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Application of the Altruistic Behavior Coding Scheme to Cross-Cultural Contexts[1]

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Smith and Smith claimed that altruistic action "is intended to benefit others beyond simple sociability or duties associated with role." This definition will need to be carefully applied to behavior in communal cultures as they have extended obligation networks, the basis of which are expected helping behaviors offered to others in the network. Therefore, behaviors that would be captured by the coding scheme in an individualistic culture would not necessarily be seen as altruistic in a communal culture as they may be non-voluntary and role-related. Six components of altruistic behavior are addressed here, and two of these are predicted to differ according to the culture in which they are enacted. These are determining whether the act was motivated by a primary concern for the other and whether the actor would be likely to engage in self blame if he or she did not engage in the action. The other three components of altruistic behavior are postulated to operate pan-culturally. They are actual benefit to the recipient, empathy, cost to the initiator, and ease of escape from social censure.

Keywords: Altruism, Communal Cultures, Individualistic cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION

A movement to study compassion and altruism scientifically began, and has continued for the past five years, due to the tireless efforts of Lynn Underwood and others at the Fetzer Institute and Steven Post at the Center for Unlimited Love. The root of the work described here was supported by the Fetzer Institute. One goal was to develop conceptual definitions of altruism and related issues and an operational coding scheme that could be used to code instances of altruistic behavior on American television.

As such, the definitions and coding scheme reflect a societal conception rooted in an individualistic culture. The purpose of this paper is to describe the conceptual definition and coding scheme and to determine in what ways this can be extended or modified to reflect communal cultures, as well.

Smith et al. (2004), 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." More specifically, altruistic behavior was seen 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, an previously affectionless father may break down and communicate love for his daughter by hugging her as she departs for college, a fireman may run into an inferno to save a pregnant mother despite the fact that all of his training would suggest not to do so. A doctor may read to an unconscious child in intensive care hours after performing surgery for a congenital heart defect. Such acts not only are 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 actions that go beyond the boundaries of role-related norms. However, communal cultures are often based on a strict and more fully articulated system of social obligations to others compared to obligation in more individualistically-oriented cultures (Bresnahan 1991; Clark and Mills 1993; Janoff-Bulman and Leggatt 2002; Miller and Bersoff 1998). While 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 and Chung 2005). 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 of the current study is to refine the proposed coding scheme for interpreting acts of altruism to be sensitive to such important cultural differences.

As an illustration for how social obligation can be described as obligation, Filipino culture is based on a mutual obligation system encapsulated in the concept of *utang na loob* (literally this translates 'debt that is inside' but means something like 'continuing debt of gratitude to another,' Santos 1978). To neglect to carry out one's social obligations to others or to fail to show respect to another who has observed social obligation to you is considered to be *walang hiya* behavior (literally this translates as 'having no shame' but in practical terms it means 'not honoring obligation to others'). Being referred to as *walang hiya* is the ultimate insult or social sanctioning device in Filipino culture (Bresnahan 1991). The measure of public personhood is the extent to which a person honors *utang na loob*. This is not voluntary behavior as being negligent in honoring one's social obligation would make one a pariah and result in social ostracizing.

To make this clearer, we provide a further example. For many years, a wealthy Filipino friend of one of the authors hired many members of his extended family and his wife's extended family from the provinces who wanted to better their situation to work in his optical shops in the city and let them live in his house. He expanded the number of shops that he had in order to accommodate the expanding number of relatives that he was bringing from the provinces. In doing this, he was fulfilling his social/role obligation to help out less fortunate members of his extended family. This would not fall under our definition of altruism because he was doing what was expected for someone in his role in his communal

culture. This same example within an individualist culture would clearly be coded as an example of altruism.

But this man also made it possible for every one of those relatives who worked for him to obtain a college education at his expense so they would have a chance to escape from the cycle of poverty as he had done when a wealthy relative had sponsored his education in the city when he was a poor farm boy from Bulakan. No one expected him to send all these young people to school, and most people did not know that he did this for others until all the people that he had helped got together at his funeral. It was his free choice to help them more than he had already done by providing them with a job and lodging. He never expected nor received any repayment for his generosity in educating these relatives. In fact, if a relative had attempted to give money back to him this would have been extremely offensive and a violation of the mutual obligation system. On the other hand, occasionally a basket of ripe mangoes, jackfruit, or fresh papayas from the provinces would appear at his house, and when he went to the provinces, his relatives welcomed him with iced beverages, and after he rested on the shaded veranda, they served him cool ripe mango slices with barbecued chicken and homemade rice cakes. While both providing his relatives with a job in his optical shops and sending them to the university exemplify *utang na loob,* the second instance of his generosity in providing these young people with the means to get schooling exceeds the expected social obligation to extended family in his communal culture and is an example of altruism by our definition.

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 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 et al. 2002).

We believe that the variability in definitions is something to embrace rather than eschew. Instead of wrestling over what constitutes an "altruistic act" beyond a voluntary action that is intended to benefit others beyond simple sociability or duties associated with role, we decided to operationalize aspects of different definitions offered in the literature so as to not be dependent on *our* conceptualization of this construct, but rather on different *researchers'* conceptualizations.

