

Altruism and Social Learning in Kuwait; an Analysis of Gender Differences

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Abstract Our paper aims to identify the gender differences in helping behavior. It also seeks to explore how gender roles and prescribed norms affect the kind of helping behavior displayed by men and women in Kuwait, a collectivist society. In addition, we examine how altruism is related to the social learning theory and the effects of media as a major component of social learning. Authors explored whether altruistic behavior is impacted by observing others perform helping behavior. The Rushton et al. "Self-Report Altruism" scale was used to gather this information. We distributed 652 surveys to respondents between the ages of 18-33 living in Kuwait. The main findings concluded that males living in Kuwait are more altruistic than females and as both males and females get older, they tend to help more. Furthermore, the results show that there is a strong correlation between the social theory and altruistic behaviors. In Kuwait, both culture and religion emphasize that men are expected to provide help both at home and work, whereas women are only expected to provide help at home.

Altruism

Being kind to others and outwardly performing acts of kindness is universally considered to be ethical. Whether one chooses to perform an act of kindness; however, is contingent on many variables: the nature of the relationship, need for help, and sense of responsibility to help the beneficiary amongst other factors (Meissner, 2003). A set of criteria can be used to define altruism:

"Altruistic behavior (a) must benefit another person, (b) must be performed voluntarily, (c) must be performed intentionally, (d) the benefit must be the goal by itself, and (e) must be performed without expecting any external reward" (Piliavin & Charng, 1990, p. 30).

Still, many others disagree. Some theorize that there is no true sense of altruism, that any act of kindness can inevitably be traced back to self-interest and the satisfying one's own ego. These two divergent views are framing modern inquiry into the study of altruism. According to Emmerik and Jawahar (2005), helping behaviors are "activities entailing more commitment than spontaneous assistance in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, organization or cause" (p. 347). There are two types of helping behaviors. The first type is helping that happens within one's own group such as friends, relatives and close neighbors, also called organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs).

"Helping behaviors differ on two dimensions, the familiarity with recipient and moral obligation" (p. 349).

In other words, an individual would filter out whom they would help, inclining more towards people to whom they connect with or to someone they feel truly requires assistance. It is also common to volunteer for a cause that personally affects the individual rather than something they know nothing about. For example, a recovering alcoholic is more empathetic towards someone going through the same situation and is more likely to volunteer as a sponsor to help with problems he experienced earlier. Similarly, a parent would be keener to help a relative or a friend when a situation related to child rearing arises.

Still, despite a vast landscape of inquiry into altruism in the fields of psychology and sociology, scholars have struggled with the best empirical and methodological approaches to study the subject. The field of inquiry now has moved away from merely a philosophical debate to one that centers upon the origins of altruism. One of the challenges is trying to understand if altruism is merely a character trait that is learnt behavior or a genetic predisposition hard wired into one's genetic code (Losco, 1996; Meissner, 2003). Inherent forms of altruism are generally classified as *autonomous* altruism and *normative* altruism is based on social learning and conformity (Skarin & Moely, 1976).

Scholars subscribing to the autonomous paradigm posit that altruism is linked not only to evolutionary traits but also to human nature. The idea being that one can be as concerned with others as individuals are concerned with themselves, underscoring a strong human propensity for compassion (Meissner, 2003). One point of view on the derivation of altruism is rooted in the Judeo-Christian idea of the Golden Rule, which states that one should love others as one loves oneself (Meissner, 2003). However, this idea of being a Good Samaritan is still grounded in the tenets of the social learning

theory, as these religious ideas need to be transmitted through social religious settings such as attending church or through Bible study classes.

Several studies have found that altruistic expression was less about being a Good Samaritan but was often times linked to amends for wrongdoing (reparative altruism). This approach routinely aligns altruism with guilt and adherence to social norms frequently involving trial and success until optimal or acceptable altruistic behavior was adopted. To this end, investigations have found that altruism can at times rise out of private situations outside of group or public displays, leading some to wonder how much of altruism as social learning is in fact conformity to group norms (Losco, 1996). Conversely, the limit here is perhaps a lack of understanding that social learning may be at work outside of group situations once it has been adopted. For example, one may choose to eat with a knife and fork, and with a napkin placed in their lap, even though they are eating home alone, when adhering to proper etiquette can be precluded altogether outside a group dining setting.

