



## **Civil Society Working Paper**

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### **In Search of a Good Society**

#### **Introduction to Altruism Theories and Their Links with Civil Society**

**Anne Birgitta Yeung**

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The Centre for Civil Society  
Department of Social Policy  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE

Tel: +44 (0)20 7955 7205/6527 Fax: +44 (0)20 7955 6038 Email: [ccs@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ccs@lse.ac.uk)

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## **Abstract**

This working paper focuses both on theoretical analysis of altruism and its links with the promotion of active civil society. The main goal is to separate the different forms of altruism and to examine the factors contributing to the changing degrees of altruism. This paper also aims to specify the definition of altruism and the conceptual and empirical dilemmas related to it. The article will, first, look at how altruism has been understood within economic and sociological studies. The text will then – before focusing on the civil society links in the last section – concentrate on the main lines of empirical research on altruism, their main findings, and preferable future research developments. The overall goal of this text is to develop and focus the discussion and research on altruism by offering specifications, problems, and links with the empirical world – the search for a good communal life and a good society.

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## **About the author**

Anne Birgitta Yeung is currently Research Fellow at the Collegium for Advanced Study, University of Helsinki. She is Adjunct Professor of Church and Social Studies.

Email: [anne.yeung@helsinki.fi](mailto:anne.yeung@helsinki.fi)

Tel +358-(0)9-191 23453

Fax +358-(0)9-191 24509

Mobile +358-(0)41 544 3424

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Anne Birgitta Yeung, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, P.O. Box 4 (Fabianinkatu 24), 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

## 1. “The most important sociological question”

*The Voice of nature and experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory.*

– David Hume, 1751

The claim and the hypothesis on which this text is based is that altruism forms the cornerstone of societal cohesion, the everyday well-being of individuals, and the central manifestation of values.<sup>1</sup> Most sociological and economic studies consider altruism, and particularly selfless helping behaviour as a superfluous category that blends into the white background noise in scientific explanation. Much research views humans and humanity in a way best described in David Hume’s words, as “homo homini lupus”. Altruism is thus often neglected as a secondary ad hoc explanation as its explanatory power compared to selfishness is considered to be less.

This however need not – nor should it – be the case with altruism. Appreciation of various forms of altruism can bring considerable benefit for the understanding of the interaction between people both in theoretical considerations and empirical studies. Altruism, an essential and pivotal part of humanity, can be regarded a universal phenomenon, since it has been found in all known societies. The forms of altruism vary greatly between and within societies, however, and probably between different eras in the same societies.

Altruism usually refers to actions that take other human beings into consideration; action concerned with the well-being of others. The concept was brought into the social sciences by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as the antonym of selfishness. The term derives from the Latin “alter”, “other”. The concept was quickly established and the first date recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1853 (see Hardin 1993, 225).<sup>2</sup> The concept has since remained part of the social and natural science vocabulary. In Comte’s often restated view, altruism is *the most important sociological question*. In his view, individuals have two distinct motives: egoism and altruism, and although most behaviour concerns self-serving motives, the unselfish desire to help others also motivates behaviour.

Similar views were later put by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) in his early work “The Division of Labour in Society” [1893]. Durkheim argues that wherever there are communities there is altruism since communities exhibit solidarity (Durkheim 1966, 186.) Durkheim linked egoism and altruism to the deepening of the societal division of labour, the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity. Likewise, he linked egoism and altruism to the maintenance of moral communality demanded by and included in the transformed solidarity. According to Durkheim, it is not a question of linear change from egoism to altruism but of different forms of communality constructed under different circumstances. In his opinion, both egoism and altruism have been a part of each human consciousness from the very beginning, since consciousness that does not reflect both elements cannot exist (Durkheim 1966, 212.) Unselfishness is expected to come from the deepest foundation of our social life; people cannot live together without mutual understanding, and thus without mutual sacrifice, and without being bonded together in a strong, durable manner. (Durkheim 1966, 212.)

Today’s late-modern – or post-modern to some observers – societal context creates an especially interesting framework for the study of altruism: while individuals are less dependent on social ties and traditions than ever before, we are increasingly tied to other types of network, including global ones. In today’s Western societies, individuals live in the midst of multiple novel networks in several senses of the word. People may, for instance, not be interested in helping their neighbours but have godchildren on the other side of the world. In other words, as the networks of individuals and what could be called ‘personal groups of good life’ are changing, so too is altruism. The changes in the forms of altruism and helping behaviour might even be playing a role in the transformation of social networks.

Furthermore, in this context of rapidly transforming social networks (both from more dependence to less dependence, and vice versa) we can no longer simply divide people into individualists and collectivists. As Maffesoli (1996, 63) has written, today’s social relationships within the sporadic networks can express even *closer* communality than traditional social ties. The present-day societal context deeply

underscores the question of how the individual can become both more free, more of an individual, and more closely linked to society, networks and altruistic ties.

We have come a long way in the development of civil society from rural self-help and communality to international volunteering in developing countries, internet peer groups, and so forth. Old and the new forms also live today side by side. In the streets of the major cities one might run into a Salvation Army fundraising pot and Red Cross fundraisers, or young people hired to recruit supporters for various more specific causes and associations, like Unicef or Amnesty International. Similarly in volunteerism it has become increasingly difficult for many associations and institutions to enlist and engage volunteers for long-term activities, which of course naturally still exist, but younger people in many countries are interested in joining a short-term project “if only someone would ask me to come along” (concerning Finland, see Yeung 2002).

Thus, all in all, altruism is indeed changing. Nevertheless, we still lack up-to-date studies and discussions on altruism, specifically in the European context. As pointed out by Wuthnow (1993, 345), theoretical and empirical work in sociology since the 1960s has shown “a decided reluctance to employ the idea of altruism as such”. Altruism relates to several currently topical academic themes, including happiness, experiences of the good life, trust, social capital, citizen activity, participation, empowerment, and so forth,.

This working paper focuses both on theoretical analysis of altruism and on its links with the promotion of an active civil society. The main goal is to separate different forms of altruism and to examine the factors contributing to the changing degrees of altruism. This paper also aims to specify the definition of altruism, its various forms, and the conceptual and empirical dilemmas related to it. After a brief look at the history of altruism research, the article will discuss how altruism has been understood within different disciplines. Special interest is directed to the intersections between social science and biology literature.<sup>3</sup> The latter part of this text – before focusing on the civil society links in the last chapter – will concentrate on the main lines of empirical research on altruism, their main findings, and desirable future



research developments. The overall goal of this text is to develop and focus discussion and research on altruism by offering questions, and connections with 'the real world' – the search for a good communal life and a good society.

