



## Original Article

Self-protection promotes altruism<sup>☆</sup>Eugene Y. Chan<sup>\*</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Self-protection tendencies allowed our human ancestors to survive and thrive. In three experiments, we find that individuals who have a salient self-protection motive are more altruistic to others, such as by helping them out or offering them more money in the dictator game paradigm. Self-protecting individuals desire to “bind together” as there is “safety in numbers”, and being altruistic to others should be one (but not the only) way to achieve this goal. Consistent with this reasoning, we find across three behavioral experiments using both non-monetary (Experiment 1) and monetary altruistic contexts (Experiments 2–3) that self-protecting individuals are more altruistic when the altruism is not anonymous (Experiment 1) and when they have the reasonable expectation of future interaction with the recipient (Experiment 2), both of which are situations that should increase affiliation. The effect attenuates when altruism does not help self-protecting individuals, such as when money is donated to impersonal organizations rather than individuals (Experiment 3). We finally discuss the theoretical contributions as well as limitations of our work.

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## 1. Introduction

Humans are endowed with psychological mechanisms that direct them to process information, make choices, and behave in ways that enabled their ancestors to reproduce (Confer et al., 2010). Throughout history, humans have faced numerous challenges that restricted their ability to survive and thrive, ranging from physical harm, disease, to making friends, acquiring a mate, and caring for one's family (Ackerman & Kenrick, 2008; Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003; Kenrick, Neuberg, Griskevicius, Schaller, & Becker, 2010). Each challenge is different and a solution to one is often incompatible with tackling another, but they nonetheless all confer advantages for reproductive fitness and human evolution. Researchers have considered these challenges to be “fundamental” for human survival (Kenrick et al., 2010). A fundamental motives framework thus has been proposed. It argues that the specific challenges that human ancestors have often faced can be mapped onto “fundamental motives” that function to solve each distinct challenge.

One motive is self-protection. Indeed, a particular challenge that human ancestors confronted often was the possibility of threats and dangers – not just those from potential predators but also from unsafe environments as well. A self-protection motive can, for example, be elicited upon detecting angry faces in others, reading a scary news report, or simply being in the dark (Ackerman et al., 2006; Becker, Kenrick,

Neuberg, Blackwell, & Smith, 2007; Ohman & Mineka, 2001; Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003). Human beings thus have evolved a set of emotional expressions and behavioral mechanisms that allow them to protect themselves (Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2011). For example, seeing a snake in the woods can prompt individuals to protect oneself by taking actions or making choices that return them to safer environments. A self-protection motive can produce other responses including risk aversion, a preference for the status quo, as well as loss aversion (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Li, Kenrick, Griskevicius, & Neuberg, 2012).

A prominent response when people are protecting themselves is seeking out others (Sarnoff & Zimbardo, 1961). For example, individuals who experience natural disasters and terrorist acts often act in solidarity with others, especially those who experience the same event (Fried, 1963; Moore, 1958; Tyhurst, 1951). In wartime, there is camaraderie among combat troops on the battlefield (Grinker & Spiegel, 1945; Janis, 1963; Marshall, 1947) and among citizens of a nation (Durkheim, 1947). This desire to affiliate protects oneself because, as in the adage, there is “safety in numbers”, and groups of individuals can better confront threats and dangers than a single person. In his seminal study, Schachter (1959) reported that participants who were told that they would receive high-intensity electric shocks and thus were fearful were more likely and willing to wait for their turn with others than those who were induced to feel low levels of fear by being told that they would receive painless electric shocks instead. For example, when people are made to threatened afraid in online chat rooms, they often conform to and follow the opinions of others because conformity helps build group cohesion (Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen,

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Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). This motivation to protect oneself through safety in numbers is not specific to humans but can be found in animals as well (Alcock, 2005; Wickler, 1968).

We posit that another strategy that should facilitate affiliation and thus help self-protecting individuals is being more altruistic, such as by being kinder and/or more benevolent to others. Per reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971), our human ancestors had an evolutionary benefit from helping unrelated others, especially if it had the sufficient probability of being repaid in kind. As such, people help others who they expect to help them in return (Boster, Fediuk, & Ryan Kotowski, 2001), with helping as an act that also increases one's status and reputation among community members (Wedekind & Braithwaite, 2002). Thus, we posit that a self-protection motive, because it prompts individuals to seek out affiliation with others and because altruism is one (but not the only) way to achieve this goal, should similarly increase their altruism when there is the perceived possibility of it being reciprocated. Being kinder and more generous to others enhance the likelihood that the recipients would return in kind, which would then facilitate the affiliation goals that self-protecting individuals pursue.

