

The Effect of Relationships, Cost and Religion on College Students' Perceived Willingness to Help

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Previous research suggests that individuals who are more religious with positive relationships and in low personal cost situations are more likely to help. To test these theories, scenarios of varying costs, questionnaires, and two relationship conditions were given to 40 university students. There was no significant difference in willingness to help among the cost, religiousness or relationship conditions or in perceived altruism in the cost or relationship conditions. There was a significant difference in willingness to help. These results suggest there is no significant connection between cost, religion, or relationship alone, but multiple reasons affect the decision to help or not.

Altruistic acts are any deeds done with no intention of a reward; in other words, totally selfless act. Have you ever helped a friend who needed a place to stay for a night without expecting anything in return from him/her the next day? Everyday there are selfless heroes doing just that, whether it be something as small as letting a friend spend the night or something as big as saving a stranger and his/her family from a car on the verge of explosion. Whether or not these acts are truly selfless is frequently debated among researchers and scientists. Some say the internal automatic reaction of feeling good after doing a good deed is a reward in and of itself. Whether we are getting an intrinsic reward from helping or we are being rewarded with money, true altruism is very hard to distinguish from a deed done with rewards in mind.

A study conducted by Maner and Gailliot (2007) evaluated the willingness to help when given a high cost and a low cost scenario. Each individual was given a high and low cost scenario and was told to imagine either a close relative or a stranger in the given situation. After reading each scenario the participants were asked to rate their emotions and thoughts about the situation. The results showed that kinship relationships resulted in more helping than when a stranger was imagined. When push comes to shove in a serious situation, most individuals would help the people closest to them (such as family, friends, or loved ones) instead of strangers.

When the commitment between two individuals is greater, though, it has been said that there is a difference in the altruistic behavior. Powell and Vugt (2003) examined 110 postgraduate students on their willingness to help in a high cost versus a low cost scenario when the level of commitment in the couple's relationship was different. A high cost scenario was similar to "Your friend was in a car accident and has passed away. His/her two children are now without a home and you have been asked to take care of them." An example of a low cost scenario would be: "Your friend just lost his/her house and needs a place to stay till he/she can get back up on his/her feet" (Powell & Vugt, 2007). Their study showed that the more committed the couple was, the more likely they were to react positively to the high cost scenario. The couples who were less committed reacted just as positively to the low cost scenario as the high cost group did. The closer someone was to the individual in need of help, the more willing he/she was to help no matter the cost of the situation.

Seeing altruism is difficult enough when trying to see it inside oneself, but can prove even more of a challenge when interpreting the motives of other people. A set of studies run by Barnett, Bartel, Sanborn, and Vitaglione (2000) tested how likely people were to believe altruistic behavior if it came from everyday self-oriented helpers (helpers that helped to help themselves over others) or every day other-oriented helpers (helpers who helped to help others over themselves). They tested it twice: once when undergraduate students examined other undergraduates helping, and then again when undergraduate students examined preadolescent helpers. The study showed that, no matter the age of the helpers, other-oriented helpers were favored over self-oriented helpers. Similar to the results found by Powell and Vugt (2007), the closer the helper-recipient relationships and the more altruistically motivated the helping

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individual was, the more likely the participant was to be influenced by it.

