

Chapter 2

Conceptual Aspects of Altruism in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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2.1 Introduction

In today's global society, it is important to study and analyze behavioral manifestations of altruism cross-culturally. The ideas discussed here originated with an effort to develop conceptual definitions of altruism and related issues and an operational coding scheme that could be used to code instances of altruistic behavior as it appeared on American television (Smith et al., 2009). As such, the definitions and coding scheme reflected a societal conception rooted in an individualistic culture. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the conceptual definitions and coding scheme and to determine in what ways this can be further extended or modified to reflect communal cultures (Smith, Bresnahan, & Smith, 2011). Therefore, we are reconsidering the concept of altruism in light of possible cultural variability in order to expand research coding the altruistic content of television programs (Smith et al., 2006) to include behavior in different contexts and cultures. The coding of such content is challenging because it involves examining the context and messages exchanged among actors to determine the extent to which they embody the dimensions outlined below. This type of coding scheme has relevance for understanding the communication of altruism in verbal exchanges of all types, including interviews, policy debates, negotiations, physician-patient communication, and relational communication, among other contexts. As Arkhipova and Kozmin (2013) demonstrate in Chap. 5 of this volume, coding content of narratives such as fairy tales and animal

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tales can provide insight into the ways in which different ethnic cultures value particular characteristics, including altruism. By expanding the conceptualization of altruism, which is the basis for this coding, we hope to further work on altruism to be more inclusive of multiple cultural perspectives.

Smith et al. (2006) created a conceptual definition of altruistic behavior as “behavior that is intended to benefit others beyond simple sociability or duties associated with role (i.e., family or work). All altruistic behaviors, by definition, must be legal” (p. 711). More specifically, we defined altruistic behavior as acts of cognitive or physical helping and sharing (including giving and donating) that occur outside the bounds of role relationships. Thus, all altruistic actions associated with the *normal* duties of an occupation or social role were not included in that definition. However, there are times when people operating within the bounds of a particular occupation or role go above and beyond normal expectations. To illustrate, a first responder may run into an inferno to save a pregnant mother despite the fact that all of his training would suggest not doing so. A doctor may read to an unconscious child in intensive care hours after performing surgery for a congenital heart defect. Such acts are not only attempts at benefiting another but also defy or exceed norms associated with a particular role. Such acts would also be considered acts of altruism in communal cultures, as they are clearly identified as voluntary (see Chap. 6 of this volume by Grönlund (2013), for additional discussion) and intentional actions that go beyond the boundaries of role-related norms.

However, communal cultures are often based on more fully articulated systems of social obligations to others compared to more individualistically oriented cultures (Bresnahan, 1991; Clark & Mills, 1993; Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002; Miller & Bersoff, 1998). Communal or collectivistic cultural values emphasize connectedness within in-groups and place higher priority on the goals, needs, and concerns of the group over those of individuals (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultural values emphasize autonomy and personal choice and place higher priority on the goals, needs, and concerns of the self over those of the group. There is some evidence that these preferences can influence self-conceptions and as such can be assessed at an individual level (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It is clear that altruistic behavior has some basis in both culture and genetics (see Chap. 3 of this volume by Coe and Palmer (2013)).

The distinction between communal and individualistic cultures was chosen as a point of focus here, despite the multiple ways one might distinguish among cultures, for several key reasons. First, this distinction focuses on the relationship of the self to others within a society and is inherently relational in nature; this is critical when considering altruistic behaviors. Indeed, theories that address the basis of altruistic behaviors suggest culture may drive altruistic behaviors along with genetically-based kinship and reciprocity explanations (e.g., see Moody, 2008). Second, the distinction between a communal and individualistic cultural orientation has been linked to the ways in which people communicate and their social-psychological experience (see Kim, Aune, Hunter, Kim, & Kim, 2001; or Lapinski, Rimal, DeVries, & Lee, 2007). The analysis of altruism here focuses on the ways in which altruism is communicated through overt behavior.

Although on the surface many exchanges between people appear to be altruistic, they may be motivated and explained by processes such as the maintenance of face relations and obligatory exchange rather than altruism (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Indeed the anticipation of experiencing guilt (Lindsey, 2005), shame, and other negative emotions as a result of unfulfilled role obligation (Bedford & Hwang, 2003) or normative violations (Bierbrauerin, 1992) may drive what appear on the surface to be altruistic behaviors. Thus, the boundary between obligatory role-expected behavior and voluntary action is often blurred in more communal cultures, particularly for the outside observer. An important goal here is to refine the proposed coding scheme for interpreting acts of altruism to be sensitive to such important cultural differences. In order to do so, we first conceptualize altruism along five key dimensions.