Another challenge is that individual differences need to be factored in any time an experiment is conducted into altruism. Many studies emphasize external forces and often times mitigate the individual differences of subjects in the experiments (Losco, 1996). Still, despite these individual differences studies show that altruistic tendencies and behavior increases as we age (Meissner, 2003).

Altruism, Age and Gender

Research findings suggest that just other factors change and develop as children age, so too does the understanding and expression of altruism. Many of these variables are linked to cognitive development and the constant assessment of child's own judgment of morality. So the expression of altruism will become stronger as a child grows and cements moral judgments. Data however doesn't just place the construction of altruism solely on cognitive development; it further stresses that there is a compounding effect of both cognitive development and socialization processes on altruism (Skarin & Moely, 1976; Losco, 1996). As the child grows and develops higher cognitive function, they rely on models upon which to base their actions.

"As children grow up, their altruism may be increased because of growing empathic sensitivity, greater ability in perspective-taking, broader knowledge of cultural norms, increased social responsibility and competence, or enhanced moral reasoning capabilities." (Piliavin & Charng, 1990, p. 38)

Males are socialized to be competitive and assertive, while female are socialized to be caring, subservient and dependent. Females conform with the role of care provider who fulfills a function that is contradictory to the male role. Some studies propose females may be socialized to be more in tune to the emotions of others more so than men are (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Skarin & Moely, 1976).

In a sample of 11 studies on gender and empathy, the results were comparable across the collection of data. What the research showed was that females consistently scored higher on the empathy scale (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). In a field experiment conducted on children ranging from ages 5 to 12, the females in the trial demonstrated the highest levels of altruism. The significance of the findings signify that females are conditioned to be caregivers and so are more likely to help other children needing help and males are socialized to be competitive so are less likely to assist. The only noted exception being, females were less likely to help if the altruistic act was one of physical aid directed toward the males, as this was seen as inconsistent with the female gender role (Skarin & Moely, 1976).

Piliavin & Unger (1985) found different results: Looking at a sample of adults, their data indicated that men and women were equally likely to engage in altruistic behavior. The only difference noted is that women would most likely engage in altruism in low-level scenarios in addition to high-level, whereas men generally only acted in high-level scenarios. This disparity again was attributed to gender roles where females reported more often providing emotional support and counseling to friends, while men tended to indicate only lending aid when the action was more high risk or protection was needed (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Still, overall, women in the literature were more likely to engage in altruistic behavior than men.

Social Learning Theory

Baldwin et al. (2004) contends that the social learning theory is behavior that one learns from observing those around them. This observation however is not limited to personal interaction and oftentimes includes mediated messages from both television and movies. Albert Bandura first developed the theory in the 1960's. He proposed that both adults and children learn through the process of observation (Baldwin, 2004; DeFleur, 2004).

The paradigm emphasizes that media acts upon individuals. Adults and children learn acceptable behavior through consumption of these media messages. Therefore behavior is not only learnt or modeled but rather it is adopted (Baldwin, 2004).

The theory, initially applied to the subject of learnt violent behavior, was subsequently extrapolated from aggression to other types of learnt behavior. Bandura posits that in a social setting behavior was learnt and adopted by simply watching others and seeing their behavior as positive (DeFleur, 2010). By observing or by consuming mass media, the social learning theory would conclude that trial and error could be circumvented, and through observation and then adoption of appropriate behavior, one assimilates positive social behaviors. Social learning then could be constructed on a myriad of behaviors from how to dress, how to speak, how to act and suitable gender behavior for both male and females (Severin, 2001).

