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Determining if there is a Relationship between Altruism and Self-worth

Jacob Brown and Sara Roderick³

Altruism and self-worth are important concepts that past research has attempted to define and explore in various contexts. Some studies focus on self-worth and the various components of self-worth, while others define the concept in looser terms. Additionally, altruism is indirectly referred to in some studies, guised as “morality” and an attitude geared towards helping others. The present study sought to explore the relationship between these two concepts, using more basic definitions. Participants were given a survey comprised of two other surveys combined measuring self-worth and altruism. Additionally, demographic information was also collected within the same main survey. Participant’s scores in each area were compared. Some demographic information (such as gender) was also compared to corresponding score of self-worth and altruism. The results of the study indicated that there was no significant relationship between altruism and self-worth, but the correlation between altruism and self-worth for males and females differed, additionally there was a significant difference between genders for self-worth, but not for altruism.

This study was conducted in order to discover if there was any type of relationship between an individual’s level of altruistic traits and that same individual’s level of self-worth. By obtaining more information as to the relationship between altruistic traits and self-worth, it is at least somewhat possible that participating individuals will become more informed as to their own feelings of self-worth and altruism. Perhaps by doing so, individuals can then take more effective steps to foster the traits they desire within themselves. The reasoning behind this study is to increase awareness of altruism and self-worth. In the study recounted here, one survey was given out to participants that measured levels of altruistic traits and self-worth. The survey also asked for basic, demographic information. It is believed that examining the scores for altruism and self-worth could lead to further insight as to whether or not the two concepts have any type of relationship.

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The concept of altruism can be a bit ambiguous. There are many different views as to what being altruistic entails. One definition states that to be altruistic is to help, plain and simple. More extensive definitions qualify that altruism is an act of helping, or volunteering to help, even when there are no obvious rewards for doing so (Weiler, cited in Dibou, 2012).

Though there are differences in definition, overall it is agreed that altruism involves acts of helping or volunteering assistance. In our study, we are most focused on measuring the aspect of altruism based on the more extensive definition in which assistance is given even in the absence of obvious rewards.

The importance of altruism, or at least the possible benefits of it, is explored in great detail in the review by Post (2005) who states that current research indicates that there is in fact an association between altruistic behaviors and an increased sense of well-being and good health. Furthermore, altruism is also implicated in preventing negative emotions, as it acts to ward off such thoughts and emotions (Anderson as cited in Post, 2005). It is significant to report on the supposed benefits of altruism in order to better demonstrate the power the concept can hold, and further reinforce the possibility of a significant relationship between altruism and self-worth in particular.

Even more potentially ambiguous than altruism is the concept of self-worth. Far from being concrete and definable, self-worth can be represented by various subcategories, or contingencies. The importance of these contingencies is illustrated by various studies based upon the varying sub-categories of self-worth. Buckingham, Weber, and Sypher (2012) conducted a study examining the effects of various external stimuli on different areas of self-worth. Essentially, Buckingham et al. (2012) found that the contingencies of self-worth truly are “states” or a frame of mind of an individual. By surveying participants, the researchers found support for the idea that different areas of self-worth, such as self-worth based on others’

approval, appearance, and one's academic competence, and virtue, were influenced by a multitude of different stimuli, signifying the fact that self-worth varies from one "type" to the next. For example, one who may feel content with his or her appearance may have high self-worth within that contingency, but may feel inadequate in relation to academic performance.

Self-worth can also play a role in activities and work-performance. Thau, Tröster, Aquino, Pillutla, and Cremer (2013) conducted a study to examine how preferential treatment by an authority figure can increase an individual's propensity to cooperate and allow a leader to inspire positive attitudes and outcomes from those they are in charge of (Tyler & Blader as cited in Thau, Tröster, Aquino, Pillutla, & Cremer, 2013). Most significantly, one of the main components used as a measure in Thau et al.'s (2013) study was self-worth. It was found that 'preferential treatment' did indeed relate to an increase in self-worth over 'good but equal treatment,' which also signified an increase in cooperative performance by those treated preferentially.