This brings up the relationship of altruism to religion and how it teaches individuals to help where help is needed no matter the situation. This mindset could affect an individual's decision when considering helping or not. In all major world religions, the "Golden Rule" (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), even if stated differently, is a core principle. Could those individuals with more spirituality and religious beliefs help more frequently than not? In a series of studies done by Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg and Hagekull (2007), two hypotheses were analyzed. The first was the correspondence hypothesis, which was concerned with the relations between individuals' internal working models (IWMs) of self-others and their perceived relationships with and images of God. Individuals who have strong attachments to others were hypothesized to form a strong relationship with a loving caring God, whereas those with non-secure relationships formed relationships with a non-caring God. Participants were questioned about their attachment to their parents and other important relationships (to family, friends and God). It was shown that they believed God had a lot to do with their positive relationships as well as with their relationships with their parents/guardians. The more loving their parent/guardian relationship, the more loving and caring the participant's image of God was. The second hypothesis suggests that the perceived God relationship serves a "surrogate attachment" function that helps insecurely attached individuals get a sense of security. So those who are insecure and have never had a real lasting relationship can find hope in the relationship with God, depending on how they perceive it. After testing this hypothesis, the researchers concluded that individuals living with insensitive parents had a positive bond with God. They also tended to undergo sudden changes in religion, especially in opposition to their parents' beliefs (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg & Hagekull, 2007). This shows how relationships with kin and God can affect an individual socially as well as psychologically. This could be attributed to the relationships among religious beliefs, an individual's upbringing, and helping behaviors. Many people do what they have learned or been taught. This could significantly affect social behavior such as relationships and their view of society as a whole. That in turn could affect what they think of helping and why they would perceive others as selfless helpers or not.

According to previous studies done by Granqvist et al., and Cohen and Hill, religion seems to play a small role in the relationships we form and how closely those relationships correspond with an individual's beliefs and outlooks on society. Does religion have an effect on how willing someone is to help another individual? Cohen & Hill (2007) examined whether Protestants, Jews, and Catholics differed in intrinsic and extrinsic ways. Their four studies tested whether each religion was individualistic (intrinsic or internally based) or collectivistic (extrinsic or externally based). The results of the studies showed that overall, the Jewish were more collectivistic, the Protestants were individualistic, and the Catholics were a mix of both individualistic and collectivistic. The collectivistic religions tended to be more group related and society related. This

suggested that individuals were more secure with group and society ties to God and less secure with one on one relationships. The individualistic groups, however, were shown to be more one on one with God and intrinsic motivators are more positively linked to their culture and society. This suggests that, depending on religion, one may lean more closely to internal deeds rather than society focused ones.

This study examined the relationship between religion, kinship, personal cost, and altruistic behavior. The independent variables in the present study were high cost scenarios and low cost scenarios, strength of family and stranger relationships, and whether an individual is religious or non-religious. The dependent variables in the study were the perceived willingness to help and how likely the participant would be to help. Considering previous research I hypothesized that in the high cost versus low cost condition, the low cost group would have a higher report of willingness to help than the high group. I also hypothesized that in the family versus acquaintance condition, the participants in the family group would have a higher report of willingness to help when compared with the acquaintance group. My third hypothesis was that the more religious a participant reported to be, the more the individual would be willing to help over all groups. I also hypothesized that the participants in the family condition would perceive altruistic helping more than the participants in the acquaintance group. My fifth hypothesis was that over all, the more religious an individual was the more he or she would perceive altruistic helping from others due to the golden rule and the belief systems that are in place. I hypothesized that the participants in the family condition who were religious would report more willingness to help than the participants in the acquaintance condition who were not religious. Finally, I hypothesized that the participants in the low cost scenario – family condition would report the most willingness to help.

Method

Participants

The individuals involved in the study were a convenience sample of 40 public northeastern university students between the ages of 18 and 51 years old.

Materials

Participants were given two high or low cost scenarios, no longer than a paragraph each, with three questions on the reverse side that asked questions about the altruistic behavior in the scenario (see Appendices A–E). Next, they completed a short questionnaire asking about their religious beliefs, how likely they would be to help in a similar situation, and their demographics (see Appendix F). The questionnaires were used to test their willingness to help and their perception of other helpers. Sheets of paper were distributed to the subject. The slips either had family (20 slips) or acquaintance (20 slips) written on them; each participant received one (see Appendix G). Participants received an informed consent sheet before the experiment began. The

participants also received a short debriefing after the experiment was completed.