## **2. From monologues to dialogue**

### **2.1 Economic and sociological views of altruism**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century an increasing part of the literature on altruism-related themes was encompassed specifically by the concept of altruism. Research can indeed be found on various fields: philosophy (e.g., Singer 1981; Galston 1993), religious studies (Habito & Inaba 2006; Saarinen 2005), developmental psychology studies (e.g., Eisenberg 1982), social psychology (e.g., Rushton 1976, Batson 1986), organisational studies (e.g., Korsgaard et al. 1997), political science (e.g., Monroe 1991; 1996; 2002; 2004), economics (e.g., Field 2004), evolutionary studies both in psychology (e.g., Sober & Wilson 1998) and biology (e.g., Trivers 1971; Smith 1998), et cetera. There are also more practice-oriented handbooks and study materials for helping professionals (e.g., Kottler 2000; Breggin 1997).

Economists have developed their own point of view on altruism, especially in connection with the theory of production of public commodities. The theory predicts that:

- a) most individuals try to avoid altruistic contributions or contributions aimed at the common good, and thus
- b) only the wealthiest members of the society participate in the production of common good, and correspondingly, and
- c) the average contribution of individuals is in practice zero.

As long as the interests of individuals and households are evenly divided, no one participates in the production of a commodity if the participation of other individuals/households cannot be guaranteed. In other words, households free-ride in

the production of public goods unless binding general agreements on their production are made.

Free-riding may not be quite as general as rational choice theory and neo-classical economics predict. Most experiments and test situations have shown that free-riding is quite usual but its probability is essentially less than the theoretical prognoses predict. Interestingly, much free-riding seems to be connected with people who have economic education and training.

The game theories of economics and of evolution biology have also identified the altruistic and co-operative inclinations of humans. Altruism has been tested using these classic games (e.g., Ultimatum, Dictatorship games, etc.) in which short- and long-term advantages of an individual are set in contrast to each other, and the solutions of the second players determine the usefulness of one's own strategy. The so-called 'prisoner's dilemma' is one of the best –recognised of these. It concerns (in one of its forms) an imagined interrogation situation in which the police have arrested two people who have operated together. The detainees have been placed in separate rooms so that they cannot talk with each other. The police know that both are guilty of a minor offence about which the police have undisputed evidence and of a larger offence for which the evidence is missing. The police are specifically interested in the more serious crime and the following proposal is made to both prisoners (A and B). If one testifies against the other, and the other refuses to testify, the one who has testified will go free and the other will be imprisoned for ten years. However, if both testify against each other, both prisoners will be condemned to six years. If however both refuse to testify they will be condemned to two years' imprisonment on the lesser charge. The alternatives in this game theory dilemma are indicated in the following table:

TABLE 1. Prisoner's dilemma

<b><u>Prisoner, 'player' A</u></b>	
<i>Testifies</i>	<i>Refuses to testify</i>
<hr/>	

<b><u>Prisoner, 'player' B</u></b>	<i>Testifies</i>	A: 6 years B: 6 years	A: 10 years B: free
	<i>Refuses to testify</i>	A: free B: 10 years	A: 2 years B: 2 years

The situation is difficult from the point of view of the prisoners in that both would maximise their own benefit by testifying against other, but only if the other one remains silent. When both testify, the situation becomes catastrophic from their point of view, since the prison term is twelve years altogether (6+6 years).

This, and other game theory experiments have repeatedly shown that individuals co-operate more than the rational choice theory and the ‘hard-core’ economics game theories predict. Basically, a rational individual should not co-operate in such problematic situations at all – but about half do co-operate. Furthermore, in repeated games patterns of reciprocity between the players soon appear. (Field, 2004; Fehr & Fischbacher 2003; Andreoni & Miller 1993.).<sup>4</sup> Altruism and interest in other people’s well-being is, at bottom, the basis of co-operation – and co-operation further promotes altruism.

It also is fascinating that findings in neurobiology indicate that when similar games reward cooperation, the players’ brain reward-circuit is activated, and in situations in which one player would have co-operated but the co-player not, there is a negative response in the dopamine system in the more co-operative player’s brain. (Fehr & Fischbacher 2003, 788.) Thus, altruism is deep in our culture, even in our brains.

In addition to game theories, evolutionary biology and economics are also related in the study of altruism in other ways. For instance, the economists Robert Frank (1988) and Herbert Gintis (2003) have proposed that pro-social operation and action may be the result of evolutionary cultural selection, since the evolutionary selection process has favoured the spread of feelings such as shame, guilt and empathy. It is obvious that at the individual level the choice favours selfishness more strongly

the less the internal processes in the group restrain its dissemination. (e.g. Kokkonen 2003, 263) The economist Samuel Bowles, a long-time collaborator of Gintis, has developed a similar model. In his view, when the institutional frame of action and interaction changes, the demands and expectations concerning thanks will also change. The market economy favours a different kind of behaviour and personality type from, for instance, the gift economy of antiquity or the economy model based on robbery. (Bowles 1998).

Much sociological writing takes the view that selfishness and reciprocity – or altruism and rationality – are not mutually exclusive but phenomena which reinforce each other. De Tocqueville, who analysed the society of North America, outlined the linkages between individualism and altruism; in his view, individualism in particular made Americans more dependent on each other. In such a case, rationality supports helping others, which may be called “self-interest rightly understood” (Tocqueville 1948 129-135). Robert Wuthnow (1991, 286-287) also considers that it is actually individualism that leads people to altruism and care; for example, in the ethos of one’s own well-being and own interests in the present-day volunteer work. Volunteerism is indeed in an arena of “altruistic individualism” (Yeung 2004a, 128).

As noted above, interaction-related altruistic behavioural models may also be rational by nature. It may be, for example, more useful in the long run to maintain a reputation as a reliable person than utilise temporary opportunities which contradict social norms. Correspondingly it is generally speaking more justifiable to fight even in a situation which leads to unavoidable defeat because the consciousness of resistance reduces the probability of violence in the long run. On the other hand, Frank emphasises that while people who bind themselves to honesty and fairness can sometimes relinquish personal advantage, they create opportunities for themselves which are beyond the reach of more selfish people (Frank 1988.)

