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The (in)stability of social preferences: Using justice sensitivity to predict when altruism collapses



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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that altruism can be surprisingly tenuous; minor situational variations can turn altruism on and off. For example, if provided with sufficient cover, "reluctant altruists" will often avoid situations that compel them to give, and they may even secretly renege on gifts they just made. This behavior puts pressure on classic explanations of altruism and raises many questions about its stability. Is everyone's altruism prone to such collapse? If not, how can one predict it? We show that some people exhibit more stable altruism, predicting who is who weeks prior to the task. We show that high degrees of *justice sensitivity* is associated with pro-social behavior across situations, while low degrees of *justice sensitivity* relate to the use of situational variables as excuse to display less altruistic behavior. Our findings contribute to recent research on altruism and give insight into how to predict it.

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1. Introduction

During the rise of social preference theories (e.g., Andreoni, 1999; Battigalli and Dufwenberg, 2009; Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000; Fehr and Schmidt, 1999), it became even more clear that people had other-regarding preferences of some sort. For example, individuals were thought to have a preference for improving others' welfare (Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000; Fehr and Schmidt, 1999) or a desire to experience the "warm glow" associated with giving to others (Andreoni, 1999). More recently, the assumptions of these social preference theories have come into question by research suggesting that people are often "reluctant altruists"—they will give but will also avoid the situations that compel them to give (Cain et al., 2013); e.g., they will avoid giving if they can avoid appearing stingy (Andreoni and Bernheim, 2009; Dana et al., 2007; Levitt and List, 2007; Ockenfels and Werner, 2012) or are provided opportunities to reconsider/renege when facing less social pressure (Dana et al., 2006; Sah et al., 2013). Because would-be recipients are so often left with nothing, these results challenge the idea that people generally have other-regarding preferences. However, this all leaves open the possibility that some subsets of people are not reluctant in their altruism. In other words, are there not some people whose altruism is more stable and can be explained by the typical motivations, e.g., by preferences for warm-glow or distributive outcomes?

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Using personality differences in *justice sensitivity*, the present research suggests that predictable subsets of the population have stable other-regarding preferences, while (reluctant) others are more prone to finding ways of avoiding giving. Generally speaking, this personality trait serves as a detector of justice-relevant situations, and represents the importance that an individual places on justice in her daily life. We argue that allowing for such preference heterogeneity (i.e., individual differences) can deliver useful insights to *ex ante predict*, not just *ex post explain* both genuine as well as reluctant altruism. Importantly, this individual difference measure is well-grounded in personality psychology and cognitive psychology and thus provides a theoretical basis for understanding differences in behavior. While our main question is whether there are stable components of altruism—predictable by anything—perhaps using a known personality scale will open the door to better understanding the social-cognitive and motivational foundations of altruistic behavior.

1.1. Reluctant altruism in dictator games

A prototypical lab measure of other-regarding preferences is the “dictator game” (Camerer, 2003; Forsythe et al., 1994; Guala and Mittone, 2010). Player *A* is endowed with x dollars and can “dictate” how the money is allotted between players, giving any amount he or she desires, \$0 to $\$x$, to player *B* in an anonymous, one-shot task. A key feature of the game is that if player *A* sends \$0, player *B* gets nothing, but is told that an anonymous dictator sent \$0; i.e., player *B* would know that he or she was “stiffed,” but could do nothing about it. A substantial amount of studies suggest that the majority of individuals gives something to receivers and that the average gift equals 20% (Forsythe et al., 1994; Guala and Mittone, 2010).

However, recent studies find that slight variations of the dictator game provide substantially different results, causing strong debates about what actually motivates social behavior. For example, Dana et al. (2006) show that many dictators took the opportunity to renege on a gift when they were surprised by a “dictator exit” option allowing them to pay a small price for leaving the receiver with no money and no knowledge that a dictator game had taken place. This acceptance of small costs to avoid (being seen) refusing a request is what Dana et al. (2006) call “crossing the street to avoid the beggar.” Similarly, Broberg et al. (2007) found that roughly two-thirds of participants were willing to accept the dictator-exit option, giving up part of their endowment to avoid sharing. Recent studies yield similar findings supporting instability of other-regarding preferences that merely focus on financial outcomes (DellaVigna et al., 2009; Lazear et al., 2012). These observations rule out many classical explanations for the initial giving. Givers who vary their gift depending on the situation must not worry about receivers’ payoffs or the inequity of the situation (e.g., Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000; Fehr and Schmidt, 1999); they must not value the warm, fuzzy feeling derived from giving (Andreoni, 1999)¹; and they must not ultimately want to see themselves as altruistic because these players see themselves ultimately giving nothing. Indeed, one might quip, if these people truly have other-regarding preferences, not only should they not avoid the beggar but even sign up for beggar-delivery services, bringing the needy to their doorsteps and allowing them to fulfill their putative desire to improve others’ welfare or reduce inequality in the world.

If many people prefer to avoid requests for help, why do they also help when confronted? It is suggested that giving not only reflects preferences over outcomes but also something like “a desire not to violate other’s expectations” (Dana et al., 2006, p. 193), as concluded from givers’ willingness to pay to leave receivers in the dark as to what is actually going on—what one does not know about cannot disappoint. Specifically, less-generous behavior occurs as soon as transparency between (beliefs about) dictator-actions and (beliefs about) receiver-reactions is clouded (Dana et al., 2007). A variety of experimental evidence points to the importance of such belief-dependent preferences, for example, in trust games (Charness and Dufwenberg, 2006), in field experiments (Andreoni et al., 2011), and in a large-scale newspaper dictator game (Ockenfels and Werner, 2012).²

As intriguing as these results are, however, they do not entail that nobody has other-regarding preferences over outcomes. Surely some altruism is genuine and is not merely disappointment aversion; and surely, the warm glow that people obtain from giving does drive some altruism. After all, contrary to our prior quip about beggar delivery, people sometimes do leave their house in search of ways of making the world a better place; such altruism may not be reluctant at all. Perhaps there are stable individual differences along these lines. Given additional experimental and theoretical evidence about people’s diverging motivations to be perceived as “fair” (Andreoni and Bernheim, 2009; Fetschenhauer and Dunning, 2006), or their aversion to falling short of others’ expectations (Battigali and Dufwenberg, 2007; Dana et al., 2006), we posit that there are stable, measurable interpersonal differences with regard to these justice-related perceptions and motivations. These differences can be captured by measuring people’s personality prior to engaging in these economic games.

1.2. Measuring personality by means of justice sensitivity

Justice sensitivity (JS) is a personality trait that people possess in various degrees. It captures stable and consistent interpersonal differences in people’s *inclination* to perceive situations as justice-relevant, as well as in the *strength* of emotional

¹ It is logically possible that the warm, fuzzy feeling is felt the instance that the initial gift is sent and can be enjoyed even if the giver ultimately reneges before the money is received. However, even this cannot explain givers who try to avoid giving in the first place, for example, by crossing the street to avoid the beggar entirely.

² However, for a contrary argument, see Ellingsen et al. (2010).

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