Procedure

As the participants entered the room the experimenter randomly assigned them to a seat. The informed consent sheet was passed out as the experimenter explained that all answers were confidential and they could withdraw from the study at any time. After the informed consent sheets were signed and witnessed, they were collected and placed in a folder separate from the data sheets. The scenarios were randomly distributed and the participants were randomly given a slip (either family or acquaintance) from the table. The experimenter told the participants that the experiment would take roughly five minutes to complete, depending on the average speed of the reader.

Once all materials were passed out the experimenter instructed the participants to read the word on the slip and carefully take a minute to imagine someone that fits that title, for example a mother or close cousin. After a minute the participants were asked to write the word on the slip at the top of their scenario. They were told to read the stories while thinking about the person associated with the word and, when finished with the first one, to turn it over and answer the questions. They were told to repeat the process for the second story and, once completed, to answer the short questionnaire. After debriefing the participants were finished with the experiment.

Results

After all the data was collected a one-way and a two-way between-subjects ANOVA was used to statistically test my hypotheses. The results showed that there was no significant difference in willingness to help between the high cost ($M = 7.90$, $SD = 4.56$) or the low cost ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 4.88$) conditions, $F(1, 38) = 3.637$, $p > .05$. This suggests there was no significant influence of the cost of the situation on an individual's willingness to help. There was also no significant difference in willingness to help between the family ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 5.890$) or acquaintance ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 3.249$) conditions, $F(1, 38) = 3.104$, $p > .05$, and religious ($M = 7.04$, $SD = 4.88$) or non religious ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 4.93$) responses, $F(1, 38) = .728$, $p > .05$. These results suggest that neither relationship nor religion alone significantly influenced the participant's willingness to help.

There was also no significant difference in perception of altruistic helping between the family ($M = 1.35$, $SD = .813$) or acquaintance ($M = .95$, $SD = .686$) conditions, $F(1, 38) = 2.828$, $p > .05$, and the high cost ($M = 1.30$, $SD = .733$) or low cost ($M = 1.00$, $SD = .795$) conditions, $F(1, 38) = 6.003$, $p > .05$. These results suggest that neither relationship nor the cost of a situation significantly influenced how participants perceived the helpers.

There was, however, a significant difference in the perception of altruism in the religious ($M = .139$, $SD = .722$) and the non religious ($M = .82$, $SD = .728$) conditions, $F(1, 38) = 6.003$, $p < .05$. This suggests that the presence of religion as a major part of the participant's life significantly affected their perception of

other's actions. Finally, there was a significant difference in willingness to help among the interaction between cost and relationships ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 4.88$), $F(1, 36) = 78.457$, $p < .05$ and relationships and religion ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 4.88$), $F(1, 36) = 67.609$, $p < .05$. This suggests a combination of causes could be the fuel behind deciding whether to help or not.

Discussion

This data suggests that it is a combination of circumstances that causes altruistic responses. No one situation gave an individual enough will to help but when combined, the helping was significantly improved. The only single factor that had any effect was the presence of religion in the participant's life and how often he/she perceived helpers as altruistic. This could be due to the teachings within the religion or the overall understanding and living the word of the Golden Rule. Similar to the results from the studies run by Barnett, Bartel, Sanborn, and Vitaglione (2002), the results of this study suggest other-oriented helpers are viewed as more altruistic. Many comments made by participants showed that when in the family condition they assumed others helped because it was family, not because it was altruistically right, whereas individuals in the acquaintance category appeared to view the helpers as more altruistically motivated more of the time.

One limitation of this study was the set up of the experiment itself. The scenarios may have been too long and wordy. By the end of the scenario the reader appeared stuck on the story rather than the specific details pertaining to the altruism involved. Also, the questionnaires could be confusing due to the phrasing or selection choices given after each scenario. When given the relationship slips (family or acquaintance), participants seemed confused and were not quite sure what to do. This could directly affect the outcome of the relationship groups which could be a reason those results were not significant.