Gintis (2003) interprets altruistic behaviour as preserved and maintained in a selfish environment if altruists are cooperative in a manner which benefits the group, even though this costs the individual. In addition, it is important that some altruists are ready to punish individuals who break the altruism norm even though this also causes

both immediate and indirect cost to them. They as individuals cannot expect to benefit from this investment, not even in the long run.

How then do societies actually maintain altruism and socialise their members to it? Pro-social action can move from one person to another through three different transitional displacement and transition processes (Gintis 2003):

- First, in *vertical* transition, values and attitudes are transferred to children from adults.
- Second, in *horizontal* transition, values transform with the help of peer learning.
- Third, in *socialising* transition, social – or antisocial – operation/action becomes common through various rituals, education systems or media (e.g. Rushton 1982).

Altogether, in the maintenance of altruism (from the perspective of economic theory and sociology) two factors are crucial: on the one hand, the maintenance of strong altruism-promoting transitions and strong cooperative culture on the other. Both prevent the spread of selfish behaviour in populations and support altruistic cultures.

## **2.2 Change of paradigm**

The contemporary genre of altruism literature is extensive and multi-disciplinary, and includes various definitions. In social psychology, sociology, economics, and political science, however, *a clear paradigm shift* away from the position that behaviour must reveal egoistic motivation has recently taken place. Recent theory and data being more compatible with the view that “true altruism” does exist (e.g., Pilivian & Charng 1990; on evolutionary biology, see Wilson & Kniffin 2003 and Kniffin et al. in Post et al. 2003). As Sober & Wilson (1998, 295) have aptly pointed out, it would be a fascinating problem in the history of ideas overall to explore how egoism achieved its position of prominence.

Rushton and Sorrentino (1981a) have summarized the history of views on the possibility of altruism somewhat differently, invoking three phases: 1) humans are

innately *evil or bad* (e.g., Hobbes, the Sophists, Freud), 2) humans are *basically good* (e.g., Aristotle, Rousseau, Maslow), and 3) humans are *neutral* (e.g., Plato, Locke, Marx, Skinner). In any case, we have moved on from the Hobbesian viewpoint of altruism being caused solely or primarily by personal interests such as discomfort at seeing another person in pain.

In fact, however, the division between “false” and “true” altruism seems entirely black-and-white. More promising recent altruism analyses focus on more holistic explanations. One example is Monroe’s theory of altruism (1996; see also Monroe 2004; 2006). She concludes from empirical exploration that altruism is constituted most fundamentally by *perspective*, a different way of seeing oneself and one’s world. This perspective might easily be activated by different factors, such as religious teachings. The basic explanation of altruism, however, consists of the individual’s perceived identity (not identity as such) and their perspective of themselves in relation to others.<sup>5</sup>

Five concepts are crucial to this perspective theory of altruism:

- *Cognition*; cognitive framework and processing, including intentionality, agency, as well as both biological and cultural self. In other words, the processes by which people come to make sense of the world.
- *World view*; group membership and connection with others playing a crucial role.
- *Canonical expectations* concerning what is normal, or what is ordinary; expectations.
- *Empathy and/or sympathy* including both cognitive and affective elements; resulting from socialisation and developmental processes.
- *Views of self*: identity and perception of who one is, including in relation to others.

All in all, such a “perspective viewpoint”, or “perspectival approach” indicates that altruism concerns both our world view and identity and “how we connect and forge ties with the other” (Monroe 1996, 9-15, 214-6, 220) or, as she has put it in an earlier version of the theory, “commonality in humanity with other people” (Monroe 1991). Indeed, individual networks and perceptions (of self and others) must be the cornerstone of thorough exploration of altruism.

To sum up, the most recent altruism research corrects the traditional view of humanity taken by the natural and social sciences, with its extreme emphasis on selfishness, by replacing it with a view of humans which emphasises pro-social behaviour. As Kohn (1990, 234) has put it: “The problem with theories of motivation based on self-interest is not that they are false but that they are only partly true”, and continues: “Neither egoism nor altruism seems adequate” (Kohn 1990, 239; similarly e.g., Sober 2002). All humans have both, and act accordingly. In evolutionary biology studies such motivational pluralism has also been linked to a higher degree of evolutionary plausibility (e.g., Sober & Wilson 1998, 324). Recent studies in philosophy also deal with this matter (see, e.g. Bahwar 1993; Schmidtz 1993). One interesting basis for future studies of altruism is the model developed by Le Grand to describe motivation, agency, and ideology in the public sector (both people working there or the recipients of public services). Humans can be motivated by extreme altruism (‘knight’ in Le Grand’s model) or by pure self-interest (‘knave’), and the spectrum of human agency varies from passiveness (‘pawn’) to autonomy (‘queen’). (Le Grand 2006, 16). Studies on altruism similarly employ all four.

The pro-social human being is still a selfish one and places its own well-being first, but her/his selfishness has in the course of time been affected by social operations models and values and norms which emphasise fairness. Such a human being both internalises certain behaviour models and takes other people's expectations and needs into consideration on the basis of comparing differences in well-being.

The breakthrough of the pro-social view of humanity in social scientific research in sociology, psychology, economics and theology has created significant opportunities related to social policy, among other fields. If, for example, we suppose that people are

selfish beings who maximise short-term advantages – wolves to each other – we will soon end up in theoretical prophecy and a political view that social policy is too broad and violates rights.

### **3. The dilemma of definition**

As Monroe (1996, 6) has noted of altruism, “there is a remarkable lack of agreement over what is meant by the term.” Altruism is often used interchangeably with pro-social behaviour, helping, sacrifice, and giving, as well as even cooperation and sharing. Several philosophers have also pondered the definition of altruism (recent examples include Sober 2002; Wyschogrod 2002).

What then indeed is the concept of altruism about? Macaulay and Berkowitz’s classic definition of altruism is “behaviour carried out to benefit another without anticipation of rewards from external sources” (1970, 3). As Rushton and Sorrentino (1981b, 425-440) have noted, this definition includes internal rewards, such as alleviation of guilt, increase in self-esteem, and feeling good about oneself. They have further noted that such a definition offers the advantage of avoiding both the philosophical dilemma of true unselfishness and unobservable variables. Krebs and Von Hesteren (1992, 149) have summarised the key components of altruism quite well as follows: self, other, cost, and welfare.