Bandura attempted to demonstrate the media effect of learned violent behavior with an experiment on children. In the pioneering experiment, the Stanford University psychologist placed preschool children in a room and made them observe a video of adults hitting a plastic blow-up clown— Bobo; while another group of children watched the clown being hugged. The children were then placed into the room with Bobo shortly after viewing the video. The kids then modeled the behavior demonstrated in the video: The ones who had seen the violent video began hitting the doll in a similar manner to the mediated message. Furthermore, the children elevated the violent behavior by picking up toys strewn throughout the room and hitting the doll with these other instruments in a manner more severe than what was demonstrated in the video. Conversely, the kids who viewed the video of the clown being hugged also duplicated the behavior they had observed (Dominick, 2009; Rubinstein, 1978; Baldwin, 2004).

An interesting twist in the area of social learning theory is how much of social learning is actually conformity. Nicolas Claidière and Andrew Whiten (2012) studied conformity and its relationship with social learning. Conformity is defined as that “behavior (that) is said to conform when an individual in a group displays behavior because it is the most frequent the individual witnessed in others” (p. 129). Looking at an experiment by Solomon Asch in 1955, Claidière and Whiten found that often times in experiments respondents are unwilling to voice a dissenting opinion in a group setting even when they know they are right. Once they learn what behavior is appropriate they are routinely unwilling to diverge from this action.

The social learning theory is then much more than just learning through observation of friends, peers and media, but many individuals are conforming to group norms because they do not see their action or behavior as an individual choice. While social learning is mainly about acquiring new knowledge and demonstrating this through action, oftentimes conformity is illustrating action that we have already learnt is appropriate. For example, if altruistic behaviors were acquired through social learning, then conformity would require an individual to demonstrate such behavior when the situation requires helping action. Several factors are listed as necessary for the conformity to occur: An individual “(a) has to choose between several alternative behaviors, (b) chooses the one displayed by a majority of other individuals, and (c) does so because it is the option chosen by the majority and not for alternative reasons.” (p. 128)

In 1984, a researcher at Kuwait University replicated Asch’s original study using cards and a group of actors (confederates), whose role was to mislead deliberately respondents by providing erroneous answers, in order to judge group influence on responses. The aim of the Kuwaiti experiment was to see if there would be a strong tendency for Kuwaiti undergraduates to conform to group norms and to see how conformity in Kuwait would rank compared to previous experiments conducted in other cultures. Many other studies had found little conformity (Amir, 1984) with many investigators concluding that the culture must play a heavy hand in conformity. For example, Asch’s original experiment took place during McCarthyism, where conformity to group norms was especially high; and so effectively many subsequent experiments, didn’t find the same effects Asch did. However, the recent Kuwait experiment was different. When the experiment was replicated here, results found that Kuwaiti students had a powerful propensity toward conformity. The results were comparable to the original Asch study in 1950’s USA. This study reinforced several researchers claim that Kuwait’s cultural makeup plays a strong role in conformity to group norms (Amir, 1984) and avoiding alternative choices. We can surmise then that social learning is a strong force in the culture of Kuwait for acquiring norms such as altruism.

Cultural Background

Kuwait is a Middle Eastern country bordering Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. Kuwait is a collectivist society where family, religion, and tradition are highly emphasized. Kuwait is predominantly an Islamic country with more than 80 percent of the total population being Muslim (The CIA World Factbook). The rest of the population includes, amongst others, Christians and Hindus. In Islam, altruism is highly emphasized and because Kuwait has a high Muslim population, in addition to its strong collectivist nature, society generally emphasizes and encourages altruistic acts. In 2005, Kuwaiti

women finally received full political rights, which led some women to participate in the electoral process, including running for parliament and voting (The CIA World Factbook).

