

# The Relationship of Altruistic Behavior, Empathetic Sense, and Social Responsibility with Happiness among University Students

Raziyeh Meyzari Ali <sup>1</sup>, Zahra Dasht Bozorgi <sup>1\*</sup>

1. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran.

## Article info:

Received: 02 Aug. 2015

Accepted: 02 Dec. 2015

## Keywords:

Altruism, Empathy, Social responsibility, Happiness

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present research aimed to study the relationship of altruistic behavior, empathetic sense, and social responsibility with happiness

**Methods:** This research was a survey, cross sectional and correlational study. Hence, a total of 300 university students were selected through random-stratified sampling from the students of Islamic Azad University. The students filled out the research tools including altruism, empathy, social responsibility questionnaires and Oxford happiness questionnaire. The obtained data were analyzed using the Pearson correlation and enter multiple regressions by SPSS version 20.

**Results:** Results showed a significant relationship between happiness, altruistic behavior, empathetic sense, and social responsibility ( $P < 0.05$ ). Moreover, happy individuals demonstrate more cooperative behaviors and are more satisfied with their residence.

**Conclusion:** Happiness as one of the most fundamental positive feelings has a crucial role in creating altruism and empathy in both the individual and the society.

## 1. Introduction

As social roles are lost in late life, opportunities to engage in prosocial, contributory activities provide a promising avenue for maintaining life satisfaction and happiness (Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2014). Happiness, which means being happy and having a positive attitude in life, is one of the most important psychological needs for humans that has a significant influence on the quality of human life (Seyed Joodat & Zarbakhsh, 2015). Happiness as a positive mental state is characterized by high life satisfaction, positive affect, and low levels of negative affect (Morrow-Howell, 2010).

Moreover, positive relationship with others, purposefulness, personality growth, and loving others are considered as the components of happiness (Ghasempour, Jodat, Soleimani, Kiomars, & Shabanlo, 2013). Happy individuals value their skills, and therefore their lives are more intertwined with positive events rather than negative events (Piqueras, Kuhne, Vera-Villarrol, van Straten, & Cuijpers, 2011).

Altruistic behaviors are defined as behaviors that provide positive response for others' needs and welfare with the aim of helping and bringing benefits to others (Mujcic, 2011; Saroukhani, 1991). These behaviors include sharing, loving, showing respect, cooperation, and supporting to save others from danger and empathizing with others

### \* Corresponding Author:

Zahra Dasht Bozorgi, PhD

Address: Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran.

Tel: +98 (916) 3059829

E-mail: zahradb2000@yahoo.com

(DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012). Batson (2011) who put forward the theory of empathy and focused on explaining the characteristics and features of altruistic individuals define this behavior based on the ability to empathize with others. He stated that individuals who are more capable to understand the situations of individuals in need and empathize with them are more likely to do an act of altruism or demonstrate altruistic behavior. Individuals who show stronger empathy toward others' issues are more sensitive, respond affectively, and provide the most frequent and best quality help (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Penner & Orom, 2010).

Empathy can be defined as an emotional state triggered by the formation of an internally generated replica of the emotional state of another person combined with the feeling of goodwill (Light et al., 2009; Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007). This ability plays a significant role in social life (Reiff, Ketelear, & Wiefferink, 2010) and is regarded as the stimulating force of social behaviors, which are associated with group cohesion and distributed in all humans whether man or woman (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Reiff, Ketelear & Wiefferink, 2010). Empathy is regarded as a vital element for successful performances and interpersonal responses of women and men (de Sousa et al., 2010).

Responsibility is one of the personality characteristics, defined as the capacity of accepting, responsiveness, and shouldering a requested task while having the right to either accept or reject it (Mousavi, 1998). Cereto (1989) contends that responsibility is the internal commitment and obligation of an individual to desirably do all the activities assigned to him or her.

