

Defining Altruism: An Anthropological and Sociocultural Literature Review

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This paper considers an anthropological framework of altruism insofar as committing to selfless acts in which the organism reduces its fitness towards increasing the fitness of another related organism. This literature-review focused paper considers the provenance of altruism as an instinct and also explores studies through divergent cultures to define altruism using a universal approach as well as a culturally relevant one by considering where altruism is practiced and how it has been in history. It is composed of two parts: An anthropology of 'the good' that considers altruism as a human condition and a brief foray into the nurture, or cultural studies of altruism and related phenomena. In order to do this, consideration is given to modern, more commonly accepted theoretical frameworks and thoughts from researchers in the field. Findings from this paper conclude that the covered altruistic theories provide new perspectives on cooperative efforts and separate them from purely selfish explanations, acknowledging the importance of the evolving definition of altruism as a pragmatic tool that serves humanity.

Keywords: *altruism, selfless acts, fitness, instinct, cultures, cultural relevance, practice, history, anthropology of 'the good', nurture, pragmatic tool, humanity*

Introduction

The survival of the human species does not solely rely on our physical prowess or individual ability to outsmart other predatory animals. Instead, it hinges upon our capacity to come together as a cohesive species to endure the challenges of nature. Human social relations, the organization of society, and our interactions with one another often revolve around fundamental questions about the nature of good and evil in human beings. Some theories propose that individuals are born with inherent goodness or badness, while others argue that these traits are acquired over time through learning. In light of these inquiries, altruism, one of humanity's most intriguing and collectivity-promoting impulses, has been the subject of scientific investigation. Can altruism be concretely defined and attributed to specific characteristics? Is it inherent in human beings, or does it require sentience? Early evidence from human history, such as cooperative hunting and a propensity for group cooperation and sharing, suggests that altruism is deeply ingrained in human culture.

In more recent times, human classification has expanded to encompass a broader range of groups, including cultural and regional distinctions. Numerous studies suggest that altruism may have a place in human nature. However, when exploring the role of nurture in shaping altruistic behavior, the connection to culture becomes an area of interest. How can we better define altruism through comprehensive research and analysis

of secondary sources? How can we refine our understanding of altruism through literature reviews? In the pursuit of a practical humanist definition of altruism, to what extent is it an intrinsic or societally derived phenomenon?

This literature review focuses on exploring the origins of altruism as an instinct and delving into studies across diverse cultures to define altruism using both a universal approach and a culturally relevant perspective that considers where and how altruism is practiced throughout history.

Research Methods

This research paper comprises two parts: an anthropology of 'the good' that considers altruism as a human condition, and a brief exploration of nurture through cultural studies of altruism and related phenomena. To achieve this, we will draw on modern, widely accepted theoretical frameworks and insights from researchers in the field.

This paper adopts an anthropological framework of altruism, specifically examining selfless acts in which an organism reduces its fitness to enhance the fitness of another related organism. The materialist view of human behavior, popularized by Richard Dawkins, suggests the existence of a "selfish gene." By analyzing historical data, we aim to shed light on the altruistic tendencies observed in early humans and explore the societal engagement of other species. The following aspects will be explored: the provenance of altruism as an in-

