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Phenomenon of Altruism: Current Youth Perceptions From the Historical and Sociological Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions held by youth regarding altruism are analyzed using the findings of empirical research. The article proposes a historical and sociological conceptualization of the phenomenon of altruism, which is interpreted as a set of actions and interactions between individuals and groups intended to benefit another person. Drawing on interview materials ($n = 34$), the authors argue that the younger generation is oriented toward prosocial activities (banal altruism) in everyday practices and believe altruists to be selfless, responsive, caring, well-bred, and kind people. Young people adopt the Golden Rule of morality, believing that altruistic acts promote social solidarity and justice. A small proportion of youth exhibit egocentric attitudes, which can be attributed to rationalized thinking, fear, and negative experiences of prosocial activities. The informants are selective in their willingness to engage in altruistic acts, focusing primarily on personal, reciprocal, public, and non-institutional altruism. The study revealed that youth consider altruism to be a form of local proactive normative behavior, which indicates the social potential of youth to reproduce social order and social sustainability through altruistic practices in everyday life.

Received 23 October 2024

Accepted 23 February 2025

Published online 30 April 2025

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KEYWORDS

altruism, altruist, prosocial behavior, egoism, youth, sociological concepts of altruism

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research was funded by the Russian Science Foundation and the Government of the Sverdlovsk Oblast No. 24-28-20018, <https://rscf.ru/project/24-28-20018/>

Introduction

As a social phenomenon, altruism has been the subject of a special sociological analysis for a long time. Introduced into scholarly discourse by the founder of sociology, Auguste Comte, the concept of altruism continues to be relevant under modern conditions both in terms of theoretical and methodological understanding and in the context of empirical research on prosocial attitudes and behavioral actions.

The interest in the phenomenon of altruism can be attributed to the institutional development of sociology as a science. Prosocial behavior serves as the basis of social order, or moral order (Rawls, 2010), social solidarity development, and social justice promotion in (post)modern social systems. It is also important to analyze the subjective perceptions, altruistic intentions, and actions of the representatives of different social groups, including young people, which gives altruistic acts new meaning and substance.

The younger generation plays an important role in the social structure, reproducing social experience, performing the innovative function, and sharing renewed experiences with successive generations in the course of their activities (Chuprov, 1998). Young people drive change and progress; they are a social resource that determines future societal development. The social potential of young people as innovators and social change drivers lies in the ability to perform socially significant functions in order to improve the social stability and sustainability of society. Therefore, it is relevant to examine altruism as perceived by young people, their readiness for altruistic acts, and actual prosocial practices from the historical and sociological perspectives.

In this study, we aim to conduct a historical and sociological analysis of the phenomenon of altruism and to study its perceptions held by the younger generation, as well as their prosocial attitudes and practices.

Historical and Sociological Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Altruism***Classical Sociology***

The concept of “altruism” was introduced into scientific discourse by Auguste Comte, who understood it to mean the implementation of the “live for others” principle. Proceeding from this, the founder of sociology stated the following: (a) the new

philosophy encourages all things to be viewed from the moral rather than the intellectual perspective; (b) the positive science “teaches us that individual happiness and public welfare are far more dependent upon the heart than upon the intellect” (Comte, 1875); (c) to establish a permanent harmony between various motives is possible only by giving absolute preference to the feeling that evokes a sincere and habitual desire to do good; it should be borne in mind that benevolent emotions generally carry lower inner energy than selfish emotions; (d) the positive science naturally turns into the Religion of Humanity; (e) “identifying happiness and duty, positive religion places them once and for all in moral improvement, the exclusive source of true unity” (Comte, 1877); (f) this will help to restore the broken link between the world of the living and the dead and to strengthen the social order; (g) the implementation of his doctrine through social policy measures is designed to ensure the harmonious existence of all people.

Auguste Comte interpreted positivism as a synthesis of science, Religion of Humanity, and social policy, through which society could overcome the crisis and take the path of progress, emphasizing that the humanistic essence of positivism “is to make our sympathetic instincts preponderate as far as possible over the selfish instincts; social feelings over personal feelings” (Comte, 1875). In his understanding, altruism was associated with the principles of solidarity and social justice.

From the standpoint of utilitarian ethics, fruitful research on altruism was conducted by Herbert Spencer (1879). Defining “altruism as being all action which, in the normal course of things, benefits others instead of benefiting self,” he rightly pointed out the close relationship between egoism and altruism: “The adequately egoistic individual retains those powers which make altruistic activities possible. The individual who is inadequately egoistic loses more or less of his ability to be altruistic.” However, the scientist noted that “undue altruism increases egoism; both directly in contemporaries and indirectly in posterity” (Spencer, 1879).