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. In addition to what we review below, two additional 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 latter two will not be reviewed below. The five key aspects of altruism include: direction of concern (self versus other), initiator

cost, recipient benefit, empathy on the part of the initiator for the recipient, and ease of escape from self and/or social censure. After we review each of these components of altruism, we will discuss their implications for cross-cultural application.

Concern

One of the common definitional elements of altruism concerns individuals' intention for performing altruistic acts. Some theorists have argued that the primary concern of the altruist is for the other (Batson 2002; Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Kagan 2002; Latane and Darley 1970; Oliner 2002; Rushton 1976) and not the self (see Monroe 2002:107). For example, Post (2002:53) 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." 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 2002:53; Sober 2002:19). 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 a reward will be given for the dog's return. In our example of the Filipino benefactor, it is possible that he thought about the mangoes, chicken and the rice cakes he would receive as well as the positive social face that he would earn for himself from providing his relatives with an education (Ting-Toomey and Chung 2005). 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 empathy theorists. Types 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.

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 native participants from the other culture who grew up in the other obligation system of that culture do the coding based on indigenous

values in that 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.

Cost

Oftentimes, 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 and 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 tap whether the initiator experiences a "cost" for helping another character. 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, 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 rather than asking 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 be likely to vary by culture and context, the concept represented by cost should characterize altruistic behaviors in all cultures.

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 can not 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 was coded as

recipient benefit present or absent. Recipient benefit is also theorized to be a pan-cultural feature of altruism in our definition.

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 et al. 1981; Coke, Batson, and McDavis 1978; Fultz et al. 1986). Yet, meta-analyses reveal that the strength of the relationship may vary depending on the operationalization of altruistic action, the method of measuring (self report, picture indices, physiological markers) empathy, and age of the participant in the study (Eisenberg and Miller 1987).

This is a controversial construct in the social science literature that is defined in multiple ways (Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Feshbach and 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 Feshbach and Feshbach 1997; Eisenberg and Strayer 1987). 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 and 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.

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. Just because 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 s/he is doing. Once again, we believe that this aspect of altruistic behavior should operate pan-culturally.

Ease of Escape

A 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 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. Typically, these are punishment-based feelings that might emerge in the face of helping. 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, shape, or form. 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 where this distinction might not be found in more individualist cultures. Ease of escape may be another area where cultural variance can be expected.

The second 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. Consequently, the inability to externally escape the helping scene – in the absence of empathy – might suggest that one is helping to avoid punishment or receive rewards from bystanders. We believe that this process should operate in relatively similar ways across cultures. While ease of escape is thought of as one component, the two types should be considered separately if we are correct that one can be differentiated between communal and individualistic cultures and the other operates similarly across both types of cultures.

For example, in the aftermath of the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean basin which killed over 200,000 people between Indonesia and Somalia, the United States, which is one of the richest nations in the world, was severely criticized for the paltry, ungenerous tsunami relief support that was offered at first. In response to global criticism, the amount of relief was increased substantially, and George H. Bush, former president and father of the current president, along with former president Bill Clinton were named to head up the tsunami relief team effort. As the extent of this international devastation affecting numerous nations, including nearly three thousand European tourists on Phuket Island in Thailand, became apparent, the United States assumed the lead in funding and organizing disaster relief.

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- (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 will help 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, benefit to the recipient, and empathy seem to bridge both types of cultures, while benefit to other versus self and ease of escape are critical to understanding the differences in altruism between individualistic and collectivist cultures.

3. COMPOSITES OF ALTRUISM

Due to the aforementioned ambiguity surrounding the conceptual definition of altruism, four specific composites of altruism were created. See Figure 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. No additional stipulations were added to these types of acts, which should render this the most *liberal* composite of altruism.

Figure 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 East of Escape				Yes

The second and third composites were informed by the work of Krebs (1970). Arguing for a framework of altruism, Krebs (1970:262) 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."

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. 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 were included in the second composite. 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*. Acts of helping/sharing that that benefited the recipient and were the byproduct of empathy were featured in this composite. 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. This composite should be relatively unaffected in cross-cultural applications.

The fourth composite is the most conservative. Only acts of helping/sharing that feature all five dimensions were included. Those 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 byproduct of empathy, and ease of escape from self- 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, or the incredible devotion of international forensic teams in Thailand working selflessly to identify the bodies of tsunami victims in the oppressive heat under difficult conditions so that the families of these victims can receive the body of their loved one for burial and have closure (Monroe 2002:108; Oliner 2002:123-133). The escape from internal censure in this strict definition will be a variable that might differ cross-culturally

In sum, we defined altruistic acts as instances of helping and sharing. Five variables that theorists identify as critical components of altruism were presented, and four composite definitions of altruism were created from these variables. 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 or social censure relatively easily. These acts might be termed *altruistically loving behavior*. More liberal forms of altruism may only include 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, and the altruistic love component of internal ease of escape are predicted to differ in communal versus individualistic cultures.

While we believe there is strong 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.

4. NOTES

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