

Gender Stereotypes Associated with Altruistic Acts

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Abstract

Possible gender stereotypes associated with altruistic acts presented in two types of vignettes were investigated. A sample of 72 General Psychology students were recruited to participate. The researchers had three main hypotheses: Females would more likely be perceived as the performers of an altruistic act, females would more likely be perceived as the receivers of an altruistic act, and the more extreme act of altruism would be perceived to be made by a male and the minor by a female. Results revealed a main effect of Vignette Type on the perceived gender of the performer and the receiver of the altruistic act. A significant Rater Gender x Vignette Type interaction on Gender of Receiver was also found. This study was important and beneficial to examine expectations of gender during the performance of altruistic acts and puts societal influence on gender roles into context.

Prosocial behavior is a broad term that is defined as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, p. 646). Prosocial behavior was not extensively studied until 1970, and since then has been a great area of interest and the focus of many studies due to a desire to understand human nature and motivation involved in prosocial and moral behaviors (Eisenberg, et al., 2006). Altruism is considered a subgroup of prosocial behavior, and can be defined as “voluntary, intentional behavior that benefits another and that is not motivated by the expectation of external rewards or avoidance of externally produced punishments” (Chou, 1998, p. 195). Altruism and prosocial behavior, in general, have been studied from a variety of different angles. The major topics in research conducted on prosocial behavior are biological, cultural, and social determinants of prosocial tendencies. Research has also looked at developmental trends in prosocial behavior and how cognition and disposition relate to prosocial behavior. Furthermore, gender differences associated with the performance of altruistic acts, the different attitudes towards altruism based on gender, and the gender stereotypes that exist related to altruistic acts have been studied (Eisenberg, et al., 2006).

Dietz, Kalof, and Stern (2002) looked at gender in relation to specific social psychological values; both the meaning and the importance of these values were analyzed. A national U.S. sample of white adult participants had to rank order the values of altruism, self-interest, traditionalism, and openness to change through a computer-assisted telephone interview. It was found that, overall, there was no significant difference in value meaning for men and women. However, the importance and priority those values were given differed in men and women. Specifically, it was found that women placed more importance on the social psychological value of altruism than did men. The authors projected that this difference could be due to the differences in socialization of men and women. Women are socialized to have concern for others and to take care of one another, while men are mainly socialized to be in competition with each other.

Despite the fact that men and women tend to place different values on altruistic acts, Krebs (1970) found that there were no gender differences in the actual performance of altruistic behaviors. Similarly, Chou (1998) examined the affect of gender and participation in volunteer activities on altruistic behaviors. The study found that there was a positive effect of age on altruistic behavior- the older the adolescent, the greater was their score for prosocial behavior. However, there was no gender difference for the frequency of altruistic behaviors. Conversely, a meta-analysis conducted by Eagly and Crowley (1986) found that, when looking at actual number of altruistic behaviors, men perform altruistic acts more frequently than women. Specifically, the higher frequency of helping usually occurred during situations considered instrumental. Instrumental situations deal with more self-oriented behaviors including independence and self-confidence, such as a situation involving a high amount of risk or ability to stay calm and think rationally in an emergency (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). This is compared to expressive situations that deal with more interpersonal behaviors and are associated with concern for others (Spence & Helmreich, 1980). The higher frequency of helping was also involved in situations chivalrous or heroic in nature (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Spence and Helmreich (1980) reviewed all of the literature on gender role attitudes and behaviors and originally classified the gender role traits into these two categories: instrumental and expressive. They found that women traditionally possess “interpersonally-oriented expressive qualities, for example, kind, tactful, aware of other’s feelings,” whereas men actually possess stereotypical “self-assertive instrumental attributes, for example, independent, active, self-confident” (p. 150). Eisenberg, et al. (2006) aptly pointed out that there are many inconsistencies amongst the studies involving which gender is actually more altruistic.

Furthermore, Eisenberg, et al. (2006) pointed out that “based on stereotypic gender roles, females generally are expected and believed to be more responsive, empathetic, and prosocial than males, whereas males are expected to be relatively independent and achievement oriented” (p. 696). Other than this acknowledgement of gender stereotypes in altruistic situations, studies conducted on the perceptions of gender on altruistic behaviors are minimal. Such studies mostly involve children’s perceptions about gender and the role of gender in altruistic acts. The research has consistently found that, when children are asked who is more altruistic, girls are generally rated as more altruistic than boys; this perception also exists in teachers (Shigetomi, Hartmann, & Gelfand, 1981).