According to Herbert Spencer (1892), altruism can be unconscious and conscious, physical and automatically-psychical; however, regardless of its nature, it includes all actions through which the life of offsprings and the species is preserved. Herbert Spencer believed that

comparisons of the altruistic sentiments resulting from sympathy, as exhibited in different types of men and different social states, may be conveniently arranged under three heads—(a) Pity, which should be observed as displayed towards offspring, towards the sick and aged, and towards enemies. (b) Generosity (duly discriminated from the love of display) ... The manifestations of this sentiment, too, are to be noted in respect of their range ... (c) Justice. (Spencer, 1892, p. 368)

Distinguishing between negative altruism (“curbing of the egoistic impulses”) and positive altruism (i.e., making efforts to benefit others leads to the well-being of our fellow human beings), Spencer paid considerable attention to “secondary” altruism, that is beneficence. The negative variants included the restrictions on freedom of competition and contract, undeserved rewards, displays of superiority, expression of disapproval and approval, and various sanctions; the positive variants included

marital, parental, filial, public, and political beneficence; assistance to the sick, accident victims, the unfortunate, those in danger, and the poor.

As a liberal, Spencer supported private beneficence, while advocating against state beneficence, which breeds bureaucracy and dependency. He was convinced that aid should not be given to “vicious” people, “good-for-nothings, who ... live on the good-for-somethings: vagrants and sots, criminals and those on the way to crime, youths who are burdens on hard-worked parents, men who appropriate the wages of their wives, fellows who share the gains of prostitutes,” etc. (Spencer, 1884/1981). We can agree with his conclusion that the transformation of human nature from egoistic to altruistic is a long process and will take ages.

Some views of Spencer were criticized by his contemporaries. For example, Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin believed that the ethical progress of a person was primarily determined by mutual help rather than mutual struggle (Kropotkin, 1921/1979). As a sociologist, Kropotkin ranged himself on the side of eudemonists or hedonists and did not offer an explanation as to why a man considers his greatest pleasure in a kind of life which we call moral. The researcher refuted Spencer’s statement (“egoistic claims must take precedence of altruistic claims”) pointing out that “the modern development of society tends toward enabling each one of us to enjoy not only personal benefits, but to a much greater extent, social benefits” (Kropotkin, 1921/1979). As an example, the Russian sociologist cited tens of thousands of European associations, societies, fraternities, unions, and institutions that represent “an immense amount of voluntary, unambitious, and unpaid or underpaid work—what are they but so many manifestations, under an infinite variety of aspects, of the same ever-living tendency of man towards mutual aid and support” (Kropotkin, 1908).

As a result of the discussions, the role of egoism and altruism in the motivation of a person’s behavior became relevant in social research. For example, according to Émile Durkheim (1897/2002), the word “altruism” expresses the state where “ego is not its own property,” where it merges with something other than itself, and where the focus of activity is exterior to itself, but within the group to which the individual belongs. Proceeding from this, he first analyzed the phenomenon of altruistic suicide committed as a result of an underdeveloped individuality and submission of the individual to a group and the society as a whole. The existence of this type of suicide is evidenced by the following cases in history: (a) suicides of the elderly and sick; (b) suicide of wives after the death of their husbands; (c) suicides of slaves, servants, etc., after the death of their master or chief (Durkheim, 1897/2002). Reflecting on the commonness of altruistic suicide in the military, the French sociologist gave a clear warning: “Where altruistic suicide is prevalent, man is always ready to give his life; however, at the same time, he sets no more value on that of another” (Durkheim, 1897/2002).

The conclusion of Durkheim that “social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon which by itself is not amenable to exact observation and especially not to measurement” (1893/2013; p. 52) is still valid. In real life, special forms of solidarity can be distinguished: professional, domestic, national, present-day, that of the past, etc., each of which has its own nature. It is true solidarity that can prevent the negative manifestations of altruism.

Rejecting Durkheim's "anti-psychologism," Georg Simmel, one of the founders of formal sociology, argued that it is wrong to divide individual actions into egoistic and altruistic since these behaviors go hand in hand (Simmel, 1892). He believes there to be an inextricable mixture of selfishness and altruism along with ambition and concern in the universal human endeavor to impose our opinions about what is theoretically and practically right on everyone else and to shape their lives accordingly. The German researcher attributed this to the fact that as altruism (which prevents egoism) increases, it becomes a psychological end in itself for the individual.

Georg Simmel convincingly showed the dialectics of subjective assessment of this phenomenon: the same action can be both selfish and altruistic, depending on the views of a person. For example, if an individual, selflessly taking care of their family, uses means that harm third parties, this behavior is altruistic only from the individual's point of view; the wider social circles consider it to be selfish since, in relation to them, the individual and their family are a single subject (Simmel, 1892).

Neoclassical Sociology

In neoclassical sociology, an original concept of altruism was proposed by Pitirim Sorokin. Researchers note that his views were affected by Christianity and the teachings of Leo Tolstoy (Krotov & Dolgov, 2011; Lomonosova & Egoshina, 2019); as well as Georg Simmel, he gave special attention to the psychological component of the phenomenon. In his view, depending on various combinations of emotional, volitional, and intellectual elements, altruistic love, in terms of its psychological characterization, is distinguished by "tones" or "colors": compassion, sympathy, kindness, friendship, loyalty, reverence, benevolence, admiration, respect, etc.