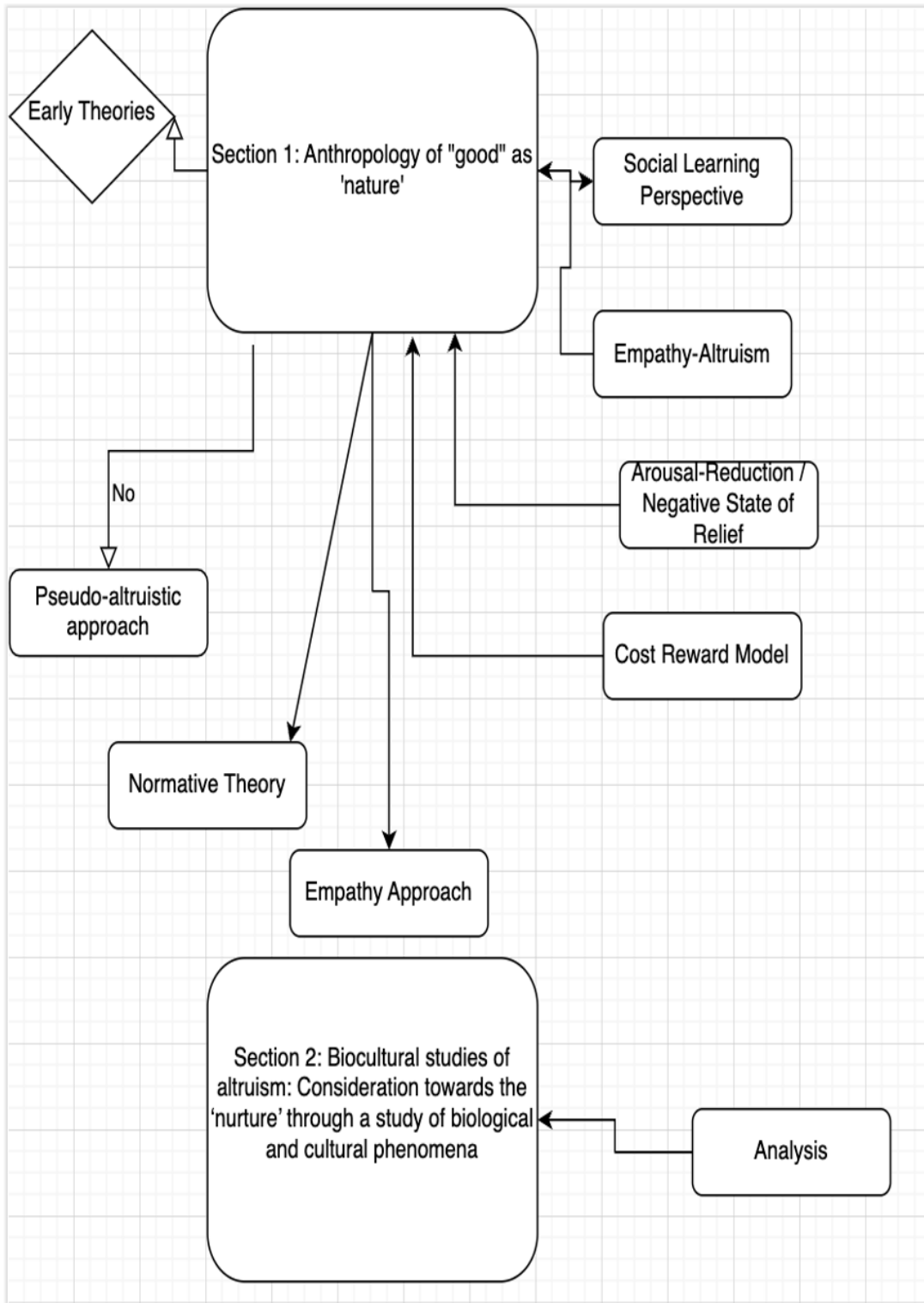


Fig. 1 Research Method

stinct, studies across diverse cultures to determine the extent to which altruism is a fundamental instinct influenced by cultural phenomena, research on altruism and its definition for the purposes of this paper, altruism and levels of selection, game theory for decision-making in altruism (such as the prisoner's dilemma), and concepts of kin selection and inclusive fitness.

A biocultural approach to altruism incorporates the evolutionary aspect of social behavior, particularly its relation to kindness. This approach involves considering the following factors: evolutionary theories of cooperation, viewing cultures as symbolic manifestations of a material psychology grounded in neurochemical prompts for social behavior, reviewing English literature that discusses American cultural beliefs in altruism, comparing and contrasting approaches to altruism and the current body of research on altruism in the context of a shifting technological society amidst the fourth industrial revolution, and reviewing the existing literature on contemporary American engagement in altruistic behaviors and the cultural norms that trigger them. Defining altruism is challenging due to the multitude of interpretations researchers have, which dictate the methods used in research. Of particular interest is understanding the motivation underlying altruism, which remains a contentious aspect of its definition. The following overview provides a comprehensive yet not exhaustive exploration of the various models of altruism that exist.

Section 1: An anthropology of 'the good' that considers altruism as a human condition: nature

Early theories: Darwin, self-preservation, group and kin selection, and reciprocal altruism

Charles Darwin's concept of natural selection and the evolution of mankind initially seemed to contradict the idea of altruism, as it appeared to conflict with the notion of self-preservation. However, it is worth considering the argument that the survival of our species was facilitated by the division of labor within tribes, which may shed light on the persistence of altruistic traits. In this communal perspective, individuals specializing in hunting, protecting, and nurturing contributed to the overall survival and inclusive fitness of the group¹. While the "selfish gene" argument presented an incomplete explanation, the concept of group and kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and inclusive fitness emerged in the late 20th century to resolve this apparent paradox².