Further studies have also examined the ways in which self-worth is related to deviancy, further implicating it as being coincided with other important traits. It has been found in other studies that one's levels of self-worth appeared to indeed have an effect on the possibility of deviant behaviors (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden as cited in Ferris et al., 2009).

However, the possibility that the two concepts of altruism and self-worth have a relationship is the true focus of this study. Driver (1987) directed a study that, though dated, still provides some insight into this line of inquiry. Driver (1987) wished to test the hypothesis that those who have more positive moods in general, may have a greater sense of personal well-being and would in turn be more willing to help others.

Based on the definition of concepts we used for our study, Driver's (1987) hypothesis closely relates to our own. However, the study conducted by Driver differentiated between

feelings of individual altruism towards friends, enemies, and strangers. Driver (1987) found a significant correlation between positive feelings of self (self-worth) and altruism towards friends, but no correlation between self-worth and feelings of altruism towards enemies or strangers. Though Driver's results were interesting, we hope to examine any possible relationship between the concepts of interest on a broader scale in order to develop a more encapsulating idea.

Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) also conducted a study examining altruistic acts in regards to self-image. Although slightly different than our use of the concepts mentioned, Sachdeva et al.'s (2009) research is also an exploration of the possible relationship between altruism and self-worth. They hypothesized that, by possessing a sense of "moral-superiority, an individual may feel less responsible in the future, and be less inclined to partake in future moral or altruistic acts. In other words, feeling moral would give one the impression that they then had license to act more immoral. In order to test their hypothesis, the researchers assigned participants a list of words containing positive, negative, or neutral terms. After penning a story about themselves based on the words given, participants were asked to then contribute a small donation to a charity of their choice, as part of a social-awareness movement the lab was participating in. The conclusions reached by Sachdeva et al. (2009) are extremely thought-provoking. They found that those participants who had been primed with positive traits through the telling of a self-relevant story about themselves donated *less* to charities than those who had been primed with negative traits through self-relevant stories. They described the findings as "moral-license," and "moral-cleansing." Overall, the fact that self-image seemed to relate to later altruistic acts, at least in some way, is further indication that the possible relationship between the two constructs is worthy of exploration.

Method

Participants

Participants were all undergraduate students attending Lindenwood University. The total number of participants was $n=35$. All participants were those authorized for participation in the Lindenwood Participant Pool program. The Lindenwood Participant Program (LPP) manages the recruitment of student participants for student and faculty-run research projects. The LPP also keeps records of who participated in each project so that bonus points may be awarded to the participants towards their corresponding class. The majority of participants were female, as there were only 12 men to the 23 total women tested. The majority of the participants consisted of students of freshmen or sophomore standing (mean number of school years completed = 1.29, $SD = 0.519$). Additionally, participants were from 18-26 years old (mean age of participants = 19.43, $SD = 1.596$). Most participants indicated that they had at least a few family member that they felt comfortable talking with ($M = 3.60$), a demographic we felt might be of significance while examining self-worth.

Materials

The material used in this study was the survey administered (see Appendix A). The survey used was a combination of two previously created surveys, one on self-worth titled Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003), and the other on altruism titled The Altruism Scale (Clark, Kotchen, & Moore, 2003). In addition, as a short demographic questionnaire was created by the principal investigators (P.I.s). The two surveys on self-worth and altruism used were chosen by the P.I.s because they were effective measures of the two concepts under investigation. Only questions that were the most direct and to the point in regards to altruism and self-worth were selected for use in this study. The Altruism Scale (Clark et al., 2003) survey was modified slightly, so that the selected questions

matched the selected questions from the Contingencies of Self-worth (Crocker et al., 2003) survey more closely. The questions asked in the demographic survey were chosen to best determine the relevant characteristics of the sample population that was investigated. Participants were asked to fill out the survey, but to also feel free not to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable, a fact also found in the informed consent form (see Appendix B). The survey was conducted in a designated room complete with ample space and seating. Rooms included adequate lighting and ventilation, and writing surfaces such as tables or other similar furnishings were always present, along with writing utensils.