The researcher believed that all true altruistic experiences and acts exhibit two common characteristics (Sorokin, 1964):

- the ego or "I" of a loving individual seeks to merge and identify with the beloved "You";
- all beloved individuals are viewed and perceived as the ultimate value. If altruistic love remains at the level of purely psychological experience and does not manifest itself in obvious altruistic actions, it is "hypocritical altruism".

Having studied the altruization of the great apostles of selfless love, the sociologist identified three types of altruists: (a) "fortunate" who are humble from early childhood and focused entirely on love, superior self, or God; (b) "catastrophic," whose personalities were dramatically transformed by an illness, death of a loved one, etc. and "late," who internalized new values; (c) the intermediate type exhibits some of the characteristics of the "fortunate" and "late-catastrophic" types (Sorokin, 1964). Historical examples show that, as a rule, the altruization of an individual is possible only through the altruization of their group or institutions.

As the head of the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism, Pitirim Sorokin (1964) conducted a series of experiments that allowed him to develop five dimensions of altruistic love (Table 1).

Table 1
Dimensions of Altruistic Love (According to Pitirim Sorokin)

Dimension	Range
Intensity	From zero to infinity, from a rich man giving a few cents to a starving man to a voluntary sacrifice of “body and soul” for the well-being of a loved one
Extensity	From the zero point of self-love (egotism) to the love of all mankind
Duration	From the briefest possible moment to several decades, often the whole life of an individual or a group
Purity	From pure love of a human being to the “soiled love” driven by selfish motives of adventure, utility, and pleasure
Adequacy	From “blind” to “wise”

Note. Source: Sorokin (1964).

The research of Pitirim Sorokin on the subject of altruism has been repeatedly criticized in the scientific literature. For example, Lewis Coser (2003) hesitated “to say much about the value of the inquiries of the Center,” while Andrey Bykov (2015) believes that Sorokin’s studies of altruism have contributed little to advancing the scientific explanation of this phenomenon. However, we argue that they underestimate the contribution of Sorokin to the study of altruism. His statement that “the altruistic transformation of man and man’s universe is the paramount item on today’s agenda of history” (Sorokin, 1964) is relevant and has set a vector for the continued development of sociology in this direction. For example, Alexander Dolgov (2014) characterized specific techniques of altruization proposed by Pitirim Sorokin.

A different (structural-functional) approach was developed by Robert Merton, who defined institutional altruism as a special form of altruism in which structural regulation, specifically the distribution of rewards and punishments, promotes behavior that is useful for others (Rubtsova & Martianova, 2012). Having examined the issue of institutional altruism in professions, the American sociologist concluded that the reward structure in the professional community promotes the professional’s interest in placing the client’s well-being above the standard required by the profession (Merton, 1982). Thus, institutional altruism is focused on action alternatives through which the social structure increases the likelihood of people choosing altruistic actions over all other possible options.

A representative of the neo-institutional approach, Kieran Healy, convincingly proved that the organizational and institutional environment can structure and develop the basic capacity for altruistic acts in modern society. He identified three types of logistical effectiveness: (a) resources, i.e., larger organizations that have better funding and/or staffing have more opportunities to provide charitable services; (b) scope, i.e., organizations represented in many locations are more likely to find potential donors; (c) persistence, i.e., consistent actions taken by organizations enable greater success in procuring donors (Healy, 2004).

Postclassical and Nonclassical Sociology: Approaches to the Study of Altruism

In postclassical sociology, assistance is understood primarily as a contribution to the fulfillment of another person's needs. Niklas Luhmann (1975) showed that, although archaic symbiotic relationships and morally generalized forms of assistance still exist, the main focus of social assistance today is on decision-making programs, that is, on the rules by which the accuracy of decisions is assessed.

This fact can be attributed to the nature of modern society: many functions that used to be performed at the level of the whole society are transferred to organizations (due to the advantages associated with the functional division and specialization of services). To the extent that the institutional environment defines the horizons of possibility, its characteristics become the basis for life experience and action. Within this framework, the decision to help or not to help is no longer a matter of cordiality, reciprocity, or morality, but a matter of procedural training and interpretation of the program that is implemented by professionals in a limited working time. The list of problems to which the organization is guaranteed to respond is prepared by its own structures.

The organized efforts to eliminate problem cases supplant other motives for helping because they are characterized by greater effectiveness and capability to regulate workload distribution. Niklas Luhmann points out the danger in this since not every problem can be solved by organizing social work. It is clear that direct assistance is also possible and makes sense. The society recognizes, including normatively, the freedom of individual decision-making (Luhmann, 1975, pp. 134–149).

Nonclassical sociology offers a variety of approaches. From a sociobiological perspective, altruism involving self-sacrifice arises from the need to pass on the best set of genes shared by several individuals to the next generation. Behaviorists argue that altruism is not a behavioral feature: it is based entirely on the intentions behind the action (Rushton, 1982).

