequency. The majority of respondents (67%, 20 respondents) expressed that they help others often, 23% (7 respondents) expressed that they help others sometimes, and 10% (3 respondents) say that they help others always. In coordination with this question, respondents were asked why they help others, which led to some interesting responses.
In this question, respondents were asked to check all responses that applied to their motivations and, as demonstrated above, the majority of respondents say that they help because it makes them feel good and also for the benefit of the one in need. This data is conflicting, inasmuch as, on one hand respondents are helping in an altruistic manner, and, on another hand, they are helping for their own benefit. Those that said that they always help others, however, say that their motivations for helping are for the benefit of the one in need, expressing altruistic motivations. In order to ensure that this question was exhaustive, an “other” category was included and a few respondents described their motivations for helping.

**Why do you help others? (responses given for the “other” category)**

- I help because I have no problem helping and I can.
- I help because others would do the same for me.
- good karma
- because it is the right thing to do
- just seems right if I can
- religious beliefs and obligations
In order to measure the second variable in our study, spirituality, a few questions (Question#8 and Question#9) were posed to determine the extent of their spirituality through the frequency of prayer and meditation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of activity</th>
<th>Engage in Prayer</th>
<th>Engage in Meditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>23% - 7 respondents</td>
<td>0% - 0 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>17% - 5 respondents</td>
<td>3% - 1 respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>13% - 4 respondents</td>
<td>43% - 13 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>47% - 14 respondents</td>
<td>54% - 16 respondents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To my surprise, half of the respondents never engage in prayer nor engage in meditation. The other half of the respondents are spread across the spectrum. For prayer, only 7 respondents engage in prayer daily and the other 9 respondents engage in prayer occasionally. For meditation, there are no respondents that meditate daily, with the majority meditating sometimes. This data did not provide a strong enough indication of the respondents' spirituality in order to make a correlation between altruism and spirituality.

To determine a correlation between altruism and spirituality, two 10-point scale questions (Question# 3 and Question#6) asked respondents about the extent to which they were altruistic and spiritual. While respondents feel that they are fairly altruistic, their spirituality, contrary to our hypothesis, does not seem to account for this.
A test for correlation was performed using the Pearson $r$ calculation and it was determined that the correlation of .18 between the two variables is very weak and is not statistically significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALTRUISM</th>
<th>SPIRITUAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALTRUISM</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIRITUAL</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

It was hypothesized, after having looked at previous research on altruism and religion, that those that are spiritual will be more likely to be altruistic, as they have learned through their beliefs to act on the behalf of others and for the goodwill of all. Although in the analysis of data collected it was found that this hypothesis was not supported, the study yielded some interesting information for future research on this topic.
In contrast to the expected outcome, the data demonstrated that although respondents rated themselves highly on a scale of 1-10 for being altruistic, they did not rate themselves as highly for being spiritual. For the rating scale on altruism, there were no responses below a 5, indicating that all of the respondents felt that they helped others solely for the others’ benefit and not their own. However, for the rating scale on spirituality, there were no responses above a 9 and there were several respondents that expressed that they were not spiritual at all, marking a 0. Further analysis and comparison of specific respondents’ responses to both rating scales leads to the same conclusion, that their ratings for altruism and spirituality do not correlate. This indicated that the majority of the respondents felt that they were altruistic, but their spirituality did not account for their pro-social behavior, as was hypothesized.

Secondly, when respondents were asked to determine their motivations for helping others, they expressed several different reasons for their behavior. Although the majority of respondents say that they help others solely for the other’s benefit, these same respondents also report that they helped others to make themselves feel good, because they were expected to, and even some to be rewarded. Thus, the conclusion that can be made from this data is that these respondents’ motivations for helping were not solely altruistic and for the benefit of others. Rather, they helped others for several reasons which depended on specific circumstances.

Thirdly, although it has been reported in the research literature that altruistic behavior is learned through religious tenets and beliefs, this finding was not demonstrated in the current study. Rather, when respondents were asked if their religion or spirituality stressed the importance of helping others, half of the respondents expressed that it did not at all. Along with this finding, the majority of the survey respondents report that they never engage in religious and/or spiritual events. Thus, it would appear that religion and/or spirituality is not very influential in their altruistic behavior.

In order to conduct future research on this topic, several issues that affected the reliability and validity of the current study should be addressed. First and foremost, due to the
manner in which the survey was conducted, through a web survey, the sampling frame was fairly small and unrepresentative. Posting the web survey on only two different news groups limited the number and characteristics of the respondents. Thus, the respondents that chose to take the web survey were not a representative cross-section of the general population. As noted above in the results, the respondents mostly consisted of individuals between the ages of 20 and 21 years old. Individuals at this age are typically not very religious and/or spiritual and this may have had an impact on the data. Without a representative sample, issues of external validity arose and the responses were not generalizable to the greater population.

Secondly, the definitions of both altruism and spirituality were vague and were in need of further clarification in order to ensure reliability in the responses given. The term “altruism” was not described to the respondents, thus in analyzing data one is unaware of what each respondent understood as being altruistic. For the term “spirituality,” it was evident that each respondent had a different interpretation of the term, as Question #12 on the survey pointed out. Question #12 asked respondents to provide their personal definition of spirituality, which clearly was different for each and every respondent. Below is a representative sample of respondents’ quotes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Briefly, what is your personal definition of spirituality?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is being religious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is an integral part of my life that guides me in everything that I do from sleeping to eating. Without this guidance I would not be able to function daily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a good relationship with God and trying to understand my purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believing in a higher being and basing your values upon those beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is an individual attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling the energy present in nature and its elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity beyond the physical world which has an effect on the physical world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My belief that there is more to life than what we can see/measure and it comes from within not from organized man-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It's how you feel, what your soul is and has to offer

*Spirituality is an introspective look at oneself while following a separate doctrine focused on past-death existence*

Some respondents defined spirituality as a belief in God, while others believed it was an appreciation of nature and all of its elements. In order to provide more reliable responses in future research, it would be beneficial to provide respondents with a clear definition of what was specifically being measured.

Lastly, when asking respondents about their social behavior in surveys, another reliability concern may be the presence of social desirability in responses. It is very likely that social desirability played a large role in the respondents’ ratings of how altruistic they were, which is suggested by the fact that every respondent rated themselves above a 5. In an attempt to be portrayed as a good person and one whose actions are socially desirable, respondents rate themselves as being more altruistic than they may realistically be.

Despite shortcomings of the study, reliability and validity issues of using web surveys and unclear wording were acknowledged and a starting point was provided for future research on this topic.
References