Monroe, the originator of the perspective theory of altruism, has defined altruism as “behaviour intended to benefit another, even when this risks possible sacrifice to the welfare of the actor” (Monroe 1996, 6). She has also outlined six critical points in the definition:

- 1) Altruism entails action.
- 2) The action must be goal-directed, either consciously or reflexively.
- 3) The goal must concern the welfare of another.
- 4) Intentions count more than consequences.



- 5) The act must carry some possibility of decrease in the actor's own welfare.
- 6) There must be no conditions or anticipation of reward.

Monroe sees human behaviour occupying a continuum with pure self-interest and pure altruism as its poles (Monroe 1996, 6-7; Hardin 1993, 225-236; Staub 1991), and Monroe considers altruism to be empirically relatively rare.

Some of these six critical points, however, seem more difficult than others, and divide scholarly views. The sixth criterion: "no conditions or anticipation of reward" is particularly tricky. In other words, the question of whether the actor is allowed to gain joy from altruism – or expect to gain it prior to the action – is critical for some authors; some consider helping behaviour which brings joy as *not* altruism. For instance, Batson et. al (1986) consider helping that makes the individual helper feel good about herself or himself as intrinsically egoistic. By contrast, Bar-Tal and Raviv (1982; and similarly, as noted above, Rushton and Sorrentino 1981b) consider that altruistic individual may experience self-satisfaction as a result of the altruistic act. In relation to this particular dilemma, we can look at the definition of altruism of Montada and Bierhof (1991, 18): altruism is voluntary "behaviour that aims at a termination or reduction of an emergency, a neediness, or disadvantage of others and that *primarily* does not aim at the fulfilment of one's own interests" [my italics]. This constitutes a very productive starting-point for research.

It is intriguing that it is actually logically rather difficult to explain or demonstrate altruism for the extreme cynics (those thinking that helping is always inherently selfish); this is because those who do personally value altruism probably *do* derive happiness and positive feelings from altruistic behaviour. Thus, a cynic can always claim that there is always a selfish gain. We could always point out that although it may be true that helping others brings one pleasure, this is by no means the same as showing that one has helped *in order to* please oneself (but a true cynic probably would not agree). The cynic's list of self-directed motives is endless.

How should this dilemma be resolved? The continuum perspective from pure egoism to pure altruism can be utilized as the key by considering the pure form of thinking and acting (either egoism or altruism) as extremely rare, and taking most human thinking and behaviour as including elements of both these poles, which leads us to understand that helping others and gaining joy from it (or the increased social respect and status) are two sides of the same coin – two inseparable parts of the phenomenon of helping. For various reasons (many surely linked to both biological and cultural evolution) “giving something to someone else” and “gaining something for myself” are linked in human existence.

There are overall considerable fundamental differences in the criteria for altruism in the literature; in other words, what is considered “pure altruism” or even just “altruism” if we look at these phenomena in the continuum framework. Some scholars consider that altruism resembles self-sacrifice and heroism, while others link it more loosely to pro-social behaviour, taking it a synonym for helping behaviour. For instance, the psychologist Konarszewski, who has written on individuals who rescued Jews during WWII (1992), dismisses most ordinary forms of pro-social behaviour as not altruism. Not all agree; for example, Seidler (1992) does not see such a sharp distinction between altruism and everyday pro-social action.

How then do we resolve this puzzle of the criteria for altruism? One solution is to return to the original concept in Latin – altruism is “other-ism”, behaviour that primarily takes the other (not oneself) into account, as a starting-point. The essence of altruism then is in putting someone else’s welfare and well-being above one’s own benefit. It is thoughts/action founded on concern and care.

Two clarifications must be made here. First of all, seeing altruism as “other-ism” does not prevent one from being able to separate something that could be labelled as “more extreme altruism” from “milder altruism”, or from “everyday helping-behaviour altruism”. In other words, different forms of altruism indeed can be seen as a continuum – not only forming a continuum from egoism, but a continuum of their own.

Second, does understanding altruism as “other-ism” pose a risk to the altruist. According to many psychology textbooks an act is altruistic when it rewards another individual but negatively reinforces, or punishes, the actor. Basically, my viewpoint of altruism as “other-ism” does not demand such negative consequences for the actor her/himself or the threat of them. However, committing an altruistic act does always impose *some* cost on an actor in some sense, in that the time spent on an altruistic act could have been spent on something else. Thus, a cynic – or perhaps a rationalist – may always say there is *always* a price to pay in altruism.

To conclude, altruism research presupposes that altruists should not get (primarily personal) satisfaction from their actions. It has thus been considered that anonymous or impersonal altruism is “better”, “more real”, “higher level” altruism than, for instance, public altruism in which the helper makes her/his act known to the public. Human behaviour indeed can be seen as running along a continuum between pure self-interest and pure altruism. Neither egoism nor altruism alone are adequate – the human mind and actions fundamentally include both (Kohn 1990, 239) and the continuum between them. Many researchers have indeed rejected the dichotomy between egoism and altruism in various frames of reference such as philosophy (e.g., Seidler 1992), educational studies and psychology (e.g., Krebs & Van Hesteren 1992), and so forth. In relation to motivation, human thinking, acting, behaving is almost always motivated by both egoistic and altruistic elements.

### **3. Two streams of empirical study and the need for further studies**

The theoretical discussion on altruism should not leave the fact that empirical study and dimension are fundamental parts of the analysis and deeper understanding of altruism in its shadow. The mainstreams of previous empirical altruism study are examined next.

There are two strong currents in empirical altruism study. First, several researchers have analysed “heroes” and their choices. Subjects of such *hero research* have included people who saved Jews during the Second World War, and people who have led an exceptionally altruistic life such as Gandhi or Mother Teresa. In these

cases individuals have made choices that underscore the common good and require sacrifices, choices that have deviated from the dominant cultural models. (Brehony 1998; Monroe 1996; Monroe 2001)

Organ and blood donation research forms the second area of study, most of which has sought the donors' motivation. Behind this reserve of donors there are often rather practice-oriented research needs connected with the chronic shortage of blood in several countries.

What have these studies concluded overall? The findings have emphasised the significance of an exceptional personality in altruism. Even more importantly, the lack of borders and limits, such as “we” and “them”, plays a significant role as a source of altruism. This relates to the perspective theory already mentioned, and the elements of self-awareness, conception of self, and empathy in altruism motivation. The donator studies in turn have sought differences between groups, either within the groups of donors or between donors and non-donors. For instance, Eurostat conducted the most extensive of the donor studies in the middle of the 1990s, surveying blood donation views in twelve EU countries (Healy 2000).

