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Recommended Citation

Roundy, Landen M.; Griffith, Meagan E.; Jensen, Sarah E.; and Allen, Joseph A., "Altruism in the Context of door-courtesy Behaviors among College Students" (2005). *Psychology Faculty Publications*. 82.
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Altruism in the Context of door-courtesy Behaviors among College Students

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Altruism has been debated as both selfishly and selflessly motivated. Though there are many possible illustrations of altruism in daily activities, a simple model to measure altruism is observing door-holding behaviors. This study observes the door-holding behavior patterns of undergraduate college students, assessing the sex differences and the possibility of an altruistic theme within the observed population. A general sex difference was found illustrating that males hold the door more often than females. Implications of the results are discussed.

Many people actively seek opportunities to serve others, such as helping at a nursing home, volunteering at a fire department, or even taking out their neighbor's garbage (Brewer & Kramer, 1986). Two schools of thought have appeared concerning the true motive of these actions. The main researchers on both sides of this issue debate whether the goal of altruistic behavior is selfless or selfish (Batson, Ahamd, & Tsang, 2002; Neuberg, Cialdini, Brown, Luce, Sagarin, & Lewis, 1997).

One school of thought, led by Batson (1990), claims that altruism is selfless. Experiments were conducted by placing an individual in apparent need and recording the feedback on the conditions of the people who gave aid. Batson formulated the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which states that pro-social motivation is based on the desire to increase the well-being of a person in need. He concluded that people help others simply because they care about them, not for any true benefit to themselves. The joy experienced by the helper is not the goal of helping, but is a by-product of the act. Batson et al. (2002) found that the helpful

acts of individuals who have been in close proximity with others who have experienced injustice can at times be truly altruistic. The rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, risked their own lives to aid other people (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Neuberg heads the other school of thought, which focuses on the innate selfishness of altruism (Neuberg et al. 1997). Neuberg et al. replicated Batson's study by placing an individual in a situation intended to evoke feelings of empathy and altruism (Batson et al., 1999; Neuberg et al., 1997). The researchers then looked for plausible nonaltruistic alternatives for the empathy-helping effects, such as sexism or desire for recognition. Next, they measured these nonaltruistic alternatives and examined whether the empathy-helping relationship remained. They found that individuals help others in order to alleviate their own feelings of distress. For example, when a person witnesses another person in need they experience painful feelings. Neuberg et al. (1997) concluded that people are motivated to help others by their desire to make their own guilt or bad feelings go away rather than increase the well-being of another person.

Either school of thought can be used to explain

complex altruistic behaviors, such as aiding Jews in postwar Nazi Germany, as well as simple behaviors, such as door-holding (Yoder, Hogue, Newman, Metz, & La Vigne, 2002). For the purposes of this study, altruism is defined as motivation with the ultimate goal of increasing the welfare of one or more individuals other than oneself (Batson, Ahamad, & Tsang, 2002). Behavior that is focused on serving others will be used as an expression of altruism. Simple altruistic behaviors are more easily observed and quantified, allowing researchers to apply both selfish and unselfish altruistic hypotheses as explanations of the behavior. Yoder et al. (2002) observed door-holding behaviors among college age dyads in the context of dating and nondating situations. They found that door-holding behaviors of males increased in dating situations when compared to nondating contexts. The explanation of this conclusion centered on the possibility of sexism illustrated in male dominance as opposed to selfless altruistic behavior (Yoder et al., 2002; Batson et al., 1999).

In the present study we examine both altruistic behavior in the context of door-holding and the possibility of sex differences in those behaviors. It is first hypothesized that there will be a difference between males and females in door-holding behaviors. Secondly it is hypothesized that a majority of the population will show some form of altruism characterized by door-holding. These hypotheses maintain the school of thought illustrated by Batson in his studies among college-age individuals.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 745 male and 764 female unpaid undergraduate students at a university. Subjects were unsystematically chosen. During observation intervals, subjects were watched and were unaware they were being observed.

