

# A Conceptual Approach to Study Altruism

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## Abstract

Altruism is precious and fragile, precious because of selfless concern for the welfare of others and fragile because the good deed can be tarnished at the smallest notion of any ulterior motive. Altruism is integral and quite unique to the existence of human beings. This paper explores the differences in conceptualization of Altruism in some of the Asian and US societies. It focuses on the concept of helping others to see whether it is a cultural phenomenon or an individual quality. In addition, it discusses the significance of helping others as part of teachings by various religions. It explores the factors that constitute these cultural differences such as individualism and combined family system. In the last part, some insightful recommendations are drawn based on the prepositions raised as a result of the comparison.

**Keywords:** Altruism, Asian and US societies, Culture, Individualism, Social Responsibility

## Introduction

Helping others is an integral building block of human societies, an essence of human nature as a social being. Acts of selfless help by an individual or a group ameliorate society, help shape the community and organization process as well as progress. Altruism, the selfless voluntary welfare of others, is a traditional virtue in many cultures and a core religious value. While the basic notion is same, the practice and the expected results may vary in different social setups thus giving rise to different perspectives on altruism. Altruism finds its roots in the Greek word *Alter* which means “other.” Monroe (1996) finds humanity at the core of altruistic actions while Kohn (1990) discussing about those who sacrifice even their own lives while helping others sees Altruism and Empathy as the bright sides of human nature.

## Problem Statement

How do some of the Asian and US societies conceptualize Altruism, and what are the factors that affect it? How these concepts shape society and to what extent influence organizations?

## Description

This paper has five sections. The first section narrates the point of view of various scholars on Altruism and its implications for society and individuals. The second section covers various religious perspectives on selfless giving to others in the society. Third section discusses the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility with an attempt to see the true motives when

profit earning organizations try to give back to society. Then it focuses on the influence of cultural differences on Altruism between Asian and US societies. Finally, it explains how different concepts of Altruism shape societies and may also influence organizations.

This study explores the conceptual differences in perceived understanding of altruism in western and non-western societies. Altruism is as old as mankind which is the unselfish concern for the welfare of others as opposed to egoism (Comte, 1851, cited in Grant, 1997; Brosnahan, 1907), where egoism is self-centered approach to all aspects of existence. As a starting point this study draws on some of Organ's work to explain different perceptions about altruism. Smith, Organ and Near (1983), and Organ (1988) forward altruism as an important dimension of Organization Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs). Organ (1988, p.4) proposed that OCBs are a special type of work behaviors. These are discretionary individual behaviors beneficial to the organization. However, such behaviors are not compensated by formal reward system (Sharma, Prakash, Bajpai, & Holani, 2010). Organ forwarded four dimensions of organization citizenship: "*Altruism, Sportsmanship, Courtesy and Civic Virtue.*" Altruism, according to him, represents behaviors directed at helping a colleague including coworkers or supervisors.

However, such altruistic actions may be based on ulterior motives such as self-promotion or impression management. Individuals use impression management techniques to influence the image others have of them (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riodran, 1995). There are many strategies used for impression management. Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) have identified five impression management strategies including (1) integration, where individuals seek to be viewed as likable; (2) exemplification, in which people seek to be viewed as dedicated; (3) intimidation, where individuals seek to appear dangerous or threatening, (4) self-promotion, in which individuals hope to be seen as competent; and (5) supplication, where people seek to be viewed as needy or in need of assistance. All these desired images may also be attained by doing acts of citizenship, therefore, impression management appears to have much in common with citizenship behaviors. This definition of altruism encompasses the meaning of conducting altruistic works at job in order to make one courteous and devoted to community in the eyes of others.

Critics argue that this definition of altruism does not serve the actual purpose of selflessness. Volunteering and helping others in organizations may provide workers with opportunities to flaunt their talents and knowledge (Bolino, 1999). The proponents for Organ's altruism, however, assert that such organization citizenship behavior involve people in community services and helping others irrespective of the reason why people engage in these activities. This concept of altruism is applicable to overall American society including the nonprofit sector, corporate sector or any other volunteer based activity. Extending this debate to a broader context, I explore its differences from citizenship behavior, and study it at cultural and society level to find how altruism is perceived differently in various cultures and what are some of the factors that affect it.

