

## SEX DIFFERENCES IN ALTRUISM

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The identification of truly altruistic behavior is a difficult objective. Many philosophically-minded observers even dispute the existence of altruism altogether, let alone the sex differences found when measuring altruistic motivation and expression. For instance, most sociobiologists argue that altruism is nothing but mislabeled selfishness, ensuring the perpetuation of one's genes through some quasi-selfless act contributing to the survival of offspring or the kin group.

For the purposes of this paper, it shall be assumed that altruism does exist -- ignoring for the moment behind-the-scene motivational forces -- and shall be defined as an individual's voluntary effort benefiting a recipient, with no expectation of reward. Altruistic behavior should be differentiated from compliant behavior, which is a response to a request that may involve pressure or coercion.

Several theories have been proffered seeking to explain sex differences in altruistic behavior. Noted sociobiologist E.G. Wilson (1978) argues the genetically-encoded evolutionary model of behavior, suggesting women, with very recognizable parameters of genetic interests, tend to display altruism more readily within the family unit; while men, with a wider range of possible and unverifiable progeny, will have a greater interest in contributing to the well-being of the social unit as a whole.

Wilson contrasts "hard-core" altruism with "soft-core" altruism, claiming the former likely to have evolved through kin selection and serving the altruist's closest relatives but declining in intensity as relationships become more distant, while the latter is ultimately selfish -- with the "altruist" calculatingly expecting reciprocation from society for her/himself or closest relatives. Regardless of the brand or motive, sociobiologists claim altruism to either consciously or unconsciously be self-centered, even attributing the martyrdom of saints with selfish orientation toward the goal of self-salvation.

While deserving of recognition for its brave attempt to reduce the complexities of human behavior to such primal motivation, for the same reason should sociobiology be critically suspect as a viable explanation for altruistic behavior.

Pandey and Griffitt (1977) content that, on the basis of studies investigating sex differences in altruism, it cannot be concluded that one sex is consistently more helpful than another. Depending on the nature of the experiment, men have been demonstrated to have a higher degree of displayed helpfulness, while other tests have provided evidence showing women to have greater altruistic tendencies.

Pandey and Griffitt cite variations in experimental situations as a factor leading to the inconsistencies in results across studies investigating the role of sex in altruism. Complicating the consistent measurement of altruism is the call for consideration of such experimental situations as the benefactor's need for nurturance, the recipient's dependency, the number of other potential helpers in a given situation, as well as the nature of the situation itself, and the cost involved to the altruist for help rendered.

One study (Ullian, 1984) suggests sex differences in the expression of altruism (if such a difference exists) could be due to the female's reluctance to engage in aggression and high-risk situations -- often a prerequisite for altruistic behavior. Ullian associates this reluctance on the part of women with differing socialization effects on the development of masculine and feminine personalities. Ullian, referring to interviews with young girls and boys, says the typical girl tends to be more fearful in new situations, and avoids competitive situations believing she is small, fragile, and vulnerable. This reduced sense of efficacy in a demanding situation could certainly contribute to differing responses from men and women in behavior attributable to altruism. However, Ullian reports, women, in contrast with men, tend to be more concerned with close relationships and remaining loyal to their local work group, rather than exhibiting similar behavior (altruistic or calculated) that may cause them to have to leave their social environment. Ullian cites numerous studies which have demonstrated that girls are more responsive to babies than boys, and have a tendency to care more about specific people in immediate situations, in contrast to the more abstract and impersonal mode of reasoning in the moral judgment of boys. Women, apparently are just as -- if not more -- giving than men, depending on the context and ramifications of such behavior.

Another factor in the elicitation of altruist response in men and women is the message-wording asking for help, and the sex-role appropriateness or inappropriateness of the request. One study (Dougherty, 1983), though complicated with the effect of distraction during the experiment on the results, provides evidence for a difference in the subjects' response to a test for altruistic behavior depending on the sex and gender-appropriate request for help of the experimenter. Eighty-three college students, 41 males and 42 females, served as subjects for an experiment where they were told to watch a short film carefully, as they were to be tested on its content. After giving the directions, the experimenter told the subjects (three of the same sex in each six-subject session) to relax while the projector was readied. A confederate experimenter then entered the room and asked if he or she could talk to the subjects for a few minutes. The experimenter agreed, saying it would take some time to get the projector ready anyway. A request was made of the subjects to help with another experiment (with no offer of reward or enticement) immediately following the one in progress. The request was made in half of the sessions by a male confederate, and the other half by a female. The wording of the request was based along lines of gender appropriateness, with the sex-role appropriate male request expressing an expert background (graduate student), and a sex-role inappropriate request expressing non-expert status (undergraduate). The sex-role appropriateness of the female confederate's request was based on the opposite qualifications, with the sex-role appropriate request based on non-expert status (undergraduate), and the sex-role

inappropriate request based on expert status (graduate). In brief, the male expert and the female non-expert were seen as appropriate sex-roles, and the hypothesis was that a favorable altruistic response from the subjects would be more likely given through a sex-role appropriate request. This, in fact, was demonstrated by the significant results where both the male and female confederates received twice the offer of help from the subjects when the request was made in sex-role appropriate terms.

