

Altruism

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the correlation between perceived altruism and measurable altruism and to show, if any, the extent to which people overestimate their own altruistic characteristics. Participants were mainly of university age and from higher income households. We constructed an distributed an online survey through Qualtrics, and then analysed the data through SPSS. We can conclude that there does not appear to be a correlation between perceived altruism and measured altruism. This supports our hypothesis, however, given the limited sample of survey participants, we believe that more research needs to be conducted on the subject.

Introduction

Our motivation for doing this research was to find if people are as good as they believe they are. People might believe that they are good, and yet despite this belief, most people do not actually attempt to make any sort of positive difference in the world through their actions, and so are not truly good, but neutral at best. Therefore, we wanted to figure out whether people's actions line up with their beliefs about themselves or if they are deluding themselves. In order to familiarize ourselves with previous work done around this topic, we reviewed two previous studies revolving around the topic (Berman, Levine, Barasch & Small, 2015) (Berman, Levine, Barasch & Small, 2014). Specifically, we borrowed the 12-item perceptions of altruism measure from the 2014 study (Berman, 2014) conducted on selfishness in order to measure perceived altruism.

The research objective was to show, if any, the extent to which people overestimate their own altruistic characteristics when compared to how they act. The research problem was to determine whether or not there is a disconnect between people's perception of their own altruism, and their measurable acts of good in the world. For the purpose of the study, we decided that "good" was going to be measured in actions, as opposed to thoughts or beliefs, as those do not have any measurable impact. Our hypothesis is that people generally tend to believe they are more altruistic than they actually are, and compared to their personal beliefs, most individual's actual actions do not match their self-perception of altruism. In other words, there is no correlation between perceived altruism and actual altruism.

Methodology

We decided that descriptive research conducted through the use of an online survey created with Qualtrics would best serve our needs. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, and

the belief stated in our hypothesis that most people overestimate their level of altruism, we were worried that any exploratory or causal research could make the participants feel pressure to lie or exaggerate their engagement in altruistic acts even further; they would be more susceptible to social desirability bias. Therefore, an anonymous survey, which was clearly labeled as such to the participants, was the best method available to us for the purposes of our research.

Another major consideration for us in designing the survey was to minimize the effect that the questions had on subsequent questions. We started the survey with the 12-item perceptions of altruism measure so that we could record the initial response of the respondent without any bias introduced from the survey. We then proceeded to ask questions about level of involvement in charitable activities over the course of the last month, and last year. We considered putting the 12-item perceptions of altruism measure after the charity questions but decided against this, as we were worried it might influence the responses and not give us the true baseline perception of self altruism of the respondents. We also decided to measure altruistic acts over two time frames: the past year, and the past month. This was to account for the individuals who may not engage in many acts throughout the month, but do one large act or donation every year.

The survey was distributed through Facebook and open to everybody with the only restriction being our connection, or “friend” status, with the respondent. The survey was open to anyone to take because we think that the belief that people are better than they are is not limited to any specific demographic. Distribution through facebook was used in order to maximize the exposure of the survey and to get as many responses as possible. While the total number of responses was 116, the final sample size held 79 respondents. Due to a lack of complete surveys,

we had to remove some respondents from the final sample in order to properly conduct our research.

To measure a correlation between perceived and actual altruism, we ran a regression between the two variables. In this statistical test, our dependent variable was perception of altruism and the independent variable was actual altruism. To come to a quantitative representation of perceived altruism, we re-coded the negative characteristics in Q2 in order to show that any rating that a lower score of “insincere”, for instance, would reflect higher altruism. We then calculated a mean score for each respondent and ran the correlation between that number and responses from Q3 to Q11.

Results

Our data shows that occasions of volunteered within last month ($B = -.536$, Std. Error = .225, $t = -2.381$, $p = .026$) and estimates of clothing goods donated in last year ($B = -.339$, Std. Error = .135, $t = -2.514$, $p = .020$) have a statistically significant correlation with perceived altruism. More interestingly, these variables have a *negative* correlation with perceived altruism. Perhaps this can be explained by the idea that if a person sees other individuals performing altruistic actions, they may feel less altruistic comparatively. On the other hand, all of our other variables of actual altruism showed no statistically significant correlation with perceived altruism (Table 1). However, when the regression is run with variables separately (i.e. perceived altruism-volunteering, perceived altruism-donating, perceived altruism-goods) not only is there no statistically significant correlation between *any* of the variables, but also the variables are more strongly correlated (Tables 2-4).

We also ran the correlation between respondents' perceived altruism scores and the yes-or-no responses on Q3, Q4, and Q5. Here we found that while donating goods has a positive

effect ($B = .484$) on their perceived altruism, volunteering or donating money has no significant correlation (Table 5). This means that individuals who donate goods tend to perceive themselves as more altruistic.