Quite prominent examples of previous research have emphasised the distinctive nature of altruism; as noted above, the discussion of whether altruism concerns only heroic acts and “pure altruism”. However, the best basis for ideal altruism research is not to strictly separate the core phenomenon from closely related pro-social acts such as giving, sharing, cooperating, and then to explain why some individuals are more altruistic than others. Rather, we need innovative research exploring individual-level experiences and views concerning networks of altruism: for instance, what constitutes altruism, and particularly networks of altruism, for present-day individuals? Such research would both benefit the interdisciplinary links and the links between theory and praxis. Thus some re-direction of research must be accounted for.<sup>6</sup> Five such ways will be outlined next.

First, even innovative theories of altruism limited the phenomenon entirely to deeds. In order to understand altruism in the context of the late-modern emphasis on individualism, however, and the possible novel forms of social ties and networks,

*peoples' attitudes, trust and expectations* should also be accounted for. Researchers should not divide people beforehand into altruists and non-altruists or offer presumptions about where to find the altruists, but explore the present-day experiences and views of altruism with more open eyes. What is the nature and substance of altruism networks now?

Second, previous research has largely restricted itself one-sidedly to the acts of altruism by individuals as givers, not *receivers*. However, in order to understand altruism as a societal and social phenomenon, *both directions* should be explored. The present-day support and altruism is highly likely to include sporadic and hybrid stories of altruism, as well as series of such stories, and should be studied as such.

Third, our understanding of altruism will remain limited if we focus simply on individuals, neglecting the *role of social groups and institutions* in the construction well-being and maintenance of altruistic values. Even though public institutions such as welfare agencies, schools, associations, and churches do not assist or teach altruistic norms primarily because they experience altruistic wishes (but have statutory responsibilities and regulations), we should explore individuals' expectations and trust in institutional support. It would also be valuable and interesting to explore the role individuals view institutions have in promoting societal values and common faith in compassion and altruism.

Fourth, in order to understand experiences and views of altruism more thoroughly, we should include not only the life-cycle viewpoint (past–present–future), but also a *wide range of cognitive, rational, emotional, and societal elements*. Traditionally, explanations of altruism (socio-cultural, economic, biological, and psychological) have all focused primarily only on the explanations found in their own niches. Furthermore, the most recent and more innovative understandings of altruism have primarily emphasized cognitive factors. Since this alone does not yet take us to deeper levels of understanding, various elements should be included in altruism analysis. Furthermore, both values and (for instance) religion-related elements effect views, acts, and attitudes of altruism, as well as individual faith and trust in the networks of altruism supporting them.

Fifth, altruism is methodologically most often studied through extreme cases (e.g., people rescuing Jews during WWII) and instances quite distinct from individual everyday lives (e.g., blood and organ donation). One next step in altruism research should involve exploration of *everyday experiences and views* of altruism through *combining survey and qualitative data*. Research taking these notions into consideration will better enable us to understand the nature of altruism in the intricate present-day interconnections between individualism and collectivism. Furthermore, even if nowadays there are already theories of altruism available that connect, and are useful in, socio-cultural, economic, biological, and psychological studies and explanation models of altruism (for example, Monroe's perspective theory of altruism noted above; Monroe 1996; 2004), certain themes might still connect the various disciplines further. For example, most theories emphasise cognitive elements. What about the sociology of emotions? What could this bring to altruism study?

Moreover, the theme of altruism might offer interesting topics for international comparative research that would enable us to better understand various contexts. For instance, preliminary analysis by Wrights (2002) has offered us a fascinating account of differences in giving ethos and giving behaviour, that is, on generosity and altruism, in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Perhaps certain elements of this preliminary text might also serve as promoters of inter-disciplinary altruism studies. The delineation of various forms of altruism and the focused definition offered in this paper can help representatives of different fields to first focus and narrow down the topic, and second consider how greater interdisciplinary could enhance understanding of the complexities of altruism.

#### **4. Why study altruism?**

Altruism offers a fascinating topic for both theory and empirically oriented research that easily relates to both fundamental academic theory-building and several current challenges. The following section offers a few possible points of departure for further research on altruism.

The question of altruism is a fundamental theoretical dilemma in several ways. One particular problem relates to *social networks*. The present-day societal changes and their challenging consequences underline the need for altruism research. Development, growth and individuality are the basic concepts for discussion on several fronts; but this discourse is one-sided. Individuals are far from being entirely free; recent societal changes do not necessarily imply dramatic internal transitions (e.g., Grow 2002, 132; Castels 2004, 421). Sociologists have also developed intriguing notions such as the idea that bonds of sporadic networks may actually be viewed as stronger forms of communality than traditional ties (see Maffesoli 1996, 63). Recent research on volunteer motivation (such as Yeung 2004a) has indicated that individualization and longing for communality also underpin volunteering experiences. Research has also revealed that features that have been considered threats to communality (e.g., reluctance for long-term commitment and experiences of uncertainty) may actually promote altruistic desires. This encounter between the present-day ethos of individualism and transforming societal networks begs answers to questions such as how individualism and compassion, or even communality, interact. Do altruism and individualism contradict or complete each other, and how? Furthermore, can Bellah et al.'s classic division between utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism (Bellah et al. 1985) still be maintained, or would a better starting-point for research be found in the notion of “expressive altruistic individualism”, based on volunteer motivation study (Yeung 2004a)?

It can actually be stated that the egoism-altruism dichotomy overall rests on the overt, excessive popularity of the framework of individualism, evident both in present-day research and the media. We take the existence of separate selves for granted. However, as Kohn has noted (1990, 244; see also Sampson 1977), as distinctly separate behaviours, egoism and altruism only actually exist in the contest of individualistic culture. In fact, the very idea of *society* and societal, social life presupposes close interdependence; just consider the present power of the global market economy, to take an example. We rely on each other, work together, interact in various ways. Such inter-connectedness also affects altruism – and vice versa.

The most prominent recent sociological discourses on *theory development* do indeed concern altruism (e.g., the frameworks of civil society and social capital), but do

not explain this link. In the social sciences, dichotomies concepts are still often used, such as communality versus individuality, egoism versus altruism, and self-centred versus compassionate thinking. Further research on the networks of altruism could assist in leading us forward from such dichotomies.