2.2 Conceptualizing Altruism

In 1851, Auguste Comte penned the term “altruism.” Derived from the Latin word “alter” (i.e., meaning other) and the Italian adjective *altrui*, Comte (1875) believed that altruism signified benevolence or living for others. Decades have passed and much debate has ensued since Comte originally defined the term and its selfish counterpart, egoism. Now there is much disagreement on the limiting conditions surrounding altruistic acts (see Post, Underwood, Scholss, & Hurlbut, 2002).

We believe that the variability in definitions is something to embrace rather than eschew; definitions, after all, are best evaluated in terms of their utility as opposed to some objective assessment of quality. Instead of wrestling over what constitutes an “altruistic act” outside a voluntary action that is intended to benefit others beyond simple sociability or duties associated with role, we have operationalized aspects of different definitions offered in the literature so as to embrace different *researchers’* conceptualizations of the construct.

After reviewing the literature, five key aspects of altruism came to the fore that some scholars include and some exclude in their conceptual definitions. It is important to note that much of this literature is grounded in theorizing that is yet to be tested empirically. Further, this work is based largely on work conducted from Western perspectives and has focused largely on human-human altruism as opposed to altruistic actions directed toward other living things (termed “biosphere altruism” by Gupta, 2013 in Chap. 8 of this volume), which may inhibit the generalizability of the ideas postulated here even though we have intentionally worked to consider the literature on cultural variability in our thinking. In addition to what we review below, two other attributes—voluntary and intentional—are generally agreed upon in the literature and were captured in our basic definition of altruistic behavior (see Monroe, 2002; Oliner, 2002). Thus, these attributes will not be reviewed below, although in communal cultures defining voluntary behavior is somewhat more difficult than in an individualistic culture. To a lesser extent intentionality could be problematic as well. These attributes should be present in all altruistic behavior,

no matter the culture, even from the most liberal definition of the term. Five components of altruistic behavior are addressed here, and three of these are predicted to differ according to the culture in which they are enacted: determining whether the act was motivated by a primary *concern for the other*, whether the actor would be likely to engage in self-blame or be socially censured if he or she did not engage in the action (termed “*ease of escape*”), and *actual benefits to the receiver*. The other two components of altruistic behavior we postulate to operate pan-culturally are *empathy* and *cost to the initiator*.

2.2.1 *Concern*

One of the common definitional elements of altruism centers on individuals’ locus of concern when performing altruistic acts. Some theorists have argued that the primary concern of the altruist is for the other (Batson, 2002; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Kagan, 2002; Latane & Darley, 1970; Oliner, 2002; Rushton, 1976) and not the self (see Monroe, 2002, p. 107). For example, Post (2002) argues that, “By the strictest definition, the altruist is someone who does something for the other and for the other’s sake, rather than as a means to self-promotion or internal well being” (p. 53). Whether we label the motivational state a “goal” or “concern,” theorists are arguing that the primary intent behind helping behavior is to facilitate an “other” over self in some way. Theorists also have been quite clear that there may be secondary concerns (i.e., motivational pluralism) associated with altruistic acts (Post, 2002, p. 53; Sober, 2002, p. 19). For example, a young boy may rescue a scared and injured dog that had accidentally fallen into a storm drain. After rescuing the animal and trying to find its owner, the boy may wonder whether he will get a reward for the dog’s return. Such self-motivated concerns, provided that they are not the primary reason for performing such an act, do not disqualify the act from being altruistic in nature for some altruism theorists. Types of self-concerns may include, but are not limited to, self-promotion, internal well-being, alleviation of a negative state, positive self-face, and avoidance of punishment (see Batson, 2002; Post, 2002).

To capture these issues, the coding scheme must include a variable assessing whether benefit to the self or other is the primary force behind a character’s decision to act altruistically. Therefore, coders are trained to decipher concern based not only on verbal utterances made by the initiator of the act but also their nonverbal responses and the context of the unfolding situation. The difficulty in coding this construct lies in determining the point at which concern for other is higher than concern for self. This is particularly difficult in cultures and situations in which there are strict, but implicit, social obligations to others. If an actor engages in an act primarily to avoid censure, shame, and punishment, the concern was higher for self even though it might seem primarily to benefit the other on the surface. Another way to understand this issue is to consider the relational context in which an act is taking place. In communal cultures, role obligations, for example, are thought to be bound

to in-group members. As such, acts which show concern for out-group members may not be motivated by social obligation but by altruism.