Furthermore, we ran correlations between perceived altruism and the demographic questions in our survey in order to see if any group of individuals is more likely to perceive themselves as altruistic. We found that for age, political identification, and household income there is no statistically significant correlation. However, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between gender and perceived altruism (Table 6). In fact, on average a male will rate themselves a 5 in perceived altruism and a female will rate themselves as 5.69. However, we believe this might be somewhat biased because of the unequal gender distribution of our sample (Figure 1).

Limitations

We acknowledge that our research project introduces many forms of bias, which causes inaccuracy in this study. For instance, our Likert scale might have elicited response bias, as respondents may have been inclined to respond in extremes. Our distribution method introduces sampling bias. Since we distributed the survey through Facebook, respondents had to have been connected with us in order to access the survey. Additionally, respondents themselves decided whether or not to participate, which introduced self-selection bias. Lastly, as mentioned before, we had to discard of some respondent's data due to lack of complete answers. We recognize that we should have forced responses using that condition in Qualtrics in order to have more complete data.

We wish to have had a more balanced female-male and age distribution (Figures 1 and 2). Due to large amount of respondents ages 19-22, we recognize that most of our respondents might

be college students, and might not have disposable resources, like money or time, to be altruistic. Therefore, we wish we could have had a better distributed sample by age to include those with such disposable resources. If we were to add anything to the survey, we would have liked to incorporate the Likert scale again at the end of the survey to see, after answering questions about charitable actions, whether their perception of themselves changed. It would have been interesting to analyze and see if the respondents perception of themselves stayed the same or became more or less altruistic.

Conclusion

_____ Given the results of the study we can conclude that there does not appear to be a correlation between perceived altruism and measured altruism. In certain cases, we were surprised to learn that perceived altruism might actually be lower than actual altruism when compared to others. This is something that we would like to pursue and study further. We also believe that our current research can be supplemented by in depth interviews, experiments, and scenario question that will help us understand more about the relationship between measurable altruism and perceived altruism. These sorts of insights will help us improve our current survey. We would then send out the updated survey to an even larger and more diverse sample, which should allow us to make more certain conclusions on the perceived versus measurable altruism relationship.

Appendix

Complete Survey

For the following questions, please consider all charity work including personal work (e.g. interactions with the homeless, independent charity work, etc.) and/or organized work (e.g. clubs, non-profit affiliations, etc.) This survey is anonymous.

Q1 - To what extent would you say the following characteristics apply to you:

	Not at All (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Extremely (7)
Moral							
Nice							
Altruistic							
Good							
Sincere							
Pure							

Q2 - To what extent would you say the following characteristics apply to you:

	Not at All (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Extremely (7)
Immoral							
Mean							
Selfish							
Bad							
Insincere							
Impure							

Q3 - Have you done volunteer work in the last year?

(Condition: If "Yes" is selected, skip to Q3a; If "No" is selected, skip to Q4)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q3a - On how many occasions have you volunteered in the last month?

☐0 ☐1 - 3 ☐4+

Q4 - Have you donated money in the last year?

(Condition: If "Yes" is selected, skip to Q4a; If "No" is selected, skip to Q5)

☐Yes ☐No

Q4a - (If yes) How much money have you donated in the last month?

☐None ☐\$1 - \$19 ☐\$20 - \$99 ☐\$100 - \$499 ☐\$500+

Q5 - Have you donated goods in the last year?

(Condition: If "Yes" is selected, skip to Q5a; If "No" is selected, skip to Q6)

☐Yes ☐No

Q5a - On how many occasions did you donate goods in the last month?

☐0 ☐1 - 5 ☐More than 5

Q6 - Please estimate the number of hours you have volunteered in the last year:

☐None ☐1 - 10 ☐11 - 20 ☐21+

Q7 - Please estimate the amount in dollars that you have donated in the last year:

☐None ☐\$1 - \$19 ☐\$20 - \$99 ☐\$100 - \$499 ☐\$500+

Q8 - Please estimate the number of occasions that you have donated goods in the last year:

(Condition: If "None" is selected, skip to Q12)

☐None ☐1 - 3 ☐4+

Q9 - Please estimate how many clothing goods you have donated in the last year:

☐None ☐1 - 10 ☐11 - 20 ☐21+

Q10 - Please estimate how many toy goods you have donated in the last year:

☐None ☐1 - 10 ☐11 - 20 ☐21+

Q11 - Please estimate how many canned foods goods you have donated in the last year:

☐None ☐1 - 10 ☐11 - 20 ☐21+

Q12 - What is your age?