Further research on children’s perceptions of gender in altruistic situations has explored the possibility that this impression that girls are more altruistic may be due to a measurement bias (Zarbatany, Hartmann, Gelfand, & Vinciguerra, 1985). Specifically, Zarbatany, et al. (1985) created an empirically derived measure with examples given by children to minimize a sex-bias in the formerly used theoretically produced instrument. Sixty-five children were asked to write descriptions of when they have watched a peer, or have directly “(a) helped another child, (b) shared with another child, (c) made another child feel better, and (d) got another child out of a tough spot” (Zarbatany, et al., 1985, p. 98). These four types of prosocial behavior are referred to frequently when discussing child altruism because they are a good representation of prosocial behavior as a whole. The children were then asked whether they thought boys, girls, or neither, were more likely to perform these four types of prosocial behavior. The descriptions were then rated as either more masculine or more feminine in relation to these four categories and a measure was created containing items on a 5 point scale as “definitely more likely to be performed by boys (1) to equally likely to be performed by boys and girls (3) to definitely more likely to be performed by girls (5)” (Zarbatany, et al., 1985, p. 99).

Zarbatany, et al. (1985) then administered this measurement to a second group of 58 children in two forms: peer nomination or gender rating. Once again, girls were generally perceived to be more altruistic than boys. However, they found that it depended greatly on the content of the items and on the scale of measurement. For the feminine and gender neutral items, girls were more often selected as altruistic, for more masculine situations, males were more often selected. Overall, girls were more likely to select girls as being more altruistic, and boys were more likely to select boys during responses. The only major difference between the two forms used to collect data was that the numbers were more extreme on the gender rating form than on the peer nomination form (Zarbatany, et al., 1985).

This review of the literature suggests that there is still much to learn about gender stereotypes that may accompany adults' perceptions of altruistic behavior. After reviewing previous research, and specifically Zarbatany, et al. (1985), the present study was designed to further examine gender stereotypes associated with altruistic acts but with adults instead of children. Two types of vignettes were presented to explore any differences in perceptions associated with different levels of altruism. One vignette described a major act of altruism; a situation where there was a greater cost (e.g., effort) to the person performing the act and greater benefit to the recipient. A second vignette described a minor act of altruism; a situation where there was a smaller cost to the person performing the act and lesser benefit to the recipient (Swap, 1991). The analysis focused on participants' inferences about the gender of the actors in the altruism vignettes.

There are three main hypotheses for this research. First, it was expected that people would infer a person who performs an altruistic act is more likely to be female. This hypothesis was based on previous research suggesting that people generally believe girls are more altruistic than boys (Shigetomi, et al., 1981).

Second, it was expected that people would infer a person who receives an altruistic act is more likely to be female. While there was no research found that directly examined perception's of the gender of the recipient of an altruistic act, this hypothesis is consistent with research on gender stereotypes. For example, Deaux and Lewis (1984) found that women are stereotypically viewed as more passive and males as more aggressive.

Finally, it was expected that participants would infer a person who performs the more extreme act of altruism is more likely to be male and a person who performs a minor act of altruism is more likely to be female. This final hypothesis was based on Eagly and Crowley's (1986) research which found that while females are expected to exhibit many helping behavioral traits and have the stereotypical caring type persona; males are expected to engage in high risk behaviors that are associated with heroism.

Method

Participants

Participants were 78 college students in General Psychology courses at the University of Wisconsin- Stout. The researchers recruited participants by going into three General Psychology classes. Of these participants, six were eliminated due to incomplete surveys, 42 were female, and 30 were male.

Materials

Participants were given a research packet containing one of two short vignettes and a questionnaire. One of the vignettes described a minor act of altruism and the other described a

more extreme act of altruism. The vignette of the minor act of altruism was a narrative of a person returning another person's grocery cart at a supermarket. The major act of altruism vignette described a person visiting a fast food drive-thru where the person in the front car paid for the person behind them. There were no hints at a particular gender. The participants then completed a brief questionnaire containing items about their perceptions of the vignette. Specifically, the questionnaire contained items about the person receiving the act of kindness and the person performing the act of kindness within the vignette (i.e., intelligence, wealth, trustworthiness). The questionnaire also included general demographic information about the participants themselves.

Procedure

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the vignette conditions. Participants took a research packet from a randomly mixed stack containing both conditions of vignettes. Participants were told that the study was about random acts of kindness and that they would be reading a short vignette and completing a questionnaire based on their impressions of the vignette.

