



Case Report

Good deeds gone bad: Lay theories of altruism and selfishness

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ABSTRACT

When people help others, they often benefit themselves as well. Do these benefits disqualify prosocial acts from being truly altruistic? Scientists and philosophers have long debated this question, but few have considered laypeople's beliefs about altruism. Here, we examine such *lay theories* surrounding altruism. Across two studies, observers read about agents who behaved prosocially. In some cases, agents benefitted materially, socially, or emotionally from their actions (self-oriented *consequences*); in other cases, they acted in order to accrue these benefits (self-oriented *motives*). Observers “penalized” actions that produced self-oriented consequences – rating them as less altruistic than actions involving no such benefit – unless these benefits were emotional. When agents' actions involved self-oriented motives, observers penalized them more harshly, viewing their behavior as more selfish than even clearly non-prosocial acts. These data suggest that lay theories distinguish between motives for, and “side effects” of, prosocial actions, converging with recent psychological theories of altruism.

Prosocial behaviors comprise any act that benefits others, but when people engage in such behaviors, they often benefit themselves as well. People who give to charity, for instance, enjoy positive “side effects” of their largesse, including material benefits (e.g., tax breaks), social benefits (e.g., praise), or emotional benefits (e.g., good feelings). Do such benefits disqualify prosocial actions from being considered truly altruistic?

Scholars have long disputed the distinctions between *other-oriented* (altruistic) and self-oriented (egoistic) forms of prosocial behavior (Batson and Shaw, 1991; Cialdini, 1991; MacIntyre, 1967). Some argue that if a person benefits from their prosocial action, their act was ultimately “impure” and egoistic (Andreoni, 1990; Kant, 1785). Others, however, maintain that people can benefit as an *unintended side effect* of prosocial behavior, and their true motives may nonetheless be altruistic (Batson, 2011). Despite this persistent scholarly debate, few studies have considered *lay theories* about what constitutes altruism; that is, the factors that determine whether people decide that acts are altruistic versus selfish. Clarifying how lay theories of altruism are structured could be fruitful for several reasons. First, audiences' perceptions of a prosocial act can determine whether good deeds will be met with praise, indifference, or even disapproval. Second, lay theories shape peoples' own prosocial tendencies. For instance, individuals who believe in the existence of true altruism behave more prosocially themselves (Gebauer, Sedikides, Leary, & Asendorpf, 2015). Finally, lay theories offer a new take on a longstanding, contentious scholarly debate, by probing which formal theories accord with people's beliefs

about altruism.

For centuries, a faction of philosophers (Bentham, 1789; Hobbes, 1651; Nietzsche, 1878) and psychologists (Cialdini, 1991; Freud, 1910; Skinner, 1978) have inferred that all behavior, however altruistic in appearance, is in fact driven by self-interest. Initial work proposes that laypeople tend to make similar assumptions of self-interest when assessing prosocial acts (Critcher & Dunning, 2011), particularly when prosocial agents benefit from helping others (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013). For instance, when prosocial agents reap social or material benefits from their action, people view them as less moral than agents who gain no such benefits (Berman, Levine, Barasch, & Small, 2015; Lin-Healy & Small, 2013). Moreover, people view charitable efforts that yield material gains (e.g., revenue for a company) as morally *worse* than neutral actions that provide no benefit to others (Newman & Cain, 2014). Echoing classic economic (Andreoni, 1990) and philosophical (Kant, 1785) accounts, these studies suggest that laypeople view true altruism to be reserved for acts in which an agent benefits others *without* benefiting herself in the process. Crucially, this supports the idea that lay theories assess a do-gooder's *consequences* when judging whether a good deed was ultimately altruistic or selfish – disqualifying those acts in which a prosocial agent personally benefits from her action.

Other work, however, challenges the assumption that people reflexively infer self-interest when do-gooders benefit from helping others. In particular, Barasch, Levine, Berman, and Small (2014) found that agents who experience greater emotional benefits after donating (e.g., positive feelings), are rated as *more* moral than those who feel

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little or no emotional benefits after donating. This work suggests people are sensitive to the *type of benefit* one gains from prosociality when judging whether a good deed is in fact self- or other-oriented. Crucially, this work also indicates that people view personal benefits differently depending on whether they are perceived as a cause or consequence of prosocial behavior – morally discrediting the former case (see Lin-Healy & Small, 2012), but not the latter (Barasch et al., 2014).

These findings suggest an alternative account not explored in prior work – that lay theories of altruism (i) place emphasis on an agent's *motives*, and (ii) distinguish between motives and consequences when judging whether an agent was altruistic or not. Importantly, this view instead suggests that people believe true altruism *can* involve benefitting both oneself and others, so long as one's motive is other-oriented.

To illustrate, imagine Jane volunteered at the soup kitchen *as a means* to boost her reputation (a self-oriented motive). Now imagine Jane volunteered at the soup kitchen simply to help others (an other-oriented motive), but boosted her reputation *as a side effect* of her action. Philosophical (Kitcher, 1998) and psychological (Batson, 1987; Staub, 1978) theories support this distinction, proposing that prosocial acts that produce self-oriented *side effects* can nonetheless be considered altruistic if they are driven by other-oriented *motives*. This theory also dovetails with evidence from attribution theory, demonstrating that laypeople indeed consider motives when drawing inferences about others' actions (Weiner, 1985). Together, this work suggests that lay theories of altruism should likewise take motives into account when judging whether a good deed is truly altruistic. In particular, they should harshly judge prosocial actions that reflect self-oriented motives, but not those that incidentally produce self-oriented side effects.