Materials

Two copies of three different tally sheets were used to record the observations. The first tally sheet was used to tally the total number of males who

walked through the doors. The second tally sheet was used to tally the total number of females that walked through the doors. The third tally sheet was used to tally the number of occurrences of each behavior displayed by each sex.

Procedures

To measure altruism in door-holding among college students, unobtrusive observation on a university campus was utilized. One of the most commonly used doors was observed. There were four investigators, each observing different aspects of door-holding. Two investigators sat together approximately 15 to 20 feet from the door and tallied the total number of people entering and exiting. One counted males and one counted females, and both recorded the results on their own tally sheet form. The other two investigators observed different aspects of door-holding in male and female subjects by looking for arm extensions, glance back habits, and complete door-holding for another individual. Illustrative definitions of these behaviors can be found in Figure 1. In order to maintain an unobtrusive situation, the two investigators analyzing at a close range wore reflective sunglasses to allow them to observe without the subjects being aware. Also, the investigators had their tally sheets on college notebooks or textbooks to give the appearance that they were studying. These two were in close proximity to the subjects so they could observe their eye and body movements.

Data Analysis

Male and female trends and general sample trends in door-holding were analyzed. A chi-squared analysis of variance was performed to determine the significance of the results.

Results

Male and female trends and general sample trends in door-holding were analyzed. A chi-squared analysis of variance was performed to determine the significance of the results. The results are summarized in Figure 2, where a significant difference ($\chi^2=256.1, p\leq 0.01$) was found between males and females in door-holding behaviors. The arm extension behavior was similar

between males and females; however, significantly more males than females glanced back or held doors.

Discussion

The first hypothesis stated that there would be significant sex differences in door-courtesy behaviors, which was confirmed by the results. Figure 2 shows that males glanced back 262 times as compared to females who glanced back 22 times. Figure 2 also shows that males held the door 112 times and females held the door 13 times. Males clearly exhibited more door-courtesy behaviors than females, indicating a significant sex difference in this behavior among the observed population. The sheer number of door-courtesy acts performed by the males indicates the possibility that these behaviors are altruistically based (Batson, 1990; Batson et al., 1999; Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991; Dovidio, Schroeder, & Allen, 1990). There are alternative explanations for door-holding such as the motivation to impress a member of the opposite sex or the desire to illustrate one's superiority. Because of the high number of door-holding behaviors observed there is a great possibility that they are not explainable by other motivations. In other words, the large frequency of door-holding behaviors exhibited by males cannot be fully explained away by alternative explanations. Batson (1990) argues that altruism is selflessly based and random acts of kindness such as door-holding are indicative of altruism (Baskerville, 2000).

The second hypothesis indicated that there would be a general prevalence of door-courtesy behaviors illustrating altruism among the observed population regardless of sex differences. Men and women both exhibited arm extensions at similar levels as seen in Figure 1. Men arm extended 449 times and women arm extended 470 times. Batson et al. (1999) found that altruistic motives often govern behavior unto the overall collective good. The collective good may account for the overwhelming trend towards door-holding among

college-age students. The total number of participants was 1,509 college-age students, and the actual number of arm extensions in the observed population was 919. These results suggest a general altruistic trend in door-courtesy behaviors in the observed population, confirming the hypothesis.

Although the results show a trend in door-courtesy behaviors that indicate altruism, much research by the second school on altruism argues that these acts may simply be motivated by other factors (Neuberg et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). One factor that may motivate individuals in performing random acts of kindness is the person's desire to alleviate negative feelings (Neuberg et al., 1997). Neuberg et al. argued that when a person observes another in need, the situation causes a physiological change that increases the observer's personal stress. To alleviate these negative feelings, the observer helps the person in need. Rather than being intrinsically motivated by altruism, the observer is physiologically motivated. Another factor that may account for altruistic behavior is a person's desire to put himself or herself in a good light among peers (Maner et al., 2002). Maner et al. argue that people tend to do things simply in order for others to give them praise for their random acts of kindness. Thus, rather than motivated by selfless altruism, individuals may be motivated by selfish need for approval by peers.