Furthermore, a case in point would be the aid extended to developing countries, it usually comes with lot of strings attached whereas it is propagated to be on humanitarian grounds. Invariably there are specified utilization guidelines that help in implementation of policies set by the donors. At times, the pledged aid does not materialize at all or in whole as announced. One wonders at the interesting comments made by now infamous Greg Mortenson in his book "Three Cups of Tea" (2006) that not even a small portion of the announced aid reaches its deserving beneficiaries in remote parts of the world (p.32 & 288).

The meaning of altruism can be altogether different in the non-western societies especially Asian societies. In Asian context altruism i.e. helping others, is mostly done by

keeping oneself anonymous or hidden from the receiver of the help and general public. In the context of American setup, voluntary community service by individuals and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by organizations may be viewed as not entirely selfless actions but to promote self-image, to show off in industry and social setups, or an attempt to pacify the regulators. This study attempts to explore the perceived differences in the concept of altruism in American context which is also known as volunteering, charity, community services, or philanthropy in the American society, and in other nonwestern societies especially Asian societies.

In Asian societies there is a general tendency to help others anonymously. People may help others anonymously to preserve self-image and dignity of the needy. This concept has been supported by Confucianism which implies that the concepts of harmony and trust help in uplifting societies and organizations.

This study would explore factors such as religion, business and culture which contribute towards the development and unique perception of the concept of altruism in different societies. The conceptual differences would help to look into the practice of altruism as discussed in scholarly literature within the domain of volunteering and social work.

### **Altruism and religion**

Helping others is among the core values and integral part of the basic teachings of all major religions of the world. Altruism has an important place in most of the religions followed in Asian countries. Buddhism treats all beings as equal, based on love and compassion. Karma, the law of cause and effect directly relates to motives behind interaction with others. Jainism preaches altruism for all beings with the central principle of live and let live including donations, giving up for others, non-violence and compassion for all living things. Doing good to others irrespective of religion and race differences is part of Sikhism.

All Abrahamic religions have placed significant importance to do good for others. In Christianity, altruism is central to the teachings of Jesus. Including care for others and missionary work for the promotion of education and healthcare. Islam preaches devotion to others at the expense of oneself, with emphasis on donations and sacrifice for the greater social good. The Zakat system- an important pillar of Islam- preaches a way of helping the needy in which the beneficiary often does not know the person(s) who have helped them. Judaism preaches giving without compensation of any kind, perceived as the purpose of creation and love for one another. In Tibet, a unique form of Buddhism is practiced by a large majority of population to overcome their egos with Lojong meditation in order to help other beings. Thus, disseminating the altruistic philosophy of Buddha in all aspects of life (Semilof, 2006). In contrast, Neusner and Chilton (2005) in chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have argued against the point of religious selfless help on the ground that these cannot be selfless acts as God has promised to reward every good deed.

In the same vein, the religious teachings of Vedanta are based on the notion that doing good is not the result of any cause and effect but rather it is encouraged by the creator and people do good with the ulterior motive for rewards in the afterlife. Collins and Hickman (1991) posits that the shift away from religion in US may have paved the way for the charities, higher education, and nonprofit. It is through the initiatives of the nonprofit sector that people can participate in charitable activities in democratic systems where religion is not considered a necessity.

With pronounced adherence to religious practices in Asian societies along with the importance placed on helping others in comparison to the charitable work in western societies, it would be interesting to compare the influence of religion on altruism. It would also be interesting to see what other related factors including but not limited to practicing a religion might have some influence on altruistic behavior in individuals as well as society.

