An Analysis of Prosocial Behavior in College Students

Caroline Durfeld, Robert Martin, Ashley Washburn, and Amy Wilson
Mentors: Gregory Longo, D. Kristen Gilbert, and John W. Burling
University of Montevallo

Abstract

Volunteering, which is an important form of prosocial behavior, has an enormous impact on the well-being of communities and our daily lives. In 2013, it was estimated that $173 billion worth of time and energy was spent volunteering. The aim in this study was to learn more about prosocial behavior and altruism by examining how traditional values, gender, personality, and religion are associated with prosocial behavior among college students. Data were collected through surveys given to 80 students (71 female and 9 male) that were composed of the Traditional Values Measure, the Honest Humility subscale of the HEXACO, the Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale, and a volunteer activity chart designed specifically for this study. It was hypothesized that prosocial behavior would be positively correlated with religious involvement, honest or humble personalities, and traditional values. Correlational analyses did not support this hypothesis. In addition, there were no expected differences between the amount of prosocial behavior provided by males or females, and this null hypothesis was supported in the current investigation. In future studies, a larger sample size, more gender diversity, and more variety in the field of study would possibly yield significant results when looking at helping behavior in college students. Given the positive impacts of volunteering and prosocial behavior, studies such as this help to inform researchers how to increase prosocial behaviors that better communities and lives.

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Altruistic behavior has long been a controversial topic with debate over whether it actually exists, or if all human behavior is simply rooted in self-interest. To gain a better understanding of altruism, one must examine the prosocial behavior that stems from it. To illustrate the importance of altruistic behavior's impact on society, in 2013, about 25 percent of the adult population, gave 7.7 billion hours of volunteer service worth $173 billion.[1] The aim in this study was to learn more about altruism and prosocial behavior by examining how traditional values, gender, personality, and religion are associated with prosocial behavior among college students. Though the terms altruism and prosocial behavior are often used interchangeably, there is a definite distinction between the two. "Prosocial behavior is defined as a descriptive, neutral term denoting an act that benefits others, while altruism is the subtler evaluative qualification of the motivation of prosocial behavior as being other-oriented rather than egotistic or self-oriented."[2]

Personal variables, such as gender and personality, have been seen to impact prosocial behavior in different ways. According to Eagly (2009),[3] while there is no significant difference in the amount of prosocial behavior exhibited between genders, there are differences in the types of helping behaviors reported. For example, women are more likely to provide emotional support, such as attentively listening to others, and men tend to provide more physical assistance, such as disaster relief clean-up. This rejects the common notion that females are the more likely of the two sexes to help others, a stereotype rooted in the idea that women are nurtures and men are protectors. The fact that these values and expectations are instilled in people from a young age may influence their behavior later on. This does not mean, however, that one gender exhibits prosocial behaviors while the other does not, but rather, that each may be expected to take on different roles and tasks when providing social support.

In addition, certain personality traits positively correlate to prosocial behavior. Hilbig and Glöckner (2014)[4] found that aspects related to greed avoidance, fairness, honesty, and humility were positively correlated with prosocial behavior. They used the HEXACO Honest-Humility subscale to assess these prosocial aspects of personality and then asked participants to be a part of a study where money values were at stake for the participant and a stranger. If the participant consistently chose the higher value for themselves, leaving the lower value for the stranger, they were considered less altruistic. The study found that selfless prosocial behavior was positively correlated with higher values on the Honest-Humility subscale.