Different studies (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009) indicate that higher empathy leads to the tendency toward friendship and lower empathy leads to the tendency toward ignorance. An empathic individual shows altruism and cooperation in facing life and feelings of those around him or her. However, individuals who lack empathy do not value others and regardless of the effect of their actions on others, are merely involved with their own interests and ambitions (Latané, Norenzayan, & Philbrick, 2006). The experience of empathy, results in the development of responsibility (placing importance on other individuals based on understanding and perceiving their situation and feelings) and positive feeling (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). On the other hand, responsibility is one of the main principles of altruism, i.e. the individual should consider himself or herself as responsible and not to be indifferent toward others (Latané & Darley, 1970). Therefore, the internalization of responsibility reinforces

the tendency for altruism while its lack increases the indifference (Levine, Norenzayan, & Philbrick, 2006).

Studies indicate that individuals who have altruistic feelings in their work environment show minimum resignation, help their colleagues, and show more commitment in fulfilling their duties. According to these studies, individuals who had helped others in their 30s were happier in their later years of lives (30 years later) as compared to other individuals (Dickert, Sagara, & Slovic, 2011). Based on these studies, the motivation to help others and belief in the ability to change the self and the circumstances are associated with the increase of happiness and personal satisfaction (Myers, 2004). Altruistic individuals are happier than individuals who have not developed feelings of altruism. Furthermore, the induction of happiness leads to smarter, more productive, sharper, and more responsible people (Tacey, 2003).

A significant relationship exists between different levels of happiness and the absence of selfishness, also devoted individuals are happier than more selfish ones (Rothstein, 2010). People are more inclined to help others when they feel happy (Myers, 2004). The results of different studies show that happy people develop interest in other people and solving the social problems. What's more, they are less interested in their internal world or personal interests (Argyle, 2001; Ogrodniczuk, Piper, Joyce, & Steinberg, 2009). Furthermore, the results of various studies indicate that the induction of positive mood in children encourage them to be more generous toward needy children (Rieffe, Ketelear, & Wiefferink, 2010).

Happiness positively affects the academic achievement of students and persuades the behaviors associated with academic achievement (Peterson, 2000). Happiness as a positive affection can facilitate interpersonal relationship and exert positive effect on cognition and social health (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2006; Elwell, 2002). A few studies on happiness have included measures that examine the relationship between happiness and prosocial behaviour. With regard to the importance of happiness in all aspects of life, this research aims to verify significant relationship of altruistic behavior, empathetic sense, social responsibility with happiness among the students of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran.

## 2. Methods

The present research employed a correlational method. The instruments were administered at the participants' classrooms. They were debriefed by telling the aims of the study and their informed consents to participate were obtained. None refused to collaborate in the study. The administration of the instruments took about 15 minutes.

The research population included all students studying for BA degree at Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran. The sample comprised 300 students who were selected through stratified random sampling method using Morgan table. Groups were randomly selected among the whole majors of (social science, humanistic, biological, engineering, and technical) the university. This selection was closely corresponded to a representative of public university sample, according to criteria of the Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz branch. They all had a minimum average of 15 and those who had drug abuse or mental disorder were deleted from the study sample. The response rate was 100%. In this reaserch, subject's information was confidential and their participation was voluntarily.

Altruistic behaviors was designed and developed by Webb, Green, & Brashear (2000). Four items measure altruistic values on 5-point Likert-type scale (Never=5 to very much=1). Smith (2006) reported the internal correlation mean of the items as 0.24 and its Cronbach  $\alpha$  as 0.55. In the present research, the Cronbach  $\alpha$  and bisection were equal to 0.89 and 0.85, respectively.