Q13 - Which gender do you most identify with?

☐ Male ☐ Female

Q14 - How do you identify politically? (Please position the slider to the location that most closely identifies your political stance)

Left Neutral Right
|-----|-----|

Q15 - What is your yearly household income?

☐ Up to \$14,999 ☐ \$15,000 - \$29,999 ☐ \$30,000 - \$74,999 ☐ \$75,000 - \$149,999
☐ \$150,000 or more

Tables from SPSS Analysis

Table 1				
<i>Correlation between self-perception of altruism and actual measured altruism</i>				
	B	Standard Error	t	p
(Constant)	6.175	.754	8.194	.000
On how many occasions have you volunteered in the last month?	-.536	.225	-2.381	.026*
How much money have you donated in the last month?	.248	.207	1.196	.244
On how many occasions did you donate goods in the last month?	.328	.232	1.412	.172
Please estimate the number of hours you have volunteered in the last year:	.229	.137	1.666	.110

Please estimate the amount of dollars that you donated in the last year:	-.347	.243	-1.430	.167
Please estimate the number of occasion that you have donated goods in the last year:	.205	.294	.696	.494
Please estimate how many clothing goods you have donated in the last year:	-.339	.135	-2.514	.020*
Please estimate how many toy goods you have donated in the last year:	.093	.170	.547	.590
Please estimate how many canned foods good you have donated in the last year:	.197	.160	1.226	.233
<p><i>Note:</i> $p^* < .05$, indicating that (1) occasions of volunteering in past month and (2) donating clothing goods in the past year have statistical significance over perceived altruism.</p>				

Table 2					
<i>Volunteered Month vs. Year</i>					
	B	Coefficients Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	p
(Constant)	5.736	.410		14.003	.000
On how many occasions have you volunteered in the last month?	.052	.152	.051	.340	.735
Please estimate the number of hours you have volunteered in the last year:	-.011	.123	-0.14	-.092	.927
<i>Note: $p > .05$, indicating that there is no statistically significant correlation</i>					

Table 3					
<i>Money</i>					
	B	Coefficients Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	p
(Constant)	5.445	.355		15.333	.000

How much money have you donated in the last month?	.052	.152	.051	.340	.735
Please estimate the amount in dollars that you have donated in the last year:	.009	.147	.012	.061	.952
<i>Note:</i> $p > .05$, indicating that there is no statistically significant correlation					

Table 4					
<i>Goods</i>					
	B	Coefficients Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	p
(Constant)	6.130	.545		11.246	.000
On how many occasions did you donate in the last month?	.025	.180	.023	.139	.890

Please estimate the number of occasions that you have donated goods in the last year:	-.110	.237	-.084	-.465	.644
Please estimate how many clothing goods you have donated in the last year:	-.097	.097	-1.72	-.995	.325
Please estimate how many toy goods you have donated in the last year:	.102	.147	.118	.694	.491
Please estimate how many canned food goods you have donated in the last year:	.039	.118	.051	.327	.745
<i>Note:</i> $p > .05$, indicating that there is no statistically significant correlation					

Table 5				
<i>Actual Altruism in the Last Year</i>				
	B	Std. Error	t	p
Constant	5.289	.194	27.249	.000
Have you done volunteer work in the last year?	.236	.190	1.238	.220
Have you donated money in the last year?	-.097	.205	-.471	.639
Have you donated goods in the last year?	.484	.190	2.547	.013*
<i>Note: *p < .05, which indicates donating goods has a statistically significant correlation with perceived altruism</i>				

Table 6				
<i>Gender</i>				
	B	Std. Error	t	p
Constant	4.842	.387	12.502	.000

Which gender do you most identify with?	.471	.211	2.231	.029*
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Note: * $p < .05$, which indicates gender has a statistically significant correlation with perceived altruism

Table 7				
<i>Age</i>				
	B	Std. Error	t	p
Constant	5.794	.249	23.237	.000
What is your age?	-.005	.009	-.565	.574

Table 8				
<i>Political Identification</i>				
	B	Std. Error	t	p
Constant	5.868	.174	33.715	.000
How do you identify politically?	-.004	.003	-1.417	.162

Table 9				
<i>Household income</i>				
	B	Std. Error	t	p

Constant	5.536	.290	19.062	.000
What is your yearly household income?	.038	.070	.539	.591

Table 10

Scores of Perceived Altruism

<u>Rate</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent (%)</u>
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	1	1.27
4	4	5.06
5	23	29.11
6	43	54.43
7	8	10.13
Total:	79	100.00