Group and kin selection suggests that natural selection favors groups over individual interests, as it increases the probability of genetic fitness and the survival of offspring. Reciprocal altruism proposes that altruistic behavior can extend beyond in-group members, as long-term benefits can persist even among out-groups. Inclusive fitness theory suggests that an individual's genetic fitness is not solely based on personal

survival but also on the enhancement of the fitness of the group to which they belong. These early theories have influenced psychological perspectives on self-sacrifice and parental care, and have shaped theoretical arguments suggesting that altruism may ultimately be motivated by self-interest.

Some psychological theories, rooted in perspectives such as psychoanalysis, have posited that all human motivations are primarily egotistical or inherently selfish³. These theories concluded that an inherent "hedonistic" nature drives human behavior, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. However, an alternative perspective challenges the dominant belief in universal selfishness by proposing the concept of "benevolence" as a distinct form of motivation that is selfless and different from selfish acts. Nevertheless, the existence of true altruism remains a contentious topic, and our understanding of human motivation continues to be characterized by both egotistical and altruistic underpinnings.

Some researchers argue that the concept of "benevolence" represents a significant departure from the prevailing belief in universal selfishness⁴. Benevolence refers to a genuine concern for the well-being of others and the motivation to act in ways that promote their welfare, even at the expense of one's own interests. By acknowledging benevolence as a distinct form of motivation, separate from selfish acts, we can better appreciate the potential for selfless behavior and its impact on human interactions. This perspective enriches our understanding of altruism and highlights the complexity of human motivations beyond narrow self-interest, laying a stronger foundation for exploring the intricacies of benevolence in the broader context of human nature.

Therefore, while the "selfish gene" argument may appear incomplete in isolation, considering the communal angle of selfishness and the division of labor within tribes provides a broader context for understanding the survival of altruistic traits and the complex interplay between self-interest and selflessness in human behavior.

The pseudo-altruistic approach: altruism as egotistically motivated

The pseudo-altruistic approach has exerted significant influence in psychological theory, positing that altruistic behavior is ultimately driven by egotistical motives, with the ultimate goal being one's self-interested welfare. In this perspective, altruism is redefined to align with the argument that all human actions are inherently self-serving, departing from Auguste Comte's notion of distinctively unselfish acts⁵.

According to the pseudo-altruistic approach, altruism is not motivated by external factors such as social rewards, but rather by internal rewards that are not directly observable. These internal rewards may include the reinforcement of one's self-esteem⁶. It is important to note that this perspective does

