



# Does extensivity form part of the altruistic personality? An empirical test of Oliner and Oliner's theory

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tests Samuel and Pearl Oliner's theory that extensivity is a cause of prosocial behaviors, using data from the 1995 and 2005 waves of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey. Principal components analysis of a set of 19 questions about moral obligations supports the Oliners' contention that some individuals have a constricted moral sense, meaning that they feel stronger obligations to help family members and friends than strangers, while others have an extensive moral sense and feel obligated to help both close and distant others. Tobit regression demonstrates that people with extensive moral obligations are more likely than people with constricted obligations to engage in volunteer work and charitable giving. These results provide independent support for the Oliners' theory, and encourage further research on extensivity.

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## 1. Introduction

Altruism is a topic of great interest in the human sciences, including evolutionary biology (Boyd, 1990; Sober and Wilson, 1998), economics (Andreoni, 1990; Ray, 1998), political science (Mansbridge, 1990; Monroe, 1994), and psychology (Batson, 1991; Clary and Snyder, 1991; Oliner and Oliner, 1988; Penner et al., 2005). The study of altruism has been important to sociology since Comte and Durkheim (Piliavin and Charng, 1990), was a central concern of Sorokin (1950, 1954), and remains important today (Healy, 2004; Piliavin and Charng, 1990; Piliavin and Callero, 1991; Smith, 2003).

Social scientists have paid more attention to altruism in the last few decades, in part because limitations have become evident in the explanatory power of traditional models that view human behavior as purely self-interested. Cooperation, the provision of public goods, volunteering, charitable giving, and informal helping behaviors are all difficult to explain in self-interested terms. A clearly articulated and empirically supported theory of altruistic behavior would help solve a number of empirical problems in a range of disciplines.

The easiest helping behaviors to explain are those directed to family members, and those conducted in the expectation of reciprocity. These behaviors occur even in non-human animal species, and can be explained through reference to evolutionary biology (Sober and Wilson, 1998). Many other helping behaviors are directed towards members of a group to which the helper belongs, and with which the helper identifies. This type of helping has been explained by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Most difficult to explain are helping behaviors directed towards people who are not relatives, not members of the same social group, and not in a position to reciprocate. Helpers in these situations can expect no reward beyond the emotional "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1990) or "helper high" (Wuthnow, 1991) that comes from doing a good deed. This emotional reward may be enough to motivate helping behaviors that involve minimal effort and risk, but seems

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inadequate to explain risking one's life to help others, or donating significant amounts of one's money and time. Why do some people go to such lengths to help others – particularly individuals who are not related, not members of the same social group, and not expected to reciprocate?

Samuel and Pearl Oliner's 1988 book, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, proposed “extensivity” as a cause of altruistic behavior. They define extensivity as “the means to assume commitments and responsibilities toward diverse groups of people,” and state that extensivity “includes two elements: the propensity to *attach* oneself to others in committed interpersonal relationships; and the propensity toward *inclusiveness* with respect to the diversity of individuals and groups to whom one will assume obligations” (Oliner et al., 1992, p. 370) [emphasis in the original].

The Oliners discovered extensivity through their interviews with individuals who had rescued Jews during the Holocaust. While they used quantitative measures of personality traits to support their theory of extensivity, neither their 1988 book nor their subsequent publications contain a direct quantitative measure of extensivity. Hundreds of publications on altruism cite their work, but no other scholar has devised a direct measure of extensivity. In this paper, I generate such a measure and subject it to a series of empirical tests, using data from a large, nationally representative longitudinal survey. The first element of extensivity, “attachment,” has been widely studied in social psychology (Field, 1996), and the connection between childhood attachment, the adult desire for communion with others, and prosocial action is well documented (McAdams et al., 1998; Rossi, 2001). This paper focuses on the “inclusiveness” element of extensivity, which has received less attention. I seek to answer three questions:

1. Is extensivity versus constriction a valid way to classify variation in individuals' sense of moral obligation?
2. Are people with extensive moral views more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors?
3. Is extensivity an independent predictor of prosocial behaviors, or is it merely an expression of some known cause of prosocial action?

## 2. Review of the literature

After discussing the Oliners' theory, I provide a definition of altruistic or prosocial behaviors. I then examine other research on the relationship between moral obligations and prosocial behaviors. I also discuss research on other individual traits that predict helping behaviors, and discuss their possible relationship with extensivity.

### 2.1. Extensivity

The Oliners interviewed hundreds of people who had lived in Nazi-controlled Europe, including both rescuers and non-rescuers. One thing that distinguished the two groups is the sense of moral responsibility rescuers felt towards Jews. While non-rescuers felt no responsibility to help Jews who needed assistance, rescuers did feel obligated, even though in many cases the individuals they helped were total strangers to them. The Oliners concluded that both rescuers and non-rescuers had a sense of morality, but that non-rescuers constrained their moral obligations to family and other social groups, while rescuers extended their feeling of moral obligation to all humanity.

The Oliners found quantitative support for the concept of extensivity, but this quantitative support did not constitute a direct measure. They administered a battery of self-reported psychological scales to their subjects, which contained about 150 variables. They used factor analysis to group these into 27 “summary variables,” and performed another factor analysis upon these, which reduced their data to four factors. These factors measured strength of family attachment, having Jewish friends, having broad social commitments, and subscribing to egalitarian values. The Oliners considered the first two of these variables to measure the attachment element of extensivity, and the latter two to measure the inclusiveness element. On average, rescuers scored higher on these four factors than non-rescuers (Oliner and Oliner, 1988, p. 312–324). In a later publication, Pearl Oliner (2004) re-analyzed the 1988 data to show that rescuers were more likely than non-rescuers to have positive feelings towards Jews, Turks, Gypsies, and other members of outsider groups, and that rescuers were more likely to have positive social contacts with Jews and other outsiders.

While Pearl Oliner (2004) considered extensivity in her re-analysis of the Oliners' 1988 data, neither author has generated a new measure of extensivity or tested it on new data. The Oliners produced an edited volume of research on altruism (Oliner et al., 1992), recommendations for constructing a more caring society (Oliner and Oliner, 1995), a theoretical work on altruism and forgiveness (S. Oliner, 2008), a narrative work about a Holocaust rescuer (Oliner and Lee, 1996), and a narrative of Samuel Oliner's own escape from Nazi Europe (S. Oliner, 2000). Samuel Oliner (2003) also studied recipients of the Carnegie medal for heroism, through interviews and a set of quantitative psychological measures. This study used existing measures of social responsibility, internal/external locus of control, self-esteem, empathy, and sensation-seeking (Oliner, 2003, p. 248), but did not include any quantitative measure of extensivity.

### 2.2. Altruism and prosocial behaviors

As this study examines the relationship between extensivity and helping behaviors, a note on how helping behaviors are defined and conceptualized is in order. Psychologists have studied the motives for helping behavior extensively, and have ar-

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