Contextual variables, which are transitory factors that involve the setting in which an interaction occurs,[5] are key factors that affect prosocial behavior. It has been shown that there is a positive correlation between religion and prosocial behavior. According to one study, a link between religion and prosocial behavior does exist, but is not universal, is geared toward in-group favoritism, and is conditional.[5] While most religions promote or require some form of prosocial behavior, not all people who identify with a religion necessarily participate in those practices. Also, individuals may consider giving money to their religious organizations as prosocial behavior and not feel the need to extend these behaviors outside of their religious community. As for deciding who and when to help, humans have a tendency to help those close to them and worry less about outsiders; there is more personal benefit in helping a friend or relative. However, there are still some individuals who might be motivated to perform helping behaviors out of religious or spiritual reasoning. This leads to the controversial question of whether or not there is such a thing as a truly selfless act. In turn, this applies to consideration of

whether or not members of a religious organization are truly more altruistic than their non-religious counter parts.[6]

Additionally, traditional values have a strong influence on an individual's volunteering behavior. According to Francis (2011),[7] it has been shown that social norms are important motivators for the frequency of volunteering behavior, especially when concerning immediate family and friends. Values and beliefs in families and communities may have a significant effect on amounts and types of prosocial activity accepted due to the social norm fostered there. For example, Ghose and Kassam (2012)[8] examined the amount of prosocial behavior exhibited in a society that expects students to volunteer. In order to gain employment or go to college, volunteering, at non-profits or otherwise, was required. In this study, advancing one's status was the key motivator, and altruism played only a small role. In addition, family and friends, a student's closest community, gave advice and encouraged the student to volunteer.

The purpose of the current study was to consider motivations for prosocial behavior in college students by examining personality, religious involvement, traditional values, and prosocial activity. In the current investigation, it is hypothesized that males and females will not differ in the amount of prosocial behavior performed. Second, it is hypothesized that there will be a higher participation in prosocial behaviors for those who attend religious services as opposed to those who do not. Third, it is hypothesized that prosocial behavior will be positively correlated with high scores on the HEXACO Honest-Humility subscale. Finally, it is hypothesized that traditional values will be positively correlated with the amount of prosocial behavior exhibited.

Additionally, exploratory analyses will be conducted to further examine the relations between Honest-Humility scores, traditional values, and politics and how politics is related to prosocial behavior. Further examination of the difference between males and females in regards to Honest-Humility scores and traditional values and the difference between those who attend religious services and those who do not in terms of Honest-Humility scores and traditional values will also be considered.

It is hoped that these findings may help to explain the motivations of prosocial behavior among college students, thus providing useful information on how to facilitate a social norm of helping behavior on a college campus.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 80 students at the University of Montevallo enrolled in selected classes in the 2015 Fall semester. The participants had a mean age of 22, ranging from 19 to 44 (SD = 4.58). 89% of the participants were females and 11% were males. 5% were freshman, 21% were sophomores, 43% were juniors, 30% were seniors, and 1% did not respond. 79% were Caucasian, 14% were African Americans, 1% was Asian American, 0% were Hispanic, 3% had mixed ethnic backgrounds, and 3% responded as other.

Materials

The 30-item Generalized Expectancy for Success Scale (GESS)[9] contains three sub scales: General Efficacy (GE), Long Range Career Oriented Expectancy (LRCOE), and Personal Problem Solving (PPS). Participants were asked to indicate probability with which they feel that statements apply to them on a scale of 1 (highly probable) to 5 (highly improbable). Examples of this measure include: "In the future I expect that I will not make any significant contributions to society," and "In the future I expect that I will attain the career goals I have set for myself."

The Traditional Values Measure (TVM)[10] is a 14-item measure. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements about traditional values on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of these statements are "It is somehow unnatural to place women in a position of authority over men," and "Girls should have long hair and boys should have short hair."

The Volunteer Activity Chart, specifically designed for this study, was given to participants as a self report of their volunteer activity in the past semester. Participants were given an organization or activity such as "Best Buddies" or "volunteer tutoring" and asked, if any, how many hours during the week this volunteering activity took place and for how many weeks that semester.

The 10-item Honest-Humility sub scale of the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised Scale (HEXACO-PI-R)[11] was used to examine participants' personality regarding altruism. Participants were asked to scale their agreement with statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of these statements are "I wouldn't pretend to like someone just to get that person to do favors for me," and "I think that I am entitled to more respect than the average person is."