From the perspective of the social exchange theory, the altruist providing assistance to another is in a dominant position, whereas the person receiving it has a subordinate role. Equity may become part of the context since the target of the altruism seeks to restore balance. Although altruistic actions may not lead to immediate reward from the "rewarder," the reward may be delayed or vicarious (Honeycutt, 1981).

Jennifer Carrera et al. (2018) proposed the concept of banal altruism aimed at addressing mundane tasks. It is characterized by the use of mundane, most common practices to make a positive contribution to societal development. As a special type of banal altruism, they identify research altruism, which is inherent in people who participate in scientific projects that promote public benefit. They see it as part of civic engagement. Noteworthy is that some differences were reported in how participants characterized their motivation, depending on whether they associated it with a sense of connection to common humanity, to science, or to community organization (Carrera et al., 2018).

Brent Simpson and Robb Willer (2015), while pointing to the crucial role of such social mechanisms as rules, reputation, and relations in creating and maintaining a high level of cooperation in social groups, emphasize the duality inherent in these factors.

They encourage less altruistic people to behave the way more altruistic individuals do while hiding their true motives. Since they deprive individuals of their ability to critically assess their own character and the character of other individuals, intrinsic motivation and trust often diminish, even with increased cooperation. Thus, social mechanisms offer group members to adhere to a sort of social contract, which comes at a certain cost, but in exchange provides the benefits of efficient and productive group living (Simpson & Willer, 2015).

In general, foreign researchers are convinced that the sociology of altruism and social solidarity has been institutionalized within sociology. In the broadest sense, this field of knowledge focuses on those aspects of the individual, society, and culture that benefit individuals and enrich social life. It is concerned with systematically studying these phenomena in interpersonal, intergroup, and international relations (Jeffries et al., 2006). An analysis of the concepts and approaches presented above leads us to a sociological understanding of altruism as a set of actions of individuals and interaction between them and groups intended to benefit another person, allowing us to classify the types of altruism (Table 2).

Table 2
Classification of Altruism

Classification Criterion	Types
Subject	Personal and group
Object	Different sociodemographic groups (men/women; children/youth/middle-aged people/aged people)
Consciousness	Unconscious and conscious
Nature	True (pure), hedonistic, emotional, and false (“hypocritical”)
Direction	Kin and reciprocal
Scope	Universal, local, and targeted
Specific nature of manifestation	Spontaneous and regular
Duration	Short-term, medium-term, and long-term
Frequency	Occasional, periodic, and constant
Degree of overtness	Public, semi-public, and latent
Institutionality	Institutional and non-institutional
Compliance with requirements	Mandatory, recommended, permissible, and approved
Intensity of altruism	Intense, normal, and weak
Effectiveness	Highly effective, effective, and ineffective
Result	Positive and negative

Altruism of the Younger Generation as a Sociological Problem

The younger generation is a resource-rich social group that should be the driving force behind economic, demographic, professional, and cultural breakthroughs in societal development. Young people exhibit agency in their lives (Zubok & Chuprov, 2019), which indicates the altruistic potential of the younger generation and its readiness to embrace, adopt, and reproduce prosocial practices in the future. We consider the altruistic behavior of the younger generation to be a manifestation of agency: helping behavior becomes a factor in self-determination and, according to Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), social identification. Ngai Pun et al. (2023) found that the prosocial activities of working-class students can help build and maintain social solidarity.

A wide range of modern research on altruism suggests that prosocial behavior among youth has a positive effect on their well-being (Rosli & Perveen, 2021) and helps develop social ties (Aknin et al., 2013), as well as fostering civic-mindedness (Gogleva, 2024) and social competence (Penner et al., 2005). Having analyzed scientific publications on volunteer activities, Ching Man Lam (2012) concluded that volunteers are less prone to depression than non-participants in prosocial activities; they tend to experience greater happiness, have high life satisfaction and self-esteem, and are better adjusted to life.

Studies show that certain personality traits contribute to altruism: abilities to empathize (Silke et al., 2018), assume the viewpoint of another (Batson et al., 1991), and assume responsibility (Tam & Yeung, 1999). In a survey of students, Maria Nedoshivina and Anatolii Svetsitskiy found that altruists perform selfless acts to benefit others, as well as striving to be useful and necessary (Nedoshivina & Svetsitskiy, 2014). In a study of students, Livia Yuliawati discovered that the “eudaimonic motive of wellbeing serves as a positive predictor of anonymous prosocial behavior” (i.e., without seeking recognition), while “the extrinsic motive for wellbeing emerges as a positive predictor of engaging in public prosocial behavior” (Yuliawati, 2024). Also, Carol Marchel found that motivation behind the altruistic behavior of the younger generation develops stepwise: a transition from reciprocal (receiving help from another person in the future) to true (lack of expectations from another) altruism (Marchel, 2003). We believe that along with the need to selflessly help people, youth also have egoistic motives behind their altruistic behavior, i.e., the importance of external evaluation, the desire to appear socially desirable, and the need to develop social contacts. In general, researchers indicate the importance of promoting altruistic behavior among youth (Bartolo et al., 2023) since their prosocial orientations are crucial to well-being both at the societal and individual levels (Dickey et al., 2020).