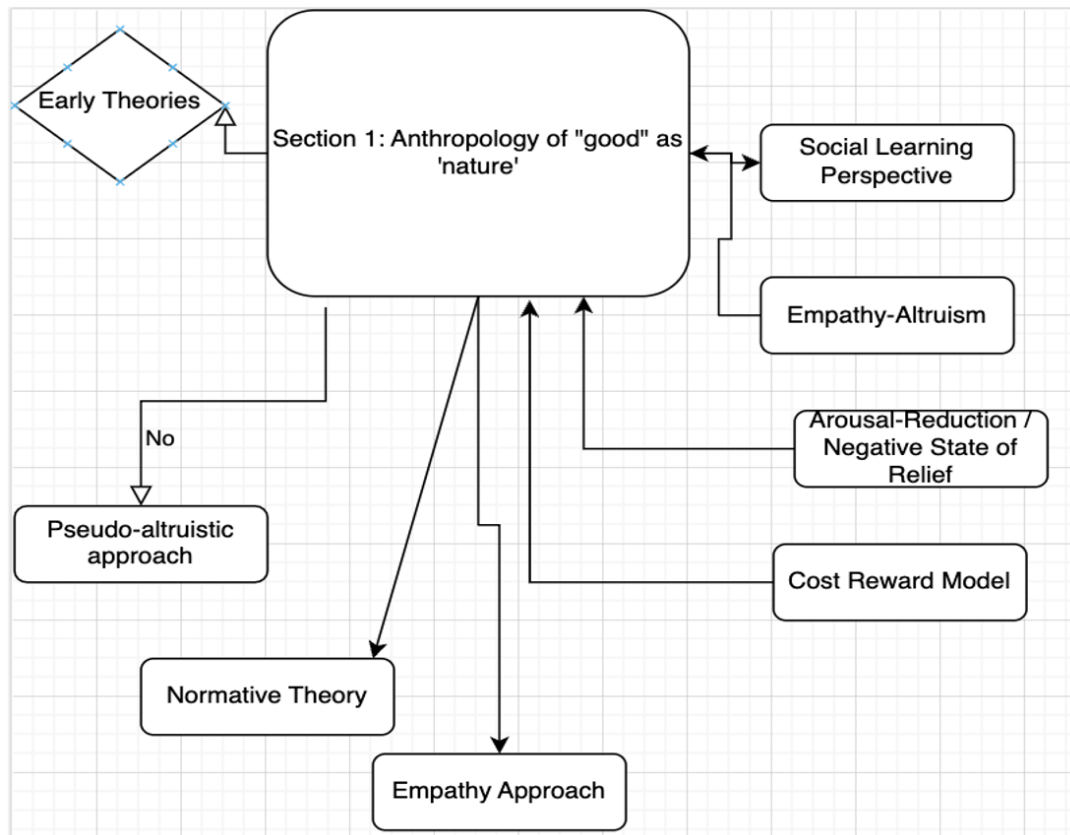


Fig. 2 An anthropology of ‘the good’ that considers altruism as a human condition: nature

not discount the existence of empathic emotions, which are considered crucial to altruism. However, within the pseudo-altruistic framework, the reliance on material rewards is believed to undermine internal motivations and is therefore not considered an effective means of inducing altruistic behavior⁵. The development of altruistic behavior during childhood is influenced by behavior-contingent learning, which can serve as internal reinforcement. This implies that certain experiences and conditioning shape individuals’ propensity for altruism, further supporting the pseudo-altruistic argument.

The pseudo-altruistic approach proposes that altruism is ultimately driven by self-interest and internal rewards, rather than external incentives. While empathic emotions play a role, material rewards are seen as potentially detracting from genuine altruistic motivations. Understanding the dynamics of pseudo-altruism contributes to a comprehensive examination of the complex nature of human behavior and sheds light on the motivations behind seemingly selfless acts.

Normative Theory: considering three basic attributes towards defining altruism

Normative theory provides a framework for understanding altruism through three fundamental attributes: the strength of moral or personal obligation, the thinking structure of values and norms, and the significance of feelings in relation to moral obligations⁷. Personal obligations are primarily influenced by the perceived rewards within a group, which can vary among individuals. Some people engage in altruistic acts because they believe it is the appropriate response based on past experiences or observations of others in similar situations. Socialization within society plays a crucial role in shaping individuals’ adherence to the norms of social responsibility and their willingness to help others based on observable normative behavior.

Additionally, normative theory is intertwined with the belief in a just and fair world. The “just world hypothesis” posits that people generally hold a shared belief that the world operates in a fair manner, where individuals receive what they deserve and vice versa⁸. This belief system, akin to the concept of karma, includes the idea of reciprocity, not only in actions but also in

the metaphysical realm. According to researcher Dale Wright (2015)⁹, karma, derived from the Sanskrit word for "action," emphasizes the natural connection between human actions and their appropriate consequences. Such belief structures provide a foundation for normative theory to function effectively and are widely prevalent, shaping the understanding and practice of altruism.

Personal norms also play a significant role in influencing cognitive and affective aspects related to altruism. These norms reflect individuals' internalized standards and values, which guide their decision-making and emotional responses in altruistic situations¹⁰. Normative theory considers three essential influences in defining altruism: moral or personal obligation, the thinking structure of values and norms, and the role of feelings in moral obligations. Understanding these attributes helps elucidate the complexities of altruistic behavior and the underlying motivations that drive individuals to engage in selfless acts.

Empathy Approach: An Intrinsic Feeling of Empathy

The concept of empathy in the context of altruism involves feelings of sympathy combined with a desire to alleviate another person's suffering. The cognitive component of empathy is influenced by the developmental stage of the observer, particularly in children who gradually become aware of others' personal identities and are more likely to experience empathy as a subjective and involuntary response¹¹. Within this framework, an intrinsic motivation for altruism can exist, where a person's empathic response to another's distress, coupled with a cognitive understanding of that distress, forms the basis for altruistic motives independent of egoistic motivations. A sense of connectedness with others plays a crucial role in altruistic behavior. When individuals feel a sense of common humanity or belongingness to a larger social group, they are more likely to engage in acts of kindness and generosity towards others. This sense of connectedness fosters a collective responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the group and promotes prosocial behavior.