In any European country there are on-going social policy processes focusing on citizen participation (e.g., in the Finnish context, the current Citizen Participation Policy Programme). However, altruism is neither explained nor explored in these processes. Overall, the distribution of the responsibility for well-being is far from self-evident at present as European societies are undergoing significant economic and social change. This debate also vitally concerns the status of mutual altruism and civil society as well as the changing role of religious institutions in service provision. The debate is clearly visible in both trans-national documents (e.g., the European Union White Paper, 2004) as well as very local agendas (e.g., *Lahden kaupungin tulevaisuuspaketti* 2004, in Finland). We need further research on altruism to enable us to understand better present-day experiences and attitudes towards altruism in relation to individual social ties and perspectives. Such research is important to understand individual-level experiences of well-being and shared altruism and the maintenance of the societal heritage of altruism.

Let us take religion as a further example that touches both theory and empirically-oriented research into altruism. Altruism forms perhaps the most paradigmatic cornerstone question in the sociology of religion; Durkheim (1966) underlined the point that mutual altruism and shared religion play a founding role in solidarity and communality. Altruism is indeed an essential part of the norms of all the traditional religious communities (see, e.g., Neusner & Chilton (eds.) 2005; Habito & Keishin (eds.) 2006; and on Christianity Saarinen 2005; Yeung 2006). It is surprising that religion and altruism have received so little attention in Europe or elsewhere.

## **5. Altruism and civil society**

### **5.1 Altruism as an ingredient to what?**

It has already been mentioned above that civil society can be seen as one form of communal altruism, and that civil society agents may play a central role in individuals



learning altruism and altruistic norms. What does this really mean? The relation between altruism and civil society and the possible contribution of altruism to the construction of an active civil society will be explored in this final section of the report.

But first, what is civil society? There are various definitions of “civil society”, both more normative and more analytical ones. Seligman (1997, 5) has aptly noted that “civil society is identified with everything from multi-party systems and the rights of citizenship to individual voluntarism and the spirit of community”. Similarly, Anheier et al. (2001, 15; see also Cohen & Arato 1992) have noted that “it [civil society] can be all things to all people”.<sup>7</sup> In his illuminating introduction to the search for civil society, Deakin (2001, 4) has chosen to begin with the definition by the American historian Walzer (1995:7): civil society means “the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks that fill this shape.”

However we define civil society, altruism is related to civil society in several ways. For instance, we can approach civil society through focusing on associational life, or elements of a “good society”, or studying the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> All approaches however could benefit from a discussion on altruism. How, and to what extent, and why are individuals interested in promoting other’s well-being and shared interests?

Membership of groups and networks, what all civil society activities are to a large extent about, always require some sacrifice of personal interest. Altruism illustrates pro-social behaviour that fundamentally relates to all aspects of civil society. One could even state that civil society is fundamentally about pro-social behaviour. However, is this too positive a view of civil society? Chandhoke (2005; see also Wijkström 1998), among others, has reminded us about the darker side of civil society, and asks, for instance, how we can arbitrate between different, conflicting visions of a good society, a good communal life. Furthermore, civil society would be an interesting arena for similar studies that Le Grand (e.g., 2006) has conducted on public policy — can we rely on the altruism of professionals?

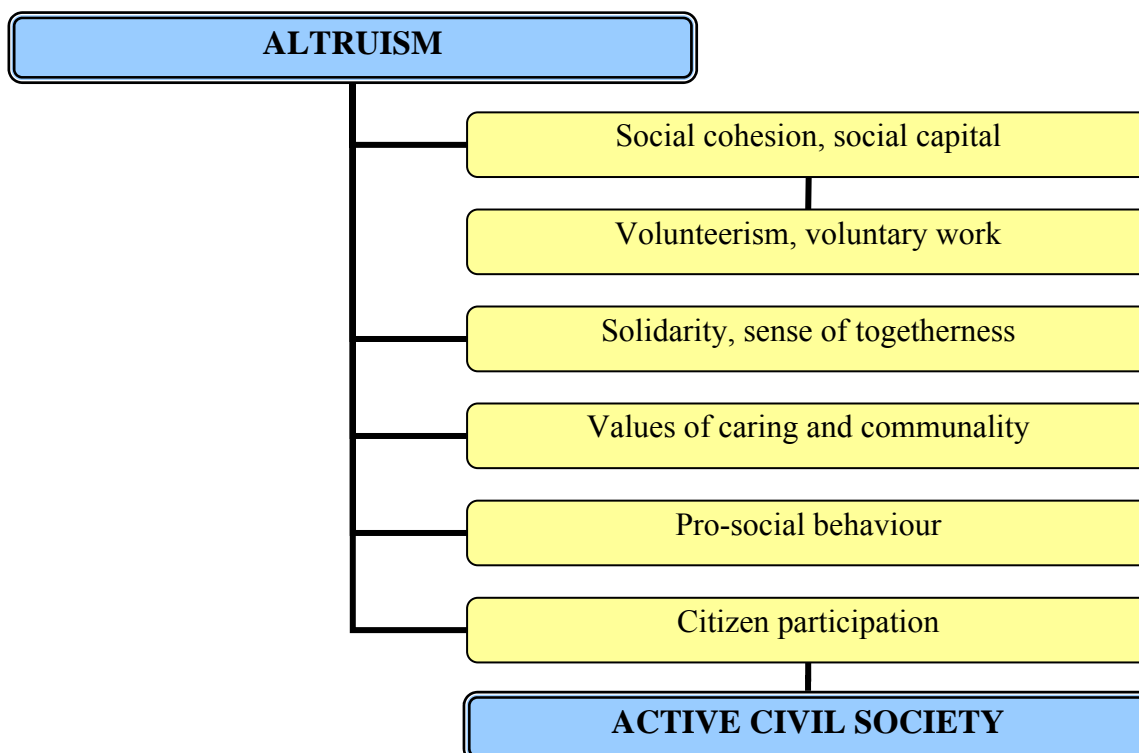
The question posed by Chandhoke is a fundamental one. Naturally, the theme of altruism — which tends, by definition, to be more about positive elements in human

interaction – in connection with the theme of civil society leads us to focus on the more positive side, the brighter side of civil society. This has been the perspective of this report.

## **5.2 Altruism promoting civil society**

The following figure aims to capture some of the elements and areas of research that link the phenomenon of altruism to the question of civil society.