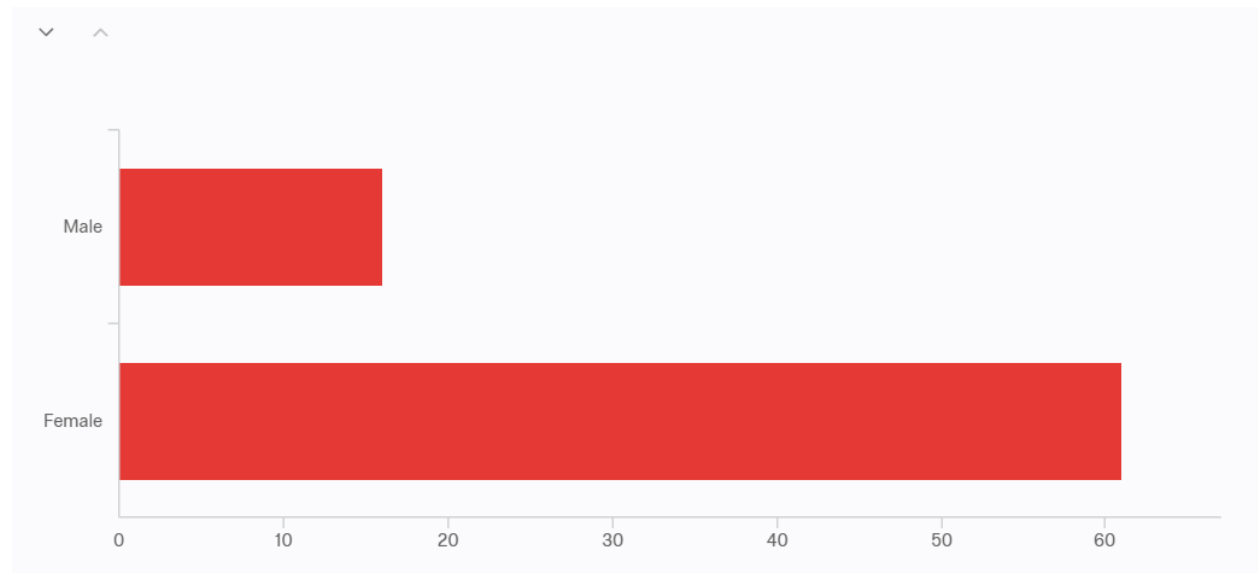
Figures

Figure 1 Bar Chart for Gender Distribution of Respondents

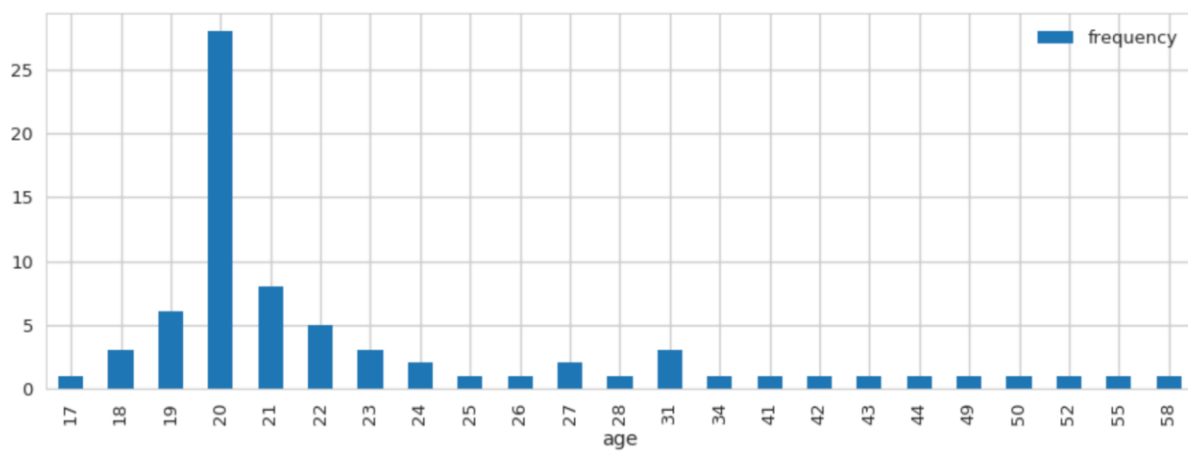


Figure 2 Bar Chart for Age Distribution of Respondents

References

- (Berman J., Levine E., Barasch A., Small D.) Selfish or Selfless? On the Signal Value of Emotion in Altruistic Behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 107, No. 3, 393 - 413 (2014).
- (Berman J., Levine E., Barasch A., Small D.) The Braggarts Dilemma: On the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior. *Journal of Marketing Research*. (2015).