Moreover, research suggests that empathy and altruism are not limited to interpersonal relationships but can extend to larger social groups, communities, and even to other species¹⁰. This broader perspective of empathy expands the scope of altruism beyond individual interactions, emphasizing the importance of compassion and care for the welfare of all beings. The concept of empathy in altruism encompasses not only the emotional and cognitive dimensions but also includes perspective-taking, connectedness, and a sense of collective responsibility. These factors contribute to the intrinsic motivation that drives individuals to engage in selfless acts of kindness and support for others, promoting the well-being of both individuals and society as a whole.

Autonomous Altruism Theory: A Selfless Theory Not Governed by Norms

Some researchers suggest that specific emotions can trigger altruistic motivation¹¹. This perspective proposes that while experiencing such emotions, the observer deviates from the laws of reinforcement by directing their behavior towards meeting the needs of others without any regard for themselves. Autonomous altruism exemplifies this notion. It should be seen as "selfless" because it is not governed by societal norms, and its impetus originates from the self¹⁰. Additionally, a process called "empathic condition" occurs in both children and adults, where specific cues elicit an empathic response that influences the observer's behavior (1978).

Karlylowski (1982)¹¹, who has adopted this perspective, posits that there is a distinction between doing good to 'feel good' about oneself, which is called endocentric altruism, and doing good to make someone else 'feel good', called exocentric altruism. This perspective suggests that endocentric altruism is pseudo-altruistic while exocentric is purely altruistic in nature and the product of focusing on another rather than the self.

Social Learning Perspective: The "Laws of Learning"

The social learning perspective argues that our responses to moral situations are acquired through the "laws of learning"⁵. Observational learning allows for the internalization of values, with parental models exerting the most significant and long-lasting influences on the internalization process. However, some critics argue that social learning alone cannot fully explain altruism as it disregards genetic influences and higher-order reasoning, such as role-taking abilities¹². Consequently, social influence falls short in fully explaining moral reasoning.

Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis: Challenging the Egoistic Concept of Altruism

The empathy-altruism hypothesis challenges the dominant argument rooted in egoistic concepts of helping. It suggests that empathic emotions play a crucial role in motivating altruistic behavior. Batson describes three key paths associated with empathically evoked altruistic motivation (1978)². This hypothesis is of particular interest in current literature because it diverges from the egoistic perspective. However, it has faced criticism for its attempt to refute the existence of altruistic motivation and instead implies an egoistic conclusion. Alternative proposals, such as empathy-specific rewards and empathy-specific punishment, have been suggested, assuming that observers anticipate internal or external rewards or fear social and personal costs.

Arousal-Reduction and Negative State of Relief Models

The arousal-reduction and negative state relief models propose that altruism is motivated by the desire to reduce aversive arousal or tension. When observers witness another person's suffering, negative emotions arise in the observer. The feeling of guilt towards another's suffering can serve as a motivator since helping behavior helps restore one's self-esteem and alleviates feelings of guilt. Motivation is dependent on the self-rewarding properties of helping. However, if helping is unlikely to relieve negative emotions, the observer is less inclined to offer assistance, according to these models.

Cost-Reward Model: Witness To Distress

The cost-reward model explores the costs and rewards associated with contributing to or not contributing to the arousal-reduction models of altruism¹³. This model suggests that witnessing another person's distress evokes unpleasant arousals in the observer, leading to a motivation to reduce those emotions through altruistic actions. Variations of this model, such as Hoffman's model (1981)⁶, propose that suffering within the observer's in-group triggers aversive tension, and perceiving a discrepancy between the current and desired welfare of others produces cognitive inconsistency.

These various approaches and theories shed light on the complexities of altruism, emphasizing the role of empathy, personal norms, social learning, emotional responses, and the balance between costs and rewards in understanding and explaining altruistic behavior.

Section 2: Biocultural studies of altruism: Consideration towards the 'nurture' through a study of biological and cultural phenomena

To what extent does culture and group dynamics influence altruism? While various theories of altruism exist, it is important to explore the impact of 'nurture' through culture and group dynamics. The evidence strongly suggests that socialization, which involves the transmission of values and beliefs by parents and other adults, plays a significant role in shaping children's altruistic behaviors¹⁴. Children who are taught to be generous and willing to sanction others are more likely to exhibit generous behavior in real-life situations⁹. Moreover, research indicates that children's altruism evolves over time, likely due to the influences of socialization.