Media in Kuwait

Kuwait has some of the most liberal media laws in the Persian Gulf and in all of the Middle East. The Kuwaiti constitution guarantees freedom of the press and freedom of expression, as long as disparaging remarks about Islam and libelous statements about the His Highness the Emir of Kuwait and the Crown Prince are avoided. More than 78.3% of the Kuwaiti population report listening to the radio and 46% watch TV regularly. With Kuwait having close to an 80% literacy rate, local newspapers, overwhelmingly in Arabic, still are the dominate source of information in the country despite widespread access to the Internet and to foreign satellite television. Most of Kuwait's TV and radio have been historically controlled through the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), a branch of the Ministry of Information. KUNA also provides significant local news content to newspapers (pressreference.com & reporterswithoutborders.com). In 2006, Kuwait liberalized its publication laws and opened its doors to new newspapers and radio and TV broadcasting stations. In addition to traditional and foreign media, black market access to satellite, DVDs and CDs are mainstays in the media landscape of Kuwait, largely due to government censorship (Wheeler, 2000).

Despite the proliferation of western foreign media, both legal and illegal, one study observed foreign media could be used for social learning. For example, in one study a Kuwaiti respondent said the best way for her children to understand and learn Kuwaiti traditions was to watch foreign programs with them and explain Kuwaiti customs when American/Western traditions were on display. By this method, traditional values and customs are transmitted through social learning theory processes and the discourse of mediated messages (Wheeler, 2000). If this same process is also applied to TV and radio consumption of local Arabic media, then we can assume that social learning is occurring through the transmission of media, as parents use the opportunity of watching television to explain traditional customs and values to their children.

Religion in Kuwait

In Kuwait, Islam is the main religion, which has a big role in helping behaviors. In the country, a predominantly Islamic society, both genders are brought up with the idea that helping others will erase their sins in a somewhat karmic fashion (Çetin, 2006). For example, when a person does something that Islam prohibits, such as lying, giving to charity or helping a poor family may assist in erasing that sin. This is a way for the person to feel that society, and God, will excuse their ill behavior. We assert that this may be one of the underlying reasons for altruism in Kuwait (Çetin, 2006).

Gender in Kuwait

The interplay between family, tradition, and religion plays an important role in defining gender role. In Kuwait, males and females act in a certain way in order to gain acceptance in the society. Gender roles in Kuwait do not "only indicate specific roles for men and women to adopt, but also shape cultural and religious beliefs that structure men's and women's rights, access to resources, and mobility in society" (Torstrick & Faier, 2009, p. 112).

With respect to altruism, it is the norm that males will usually display altruistic behavior towards strangers, in addition to family members. "Men are expected to provide for the family and make major household decisions as well as those pertaining to children" (Torstrick & Faier 2009, p. 112). Their role is to stop and assist a person with a flat tire, or a person being attacked on the street. If a man doesn't assist the family, or in some cases the entire household, financially he is viewed as irresponsible. In Kuwait, families usually live in the husband's family house with extended family members (Torstrick & Faier, 2009) and the males are expected to provide financial aid for relatives in need. Conversely, females are most likely to display altruistic behavior to family members or in indoor situations. For example, if a woman doesn't help with the household, this is considered disrespectful to the family and she will be criticized. In Kuwait, women are perceived as "weak...and that women's virtue must be protected" (Torstrick & Faier, 2009, p. 112). Thus the differences in the ways males and females are raised and treated within society defines the ways both will display altruistic behavior within that society.

In this paper, we will be focusing on the following hypotheses:

1. Men will exhibit helping behavior more than women will.
2. A female will less likely offer help to a male.
3. Helping behaviors increase with age.
4. Gender roles will determine the type of help offered by the individual.

Methodology

We conducted our research by distributing the Self-Report Altruism questionnaire equally between both genders. The Self-Report Altruism Questionnaire consists of 20-items designed to examine different types of altruistic behavior (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981). Participants were asked to rate the recurrence of their altruistic behavior using the categories 'Never,' 'Once,' 'More than Once,' 'Often,' and 'Very Often.'

In this study, we randomly selected the respondents with equal numbers of males and females in our sample. The questionnaire was given to a group of university students who were trained and supervised by the research team. The survey was distributed to ages 18-33. Many surveys were distributed in universities, companies and shopping malls.