This study aims to examine perceptions held by youth regarding altruism and their orientation toward helping behavior in everyday life, drawing on the ideas of both classic sociologists and modern researchers. This idea seems promising since it allows the sociological concepts of altruism to be updated and contributes to the development of modern sociological science.

Methods

This empirical sociological study was conducted among the students of the Ural Federal University in April 2024. The research objectives were as follows: first, to determine what the younger generation understands by altruism; second, to ascertain whether young people perform altruistic acts in their everyday practice and perceive them as altruistic; third, to find out whether young people are ready for different types of altruistic behavior.

A total of 34 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview guide comprised ten questions (five open-ended questions and five closed-ended questions). In the questionnaire, we offered informants four projective situations (vignette method: Kalinin, 2022; Puzanova & Tertyshnikova, 2016) designed to determine the readiness of interviewees to act altruistically. The situations were designed to identify the predominant type of altruistic practice that might be of interest to young people. All vignettes measured conscious, local, short-term, approved/permissible, and effective types of altruism with a positive outcome. The main characteristics of the vignettes are as follows. The first vignette describes a situation of helping a close relative, which corresponds to personal, kin, and non-institutional altruism; this vignette was given the conventional name “Relative.” The second situation (“Charitable foundation”) is aimed at measuring personal, reciprocal, public, and institutional altruism, which is expressed through financial assistance to a charitable foundation followed by a public demonstration of the altruistic act by the subject. The third vignette, conventionally called “The elderly,” attempts to identify informants’ orientation toward true, group, public, and non-institutional altruism when fulfilling the role of a volunteer caregiver for the aged and elderly as the target of altruism. The fourth vignette (“Girl”) reveals a group, emotional, public, and institutional type of altruism toward a child: a situation is described to informants where they need to help find a little girl lost in the woods. In assessing readiness to engage in altruistic practices, a scale from 1 to 10 was proposed (where 1 = *not ready to act altruistically*, 10 = *maximally ready to act altruistically*).

On average, interviews lasted 25 minutes. The selection of informants took into account gender (the participants included 18 young women and 16 young men) and age (the average age of informants was 20.2 years). The informants were interviewed in their free time. After transcribing the interview materials, the obtained texts were summarized and grouped according to the research objectives.

The obtained materials are not representative, and the data cannot be extended to all Russian youth; they may also be inconsistent with the research data of sociologists who focused on the altruistic behavior of the younger generation from other countries. This study is exploratory in nature and provides a preliminary assessment of the social potential of Russian youth on the example of students studying at the Ural Federal University located in the central part of Eurasia.

According to the findings, the traits of an altruist, as perceived by the students, are as follows. An altruist is a person who can be described as being:

- selfless, i.e., “not seeking personal gain” (Male, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- responsive, i.e., “helping others is not something responsive people have to do, but something they want to do” (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- mobile, i.e., a person “that can easily drop everything and do something necessary and important for someone else” (Female, 22 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- caring, i.e., showing “concern for the people around them” (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- well-bred, i.e., “people are taught from childhood to help those in need; it is a particular worldview” (Male, 18 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- kind, as “only kind people seek to do good to others” (Female, 18 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- ready to sacrifice their resources for the sake of another, i.e., demonstrating “willingness to sacrifice as the ability to do something, even if they have to spend time or money that they need” (Male, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- life-loving, since “those who love life the most help others” (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- goal-oriented, as “persistent and goal-oriented people do not ignore those who need help” (Male, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- happy, since “those who help others are happy, and vice versa, those who are happy help others” (Female, 22 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- self-reliant, i.e., “resolute, proactive, and self-reliant” (Male, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.);
- considerate, meaning that “a considerate person shows empathy and compassion and knows how to sympathize” (Female, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

In several cases, the informants used words reinforcing altruistic traits: “very kind/very well-bred,” “highly unselfish,” and “largely self-reliant.” A wide range of descriptions of the altruist was given by informants through the definition of altruistic behavior: from the clichéd phrase “helping people” (10 statements) to the key idea of prosocial practice, that is self-sacrifice to benefit someone or to save something (three statements).

Do the interviewees describe themselves as altruistic? Two-thirds of respondents are sure that they are altruists, explaining their help to others by the desire to support/help/show concern: “I don’t think about getting something in return for helping someone. I like to help others. I feel happier” (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.). Marina Butovskaya et al. (2021) note that happy people feel the desire to do good to others or, conversely, altruistic acts and empathy trigger positive emotions and a feeling of joy. The authors believe that this phenomenon can be attributed to the correlation between empathy and the level of oxytocin, which increases the feeling of happiness.