Here, we explore this possibility. Specifically, across a range of prosocial situations, we examine people's perceptions of prosocial acts, both as a function of (a) the benefits those acts produce, and (b) whether these benefits are framed as a motive for, or a consequence of, prosociality.

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

We assessed how different benefits of acting prosocially shape perceptions of altruism within-subjects. Thus, we aimed for a minimum sample size of $N = 270$ (or $N = 90$ per condition) in order to attain approximately 80% power to detect a medium-sized effect ($d \approx 0.30$; $\alpha = 0.05$) within each framing group (motive vs. consequence). We recruited 300 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, and received 295 completed surveys. Participants who spent less than 1.5 s reading each vignette ($N = 8$) were excluded from analysis, as it was not possible to read the vignettes in this time span. This left a total sample size of $N = 287$ (motive condition = 94, consequence condition = 88, and control condition = 105).

1.1.1. Prosocial vignettes

Participants read and rated eight vignettes in an online survey. Each vignette described a unique prosocial action performed by a unique agent (counterbalanced for gender). For instance, in one such vignette participants read about Jane, who gave blood at a local clinic. All vignettes and study materials can be found in the Supplemental Material available online.

Participants were randomly assigned to read vignettes in one of three conditions. Participants in the *control* condition read vignettes that only described prosocial actions. This provided a baseline for assessing the perceived altruism of a given action absent any other information. Participants in the other two experimental groups further read about ways in which the agent benefitted from her prosocial action. These benefits comprised four types: (i) *material* benefits, for instance receiving a tax break after a charitable donation, (ii) *social* benefits, such as receiving praise for a donation, (iii) *emotional* benefits,

such as feeling good after making a donation, and (iv) *other-oriented* benefits, such as helping others through a donation. This last condition does not represent a self-oriented benefit, and thus provided a benchmark through which to assess the extent to which people “penalize” prosocial acts that do provide self-oriented gains. Benefit type was manipulated within subjects, such that each type of benefit was described in two vignettes, for a total of eight vignettes. The type of benefit paired with each action was counterbalanced across participants.

Participants who read about benefits of prosocial actions were further randomized to read about these actions either as *motivating* those actions or as an incidental *consequence* of those actions. For instance, participants in the motive group might read that Jane gave blood *in order* to (i) receive a gift card [material benefit], (ii) impress her friends [social benefit], (iii) feel good [emotional benefit], or (iv) help someone in need [other-oriented benefit]. Participants in the consequence group might instead read that *as a result* of giving blood, Jane (i) received a gift card, (ii) impressed her friends, (iii) felt good, or (iv) helped someone in need. Again, vignettes were counterbalanced, such that each participant read about each benefit type paired with each of two prosocial actions. Unlike benefit type, motives versus consequences versus control conditions were manipulated between subjects.

1.1.2. Ratings of perceived altruism

After reading each vignette, we probed participants' judgments using 6 items ($\alpha = 0.88$). Specifically, participants rated (i) *how altruistic* they thought the prosocial *agent* was (ii) how altruistic they thought the agent's *action* was, and (iii) how altruistic they thought the agent's *motive* for their action was. For example, after reading about Jane giving blood, all groups were asked “How altruistic was Jane's action?”, and responded on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Extremely”). Participants also rated *how selfish* they perceived agents, their actions, and their motives to be. For instance, after reading about Jane, participants were also asked: “How selfish is Jane as a person?” from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Extremely”).

Ratings for questions about agents, actions, and motives were very highly correlated, $r(284) = 0.86\text{--}0.94$, $p < .001$. Thus we collapsed these three ratings together, producing one composite measure of altruism and one composite measure of selfishness. Ratings of altruism and selfishness exhibited a strong negative correlation, $r(284) = -0.44$, $p < .001$. Thus we combined these ratings into one continuous scale ranging from -5 to $+5$ to form our final measure of *perceived altruism*. On this new measure, positive ratings indicated greater perceptions of altruism than selfishness, and negative ratings indicated greater perceptions of selfishness than altruism. The pattern of results described below also holds if we analyze altruism and selfishness ratings separately (see Supplemental material). All data and code can be found at https://github.com/carlsonrw/layTheories_altruism

1.2. Results

Our main analyses focused on two questions: (i) to what extent do lay theories of altruism “penalize” agents who benefit from their prosocial acts, and (ii) to what extent does it matter whether these benefits are framed as a motive for, versus a consequence of, prosocial actions?

To address these questions, we used a 4 (benefit type: material, social, emotional, & other-oriented) \times 2 (framing: motive vs. consequence) mixed ANOVA, in which benefit type was a within-subject factor and framing was a between-subject factor. Greenhouse-Geisser corrected degrees of freedom are reported, as Mauchly's test found that assumptions of sphericity were not met in our model. We found a significant main effect of benefit type, $F(2.03, 365.40) = 152.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.46$, suggesting that perceptions of altruism indeed depended on whether the type of benefit involved was material, social, emotional, or other-oriented. Crucially, we also observed a significant

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