Results

A total of 652 adults completed the Self-Report Altruism Scale. The sample size by age and gender is depicted in Table 1

Age	Male	Female	Total
18-22	101	122	223
22-25	117	101	218
26-29	61	52	113
30-33	50	48	98
Total	329	323	652

Table 1. Final sample size by age and gender.

The Self-Report Altruism Scale yields scores ranging from 20 to 100. These scores were analyzed using a 4 x 2 factorial analysis of variance with age (18-22, 22-25, 26-29, and 30-33) and gender (male, female) as between-subjects factors. As anticipated, this analysis found a significant effect of age on these a scores, $F(3, 644) = 8.18, p < 0.01$; a significant effect of gender, $F(1, 644) = 5.3, p < 0.05$; and no interaction, $F(3, 644) = 0.35, p = n.s.$ These results are depicted in Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure.1, age was a defining variable in respondents' disposition toward performing altruism acts. There was a marked increase in the altruism scale scores from those 18 to 21 to those who identified as 30 to 33. While there wasn't a strong surge between each age group, the growth on the altruism scale increases incrementally with each higher age category. The results show a consistent increase on the scale, with the age of the respondents in our sample, demonstrating a substantial correlation with age and altruism.

Furthermore, when examined by gender our findings indicate that males tended to score higher on the altruism scale than females. This phenomenon was consistent and was observed in all age groups across our sample. Males in all age categories outscored females in the self-reported altruism scale, with the most marked difference observed with males and females 18 to 21. Given the lack of data specific to culture in our research, we can only hypothesize that perhaps as the students enter university stringent attitudes toward gender roles within the culture are broken down with each successive university year and exposure to academic ideas and classmates outside their usual socialization routes. However, given the limited amount of university students in older categories in our sample (98) we would need balanced sample sizes across age categories to draw stronger rationales for the disparity in gender.

Nevertheless, none of this diminishes the overall trends, which cogently demonstrate that no matter the variables, males of any age group are reporting higher levels of altruistic behavior and attitudes than females. In summary, our findings prove that males in our sample tend to gravitate toward altruism more so than females and that older subjects are more likely to score higher on the altruism scale than those who are 18 to 21, remaining consistent with our original hypothesis.

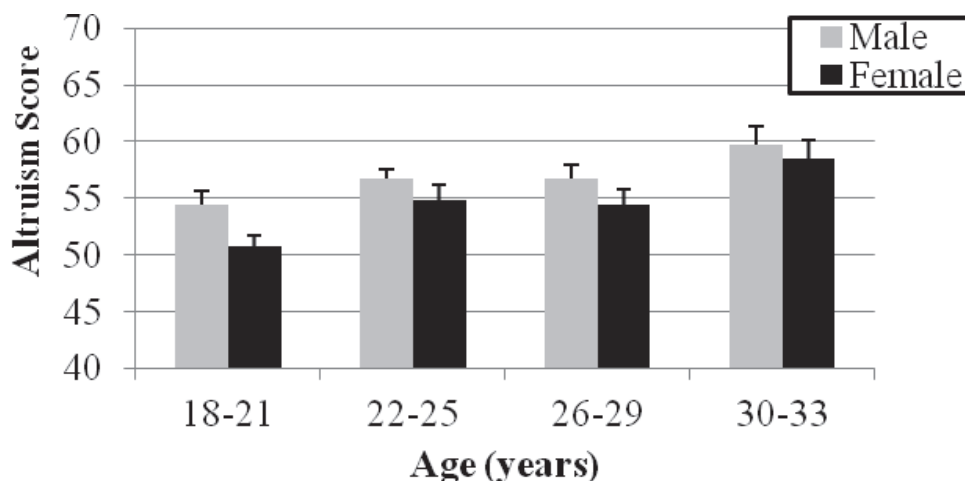


Figure 1. Mean (+S.E.M.) altruism scores by age and gender.