The influence of both parents and peers through socialization can greatly shape children's understanding of altruism as a fundamental aspect of social awareness and conduct. Cultural norms vary across different societies, impacting individuals' behavior in scenarios like the 'Ultimatum Game'⁸. For instance, the Hadza tribe from Tanzania places a strong empha-

sis on altruistic behavior, while the Machiguenga tribe from Peru does not consider equity as a significant factor. However, there is no evidence suggesting that these variations stem from genetic factors.

It is worth noting that conflict and warfare were prevalent in foraging societies, which could lead to the cultural extinction of certain groups as winners impose their norms and institutions on the defeated groups. While this observation offers suggestive evidence, its implications remain multifaceted. If cultural group selection played a substantial role in human evolution, the human inclination to reward and punish altruistically should be systematically influenced by inter-group conflicts. However, thus far, no evidence supports this claim.

To address the criticism regarding the role of socialization, we can consider its significance in two aspects: aiding the survival and protection of the "in-group" and reducing tensions. By rearranging and consolidating the sentences spread across multiple paragraphs, we can enhance the cohesiveness of the discussion.

Understanding the impact of socialization on altruism requires examining its dual role. On one hand, socialization contributes to the survival and protection of the "in-group." Evidence indicates that children who are taught to be generous and willing to sanction others are more likely to exhibit generous behavior, potentially promoting cooperation and cohesion within their group. This aspect of socialization aligns with the notion that altruistic behaviors can foster group survival.

On the other hand, socialization also serves to reduce tensions within a group. By instilling values and norms related to altruism, societies can encourage individuals to consider the well-being of others, fostering harmony and minimizing conflicts that may arise due to self-interest. Cultural variations in the emphasis on altruistic behavior, such as the contrasting approaches observed in the Hadza and Machiguenga tribes, exemplify how different societies employ socialization to shape altruistic tendencies.

However, it is important to note that while socialization plays a crucial role in shaping altruistic behavior, its influence is not solely determined by group survival or tension reduction. Genetic factors and individual variation also contribute to the complexities of altruism. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between socialization, genetic predispositions, and cultural dynamics is necessary to fully comprehend the factors influencing altruistic behaviors in human societies.

Analysis

Altruistic theories have multiple angles of engagement into the same phenomena but use different interpretations that have their benefits and drawbacks depending on the focal point of

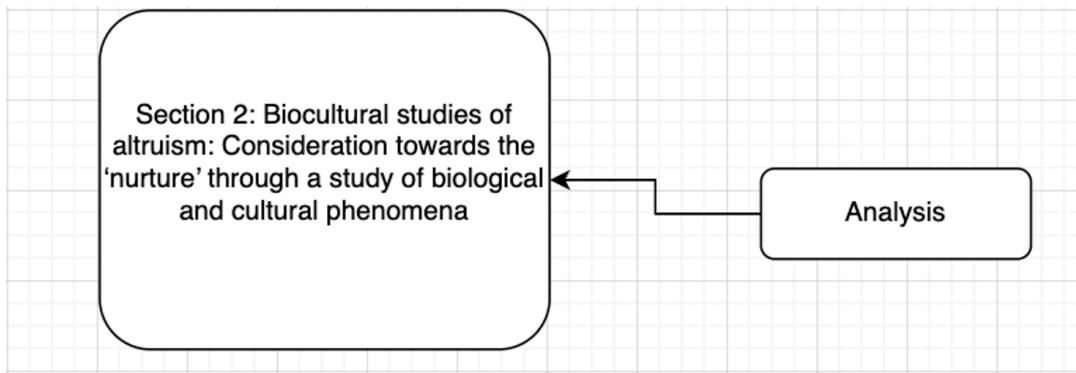


Fig. 3 Shin, Jaemin. “Flow Chart of Section 2”

study. An analysis of the different types suggest that there are varying degrees of accuracy based on what is being studied. It is also unclear just how much of what we do is actually motivated by altruism, which suggests that some findings within some of the studies can be explained by other factors. However, altruistic theories provide new ways to consider cooperative efforts and humanistic endeavors, and importantly separates them from selfish explanations.