Therefore, knowledge of the demands of the culture is critical when coding action as concern for other or self. Each action can be coded, ultimately, as either primary concern for self or primary concern for other. This apparent problem of deciding whether an action reflects self or other concern can be resolved by having cultural insiders from the relevant culture who are intimately familiar with the obligation system of that culture do the coding based on indigenous values present in the cultural system. In collaboration with representatives of the target culture being studied, the coding system can be amended where needed to be sensitive to the demands of another value system while the basic framework of the coding system is maintained.

2.2.2 *Cost*

Often, the word altruism conjures up extreme images of individuals risking life and limb for the sake of saving another from the hands of death. Central to this idea is the belief that altruistic acts involve a sacrifice or cost on the part of the initiator. Several theorists hold this view (Monroe, 2002; Sober, 2002; Wyschogrod, 2002). Oliner (2002), one of the most notable sociologists in this area, arranges costly altruism on a continuum from heroic acts to more conventional daily experiences.

Many of Oliner's ideas about altruism are derived from hundreds of interviews with rescuers of Jews during the time of the Holocaust (see Oliner & Oliner, 1988). The researchers found that many individuals risked not only their own lives but also the lives of family and friends in an effort to save those destined to death. Some of the instances involved single, extraordinary acts of heroism that saved lives, whereas other efforts involved extended acts of giving and hospitality (i.e., hiding Jews in their home) in the continued face of fear. Similar results were found in Monroe's (1996) study, which involved a substantially smaller sample of interviews with rescuers of Jews from World War II.

In an effort to measure this aspect of altruism, we created a variable designed to determine whether the initiator experiences a "cost" for helping another. Costs are defined broadly and may be physical (i.e., injury/death), emotional (i.e., embarrassment, grief), and/or material (i.e., loss of home, money, car) in nature. Given that altruism encompasses all types of "costs" ranging from the tragic to the trivial, the variable captures only the presence or absence of a cost and does not ask coders to determine the degree or intensity of the potential loss on some sort of scale. The idea of altruistic acts as sacrifice or cost on the part of the initiator is theorized to be a pan-cultural phenomenon, and while the degree of cost will likely vary by culture and context, the concept represented by cost should characterize altruistic behaviors in all cultures (see Chap. 11 of this volume by Chick (2013), for an example of costs and benefits associated with the *cargo* system in Latin America).

2.2.3 *Benefit to the Recipient*

A logical extension to an act that is motivated by concern for the other and that is costly to the actor is the fact that the recipient should actually benefit from the act. Some scholars argue that altruism cannot occur without actual benefit accruing to the recipient as a result of the act.

Recipient benefit refers to something that actually promotes or enhances the life of the recipient. Benefits may be emotional (i.e., confidence, self-esteem), physical (i.e., ability to walk), material (i.e., car, house), or spiritual (i.e., faith) in nature. Each act can be coded as recipient benefit present or absent.

Similar to the case of coding the locus of concern, a case can be made that benefits should accrue to only the recipient rather than to the initiator when assessing recipient benefit. The notion of who benefits from an action becomes harder to distinguish when one considers the possibility of self-conceptualizations in which the self is inextricably tied to others. Sampson (1988) and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) have addressed the concept of the interdependent self-construal, thought to predominate in communal cultures, in which the self is defined only in relationship to others. In this case, benefits to a recipient should also accrue to the actor. That is, if an individual engages in actions to benefit others and sees those others as fundamentally tied to his or her own identity, they will benefit individually from improvement in the well-being of the other. This should be the case only for people with whom one has a shared sense of identity such as in-group members. Again, the relational context may help to explain whether or not an act truly benefits only the recipient and not the actor, if the person is someone with whom one does not likely have shared self-identification (e.g., a complete stranger) and the benefits should occur for the recipient independent of the actor alone.

2.2.4 *Empathy*

It has been argued that one of the reasons individuals' help distressed others may be because of empathy (Batson, 2002). In fact, several studies have found that empathy evoked by witnessing others in distress facilitates helping behavior (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Fultz, Batson, Fortenbach, McCarthy, & Varney, 1986). Yet, meta-analyses reveal that the strength of the relationship may vary depending on the operationalization of altruistic action, the method of measuring empathy (self-report, picture indices, physiological markers), and age of the participant in the study (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).