Procedure

At the start of each session, the participant was first asked whether or not he/she was a part of the Lindenwood Participant Pool. Once LPP membership or non-membership was established, each individual was given two informed consent forms to sign— one to keep for themselves and one to be kept with the researcher. Once the consent form was signed and it was established that the participants understood their rights and had any of their questions pertaining to the study answered, the principle survey was administered. Once the survey was completed, the participant, if a member of the LPP, was asked to finish filling out a participant receipt while the researcher recorded the participant's name, professor, and class time on an Experimenter's List of Participants. If the participant was not part of the LPP, he or she was not made to fill out any further paper work. At the end of the session, each participant was given a Feedback Letter (see Appendix C) that further explained the study and also provided the contact information of the principle investigators. All in all, the entire process took roughly 10-20 min. Once all data that we could collect had been in fact collected, the surveys were scored and the correlations between altruism and self-worth values were recorded.

Results

In order to determine if there was a relationship between participants' scores of self-worth and altruism, we conducted a Pearson's r test in order to determine if any relationship was indeed present between scores of self-worth and altruism across all participants. We found that the average score of altruism ($M = 5.3966$, $SD = 0.79795$) was slightly higher than the average score for self-worth ($M = 5.2063$, $SD = 0.48781$), however the correlation was found to be $r = .021$. Based on the results obtained, we failed to reject our null hypothesis, and conclude that there is no significant correlation between altruism and self-worth across all participants. When participants were divided into groups based on sex, the correlation between altruism and self-worth for females was $r = -.09$, and the correlation between altruism and self-worth for males was $r = -.155$. There was a significant variation between genders in regards to self-worth, $t(33) = -5.070$, $p < .001$, but not in regards to altruism, $t(33) = -0.926$, $p = 0.361$.

Discussion

In this study the hypothesis that there would be a significant relationship between altruism and self-worth was not supported because $r = .026$. A reason why our hypothesis was not supported could be because the two concepts measured do not in fact have any relationship, or are related on a yet unknown level. Additionally, our hypothesis may not have been supported due to the presence of the social-desirability effect; an experimenter was in the room while the participants filled out their survey, and even though the experimenter did not see participants' answers and explained that each participant's answers would remain anonymous, it is still possible that those taking the survey modified their answers as a result of the experimenter being present and of the overall school environment that the study took place in.

We encountered a few other limitations within our study as well, the first being the number of participants that volunteered to participate ($n = 35$). This sample size may not have

been sufficient enough to draw accurate and thorough conclusions. The next limitation could have been the fact that we had a sample size that only consisted of college students; this is not an accurate representation of an entire population outside of a college setting. Each participant came from a relatively similar age group (18-26) which may have influenced the results in that self-worth and/or altruism scores may be affected by the age of the individual.

Furthermore, the unequal number of males and females that participated could also have affected the final results. It was found that there was more of a correlation between altruism and self-worth for males ($r = -1.55$) than there was for females ($r = -.09$). Though neither correlation was particularly significant, the difference suggest that gender does indeed have bearing on the final scores.

Future modifications that can be utilized in order to overcome these limitations could be having a larger sample size that consists of many people of differing genders, and ages, as well changing the study location and placing the experimenter outside of the room in which the participant is filling out the survey (in order to diminish the likelihood of participants only answering with socially desirable options).

It would be interesting to further explore the concepts of altruism and self-worth, perhaps distinguishing between altruism towards friends and altruism towards strangers, much as Driver (1987) did in his study. Additionally, the survey used to measure self-worth could be left in its original format, therefore measuring self-worth along differing contingencies. Perhaps by more clearly defining the concepts of altruism and self-worth and by measuring each in a slightly more specific manner, the results may vary from those encountered here. Such results may provide more insight into each of these concepts and the possibility of a relationship between them.