Another limitation was due to the questionnaire phrasing. The open-ended questions left it open for the participants to interpret them as they saw fit. It also created some difficulty when statistically analyzing them. There was a wide variety of selections that did not really fit in with an altruistic or non-altruistic response. Responses to "how important is your faith to you?" and "Why do you think the people helped in this story?" were all very in-depth and complicated answers. Some responses also appeared to be dishonest, reflecting non altruistic written responses but altruistic behaviors checked off or covered for both altruistic and not altruistic helping (or religious and not religious). For example, numerous responses talked about perceiving helpers as helping in the multi-car pileup because it was in their way, so why not help to hurry things along? Other responses listed all possibilities or covered the two extremes. For example, many included some if not all of these: convenience, mutual help, morals, personal goals, wants, they were asked to help, fortune opportunity, famous, status for helping, they were expected to, human nature, and because others were doing it. Most included something about morals and fame as well, so it was a challenge to find an even way to score those

responses. Other responses seemed to have an air of sarcasm that could have been due to the fact that the scenarios did not seem realistic to the participant or because he or she was not taking the experiment seriously. The responses were also different per scenario. For one condition, one scenario may cause the participant to say the helpers were helping because help was needed while the next would cause them to say the helpers helped for fame, wealth or reward. Steps should be taken in the future to control for different responses and take into consideration each individual scenario as well as the information as a whole.

The fourth limitation was the fact that the study was based solely on measures of self report. All the data was taken assuming the participants were accurate and honest in all responses. Other limitations branched from the self report measurements. The individual experiences of each participant and the situations they have experienced were one of those instances. Whether they (or a family member) have been through a hurricane or have not experienced an apartment fire could drastically affect their willingness to help and their perception of other helpers. Also, the bonds each participant has formed with his/her family could affect their responses (if in the family condition). If an individual is close to his/her family it could make the helping behavior drastically different. Participants also showed a strong internal struggle with what is "right" to do and what they would do. Many participants either said people helped because it was the right thing to do or because it was expected. In many comment sections participants showed distaste in the realization that they would help a little but when asked to think honestly, they would not help nearly as much.

The last limitation was how the religious aspect was perceived by the participants. Many comments were said about the lack of connection between religion and the rest of the experiment which caused more distraction than anything. Religion is also difficult to score or understand mainly because of each individual perception. "Religion governs all my decisions" and "Religion is very important to me" are some examples of responses by participants. These responses could be interpreted as religious; however governing your life and just being important are very different levels of importance. Responses showed a wide variety of explanations to support their religious definition. One interesting section was the one that asked participants how often they attended and how important church was to them. Catholics, in the majority, reported attending all services but their religion was not important to them. Most other people who responded as being religious either went to church and religion was important to them, or they did not attend but wanted to more. This could be due to the fact that each religion goes about presenting information in a different way. But do those Catholics then attribute, unconsciously, what they hear in church towards everyday life or do they follow it consciously? If it is a conscious choice there is room to decide to follow it or not, it is not inherently in your daily life. Similar to Cohen and Hill's study in 2007, Catholics see religion as both individualistic and collectivistic. If the one on one connection is strong, but the group relationship is not, they may never

attend services but may entirely rely on God as their leader and guide. People may feel no connection with God on a personal level but when among a group of fellow Catholics would be able to worship and praise the Lord. The challenge for further studies will be deciding what the definition of religious is and how to form that into questions.

Further studies could examine how individuals perceive themselves and how that affects the way they see others by tying in relationships and cost by perhaps, combining them into the scenario instead of keeping them separate. One option would be to mirror the Powell and Vugt study (2003), where postgraduate students read either a high cost scenario ("Your friend was in a car accident and has passed away. His/her two children are now without a home and you have been asked to take care of them.") or a low cost scenario ("Your friend just lost his/her house and need a place to stay till he/she can get back up on their feet."). Their study showed that the more committed the couple was, the more likely they were to react positively to the high cost scenario. The closer the individuals were, the more willing they were to give of themselves. Joining the high and low cost scenarios and giving each participant one of both could also give a better insight into the relationship between cost and an individual's willingness to help.