Empathy is a controversial construct in the social science literature that is defined in multiple ways (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1997; Hurlbut, 2002; Zillmann, 1999). Some researchers define empathy in terms of affect matching (i.e., facial mimicry), emotional responding (i.e., sharing the same or similar emotional state), cognitive reactions (i.e., ability to take the perspective of the other, concern for other's plight), and/or some combination of these categories.

Most scholars agree that cognitive and affective factors are both at work in empathic reactivity (see Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1997). The most extreme reaction to another's need is emotional contagion, whereby the individual not only perceives the need in the other but is so overwhelmed by the emotion that it becomes self-, not other, focused (Preston & DeWaal, 2002).

Given this literature, three measures arise which assess different approaches to empathy. The coding scheme uses dichotomous variables, to examine whether the initiator (1) has the capacity to take the perspective of the character in need, (2) shows empathic concern for the other, and (3) becomes self-focused in his/her emotional responsiveness (i.e., contagion effect). These measures are combined so that empathy occurs when "1" and "2" are present but "3" is absent. For example, very young children might not have developed the capacity to take the perspective of the other even though they might exhibit behavior that appears to show empathic concern. Other behaviors might benefit the recipient but not be offered out of a spirit of helping. Finally, an initiator might be overwhelmed with sadness for the recipient to the extent that he or she is unable to act. In each of these cases, empathic behavior would be absent.

It is important to note, however, that it is altogether possible that measuring internal cognitive states such as perspective taking may be impossible to ascertain from behavior. Even if an actor seems to have the "capacity" or shows signs of perspective taking, it may be impossible to know if this is in fact what she/he is doing. Once again, we believe that this aspect of altruistic behavior should operate pan-culturally.

2.2.5 *Ease of Escape*

A fifth central feature of the empathy-altruism hypothesis is the notion of ease of escape (see Batson, 2002). Very simply, Batson (1991, 2002) has argued and experimentally tested other motives that might drive helping behaviors such as aversive arousal, reward seeking, or punishment avoidance. All are considered egoistic in nature; the basic premise is that when empathy is low or nonexistent, any one of these other self-focused motives may drive positive social actions such as sharing, giving, or donating. He has tested these egoistic alternatives with the variable "ease of escape," or the relative effort it takes one to withdraw from potential helping situations.

Ease of escape is defined operationally in two ways. The first is self-blame or internal negatively valenced emotions such as guilt or shame (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Bierbrauerin 1992; Lindsey, 2005; O'Keefe, 2002). Typically, these are punishment-based feelings that might emerge in the face of not helping another in need. Ease of escape is high if one can remove the self from the potential helping situation without feeling bad, guilty, or remorseful in some way. Thus, the inability to escape in the absence of empathy might suggest that one is helping to reduce aversive arousal or internal punishment within. In communal cultures, the inability of escape ties in closely to the obligation system. Even when obligation is relatively

low, there may be negative self-consequences from failure to help a member of one's in-group. It is important to point out that different standards may apply to interactions with members of an out-group, especially in communal cultures, but this distinction might not be found in more individualist cultures. Thus, internally driven ease of escape, such as helping to avoid anticipated guilt or shame, may be another area where cultural variance can be expected.

The second operational definition of ease of escape is social censure or external factors that may evoke condemnation from others. Ease of external escape occurs if one can remove the self from the potential helping situation without enduring the condemnation of others for failing to help or somehow avoid others knowing that you failed to help. The inability to escape the helping scene—in the absence of empathy—might suggest that one is helping to avoid social punishment or to receive rewards from bystanders.

We believe external ease of escape may vary depending on whether a culture is communal or individualistic. For example, avoidance of social sanctions may be less possible in communal cultures where social norms tend to have a stronger influence (Bagozzi, Wong, Abe, & Bergami, 2000; Park & Levine, 1999) relative to individualistic cultures. Because the power of actual or anticipated social sanctions has a greater influence on behaviors in communal cultures, the extent to which people believe it is possible to escape these sanctions is decreased, thus motivating helping behaviors which in individualistic cultures are considered altruistic. Actions done in private, without the possibility that others might have direct or indirect knowledge of the behavior, are likely to enhance the potential for external ease of escape by decreasing the probability of social sanctions (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Studies have typically found that egoistic motivations for helping operate in the absence of empathy (for excellent review, see Batson, 2002). The two measures in the present research that capture ease of escape are the presence or absence of internal blame (i.e., self-censure) and external blame (i.e., other censure) for each helping incident. Taken in combination with the empathy measure outlined above, the ease of escape variables helps to ascertain egotistic reasons for helping when empathic reactivity is not present.