FIGURE 1. Examples of the ways altruism relates to civil society



As the figure indicates, altruism relates to social cohesion, a sense of togetherness, and citizen participation, among other things, which all then form elements of an active civil society (or, to put it less normatively, all are elements of civil society theory and discussion).

If we choose a practice-oriented viewpoint (or a more normative one, we might argue), we have to then ask how realistic these viewpoints are. Can altruism in contemporary Western society really contribute to promotion of a lively civil society? What is the present status of such components? Let us take a few notions from recent volunteerism research, the same as above (Yeung 2004a). This recent study has indicated strongly the role of social networks in people's willingness to engage in volunteer activities. Volunteer motivation is a phenomenon of wider networks; the poles of individualism and transforming societal networks mingle in individual experiences, since many people seem to long for and enjoy even quite intimate social encounters and networks in church volunteerism, even though such networks are

generally restricted to volunteerism by choice. Furthermore, the role of altruism is apparent in the findings, which indicate that altruism clearly endures in late modernity, connecting individuals to networks, ties, and even to mutually rewarding dependence. The findings emphasize altruism and concern more than some previous research, which has even reported an inability to talk about compassion in other than individualistic terms.<sup>9</sup>

Opportunities for promoting altruism and thus civil society construction can also be found in the changing contexts of values. In many European countries, such as Finland, the rise in communal values, in the early 1990s, stopped in the latter part of the decade. Since then values have turned in a more individualized direction. However, the demands for social justice and high social morality, as well as political frustration, strengthened in the late 1990s. (Salonen et al. 2000; Helander 1999.) In recent years (2000-2003) attitude surveys have indicated that the trust of Finns in social and economic help offered by communal welfare services has decreased. However, the emphasis on responsibility and the common good is typical of Finns, and their willingness for societal participation has actually increased. (*Monitor* 2003, reported in *Kirkko muutosten keskellä* 2004.). Altruism is now one of the strongest values in Finland (Puohiniemi 2002). Similar trends can be found in several European countries.

Cohen (Cohen, 1992) has also seen positive elements of altruism and of civil society surrounding us. Cohen defines civil society as “individual and collective reactions and rule making that isolates processes by which populations come to demand greater democracy and rights protection”. Civil society thus includes both *civil life* (non-governmental social life) and *civility* (actions on behalf of other individuals that also take the other’s welfare and well-being into account). Cohen views civil society as an ideal type, a teleological causality, “a goal towards which humanity is learning to set its course --- in evolutionary terms --- to obtain increased fitness” (Cohen 1992a, 119-120; see also Cohen 1992b).

Cohen (1992a, 104, 120-123) further argues that civil society is evolving through the dual inheritance process (both genetic and socio-cultural) in which altruism is incorporated into cultural beliefs, values, norms, and regulations. One of the defining features of a civil society for Cohen include an increase in the value of

altruism, empathy, and sympathy. This relates to one of the five particular needs for further research on altruism noted above.

Cohen further notes three features as hard *evidence* for the evolution of civil societies:

- 1) Rising concern with public over private concern around the world; an increasing recognition that private fates are affected by public policies and life.
- 2) Seeking a more civil way of resolving political differences; the acceptance of more peaceful means of resolving differences in the international context, a “new mood of Pax Humana,”
- 3) Nuclearisation of family life which, in Cohen’s view, encourages the socialisation of altruistic emotions.

For Cohen, all these three notions are examples of the power of altruism in social life. One particular critical point, however, must of course be made here; global terrorism has become a much more urgent challenge since Cohen wrote during the late 1990s and especially after the turn of the millennium. Thus the “new mood of Pax Humana” in particular might evoke more cynical responses today.

### **5.3 Communal viewpoint**

Individuals can help others on four accounts with intention of benefiting first me, second me because of you, third you, and/or, fourth us (Kohn 1990, 240-247). All four viewpoints can be placed somewhere along the egoism-altruism continuum and, strictly speaking, only the third constitutes pure altruism. Furthermore, the four viewpoints are in reality very mixed, even in the same actions. One place where the viewpoints mingle particularly is civil society; a context of a state of productive interdependence. To put it in passionate terms: civil society is a field for “fighting” for me, for you, and for us.

Let us take friendship, an example of such interdependence closer to the individual level. In the framework of altruism friendships (close ones at least) are

about “helping a friend, and then helping oneself too, at the same time”. In friendships, altruism subverts moral systems based on impartiality. As the philosopher Lawrence Blum has put it (1980), with our friends we are not motivated simply by a combination of egoism and altruism, friendships being contexts in which the entire division between self-interest and other-interest is often not possible to make. The difference vanishes. A similar blurring of divisions is promoted by civil society activities; helping me and/or helping you is, at least in the long run, about helping us. Furthermore, this may promote a process in which empathy is no longer about either an egoistic or altruistic perspective but taking an altogether larger, even *global*, perspective.

One particular issue concerning the intersection between altruism and civil society is the question of communal action and co-operation. Because the altruism of an individual is largely linked to the question of whether the responsibility to commit an altruistic act can be transferred to someone else, the probability of altruism can be argued, as much empirical research does indeed, to decrease when the size of a group increases. To take an example, if only one person sees someone drowning, s/he is more likely to act than where ten or a hundred people make the same observation since nobody as an individual personally identifies an individual duty to help (Frank 1988; Piliavin & Charng 1990). Recently it has been emphasised that co-operation and mutual advantage can sustain positive social relationships but altruism among non-kin is logically necessary to establish the social relationships in the first place (Field 2004). Altruism thus can be seen as the very heart (even in the evolutionary sense) of co-operation.

Present-day charities and citizen organisations try to resolve similar challenges of collective operation by working co-operatively together. Theoretically it is a question of institutionalised altruism in which similarly-minded people, individuals with similar interests, join together in order to achieve their common objective more effectively. Efficient organising or institutionalising of altruistic behaviour as such is distinct from spontaneous or unorganised altruism.

#### **5.4 In Search of a Good Society: Education towards altruism and civil society**

Various scholars (Allport, Kohlberg, Rushton, etc.) have provided evidence supporting the theory that altruism is learned and can be further developed by teaching and learning (see e.g., Hoffman 1981; Grusec 1981). Hunt (1990) has summed up three elements that are characteristics of altruists, particularly altruistic children: being first happy, well-adjusted, and socially popular, as well as second sensitive and emotionally expressive, and third having high self-esteem. Thus, teaching by parents, schools, civil society agents etc. that support these elements will also support the development of altruism.