The literature on human altruism is very complex, and with a myriad of answers within said literature, it is difficult to say if there is anything that can be deemed ‘true’ altruism in humans. Some theories about human altruism focus on the motivational and behavioral influences behind altruism, and others look at the different elements that contribute to it. However, the literature reviewed, it’s clear that altruism is a complex phenomenon, with many different sources of influence. Therefore, it is important to continue codifying, classifying and giving nomenclature to the different angles that we approach altruism with for posterity.

It is clear, however, that selfishness isn’t the only explanation for altruistic behavior. So, we have to assume that there is some kind of altruistic instinct that can ostensibly be considered distinct from selfish intent. Scientists are still trying to figure out what motivates people to do good things. They need to be open to new ideas and theories, and not just stick to the ones they know. If they don’t, they may miss out on new ways to help people. In the future, we might see more theories that combine aspects of both egoism and altruism. This would help to reduce the conflict between them.

Ultimately, recent research indicates that repeated interactions, reputation-building, and strong reciprocity are important factors in determining human altruism¹⁵. There are formal models that can capture the subtleties of interactions between selfish and strongly reciprocal individuals, and we have a much better understanding of the evolutionary forces that shaped human altruism. However, there are still a number of

unanswered questions. In light of the relevance of cultural evolution, it is important to study the relationship between cultural and economic institutions and the prevailing patterns of human altruism.

Limitations

Some limitations of this literature review were that articles written in languages other than English were excluded, and that the review only looked at socio-psychological theories about human altruism. In terms of understanding the various theories of altruism, limitations persist in the level of understanding with thoroughness that may overlook some aspects of the theories themselves. Although recent evidence suggests that market integration and the potential gains from cooperation are important factors, our knowledge is still limited. This limitation is partly due to the fact that far too few experiments use participants from developing countries as participants. Instead, we need experiments with participants that are representative of whole countries or cultures and we need to combine behavioral measures of altruism with individual-level demographic data and group-level data about cultural and economic institutions. In view of the theoretical importance of group conflicts and group reputation, much more evidence on how these affect altruistic rewarding and punishment is necessary. Finally, to enhance the study of the evolution of human altruism, there is a great need for empirically testable predictions that are derived from the evolutionary models. Given that the timeline for this paper has been extended several times and has cycled through multiple advisors, there are a few concerns in terms of having a sufficient amount of time to discuss and determine things such as trajectory and being ready for contingencies.

Section 1: Anthropology of 'the Good'
Early theories: - Darwin, group and kin selection, reciprocal altruism
Psychological theories: - Self-interest motive, alternative perspectives on benevolence - Communal perspectives on altruism and division of labor within tribes
Section 2: Biocultural Studies of Altruism
- Socialization and cultural influences on altruistic behavior - Impact of parents and peers in shaping children's altruism - Cultural variations in altruistic behavior - Influence of inter-group conflicts on altruistic tendencies
Analysis
Altruistic theories provide new perspectives on cooperative efforts and separate them from purely selfish explanations

Table 1 Author: Jaemin Shin. "Overview of Sections"

Conclusion

It seems that there are some consistent, salient points that contribute towards a better definition of altruism: altruism is defined as selfless concern for the well-being of others, often at the expense of one's own interests. The theories covered in this review consist of theoretical frameworks of altruism, including evolutionary, psychological, and social/cultural theories. The evolutionary theory of altruism posits that altruistic behavior has evolved as a means of increasing the fitness of the individual by helping close relatives who share genes. Psychological theories of altruism suggest that altruistic behavior is driven by empathy and a sense of compassion for others. Social/cultural theories of altruism propose that altruistic behavior is shaped by cultural and social norms, as well as the influence of religious or moral beliefs. Overall, research on altruism continues to be an active area of study, with new insights and theories being developed as our understanding of human behavior expands.

Human altruism is a complex phenomenon with various interpretations and explanations. There are differing degrees of accuracy depending on the focus of study, and it is uncertain how much of our actions are truly motivated by altruism. However, it is clear that altruistic theories provide new perspectives on cooperative efforts and separate them from purely selfish explanations. Further research is needed to understand the underlying motivations and factors contributing to human altruism, and to determine the relationship between cultural and economic institutions and patterns of altruism. The study of human altruism is ongoing, and scientists must be open to new ideas and theories in order to continue advancing our understanding of this important topic.

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