In sum, five different variables capture differences in altruistic actions in our conceptualization. They can be used to create different composites that reflect different definitions of altruism. Cost and empathy seem to bridge communal and individualistic cultures, whereas concern for other versus self, benefit to recipient, and ease of escape are critical to understanding the differences in altruism between cultures.

2.3 Composites of Altruism

Due to the aforementioned ambiguity surrounding the conceptual definition of altruism, we created four specific composites of altruism. See Table 2.1 for an overview of the variables and composites that result from grouping them as described below. The first composite simply involved instances of helping and/or sharing.

Table 2.1 Composite definitions of altruism

	Liberal composite	Initiator focus	Recipient focus	Altruistically loving behavior
Helping/sharing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cost		Yes		Yes
Concern for other		Yes		Yes
Benefit for other			Yes	Yes
Empathy			Yes	Yes
Internal and external ease of escape				Yes

No additional stipulations were added to these types of acts, which should render this the most *liberal* composite of altruism.

The second and third composites were informed by the work of Krebs (1970). Arguing for a framework of altruism, Krebs (1970) asserts, “To begin with, the prototypical altruistic situation involves someone who gives (a benefactor), and someone who receives (the recipient). In some cases, characteristics of the benefactor affect altruism, and in other cases it is characteristics of the recipient. The first dimension of classification, then, separates variables which relate to the characteristics of benefactors that cause or correlate with altruism from the altruism-eliciting characteristics of recipients” (p. 262). Using Krebs’ (1970) logic, the second composite tapped key variables related to the *initiator* of altruistic acts such as the locus of concern and cost. The second composite includes instances of helping and/or sharing that were motivated out of a primary concern for the other over self and involved personal cost to the initiator. In cross-cultural applications of this coding scheme, ascertaining the locus of concern will be of primary importance.

The third composite tapped key variables related to the *recipient* and featured acts of helping/sharing that benefited the recipient and were the by-product of empathy. These acts were motivated by initiator projection into the emotional state and need of the recipient so that he or she could act in such a way that actually benefited the recipient. The extent to which recipient benefit is independent of actor benefit should be more carefully examined in communal relative to independent cultures.

The fourth composite is the most conservative. Only acts of helping/sharing that feature all five dimensions were included. These are instances in which the initiator is primarily concerned with the other, there is a cost to the actor, the recipient actually benefits, the act is the by-product of empathy, and ease of escape from self-censure or social censure is available. It is our belief that this stringent composite captures the most conservative other-oriented instances of altruistic behavior. Such acts have been described in the literature to be on par with the actions of receivers of the Carnegie Hero Commission Award, hospice volunteers, rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe during World War II, and similar heroic actions (Monroe, 2002, p. 108; Oliner, 2002, pp. 123–133). The escape from internal censure in this strict definition will be a variable that might differ cross-culturally, as will the primary concern for other over self and the locus of benefit variables.

In sum, we defined altruistic acts as instances of helping and sharing. We presented five variables that theorists identify as critical components of altruism, and we created from these variables four composite definitions of altruism. The “purest” form of altruism may involve those altruistic acts that stem from a primary concern for the other, actually benefit the recipient, involve empathy, incur a cost to the initiator, and from which the actor could escape self-censure or social censure relatively easily. These acts might be termed *altruistically loving behavior*. More liberal forms of altruism may include only one, two, or three of these elements, which would be more consistent with conceptualizations of this construct by Batson (2002), Oliner (2002), and Monroe (2002).

The different composites of altruism all are likely to be coded differentially across communal and individualistic cultures. The behavioral component that is the bedrock of all of the composites, helping and sharing, might be motivated more often by role-related expectations in communal cultures. In addition, the initiator component of primary concern for the other, the recipient component of benefit, and the altruistic love component of internal ease of escape are predicted to differ in communal versus individualistic cultures.

While we believe there is pan-cultural commonality in the meaning of acts of altruism, we have identified the elements in our proposed coding system that we believe will be most susceptible to cultural variation. We have proposed that as this coding scheme is extended to other cultures, modifications must be crafted by working in tandem with collaborating scholars from these target cultures who will be able to provide guidance on the cultural values that need to be factored into our coding scheme. In particular, we suggest that a critical need exists to accurately reflect differences in interpersonal obligation and mutual face needs as they relate to whether the act was beyond role expectations, the primary force motivating the behavior was concern for the other, and variability in ease of escape from one’s internalized obligations to others in the in-group and the out-group in order to be able to code cross-cultural altruistic behavior.

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