Another aspect to be looked at in further studies would be the relationship between participants' responses and their upbringing. Instead of religion being one of the main reasons behind how we decide who we help and when, upbringing could play a larger role. Many participants responded to the open ended questions with either "it was the right thing to do" or "it is only human nature to help people". This could be due to the fact that they were raised to think that way or they experienced that while growing up. To better understand whether religiousness or an individual's upbringing is the cause for his/her altruistic behaviors, an experiment similar to the ones done by Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg and Hagekull (2007) could be conducted. Their studies found that relationships with kin and God can affect an individual socially and psychologically. Results also showed that images of God and their beliefs were dependent upon their relationships with their parents and their introduction to God and religion as a child. Exploring this further could bring light to what influences altruistic behavior in some individuals and whether internal or external factors are causing the behaviors.

Further studies should also use shorter and more direct scenarios. Less narration and more scientific and precise information could hold the participant's attention longer than a lengthy narrative and could give direct data rather than distracters. Questions could also be posed differently to enhance responses and even make participants think less in depth and be more definite about their responses. Multiple choice options might be more appropriate for both participant response and statistical analysis. In summary, no concrete conclusions for altruism and whether it truly exists within society can be drawn from the present research. Further studies however, can go forward with new tactics which could lead to the answer behind the existence of altruism and what, if anything, causes its occurrence.

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Appendix A

[[High cost]]

Scenario

After writing the name written on your slip of paper at the top of this sheet, please take a minute to read the story below.

A hurricane has just torn across the east coast, leaving destruction and water damage everywhere. It hit Massachusetts hard. Major injuries and hundreds of fatalities were reported and the wreckage has not been fully searched as of now. No families have heard word yet; many hoping and praying their loved ones are safe as we see all the damage that has been done. Relief efforts have already begun. Connecticut has several shelters open with volunteers working around the clock to take in the homeless and get kits, food, and health supplies to those who need it. Others have been donating funds to help aid in the recovery. Any help is welcome. This is a terrible loss to the US.

Appendix B

[[Low cost]]

Scenario

After writing the name written on your slip of paper at the top of this sheet, please take a minute to read the story below.

An apartment fire was discovered late last night down the street. No one was killed but many people were taken to the hospital as a precaution and with minor burns. The fire was started by an undetermined cause, but we know it began in the basement and ignited quickly catching on to the old wood starts leading up to the first floor and engulfing the apartments one by one. The Fire Department has declared them unlivable and has condemned them. The 30 families currently living there now need to find other accommodations. The Red Cross and some other unknown volunteers have opened their doors and brought food and warm clothes and blankets for them until other arrangements can be made. Others have sent cards to the victims with cash and warm wishes. Everyone is doing their part, after this extraordinary blaze lit up the skyline last night.

Appendix C

[[High cost]]

Scenario

After writing the name written on your slip of paper at the top of this sheet, please take a minute to read the story below.

The downpour that's lasted four days showed no signs of easing yesterday as hundreds of people had to be rescued from their homes. Many were taken to higher grounds and are currently staying at shelters all across the northeast. Some didn't escape the flood waters. There is an ongoing search and rescue currently installed until all missing persons and all those in danger are rescued. As of now, 50 casualties have been sustained and more are expected as the week progresses. Shelters and food are being offered at a local church and many unknown volunteers are risking the weather and their lives in hopes to secure the safety of those still alive and hold off the flood waters until this torrential down pour lets up.

Appendix D

[[Low cost]]

Scenario

After writing the name written on your slip of paper at the top of this sheet, please take a minute to read the story below.

A multi-car pileup has stopped traffic on I-84. What started as a fender bender has now blown to monumental proportions There have been 42 victims rescued from the wreckage. No fatalities have been reported, however numerous people have been rushed to the hospital, some seriously injured. Families and communities must now deal with this tragic accident taken place in their own back yards. Phone calls offering support and donations to help clean up and aid in recovery have been given. EMT's and individuals pulling over alongside the accident to help rescue the trapped drivers and passengers have been working for hours in hopes everyone can be rescued alive. There is still no explanation