Each participant read and signed a consent form, and then they were given a research packet. The first page of the research packet contained a short paragraph with instructions to read the scenario provided and then complete the short survey. The second page contained one of two vignettes (either a minor or major act of altruism), and the third page contained a questionnaire asking about their perceptions of what they had read. The critical dependent measures assessed the perceived gender of the individual performing the altruistic act and the perceived gender of the individual receiving the altruistic act. Gender perceptions were measured by asking people to indicate the likely gender of the target on a 1 to 8 semantic differential scale. This measure was used to give an indication of the degree of masculinity – femininity associated with the act described in the vignette. Several additional items assessed various opinions about the characters in the vignette. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants turned in their packets and were given a debriefing form to read that further explained the experiment.

Results

Six of the 78 original subjects' data were discarded due to incomplete questionnaires. Within the semantic differential scales, multiple items were reverse scored and a series of correlations were run to see if the items on the semantic differential scales were related. In addition to the semantic differential about gender, the other items included: youthfulness, strength, kindness, trustworthiness, beauty, wealth, intelligence, and helpfulness. In general, the majority of the items were not related. As such, these items were excluded from further analysis.

Gender of Performer

To examine perceptions of the gender of the person performing the altruistic act, the data were analyzed two ways. First, the dichotomous items assessing gender of performer were examined. In the minor vignette condition 55% of participants indicated the performer was female. In the major vignette condition only 26.5% of participants indicated the performer was female. The second analysis was run using the gender semantic differential data. This measure was used to indicate the degree of masculinity or femininity associated with the act. A 2 Participant Gender (female vs. male) x 2 Vignette Type (minor act of altruism vs. major act of altruism) between-subjects ANOVA was used.

Results revealed a main effect of Vignette Type, $F(1,68) = 6.303, p < .05$. Participants with the minor act of altruism vignette ($M = 4.11, SD = 2.447$) rated the performer to be female significantly more often than participants with the major act of altruism vignette ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.983$). There was no main effect of Rater Gender, $F(1,68) = 2.549, p = .115$. There was also no significant interaction of Rater Gender x Vignette Type, $F(1,68) = 2.303, p = .134$.

Gender of Receiver

To examine perceptions of the gender of the person receiving the altruistic act, the data were analyzed two ways. Once again, the dichotomous items accessing gender of receiver were examined. In the minor vignette condition 84.2% of participants indicated the receiver was female. In the major vignette condition 67.6% of participants indicated the receiver was female. The second analysis was run using the gender semantic differential data. This measure was used to indicate the degree of masculinity or femininity associated with the act. To examine perceptions of the gender of the person receiving the altruistic act the data were analyzed using a 2 (female vs. male) x 2 (minor act of altruism vs. major act of altruism) between subjects ANOVA.

Results revealed a main effect of Vignette Type, $F(1,68) = 9.032, p < .05$. Participants with the minor act of altruism vignette ($M = 2.34, SD = 1.512$) rated the receiver to be female, significantly more often than participants in the major act of altruism vignette ($M = 3.59, SD = 2.176$). There was no main effect of Rater Gender, $F(1,68) = .154, p = .696$.

There was a significant interaction of Rater Gender x Vignette Type on Gender of Receiver, $F(1,68) = 4.614, p < .05$. Follow up simple effects tests revealed that male raters perceived females to be the recipient of the minor altruistic act and perceived males to be the recipient of the extreme altruistic act, $F(1,68) = 12.45, p < .01$. There was no difference in perceptions for female raters (see Figure 1).

