



# Perceptions of Altruistic and Criminal Behavior

Rochelle Smits & Jeffrey Goodman  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



## Introduction

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the psychology of good and evil (Miller, 2005). While the study of altruistic behavior is primarily the domain of social psychologists, criminologists and psychopathologists focus on antisocial behavior, making theoretical synthesis and connections of the two constructs difficult.

Research governing both perceptions of altruistic and criminal behavior may be explained through classic attribution theories (Kelly, 1967) in which the responsibility for an action is determined primarily through dispositional cues, such as the extent to which internal factors drove the occurrence of the behavior or the intended consequence of the action, rather than environmental cues.

Research in personality psychology suggests that altruistic and deviant behaviors have distinct roots as opposed to being two ends of a single dimension (Krueger, Hicks, & McGue, 2001). Although the etiological roots are distinct, it is not known whether assessments of behavior as altruistic (or antisocial), and as deserving of praise (or punishment), are governed by the same or different attributional variables.

The present study sought to determine whether the same dispositional variables that govern perceptions of altruistic behavior (judgments of prosocial behavior) also govern perceptions of crime (judgments of antisocial behavior) despite the behaviors having distinct etiologies.

## Method

Participants (n= 118, Female = 78) were presented with a number of vignettes depicting criminal and altruistic behaviors that varied on a number of theoretically identified dispositional variables. Each participant read and evaluated each of the vignettes (within-subjects), but any given participant was randomly provided with a vignette describing the behavior at one of two levels (e.g., selfishly motivated vs. selflessly motivated; between-subjects). Participants were asked to judge the degree to which the behavior was altruistic (or a crime) and the degree to which it deserved praise (or punishment).

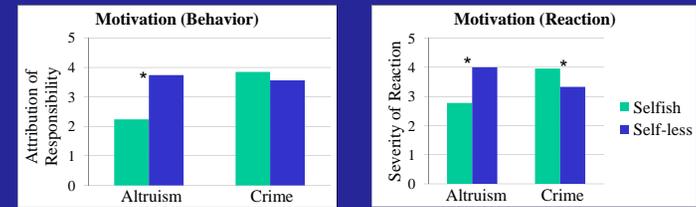
Example Question: (Variable: Motivation)

Krista set her unemployed friend up for an interview at her company because [he needed a job] [she would receive a bonus].

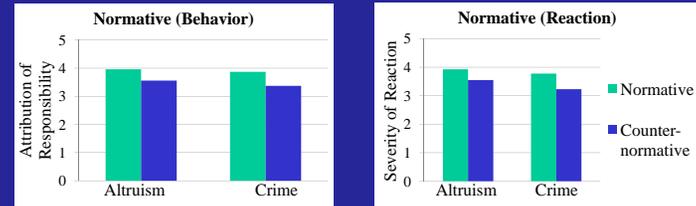
|                               | Strongly Agree        | Agree                 | Neutral               | Disagree              | Strongly Disagree     |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| This behavior is praiseworthy | <input type="radio"/> |
| This behavior is altruistic   | <input type="radio"/> |

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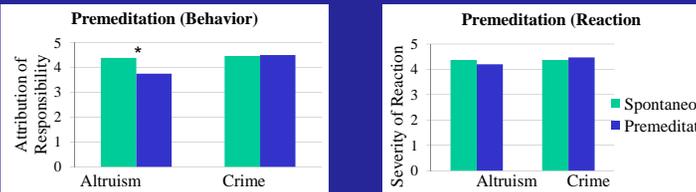
## Results



Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Main effect of Type ( $p < .001$ ); Type  $\times$  Severity interaction ( $p < .001$ ) for each of the above.



Note: Overall effect of Severity ( $p < .001$ ) for each of the above.



Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Severity ( $p = .013$ ); Type  $\times$  Severity interaction ( $p = .004$ ).

Note: Trend toward a Type  $\times$  Severity interaction ( $p = .154$ ).

## Discussion

The *motivation* of the actor (empathic or egoistic) influenced the attribution of behavior such that if the behavior was egoistically motivated it was less likely to be considered altruistic and less worthy of praise, but more likely to be considered a crime and worthy of punishment. Conversely, if the behavior was selfless (the actor had no ulterior motives), it was more likely to be considered altruistic and worthy of praise, but less likely to be considered a crime and deserving of punishment.

Similarly, the actor's *premeditation* (spontaneous or premeditated) influenced the attribution of altruistic behavior, but not deservingness of praise, such that if a behavior was spontaneous, it was considered more altruistic than if it was premeditated. However, premeditation did not influence attribution of criminal behavior or deservingness of punishment. Interestingly, whether the behavior was *typical* or *counter-normative* for the actor did not influence attributions of pro/anti-sociality and deservingness of praise/punishment.

Overall, our findings indicate that there is some overlap in how dispositional variables influence the attribution of responsibility and social reaction of behavior across criminal and altruistic behaviors (e.g. whether the behavior is typical). Interesting however, is that these dispositional variables did not always influence criminal and altruistic attributions in similar ways, suggesting that attributions of others' behavior, like the deployment of one's own behavior, operate on distinct etiologies.