The informants use the golden rule of morality, that is “treat others as you would like to be treated” (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.), to define themselves as altruists. Noteworthy is that the golden rule shapes the behavior and values-

based attitude of a person toward other people in the context of ever-changing life circumstances, establishing the individual as a responsible social actor, who maintains a moral compass. The reference to the golden rule indicates that the younger generation embraces moral values in their lives: "There's nothing unusual; it's an informal rule to help someone who is in need. I'd say that it's everyone's responsibility" (Male, 22 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

The informants also raised issues considered by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, specifically, the consideration of the phenomenon of altruism from the perspective of social solidarity and justice: "I have always helped the vulnerable (elderly women and small children); we need to support each other as it makes us stronger" (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "I believe it is right and fair to help those in need ... if we choose not to overlook the misfortune of the individual, we will become better people, and the world will become a better place" (Male, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.). According to modern studies, individuals are more prosocial toward poor than wealthy help recipients, believing this behavior to be fair (van Doesum et al., 2017).

The third part of the respondents expressed a selfish attitude; these respondents can be divided into three groups. In the first group, their attitude is associated with the demonstration of self-love, i.e., with the highest degree of egocentrism: "not interested in other people's problems" (Female, 18 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "I always put myself first" (Male, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "not ready to give energy to other people" (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "act in my own interests. I want what's best for myself" (Female, 18 years old; Trans. by N. P.). In this case, the informants perceive themselves to be of special value. As a result, while pursuing their own interests, a self-centered person stops noticing the problems of others and feeling other people's pain and stops at nothing to achieve their goals (Ivanova & Smirnova, 2019).

The absence of altruistic attitudes in the second group, the informants explain by rationalized thinking: "I reflect on my actions" (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "I only do what makes sense to me. I try to take a calculated approach" (Male, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.). Drawing on the ideas of Herbert Simon (1978), it can be argued that the "utility function" serves as a benchmark in life for some young people, which means that they refrain from altruistic acts if their potential rational utility is reduced to zero.

The egoistic orientation in the actions of the third group is associated with the negative experience of interaction with people, as well as with fears and risks involved in interacting with other people: "People are mean and petty; they have no desire to help" (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "I would probably be willing to do some good deeds if it were not for the possibility of dealing with aggression or hostility: those who are in need do not expect selfless acts" (Male, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.). According to the VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center), 81% of Russians experience feelings of rage and strong anger at various intervals: every fifth person (20%) has such feelings weekly (every day or several times a week). Over a third of Russians who experience rage (38%) reported feeling anger toward other people due to their lack of good manners, insolence, inflated self-esteem, violation of boundaries, imposition of opinions, stupidity, rudeness, disrespect, lies, and hypocrisy (Upravlenie

Gnevom, 2023). Regarding fear, according to our research, 80% of young people believe that under the influence of fear, individuals become more aggressive, selfish, and mistrustful (Abramova et al., 2022).

In the study, three informants adopted an intermediate position, which was noted by Georg Simmel (1892): the same practice may be viewed as altruistic by some people, while others may view it as selfish. This is a position that primarily involves kin altruism, and nonrelatives may view the subject's actions as selfish: "I consider myself an altruist, but only in relation to my relatives. I am not ready to make sacrifices for others" (Female, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.); "I can be selfish or altruistic, but I am certainly altruistic when it comes to my relatives" (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

In defining his position, one of the informants addressed the issue of love manifestation: "I am ready to give anything for the happiness of a loved one, but when it comes to others, it depends on a lot of things" (Male, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.). This refers to love for a particular person and unselfish actions solely toward the object of sympathy. The expression of love for all humanity as a means of reducing aggression and achieving social order in the context of Sorokin's ideas is rather an ideal model of the future: "It seems to me that altruism toward all people cannot be achieved right now; it is impossible for everyone to love and care for all people" (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

Altruistic Practices of Young People

To what extent are survey participants engaged in actual altruistic practices? They were given lists of actions involving selfless assistance. Altruistic actions are performed to help primarily the older generation (aged and elderly people) who need assistance in getting from one place to another (for example, the informants actively described their experience in helping people who needed to cross the road). The respondents noted that they were moved by compassion:

On my way to the university, I saw an elderly woman at the crossroads, who was slowly crossing the road; the traffic light was already blinking. I felt very sorry for her, so I raised my hand to keep cars from driving and helped her across the road. (Female, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.)

According to Xiaomin Liu et al. (2023), the greater the intensity of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, the stronger the altruistic motivation and the more likely individuals are to engage in helping behavior.

Compassion, magnanimity, and generosity, which were mentioned by the classics of sociology when characterizing the phenomenon of altruism, manifest themselves in financial assistance to the aged. One informant reported assisting an elderly person at a store by paying for her purchases and walking her home:

An elderly woman, probably in her 80s, was buying milk, sour cream, and bread at a small store located on the first floor of a residential building. I felt so sorry for her; she had a stick and a backpack, and I could tell she was having a hard time.

I decided to buy her this food; after all, it cost very little. Then I walked her home; it turned out that she lived in the same building. (Male, 22 years old; Trans. by N. P.)