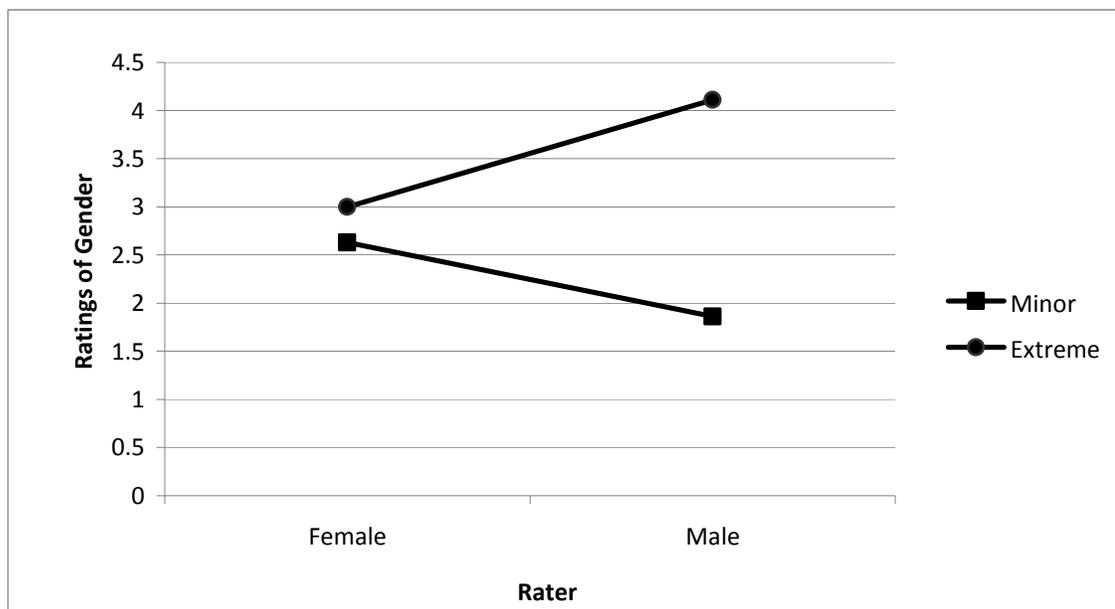


Figure 1. Perception of the Gender of the Person Receiving the Act of Altruism

Discussion

All of the major hypotheses for the study were supported. First, it was expected that people would be more likely to infer a person who committed an altruistic act was female. In the study overall, females were more frequently perceived as the performer of the altruistic act. The second hypothesis was supported in that people were more likely to infer a person who received an altruistic act was female. Overall, females were more frequently perceived as being the receiver of the altruistic act. The last hypothesis was that there would be a main effect for vignette type. Specifically, the more extreme act of altruism would be perceived to be made by a male character and the more minor act of altruism would be perceived to be made by a female character. This hypothesis was supported in the study because participants with the minor act rated the performer to be female significantly more often than those with the major act of altruism vignette.

One limitation to the study included the vignettes themselves. The researchers painstakingly attempted to create realistic vignettes that did not already have a gender stereotype connected with them. However, in the major act of altruism where a character pays for another character's meal at a drive in, there may have been a small amount of bias toward males for being the performer of the act because in American society, it is a stereotypical view for the male to pay for the female. Gender neutral scenarios were desired because if the scenarios were already too closely linked to a typical gender stereotype, then the results would have definitely shown a specific result; but the study was looking more at whether or not altruism as a whole had a gender stereotype bias. If this study were to be conducted again, extra effort would be taken to create gender neutral vignettes.

Another limitation to the study included the participants that had to be eliminated from the study due to incomplete questionnaires. This was partly due to some participants' unwillingness to select ratings based on their own perceptions. These individuals were thinking in terms of the "correct" answer so would simply put down on their questionnaire that the vignette did not say what the gender of the character was. Another reason for the incomplete questionnaires was because of the construct of the measure used. Some participants did not know there was a back to the questionnaire so they filled out the front but did not complete it. If this study were done again, a statement at the bottom of the sheet would simply instruct participants to turn the sheet over to finish their responses, or another solution would be to have the research packets change to a one-sided only format.

The last limitation that should be addressed was the measure used in general. The measure included two semantic differential scales with 8 options for rating. The problem with this scale is the fact that participants did not have an option to be neutral, and therefore either selected a higher or lower middle. Selecting a 4 on the scale would be weighted toward female, and selecting a 5 on the scale would be weighted toward male. This may have had some effect on the results simply because where they may have wished to select an option for being gender neutral in their views but were forced to choose a mid-rating that may have been unrepresentative of their intended response.

There are many possible studies that could be conducted in the future about gender stereotypes related to altruism. First, it was difficult to find previous studies that looked at the gender of the person who was receiving the altruistic act. While the author did look at this to some degree, a future direction of study could be to further explore what stereotypes are involved when it comes to the receiver of an altruistic act and whether or not it matters who the performer is. Another direction this research could be taken is to take a closer look at the significant

interaction that was found. Male raters perceived females to be the recipient of the minor altruistic act and perceived males to be the recipient of the extreme altruistic act, but what accounted for this? An additional study could look at why this occurred and why there was no difference in perception for female raters.

Researchers that pursue this area of study in the future should consider the construction of their vignettes and their measure before starting on a project such as this. They should attempt to create extremely realistic, gender neutral scenarios and should create multiple vignettes for each level. They should also consider the measure and consider a more neutral option if the participants sincerely did not have an opinion for the character gender in the vignettes presented.

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