***Proposition 1:*** *How religion affects altruistic tendencies in different (western and non-western) societies.*

### **Altruism and business**

Generally, it is assumed that a corporation exists for profit maximization. Friedman (1970) argues that organizations are only responsible to look after shareholder interests without any binding obligation to society at large. Nevertheless, organizations are assumed to work within the legal framework. Some people perceive corporate social responsibility (CSR) as incongruent with the purpose of business, and a hindrance to free trade (Friedman, 1970). On the other hand various scholars including, Byron (2006), Carroll (1991), and Font, Walmsley, Cogotti, McCombes, and Hausler (2012) have stressed on social obligations in addition to pure economic responsibilities for businesses. Taking CSR a step further, Porter and Kramer (2006) studied several companies that combine business strategies with corporate social responsibility as part of Creating Shared Values (CSV) initiatives.

Pro-business government policies are a pre requisite for a thriving business environment. Corporations sustain competitive advantage as long as there is availability of skilled workforce, input resources, and authorities enforce enabling business policies. Such conducive environment creates opportunities to generate income, broaden the tax base, and support philanthropic initiatives in a society.

The down side to this is that many approaches to CSV pit businesses against society, including the cost benefits for corporations and adhere to the externally imposed social and environmental standards. CSV acknowledges tradeoffs between short term profitability and social or environmental goals, but focuses more on the opportunities for competitive advantage from building a social value proposition into corporate strategy. There is a large body of literature that suggests additional measures along with financial performance for success (Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003).

Social welfare brings many advantages to the corporate sector. In worst cases, environmental accidents and other financial issues can damage the reputation of any company. The negative fallout of such incidents can be minimized if an organization has a reputation of doing the right thing (Kytte & Ruggie, 2005). Recalling defective products is one such option, recently Toyota addressed the defective airbag issue in certain models to do the right thing. Similarly in crowded market places, companies struggle for a distinct image in the market that differentiates them from competitors. Practicing distinctive ethical values as part of CSR may help in building a strong and loyal customer base.

Some critics believe that companies such as McDonald use CSR programs as decoys to divert attention away from their questionable business practices. Such CSR programs provide a façade behind which their business practices can go unquestioned. They suggest that corporations are unable to work in social interest (McKibben, 2006). These companies claim to promote CSR, charity and volunteer activities whilst at the same time continue the harmful business practices. In this context, McDonald Corporations' association with Ronald McDonald

House Charities has been viewed as CSR and relationship marketing. Also, the raise in wage and decrease in working hours by Ford Motors in 1914 was generally seen as an act of charity and bad business move. However, Ford did thrive financially as a result of this “act of charity.”

Research by Baghi, Rubaltelli and Tedeschi (2009) supports that people will pay more for a product if businesses express association with charitable cause by advertising that a part of sale proceeds would go to a particular charity. However, they identify the danger that businesses might use the relationship with charitable work only for promotion without supporting the cause in any meaningful financial support. A case in point is American Express campaigns “Charge against hunger” and “Statue of Liberty” where more was spent on advertisement and promotion than donated to social causes (Baghi, et al., 2009; Smith & Stodghill, 1994).

Business organizations may take advantage of the altruistic nature of their employees to further their own profit goals as pointed out by economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2009) in her article “Boost Performance by Tapping Employee’s Altruism”. She describes how General Electric’s \$6 billion initiative to create medical systems that decrease cost and increase patient access to medical facilities would be a growth strategy for the company as well as recruitment and retention strategy. She further narrates how Pfizer’s new business initiative called Global Access combines corporate social responsibility with commercial success through a business model that provides working class in emerging markets with latest medicines and health care services.

Hewlett (2009) states that Pfizer in collaboration with Grameen Health, a subsidiary of Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, plans to start rural health clinics that generate profits for both organizations. As one of the Pfizer leaders, Ponni Subbiah said that this plan is going to increase the access of needy people to the company medicines and at the same time it is also good business. Indicating that profit and market share remains the driving force behind such plans and another brilliant scheme by big businesses to capitalize on the suffering of humanity.