This scale comprises 40 items that measures empathy quotient. The subjects responded to the items on a 4-point Liker-type scale from strongly disagree to completely agree. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  was reported to be 0.85 (Kim & Lee, 2010). The Persian version of this scale was translated by Abolghasemi (2010) and reported its Cronbach  $\alpha$  in a range of 0.83 to .90 and test-retest coefficient of 0.71 to 0.78 (in a 4-week time interval). The face validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by a couple of psychometrists (Abolghasemi, 2010). In the present research, the reliability of the questionnaire using the Cronbach  $\alpha$  and bisection was estimated to be 0.91 and 0.87, respectively.

In this research, the subscale of social responsibility in California Personality Inventory (CPI-R) was used. This questionnaire has 462 yes-no items, out of them, 42 items belong to the responsibility. This questionnaire had 648 items investigating 15 personality traits. (Marnot, 2006). Hamilton, (1964) used the subscale of responsibility to measure the responsibility of 128 individuals. The reliability of this scale using bisection of odd and even items was estimated to be 0.65. Moreover, Mousavi (1998) estimated the reliability coefficient of responsibility scale by using 3 methods, including bisection of odd and even items, the Cronbach  $\alpha$ , and Gottman to be equal to 0.69, 0.70, and 0.69, respectively. In the present research, the reliability of the questionnaire using the Cronbach  $\alpha$  and bisection were equal to 0.89 and 0.83, respectively.

This inventory was designed and developed by Argyle. Its reliability and validity were reported to be 0.52 and 0.60 by Easterlin. This 29-item test is scored on 4-point Likert-type scale from 0 to 3 and the sum of 29 items gives the total score of the scale in the range of 0 to 87. This test was validated by Alipour (2007) in Iran and its Cronbach  $\alpha$  was estimated to be 0.91. In the present research, the Cronbach alpha and bisection were measured to be 0.86 and 0.81, respectively.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and through statistical methods of Pearson correlation and enter multiple regression analysis by SPSS version 20. The internal consistency of the scales was also analyzed calculating their coefficients of Cronbach  $\alpha$ .

### 3. Results

The descriptive indexes of the research variables are presented as mean and standard deviations in Table 1. The students were 53% females and 47% males; their ages ranged from 18 to 44 years (mean=21.9; SD=4.17 y); 40% of them were of middle low-class origin; while 57% constituted middle-class students and the additional 43% were of high-class extraction

Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between the research variables and the 3 hypotheses of the study. The results are demonstrated in Table 2:

Hypothesis 1: There is relationship between Altruism and happiness.

Hypothesis 2: There is relationship between empathy and happiness.

Hypothesis 3: There is relationship between Responsibility and happiness.

Table 2 shows a significant and positive relationship between altruism and happiness ( $r=0.661$  and  $P<0.0001$ ). Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed (There is significant relationship between altruism and happiness). When the altruism increases, the happiness increases, as well. Moreover, there is a significant and positive relationship between empathy and happiness ( $r=0.775$  and  $P<0.0001$ ). Therefore, the second hypothesis (There is a significant relationship between empathy and happiness) is also confirmed, i.e. with the increase of empathy, the happiness also increases. Furthermore, there is a positive and significant relationship between the responsibil-

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of altruism, empathy, responsibility, and happiness in students.

Variable	Mean	SD	n
Altruism	17.05	1.544	300
Empathy	75.75	2.30	300
Responsibility	35.84	2.16	300
Happiness	71.7	1.84	300

PRACTICE in  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

**Table 2.** Results of simple correlation coefficients between the predictive variables and happiness in students.

Criterion variable	Predictive variables	n	Correlation coefficient	Sig. level
Happiness	Altruism	300	0.661	0.0001
	Empathy	300	0.775	0.0001
	Responsibility	300	0.696	0.0001

PRACTICE in  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

**Table 3.** Multiple coefficient correlation between the predictive variables and happiness.

Predictive variables	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	b	t	P
Altruism	0.69	0.51	90.51	0.0001	0.66	14.66	0.0001
Empathy					0.711	9.9	0.0001
Responsibility					0.621	11.87	0.0001

PRACTICE in  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

ity and happiness ( $r=0.696$  and  $P<0.0001$ ). Hence, the third hypothesis (There will be significant relationship between responsibility and happiness) is also confirmed. Hypothesis 4- There are relationship between Altruism, empathy and responsibility with happiness.