Discussion

As predicted, the males in our sample were more altruistic than the female respondents. These results are contrary to the data found in western countries where numerous studies have shown that females tend to have a higher propensity toward acts of selflessness than males (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1997; Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Skarin & Moely, 1976). In those investigations, it was reported that women are socialized to be primary caregivers in western societies and this conditioning translates to acts of altruism because of the social desirability in those cultures for women to be primary helpers (Skarin and Moely, 1976). This is generally true in Kuwait as well, where women are the primary caregivers and men are the primary breadwinners (Torstrick & Faier, 2009). However, due to Kuwait being a more conservative society that does not allow women to help outside the realm of their home and extended family, we see a strong tendency for males to engage in more altruistic behaviors, especially outside of the home and with strangers. This would be especially true since the survey items were tailored to reflect altruism tendencies in the west by asking questions such as: "I have given a stranger a lift in my car" and "I have made change for a stranger." The behavior displayed in the situations presented in the survey questions would be considered taboo for females in a conservative Middle Eastern society.

In our research however, we found that social desirability toward altruism is culturally directed toward men. Due to the strict traditional gender roles and gender segregation, women are not often expected to come to a person's aid outside of the immediate household. Men on the other hand, are conditioned through social learning processes to engage in altruistic behavior. As discussed previously, Kuwait is a patriarchal society where men are expected to be the breadwinners and to be the ones who have to help extended family members (Torstrick & Faier, 2009). This duty is largely attributed to the collectivist nature of Kuwait, where aiding others is part of the sense of obligation to traditional values and norms. For example, a man may be willing to stop and help a stranger with flat tire on the street while it is inappropriate for a woman to do the same. Similarly, a woman's duty may include helping in the home but it's not generally expected that she aid outside the home as her husband would. It's more acceptable for a man to offer aid outside of his familial role. By contrast, in western society, women often aid outside of their homes because their role as care provider often translates outside of the household (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1997; Skarin and Moely, 1976). However, our data demonstrates that this luxury only extends to the men in Kuwait. Moreover, the collectivist culture dictates that males are often mandated to live up to reputational, societal and familial expectations. As a result of these factors, we deduce that these strict gender roles are what account for the disparity in Arab females' altruistic behavior compared to their western counterparts in our sample, and higher reporting of altruism behavior among the men.

Another result we found is that both males and females become more altruistic as they grow older. This is consistent with findings of similar studies conducted in the west. We believe that the reasons behind this are the same examples provided by Piliavin & Charng: as children grow older, they learn expected behavior from their parents, peers and media. These agents of socialization act are in accordance with the social learning theory, which says that societal forces condition both males and females to their roles in society (Baldwin, 2004; DeFleur, 2010). While one school of altruism says that perhaps helping behavior is inherent, the differences between females in our study and those in western studies would refute this idea (Skarin & Moely, 1976). However, in line with the innate argument for altruism, we see an increase

in levels of altruistic behavior as age and social experiences increase and gender roles and cognitive maturity crystallizes. Perhaps with age also comes an increase in cognitive abilities and a person rationalizes their behavior to offer aid (Skarin and Moely, 1976; Losco, 1976).

Even though some of the rigidity of Kuwait's culture is slowly being diluted with the effect of globalization and western media imperialism, Kuwait is still a fairly conservative society that abides by rules and regulations set by the social learning: education, culture, family, religion and media. Males are continuing to see their roles as the primary helpers in and out of the home, with the existing social learning process, it seems unlikely that we will observe any decaying of this role in the foreseeable future.

Limitations and Future Research

The study had, and lacked, information that might have affected our results, such as the survey makeup. The survey was more western centric; in other words, the questions that were asked focused on what western women would do, such as offering a stranger a ride. However, females in Kuwait, feel it is oftentimes inappropriate to offer physical aid to strangers. Another theory is perhaps social learning of religious traditions says women should limit their interactions with strange men, so perhaps males are helping both genders and women are reporting less helping behavior because they are helping other women primarily. The gender of those being helped would have to be measured. A follow-up investigation would have to be initiated to determine why women and men help and why they don't help, to understand the social learning processes that encourage or discourage people in Kuwait from altruistic behavior. Moreover, variables such as media, parents, and peers could be examined independently to gauge the contribution of each agent on altruistic behavior.

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