Though one may question Dougherty's definition of sex-role appropriate expert and non-expert status of men and women respectively, the significant correlation between Dougherty's definition and the experiment's results is shockingly substantiative. Given that no sex difference was recorded between men's and women's responses to the "appropriate" and "inappropriate" requests, it seems both sexes have a way to go in reassessing their gender stereotypes.

Another study further demonstrates that the altruistic response of subjects is again related to the sex of the experimenter requesting help. In an experiment designed to measure gender effects on altruistic behavior (Colaizzi, Williams, & Kayson; 1984), 64 phone calls were made each by a set of female and male experimenters requesting help with a stalled car. Both male and female experimenters called phone numbers randomly selected from the phone book, and, after informing the phoned subjects that they had evidently reached a wrong number while trying to call home but had no more money for another phone call, the experimenters requested the subjects to call a given number and request assistance to help with the broken car. The phone number given the subject was the experimenter's numbers, and the number of seconds it took for the subject to call back was timed. The subject was told the nature of the experiment when s/he called back, and if no call was returned, a time of 60 seconds was recorded. Results of the experiment showed that women were helped significantly faster and more often than men; the subject taking an average 28.03 seconds to call on behalf of the female, while taking 35.22 seconds for the male. Women were helped 78% of the time, males were helped 63% of the time.

Both of the preceding experiments show a difference in altruism displayed depending on the sex and gender-role of the experimenter, but no sex difference was recorded in the degree of altruism displayed according to the sex of the subjects. The expression of altruism, evidently, is determined more by the sex of the recipient than by the sex of the benefactor. If women are perceived as less efficacious, it could help explain why assistance was more forthcoming for the women experimenters, both by male and female subjects. However, if women felt or were in fact less efficacious, one would expect a sex-difference in the altruistic response of the subjects, though there was in fact none recorded.

How are altruistic tendencies developed? One study (Israely & Guttman, 1983) provides evidence that role models and reinforcement have an impact on the degree of altruistic sharing among children. The study, in part, measured the effect of symbolic altruistic models on children's altruistic behavior. A puppet-show was used, where the hero performed a sharing act and was rewarded for his behavior. Afterwards, the willingness

to share a reward (erasers) of the children participating was contrasted with a control group. One-hundred-and-twenty third- and fifth-grade children with even numbers of both sexes were involved in the experiment. The results demonstrated that children who were exposed to the puppet-show conditions shared more than the children in the control group. No sex differences were found in the willingness to share, but a significant difference in the relationship between age and sharing was recorded: only 22% of the 8- to 9-year olds shared, while 93% of the 10- to 11-year olds shared. Once again, factors other than sex differences (in this case, cognitive maturity) are found to be the larger contributors to the differences in altruism.

Whether sex differences in altruism exist, or, if so, are significant, was not answered during my research for this paper. Perhaps the best indicator of the difficulty in experimentation in this area was best evidenced by the dearth of studies in altruism aimed specifically at measuring sex differences. Though evidence of sex differences in altruism is slim, surprisingly several theories for sex differences exist (perhaps evidence itself for the existence of sex differences in altruism). These theories include that of the sociobiologist, assuming that men's altruism is more far-reaching -- if not more intense -- in light of men's greater potential for genetic investment in the whole community. Also considered was Ullian's contention that, if childhood beliefs and experiences help shape at all female psychology, then reduced feelings of power and efficacy stemming from the belief in female vulnerability established in childhood and reinforced through experience, may have an impact on the expression of altruism in women. And, of course, there's always the Freudian notion that women will possess lower proclivity toward altruistic behavior due to an underdeveloped super-ego.

What has been demonstrated is, though sex differences in the expression of altruism is inconclusive, significant sex differences in the recipients of altruism are quite clear. Women, as discussed earlier, are more likely to be helped than men in an equal need situation. Also, perhaps the most disturbing finding in my research, the amount of help offered depends on the sex-appropriateness of the male's or female's request for help, where the appropriate sex-role for women is one of lower competency.

Perhaps the answer to successful measurement of altruism lies not in examining the differences of gender behavior, but in breaking through stereotypical sex-role expectations and measuring similarities instead. While certain sex-roles and differences are bound to continue, both sexes have a need to re-examine current stereotypes and expectations, and responsibly cull out what is detrimental or simply expedient but without value, while cultivating the positive similarities and differences to ensure harmonious interaction between the sexes.

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