Leisle M. Fine (2010) argues that people give to increase their own popularity in social circles and concludes that people are highly influenced by what others think of them, thus giving is also done with relevance to achieving some kind of social benefit or increase in social standing. However, the distinction between citizenship or impression management remains open to subjective interpretation and the rewards depend upon the label used to identify the motive of individual (Eastman, 1994).

Discussing the corporate objectives of organizations for initiating community service or volunteering does not necessarily mean that their employees would also have the same motives. Thus, it is also important to discern the working behaviors and public service motives of employees in these organizations. Critics call for more government check to oversee corporate actions and enforcement of law for incidents of socially adverse actions. Do corporate altruistic objectives have some impact on the intentions of people joining these organizations or altruistic instincts of employees working for these organizations? These are some of the questions that need to be explored.

We have seen examples of US corporations on some efforts regarding CSR. By further exploring the influences of CSR practices by different corporations in other countries we may find new evidence on altruism in different settings.

***Proposition 2:*** *How commercial organizations and their corporate social responsibility programs (business environment in general) affect the altruistic tendencies of people as employees and individuals in different societies.*

### **Altruism in different cultures**

Culture seems to influence how societies do selfless acts of help, but this cultural way of helping may have covert motive for return sooner or later. In a Newsweek article “Altruism and opportunism”, Flynn (2004) illustrates this point with the help of an example of Netherlands, which “leads in altruism, wealth, and international awareness.” Based on the Commitment to Development Index (CDI) of 2004 which shows how the richest countries help the poor countries, it points out that “the Dutch government gives the equivalent of \$208 per citizen in aid to developing countries every year, as compared to US governments \$47. It also compares that on average each Dutch citizen donates \$14.60 per year as compared to Japan’s \$1.46. Moreover, Dutch gave \$201 million in aid to Tanzania for 83 projects.” The article points out that this kind of aid is quite unique but the motives behind this aid are not only altruistic but also aim to gain market access to these countries for Dutch products. Sometimes this aid is in the form of export credit that binds the developing country to buy from specific Dutch firms. The CDI (2013, p.3) report on aid states that about 50 percent of aid from US must be spent on products from US, it further explains that “tied aid must be spent on products from the donor nation and raises project costs by 15 to 30 percent.”

Combined family system in Asian societies provides added support for selfless acts of help. Less fortunate members of family and society are helped without any intended return. In Pakistan, people show en-masse faith in the altruistic initiatives of the likes of Abdul Sattar Edhi, who runs a welfare trust at national level. His foundation provides individual level services from burials to shelter homes to the helpless and needy of the society without any kind of personal benefit. Edhi ambulance service provides help in those far flung areas where other public or private operators do not even think to serve. It was due to this selfless service to humanity that during the earthquake of 2006, people preferred to donate to his welfare organization for relief efforts rather than through official channels.

In Western societies especially US, the foundation of social fabric is not that strong, individualistic approach fosters everyone for himself approach to life. In this context, charity may well become an effective vehicle for image building, relationship management or tax reliefs. However, some researchers argue that individual’s intentions to volunteer may be based on altruistic reasons (Clary and Snyder, 1991; Tschirhart, 1998).

Large donations by few rich individuals may not be adequate to fully address any cause, additionally these rich individuals might do charitable acts for other motives including tax relief or image building. Other than that these rich people can dictate their terms on the distribution and utilization of funds. In comparison contributions by a large number of people may be regarded as selfless acts by many individuals who want to help others.

***Proposition 3:*** *How culture affects the altruistic orientations of individuals in different societies.*

### **Conclusion**

This study brings to light factors based on the individual, corporate and social efforts for the selfless help of others. The findings may enable us to appreciate the variations in helping others in different cultures by creating more understanding as human beings. In future this study may be expanded to encompass the impact of cultural differences on the altruistic behavior of employees working in multinational organizations across the world. Furthermore, study of faith based and non-government organizations would add to the understanding of altruistic behaviors.

It is such a rich and intricate area of study that it needs to be studied in specific segments as stated propositions in this study to form the bigger picture of its influence on mankind and organizations.

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