According to Elena Shmeleva et al. (2021), the older generation is an attractive target for the altruistic activities of teachers in training: 41% of respondents are ready to help aged people, and the same proportion of respondents would like to help veterans. Noteworthy is that most actively students participate in the organization of cultural and sporting events (36%).

Almost all informants noted that they provided assistance to strangers on the street who needed help navigating a city. Also, the objects of altruistic actions were neighbors who asked for help during their vacation (to look after pets/water the plants) and for whom the respondents held the elevator/entrance doors.

Routine altruistic practices that demonstrate the social and moral potential of the younger generation include selfless assistance to classmates/coursemates in solving education-related issues (doing homework, studying a topic, etc.); in addition, students noted that they offer their seats in transport and let people jump the queue.

According to Jennifer Carrera and her colleagues (2018), the specified practices can be viewed as banal altruism, i.e., as routine actions of the informants in everyday life. They regard such altruistic acts as normal and unconscious: "I don't stop to think that I should offer my seat to an elderly person or hold the elevator door open: it's natural for any well-bred person" (Male, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

Two-thirds of respondents admitted that they gave money to a stranger, while only one-third of respondents gave money to charity. One of the informants described her altruistic act as follows:

At the subway station, a girl approached me and said that she had forgotten her purse and phone at home and was late for an important meeting. She asked me to buy her a ticket. I happened to have cash on me, so I gave her a hundred rubles. She asked for my phone number so she could transfer the money to me in the evening. To be honest, I didn't expect to get the hundred rubles back. I just wanted to help her at that moment. But she kept her word, thanked me, and paid me back. (Female, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.)

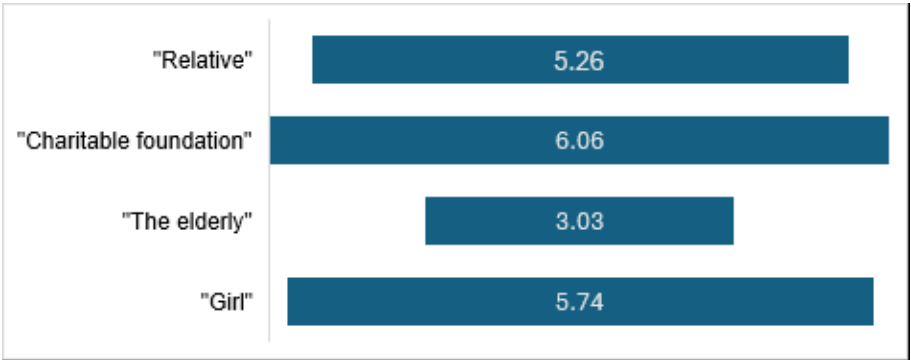
With respect to charity, the informants note that altruism is primarily targeted: "Altruism means helping a particular person. As for giving money to charity, I don't know how the money will be spent. I'd rather buy food for some elderly woman" (Female, 21 years old; Trans. by N. P.). The respondents are ready for collective practices of altruism: "I know that they raise money at the university. I haven't donated yet, but my friend told me about it" (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.). According to the informants, social networks have a high mobilization potential, uniting like-minded people to provide targeted assistance: "Money was raised for New Year presents for orphans via a VK¹ group, and then photos related to the charitable work were posted"

¹ VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

(Female, 20 years old; Trans. by N. P.). Collective altruism builds a spirit of solidarity that manifests itself in cooperative prosocial activity focused on doing good for others. Such practices of engagement in collective altruistic behavior promote group identity and integration through the establishment of social ties and relationships, as well as creating an environment of people confident in themselves and in each other who are able to support and help in any difficult life situation (Anosov, 2022). According to Pitirim Sorokin (1964), the altruization of an individual is possible only through the altruization of their group or institutions; thus, it can be argued that engagement in collective altruistic practices and self-identification with altruists sets the vector of the further altruization of society.

An analysis of projective situations (vignettes) shows that the younger generation is primarily interested in personal, reciprocal, public, and institutional altruism: the “Charitable foundation” vignette scored highest (Figure 2). Noteworthy is that the modern world is witnessing a change in the value system: the consumer society is transforming into a “society of impressions,” in which the experiences of individuals, their sensory and emotional expectations become the driving force behind social activities. In this case, the description of a new experience and public demonstration of actions, as well as their recognition by reference groups/audience, determines the desire to engage in a particular activity. As noted by Amina Agrba, people of the post-pandemic period have increased needs to get new impressions and such value-laden concepts as mercy, compassion, and altruism become more relevant (Agrba, 2023). Next, in descending order, follow the situations “Girl” (group, emotional, public, and institutional) and “Relative” (personal, kin, and non-institutional). The findings showed that young people are virtually unprepared to provide care for the aged and elderly, which indicates that true altruism is viewed by the informants more as social heroism: “I am not ready to provide care for the aged; it is very hard both physically and emotionally; few people are able to do that...” (Female, 19 years old; Trans. by N. P.).