As observed in Table 3, the predictive regression of students' happiness is significant by the variables of altruism, empathy, and responsibility ( $F=90.51$ ,  $P<0.0001$ ). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is (There will be a significant relationship between altruism, empathy, responsibility, and happiness) confirmed. The variables of altruism, empathy, and responsibility can predict the students' happiness with beta coefficients of 0.66, 0.711, and 0.621, respectively. The value of  $R^2$  indicates that 51% of the variance of students' happiness is explained by these variables.

#### 4. Discussion

The present research investigated the relationship of empathy, altruism, and responsibility of students with their happiness. The research results are as follows. First, there is a significant relationship between altruism and happiness, empathy and happiness, and responsibility and happiness. Moreover, multiple significant relation-

ships exist between altruism, empathy, and responsibility. Therefore, all 4 hypotheses of the research are confirmed. This finding is in line with the studies of de Sousa et al. (2010), Myers (2001), Tacey (2003), Myers (2004), Argyle (2001), Reiff, Ketelear, & Wiefferink (2010).

To explain these findings, we can mention several reasons that lead to the happiness from altruism. First, happy people may find helping as rewarding and want to maintain their positive mood, because good mood cause people to like each other more. Second, happy people may want to share their happiness with others. In fact, positive mood reminds people of internal aspects of helping and as a result, helping others makes us happy.

For many people, altruism is a part of mental reward system. On the other hand, happiness is a triggering power to motivation, taking action, accepting responsibility, and trying for success. Even in facing the failure, the humans struggle for purpose and decisiveness. Besides, learning the lessons taught by failures help them connect to the world around them. Being responsible and industrious leads to success and progress in different realms of life and can create feelings of happiness.

Furthermore, happiness results in more activity, facilitates the individual's social relations, and lays the foundation for altruism and empathy. Happy people have higher levels of cooperative spirits and are more satisfied with those who live with them. Happiness as one of the most fundamental positive feelings has a crucial role in creating empathy and altruism in the individual and society. Happiness is always associated with satisfaction, optimism, hope, and trust; therefore, it has an accelerating role in the process of the society development. The present study was performed on samples of university students; therefore, one must be cautious in generalizing the study results to other people.

Finally, we recommend that the role of happiness be investigated in different prosocial aspects and the basis and roots of creating and achieving this feeling be brought to light. Future work may seek to find the specific form of interventions that increase happiness. A limitation in this study was using self-report data which increases the possibility of common answers.