The key limitation of this study that impacts the first hypothesis is the alternate explanations of what appears to be altruistic behavior. One alternate explanation is the nature of the sample under observation. Many of the men that enter and exit the buildings on this campus are previous missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The nature of the mission and the time these individuals spent in the service of other people may influence their behaviors, motivating them to perform more door-courtesy behaviors than the average male. The service of these men to others may explain the reason for our observations of higher numbers of door-holding behaviors in males as compared to females (see Figure 1).

Another alternate explanation for door-holding was studied by Yoder et al. (2002), who found that males tend to increase their door-courtesy behaviors depending on the context of the situation: dating or nondating. When males would like to have a future relationship

with the female approaching the door, they are more apt to aid her. Yoder et al. (2002) suggested that benevolent sexism conveyed by male dominance may explain the door-holding behaviors and the sex difference. This explanation may account for some of the variation in door-holding between males and females in the present study.

The limitation of alternate explanations of door-courtesy-behaviors spills over into the second hypothesis that altruism is prevalent among the sample observed. The negative-state relief theory suggests that a person's desire to alleviate negative feelings is the motivation in performing seemingly altruistic acts of kindness (Neuberg et al., 1997). Members of the sample observed may have been in a sad or stressed mood, showing door-courtesy behavior as a relief of their mood. Another alternate explanation of this study's findings would be the religious affiliation of the sample observed. Not only are many of the males former missionaries, but the females are also members of the same service-oriented church organization. These individuals may have been raised to demonstrate courtesy-related behaviors to others and have thus shown door-courtesy behavior as a conditioned response.

A possible confound that may account for error in this study could be inter-rater reliability. Because of the high traffic in the area observed and the shortage of investigators, only one person observed each variable. Thus, inter-rater reliability could not be measured. Due to the busy nature of the chosen locations and various vantage points, it is possible that the observers were not perfectly accurate in recording each behavior. Therefore, having more than one rater observe the same category of behaviors would allow for comparisons between observations to determine the accuracy of the data. Another confound concerning rater reliability may be the possible ambiguity between a glance back and an arm extension. For example, during a busy time the rater may not have seen a glance back when combined with an arm extension because they may not have seen the person's eyes.

Future studies can build from the current findings by broadening our understanding of how the motive of altruism affects human behavior. An area for further research could be studying the impact of emotional

state as related to the location where door-courtesy behaviors are observed (Maner et al., 2002; Batson, 1990). People going to the courthouse are more likely to exhibit stress, while people entering and exiting a restaurant are presumably more relaxed. The effects of their emotional state on door-courtesy behavior could be measured. For example, a small questionnaire could be developed to assess emotional state at the time of door-holding. After observing a door hold another experimenter could ask the observed individual to fill out the questionnaire. Gathering this information could lead to an understanding of motivation behind door-holding that considers both altruistic schools: selfless vs. selfish.

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Figures

Figure 1A: Glance back



Figure 1B: Arm extension



Figure 1C: Door hold



Figure 2

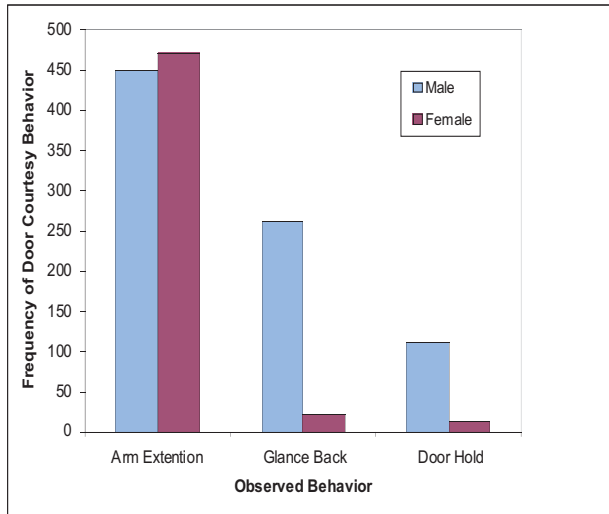


Figure 2 illustrates door-courtesy behaviors observed and recorded as an arm extension, glance back, or door hold. The behaviors were divided as pertaining to the sex of the individuals who performed them.