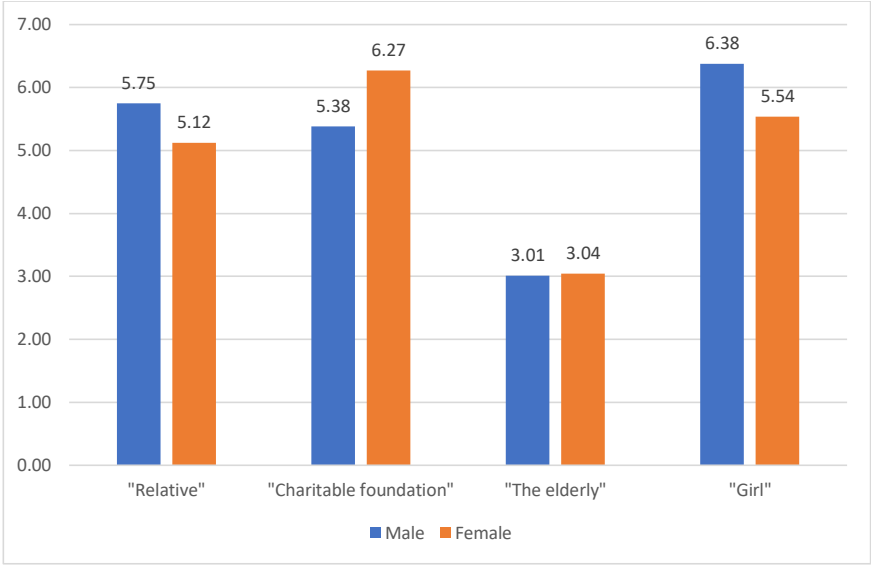
Figure 2
Readiness of Young People for an Altruistic Act



Note. The index ranges from 1 to 10. A higher index value indicates greater readiness of the informant to engage in an altruistic act. Source: developed by the authors.

A comparative analysis of responses given by young men and women revealed differences in what altruistic act they would choose to perform (Figure 3): men are more willing to help search for a little girl, as well as to assist a relative, than women. However, studies on altruism show that women tend to engage in prosocial behavior more often than men, which can be attributed to the specifics of gender socialization and the adoption of a social role that requires them to take care of others, which is characteristic of the female community (Pastor et al., 2024).

Figure 3
Readiness of Young People for an Altruistic Act Depending on Gender



Note. The index ranges from 1 to 10. A higher index value indicates greater readiness of the informant to engage in an altruistic act. Source: developed by the authors.

Thus, the analysis of vignettes shows that the younger generation is generally oriented toward personal, reciprocal, public, and non-institutional altruism, with young men being more emotionally affected than young women and kinship ties being stronger for them. This study partially confirms the conclusion reached by Maria Pevnaya et al. (2022): the proportion of young people who consciously refuse to volunteer or doubt that they will volunteer in the future is increasing. Individual practices of altruism are replacing institutionally organized and established altruistic practices; this transformation is also noted by other researchers (Kicherova et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The materials of the conducted study allowed us to draw the following conclusions. The historical and sociological analysis of the phenomenon of altruism revealed that it is generally interpreted as a set of actions and interactions between individuals

and groups intended to benefit another. The younger generation associates altruism with prosocial behavior aimed at helping others. As perceived by young people, an altruist is, first of all, a selfless, responsive, mobile, caring, well-bred, and kind person. Youth who regard themselves as a generation of altruists embrace the golden rule of morality, believing that altruistic acts promote social solidarity and social justice. It is common for young people to practice banal altruism, which is a routine practice in everyday life. Egoistic orientations can be attributed to the egocentric attitudes of a small proportion of young people, as well as rationalized thinking, fear, and negative experiences of prosocial actions.

The study revealed the following contradictions in the altruistic actions of young people and their readiness for prosocial activity. First, young people who exhibit compassion, magnanimity, and generosity act selflessly toward the aged and elderly; however, they are not ready to take care of them. Second, for young people, real prosocial activity involves providing direct targeted assistance to a particular person, i.e., it is non-institutional in nature; however, in a projective situation, informants would prefer to use institutional structures (charitable foundations) in order to make a public record of selfless acts. Third, gratuitous assistance to relatives, which is perceived by young people as altruism and practiced in everyday life, is not realized in the projective situation: relatives are not the main object of informants' altruistic acts.

The representatives of the younger generation exhibited selectivity, indicating readiness for altruistic acts, focusing primarily on personal, reciprocal, public, and non-institutional altruism. In general, the study suggests that under modern conditions, young people view altruism as a form of local proactive normative behavior practiced primarily every day. This fact indicates the social potential of youth to reproduce social order and social sustainability since local/banal/everyday altruism is the basis for setting the vector of further societal development.

We believe that a promising direction for further altruism research would be to study the role of social media in shaping the altruistic attitudes of the younger generation, as well as to determine the effect of altruistic behavior on the social well-being of the population as a whole.

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