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Appendix A

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to each of the following statements by circling your answer using the scale from "1 = Strongly Disagree" to "7 = Strongly Agree." If you have not experienced the situation described in a particular statement, please answer how you think you would feel if that situation occurred.

| | | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Neutral | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-----|--|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. | When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. | Doing something I know is wrong makes me lose my self-respect. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. | I can't respect myself if others don't respect me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. | My self-worth is not influenced by the quality of my relationships with my family members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. | I couldn't respect myself if I didn't live up to a moral code. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. | When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. | My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. | I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. | What others think of me has no effect on what I think about myself. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. | My self-worth is affected by how well I do when I am competing with others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. | My self-worth is influenced by how well I do on competitive tasks. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. | I feel bad about myself whenever my academic performance is lacking. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

INSTRUCTIONS: This portion of the survey presents a number of real-life situations that one may encounter. Please respond to each of the situations by indicating how accurately the circumstance describes an action you would take if you were in the depicted situation. Circle your answer using the scale from "1 = Strongly Disagree" to "7 = Strongly Agree." If you haven't experienced the situation described in a particular statement, please answer how you think you would feel if that situation occurred.

| | | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Neutral | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|----|---|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. | If I see a child riding his or her bike past my house who appeared to be lost, I will ask the child where he or she lives and take him or her home. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. | If a man approaches me who does not speak my native language but appears to need directions, I will still try to help him in any way I can. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. | In the event that I have to cooperate with other people even when I would rather not, I most-likely cooperate anyway if it is helpful to others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. | If a person in one of my classes is having trouble at home and with school work, I will help that person as much as I can. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. | If I am approached by someone asking for a contribution to a well-known charity, I will give whatever amount I can. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. | If I see an elderly lady standing on the street corner who appears to be lost, I will go and help her. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. | If a poorly dressed person approaches me on a deserted street seeking a dime, I will give him the dime, no questions asked. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please circle your answer for question #1, and then write in your answers to the following questions on the line provided.

- 1) Are you MALE FEMALE?

- 2) How old are you? _____ years

- 3) How many years of college have you completed? _____ years

- 4) How many member of your immediate family do you feel comfortable talking with?
_____Members

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete one 23 question survey. The survey will ask questions pertaining to gender, age and family as well as information on my views of self-worth and levels of my altruistic characteristics. This study is, first and foremost, an examination of Self-worth and Altruistic traits.

I understand that self-worth is a concept that can range from: feeling unsatisfied by one's current self-image; feeling that one has not contributed much to the world; or, on the other hand, feeling proud of one's self for being the person one is while also feeling as if one has indeed contributed to the world. Additionally, altruism is the belief in or practice of selfless concern for the well-being of others. The researchers of this study hypothesized that those who do in fact have stronger altruistic characteristics will also have higher ratings of self-worth.

I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 10-20 minutes. I am aware that I am free to skip any questions in the unlikely event that I feel uncomfortable answering any of the items on the survey. I am also aware that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that no identifying information will be kept. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction.

Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent, or that I am a minor enrolled in a course that participates in the LPP and have a parental consent form filed with the LPP office.

(Signature of participant) Date: _____

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent) Date: _____

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Appendix C

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in our study. The present study was conducted in order to determine whether there is a relationship between an individual's self-worth and their tendencies for altruism. Self-worth is a concept that can range from: feeling unsatisfied by one's current self-image; feeling that one has not contributed much to the world; or, on the other hand, feeling proud of one's self for being the person one is while also feeling as if one has indeed contributed to the world. Additionally, altruism is the belief in or practice of selfless concern for the well-being of others. We hypothesized that those who do in fact have stronger altruistic characteristics will also have higher ratings of self-worth.

Please note that we are not interested in your individual results; rather, we are only interested in the overall findings based on aggregate data. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings, nor will it be possible to trace your responses on an individual basis.

If you are interested in obtaining the final results of this study based on aggregate data, or if you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to let us know now or in the future. Our contact information is found at the bottom of this letter.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

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