Procedure

Participants were given a consent form, a demographics survey that assessed the participants' age, ethnicity, gender, major, living arrangements, political affiliation, country of origin, religious affiliation, and previous volunteering experience, and the four other measures in the test packet. The assessment was strictly confidential. After the consent forms were signed, they were immediately removed from the test packet and placed in a separate envelope to ensure anonymity. Additional measures were presented in a packet of forms following the demographic sheet. When participants completed the provided measures, a large envelope was passed around, allowing them to place their own packets in the envelope.

Results

Means and standard deviations are shown for gender differences between study variables in Table 1. In order to test the first hypothesis, that males and females would not differ in levels of prosocial behavior, a t-test was conducted, and there were no significant differences (see Table 1).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables by Gender

	Males		Females		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*
Honest-Humility	45.75	7.17	46.16	5.70	0.17
Prosocial Activity	65.86	60.35	35.71	79.17	-0.98

Traditional Values	2.14	0.89	2.19	0.59	-0.20

Note. Honest-Humility= Honest-Humility score, Prosocial activity= Total hours of volunteering activity, Traditional Values= Traditional value score, Politics= Political affiliation.

In order to test the second hypothesis, that prosocial behavior would be higher among those who attend religious services, we also conducted a t-test, and no significant difference was found (see Table 2).

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables by Religious Attendance

	Regular Attendance		Non-Regular		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Honest-Humility	46.48	5.08	45.96	6.26	-0.38
Prosocial Activity	55.07	95.36	28.74	65.29	-1.42
Traditional Values	2.53	0.45	1.84	0.58	-5.44*

Note. Honest-Humility= Honest-Humility score, Prosocial activity= Total hours of volunteering activity, Traditional Values= Traditional value score, Politics= Political affiliation.
*$p < .05$.

In order to examine our third and fourth hypotheses, that prosocial behavior would be positively correlated to honesty-humility scores and that traditional values would be correlated to prosocial behaviors, correlations were conducted (see Table 3). No significant correlations were found.

Table 3
Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Honest-Humility	-			
2. Prosocial Activity	0.06	-		
3. Traditional Values	0.05	0.2	-	

| 4. Politics | 0.03 | 0.5 | 0.52* | - |

Note. Honest-Humility= Honest-Humility score, Prosocial activity= Total hours of volunteering activity, Traditional Values= Traditional value score, Politics= Political affiliation.
*p < .05.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine altruism in college students through the examination of prosocial behaviors and traditional values, gender, personality, and religion. Although it was not originally hypothesized, we found a significant correlation between traditional values and more conservative political views, as is well documented in prior literature. In addition, we found a significant difference between those who attend religious services and those who do not in terms of traditional values. Also, our findings for the null hypothesis, that males and females would not differ in the amount of prosocial behavior, aligned with previous studies. These findings further support previous literature on these topics in relation to prosocial behavior.

The primary issues concerning this study were sample size and the nature of the topic. Our sample consisted of 80 students, of which 89% were female and only 11% male. Also, the majority of participants were psychology majors, limiting data collection because an accurate representation of the university would require participants from all majors. A larger sample size would help provide such information from a more diverse sample of students. General education class sampling, for example, might result in participants with more variation, since all students, regardless of major or gender, are required to take them. Although introductory psychology is a general education class, it is still limited to the psychology department.

In future studies, additional changes should include more questions to measure the subject of prosocial behavior and altruism that are difficult to quantify. For example, prosocial behavior was measured through the amount of volunteering done by the participant, but the measurement of altruism would require more motivation-focused questions. For example, questions concerning the level to which other's needs are put before the participant's, and whether or not rewards are involved. In terms of better measuring prosocial behavior, questions concerning the participant's family structure and what the participant's volunteer activity preferences are, such as physical or emotional assistance, could be informative in further determining motivational factors in prosocial behavior.

Notes

1. Value of volunteer time-Independent sector. (2016). Retrieved February 05, 2016, from https://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time.

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7. Ibid., 445, 451.

8. Francis, J. (2011). The functions and norms that drive university student volunteering. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing.*1-12. doi:10.1002/nvsm.390

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