As stated by Meyer there has been long and interesting debate concerning what is important for altruistic behavior (2006, 7): the role of a caring morale, as opposed to a sense of justice. Altogether, looking at the literature on the motivation of altruistic behaviour in various fields (e.g., Seidler 1992 and Konarzewski in philosophy; Monroe 1996 in political science; Cohen 1992a in evolutionary studies and anthropology; Jarymowicz 1992 in psychology), certain elements can be identified as critical to altruism and its motivation:

- First, the *conception of self* (e.g., sense of self, self-awareness).
- Second, *perspective toward the other* and inclusive identity (seeing past all the social categorizations dividing people, or even the absence of differentiation between self and other as Jarymowicz 1992 has stated).
- Third, *empathy*.
- Fourth (but this not underscored in as many studies) *higher moral principles*.

It is a hopeful notion that altruism can be developed by teaching, learning, and socialising all through an individual's life. Larger institutional structures, such as civil society agents, may play a role here. Three different processes by which pro-social action can move from one person to another have already been noted: vertical (e.g.,

family), horizontal (e.g., peers), and socialising transitions (Gintis 2003). Various forms of civil society action can certainly promote both horizontal and socialising transitions; for instance, in self-help groups (horizontal) and activist groups promoting human rights (socialising transitions).

All in all, the relationship between altruism and civil society is a dual process; this means that different forms of altruism promote civil society and participating in civil society activities promotes altruism and altruistic values. In other words, civil society socializes us into further altruism. As has already been noted in this report, altruism is usually thought to decrease when the group-size increases (Hardin 1993). Moreover, the further the group is from an individual, the less altruism. Civil society may transform our perspective, even to global spheres. Involvement in civil society may “mess up” the circles; a group not so close to an individual might start to feel closer.

This notion of extending of perspective is particularly intriguing. We have already learned that altruism and altruistic motivation fundamentally concern the perspective of the individual. In their classic and academically valuable study on individuals who had rescued Jews during the Nazi era, the Oliners (Oliner & Oliner 1988) indicated that the rescuers were marked by “extensivity”; being more attached and committed to people in their social relationships and having empathy as well as an inclusive sense of obligation toward various groups. In other words, both the propensity to attach oneself to others and the propensity toward inclusiveness in respect of individuals and groups are critical.

The Oliners (1992) have since written on eight social processes that may encourage such extensive orientation.<sup>10</sup> Four of the processes relate primarily to *forming attachments* to others:

- 1) *Bonding*; forming enduring emotional attachment
- 2) *Empathising*.
- 3) *Learning caring norms*.



- 4) *Participating in caring behaviours.*

Four other processes concern *developing a sense of obligation*:

- 1) *Diversifying*; enlarging the group of people with which an individual ordinarily interacts, reducing divisions into “us” and “them”.
- 2) *Networking*; forging linkages with the broader society.
- 3) *Reasoning*; developing shared problem-solving strategies; rational solutions to problems based upon empirical evidence and logic, as such solutions have a role to play in bringing about a more caring society.
- 4) *Forming global connections*; linking the local context and “here-and-now” to the global perspective.

As the Oliners suggest, parents, peers, schools and various other institutions can inculcate all these processes. Civil society is one of the most diverse contexts for developing both processes promoting attachments and processes promoting a sense of obligation. When people believe in egoism, they are more inclined to be less helpful. If, however, they believe in altruism, they are more inclined to be more helpful.

All in all, there seem to be viable ways to promote altruism, both attitudes and deeds, as well as an active, lively civil society. However, we need further research. What are the communities that people expect to get assistance from, and who are they themselves interested in helping? How might altruism boost their sense of belonging? What does desire to help really mean to today’s individuals? How do these meanings change with ageing? In what forms of joint responsibility, helping and participation are people really interested? How do projects based on individualism overlap with altruism and solidarity and promotion of civil society in practice? All such studies would guide us in our search for a good society, or indeed a better one.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of some parts of this paper have been published in Finnish in Yeung & Saari 2005 and in Saari & Kainulainen & Yeung 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest recording of a word in this dictionary, while suggestive, does not necessarily establish the date of its first appearance in any absolute sense (see McConchie 1997, 119-20)

<sup>3</sup> Social sciences in this context include the main branches of economics and sociology. Biological studies here refer specifically to studies on the altruistic selection processes that increase an organism's eligibility in evolutionary processes.

<sup>4</sup> Further on game theory and altruism from the perspective of political science, see e.g., Hardin 2003 and Ahn et al. 2003, and from the perspective of economics, see e.g., Sugden 1993; Heijden 1994; Camerer & Thaler 1995; Neumann et al. 2004. There are also examples of somewhat critical writings (e.g., Schmid & Robison 1995, 1; Camerer & Thaler 1995) that explain "people doing something more than maximizing their own incomes" rather with manners and etiquette, not altruism.

<sup>5</sup> Monroe's theory builds on a rather small body of data, for which it has also been criticised (e.g., Piliavin 1997). However, it is a good example of thorough, innovative qualitative research on which much later empirical research and theory-building can build.

<sup>6</sup> See also Post & Underwood (2002) who have concluded future research needs on altruism and altruistic love, particularly from the following various perspectives: spirituality and religion, ethics and philosophy, biology and medicine, social sciences and economics, as well as psychology, human development and education.

<sup>7</sup> On the evolution and variations of the concept of civil society, see, e.g., Anheier et al. 2001, 12-17.

<sup>8</sup> Similar three-fold definition of civil society offered by, e.g., Reverter-Bañón 2006. Furthermore, there are several viewpoints that emphasize very small-scale, grass-roots elements of civil society, such as Fukuyama (1995), Sawyer (2000), Wuthnow (1995) underlining the role of socialization in caring and civil society participation. These notions come close to both volunteerism and religion (see, e.g., Herbert 2003).

<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the pluralism of the USA has been reported to erode the rhetoric of compassion in volunteer motivation; only the language of individual experience remaining (Wuthnow 1991). Wuthnow claims that the reason for this is not egoism or individualism *per se*, but pluralism eroding the language of compassion.

<sup>10</sup> Also other scholars have discussed how to develop altruism. E.g., Staub (1981) has written on promoting altruism in education settings, e.g., through role playing and modeling. Similarly, Hunt (1990) writes about "character education" as a way to encourage humans' inherent altruism.