## References

- Abolghasemi, A. (2010). [The validity and reliability of Empathy Quotient in students (Persian)]. *Journal of Psychological Studies*, 5(4), 21-37.
- Ali, F., Amorim, I. S., & Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2009). Empathy deficits and trait emotional intelligence in psychopathy and Machiavellianism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 47(7), 758-762.
- Argyle, M. (2001). *The Psychology of happiness*. London: Routledge.
- Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Cereto, S. C. (1989). *Principles of modern management, Functions and systems*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.
- DellaVigna, S., List, J. A., & Malmendier, U. (2012). Testing for altruism and social pressure in charitable giving. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 127(1), 1-56.
- Dickert, S., Sagara, N., & Slovic, P. (2011). Affective motivations to help others: A two-stage model of donation decisions. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 24(4), 361-376.
- Dovidio, J. F., Piliavin, J. A., Schroeder, D. A., & Penner, L. A. (2006). *The social psychology of prosocial behavior*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Elwell, F. (2002). The sociology of wright Mills. *Qualitative Sociology*, 25(3), 337-43.
- Graziano, W. G., & Tobin, R. (2009). Agreeableness. In M. R. Leary & R. H. Hoyle (Eds.), *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior* (pp. 44-61). New York, N.Y.: Guilford Press.
- Hamilton, W. D. (1964). The genetic evolution of social behavior. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 7(1), 1-52.
- Jolliffe, D., & Farrington, D. P. (2006). Examining the relationship between low empathy and bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32(6), 540-550.
- Kahana, E., Bhatta, T., Lovegreen, D. L., Kahana, B., & Midlarsky, E. (2014). Altruism, Helping, and Volunteering: Pathways to Well-Being in Late Life. *Journal of Age and Aging Health*, 25(1), 159-187.
- Kim, J., & Lee, S. J. (2010). Reliability and validity of the Korean version of the empathy quotient scale. *Psychiatry Investig*, 7(1), 24-30.
- Latané, B., & Darley, J. M. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Levine, R., Norenzayan, A., & Philbrick, K. (2006). Cultural Differences in the Helping of Strangers. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 32(5), 556-559.
- Light, S. N., Coan, J. A., Zahn-Waxler, C., Frye, C., Goldsmith, H. H., & Davidson, R. J. (2009). Empathy is associated with dynamic change in prefrontal brain electrical activity during positive emotion in children. *Child Development*, 80(4), 1210-1231.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: the architecture of sustainable change. *General Psychology*, 9(2), 111-131.
- Marnat, G. G. (2006). [Guideline to mental assessment (Persian)] (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). In H. Pasha Sharifi & M. R. Nikkhou (Trans.). Tehran: Roshd Press.
- Meyers, D. (2004). The friends, funds, and faith of happy people. *American Psychology*, 55(1), 56-67.
- Morrow-Howell, N., Hinterlong, J., Rozario, P. A., & Tang, F. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the well-being of older adults. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 58(5), 137-145.
- Mousavi, A. (1998). [The relationship between responsibility, job happiness, progress motivation and mental health in the educational teachers of Ahvaz City (Persian)] (MA thesis). Ahvaz University.
- Mujcic, R., & Frijters, P. (2011). Altruism in Society: Evidence from a Natural Experiment Involving Commuters. *IZA Discussion Papers*. Retrieved from <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iza/izadps/dp5648.html>.
- Ogrodniczuk, J., Piper, W. E., Joyce, A. S., Steinberg, P. I., & Duggal, S. (2009). Interpersonal Problem associated with narcissism among psychiatric outpatients. *Journal of Psychiatry*, 43(9), 837-842.
- Penner, L. A., & Orom, H. (2010). Enduring goodness: A Person X Situation perspective on prosocial behavior. In M. Mikuliner & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Prosocial motives, emotions, and behavior: The better angels of our nature* (pp. 55-72). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Peterson, C. (2000). The future of optimism. *American Psychologists*, 55(1), 44-55.
- Rieffe, C., Ketelear, L., & Wiefferink, C. H. (2010). Assessing empathy in young children: construction and validation of

an empathy questionnaire (em que). *Personality and Individual Difference*, 49(5), 362-367.

Rothstein, B. (2010). Corruption, Happiness, Social Trust and the WelfareState: A Causal Mechanisms Approach. *Journal of Age and Aging Health*, 25(1), 159-187.

Sousa, A, McDonald, S., Rushby, J., Li, S., Dimoska, A., & James, C. (2010). Understanding deficits in empathy after traumatic brain injury: The role of affective responsivity. *Cortex*, 47(5), 526-535.

Seyed Joodat, A., & Zarbakhsh, M. (2015). Adaptation to College and Interpersonal Forgiveness and the Happiness among the University Students. *Practice in Clinical Psychology*, 3(4), 242-250.

Tacey, D. J. (2003). *The Spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality*. Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers.

Webb, D. J., Green, C. L., & Brashear, T. G. (2000). Development and validation of scales to measure attitudes influencing monetary donations to charitable organizations. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28(2), 299-309.