There are other findings in the literature that can be explained in terms of a self-protection motive prompting altruism. For example, individuals low on social class and lack financial and social resources are more helpful to others, at least when payoffs are high (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Hayden, & Keltner, 2010; for criticisms of this work, see Korndörfer, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2015; Nettle, Colléony, & Cockerill, 2011). This was explained by an “orientation to others' welfare”, but it can also be explained by their need to affiliate with others as a means to respond to the dangers that being low on status engenders. It has also been shown that individuals who detect fear in others are more generous and altruistic to these others (Marsh, Kozak, & Ambady, 2007). This is because individuals who detect fear in others detect concern, which motivates prosocial responding. However, since emotions in others can elicit the same emotions in oneself (Rapson, Hatfield, & Cacioppo, 1993), simply seeing someone afraid could elicit greater fear in oneself, thereby prompting greater altruism in order to “band together” and face the threat and/or danger together (Schachter, 1959).

On the surface, our prediction that self-protection should prompt altruism may seem similar to the Scrooge effect, according to which people who are reminded of their mortality donate more money to non-profit organizations (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Almakias, 2008; Jonas, Shimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). However, this is based on Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Mortality salience prompts people to adhere to cultural norms, and one of which is altruism, which is a very different process from what we posit here. We reason that self-protecting individuals are more altruistic because it can promote affiliation – not because they are expressing or adhering to a cultural norm. Thus, not only is our underlying mechanism different from terror management, our hypothesis is likely specific to altruism towards other *individuals* and not to, say, charitable organizations since, for example, donating money to charity is impersonal in that it is unlikely to elicit the affiliation that individuals provide and self-protecting individuals seek. Thus, we expect altruism among self-protecting individuals only when they can reasonably expect that their altruism might be repaid in kind, such as when the altruistic opportunity is not anonymous, when some future interaction with the altruistic recipient is likely, and when it is towards individuals and not impersonal organizations.

We test our research hypothesis in three behavioral experiments. In all of our experiments, we find that self-protecting individuals are more altruistic to others when they can reasonably expect reciprocity. In particular, they are more altruistic when the opportunity to do so is not anonymous and thus the recipient knows who was kind to them (Experiment 1). Self-protecting individuals are also more altruistic when it is towards others with whom they expect some future interaction (Experiment 2). We then show in our final study that they are only more altruistic towards individuals who can affiliate and not impersonal

organizations that can not (Experiment 3), thus also presenting a boundary condition for the effect we proffer. We test altruism in both non-monetary (Experiment 1) and monetary contexts (Experiments 2 and 3) but in all cases there are costs to being altruistic (temporal in Experiment 1, financial in Experiments 2–3), consistent with reciprocal altruism. We now present the three experiments, then discuss the contributions, limitations, and extensions of our work.

## 2. Experiment 1

The purpose of our first experiment was to test our overall hypothesis that a self-protection motivation prompts altruism towards others when individuals can reasonably expect reciprocity. If the recipient of the altruistic act has little or even no chance of reciprocating, and thus there is a low chance of building safety in numbers, then there should be little incentive for self-protecting individuals to be altruistic. To test this, we manipulated the anonymity of the altruistic act. If the altruistic act is anonymous, there is no way for the recipient to know whom to repay, and so self-protecting individuals would have little reason to be altruistic. Eckel and Grossman (1996) provided a similar reasoning for how anonymity affects bargaining games in their interpretation of Hoffman, McCabe, Shachat, and Smith (1994).

### 2.1. Method

Participants were 170 Australian undergraduate students from an upper-level management course ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.49$  years old; 88 men, 82 women) who received course credit in return for approximately 15 min of their time. They all completed this study online, approximately four weeks into the semester. By this time, they were familiar with the subject pool requirements, and they already had experience with other studies by other researchers, which was crucial as our dependent measure (presented below) requires an understanding of the researchers who use the subject pool and why they use it.

In our study, students first randomly received either the self-protection or control condition. In the self-protection condition, we asked students to imagine being in a house alone, late at night. As the scenario progressed, they overheard scary noises outside and believed that someone had entered the house. After calling out and receiving no reply, the story ended as someone was about to enter the bedroom. In the control condition, students also received an imagination-based scenario similar in length, except that it was devoid of any threat-related content. Students in all conditions spent approximately 5–10 min imagining their respective scenarios. We adopted the two scenarios from Griskevicius et al. (2006).

We then informed all participants that an honors student was collecting data for her honors thesis. This honors student had, ostensibly, run out of funding. And because the honors student was not staff, she ostensibly could not use the subject pool to collect her data. Thus, she needed to depend on the goodwill of fellow students to complete her questionnaires voluntarily – without monetary payment or course credit. We stated that she would require responses to three personality inventories (without specifying which) and that it would take “approximately 5 extra minutes”. If the students said “yes”, the honors student would come to the next class to hand out her surveys in a paper-and-pen format – giving our students the expectation of future interaction with her. The students indicated whether or not they would “help her out”, thus this was a choice (yes or no) measure. To manipulate anonymity, half of the students were informed that the honors student would have a list of who completed her surveys but, in accordance with ethics protocols, no identifying information would be linked to the responses. This was our non-anonymous condition. The other half were told that their responses would be anonymous and the honors student would not know who completed her surveys. At the following class, the professor informed that the honors student was “unavailable”

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