

ALTRUISM AROUND THE WORLD. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM INTERNATIONAL SURVEYS?

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When first addressing Microeconomics and upon opening any of the textbooks widely recommended in the many universities around the world, one is introduced to the protagonists of the theoretical models that claim to analyse the decision-making processes in different situations: the utility-maximising individuals who care only about their own well-being. However, although this type of individual remains in force in the traditional economic models, there are many behaviours and facts in reality that exist beyond the implications of this very restrictive assumption, which show that the agents are not limited solely to self-interest, but may also incorporate altruistic goals.

We can consider, for instance, the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968), which predicts the inexorable depletion of common goods due to the selfish motivation of agents. Unlike this result, the experimental literature provides extensive evidence on the social preference of individuals when allocating common resources in order to prevent their depletion (Cárdenas, 2000; Casari & Plott, 2003; Rustagi et al., 2010; Fehr & Leibbrandt, 2011; Polania-Reyes & Echeverry, 2015, among others). Likewise, many other behaviours, usual in the functioning of society, such as cooperation with unknown people, the provision of public goods, the reduction of global polluting emissions, the maintenance of social order, and charitable actions, cannot be explained without assuming social preferences (Ostrom, 1990; Fehr & Schmidt, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Gächter, 2014; Caraballo et al., 2023; Zapata et al., 2023). Moreover, psychologists (Tabibnia et al., 2008) and biologists (Nowack, 2006) also show that individuals are motivated by the well-being of others, even to the detriment of themselves.

Altruism has therefore increasingly attracted the attention not only of researchers in economics, but also those of other scientific disciplines. In fact, in the last thirty years, the number of scientific papers with the keywords “pro-social”, “altruism”, and/or “altruistic” collected by the Web of Science has increased from one single paper published in 1990 to 1,068 in 2021. This vast literature implies an enriching diversity of approaches, but it is, at the same time, confusing both from a theoretical and from an empirical perspective. On the one hand, the concept of altruism employed differs in the literature, and is sometimes not even explicitly defined. As an example, Pfattheicher et al. (2022)

compile the definitions proposed in papers about altruism published in the main Psychology journals, and they conclude that only 25.6% thereof provide an explicit definition of altruism. On the other hand, from an empirical perspective, there are several methods to proxy altruism. In the economic literature, the presence of altruistic individuals has usually been verified thorough experiments and through information extracted from the various surveys available. Therefore, the results obtained in the studies might depend heavily both on the concept of altruism employed and the way in which this concept is empirically approached.

This paper strives to provide an overview of altruism around the world whilst tackling these two issues from an economic perspective. Since we address altruism at an international level, our focus is on international surveys as a way of approaching altruism, and experimental methods have been disregarded. More precisely, we have selected the most commonly used international surveys in the economic literature: Global Preference Survey (GPS), World Values Survey (WVS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), European Social Survey (ESS), and General Social Survey (GSS). These surveys have been widely employed to analyse the characteristics of altruistic individuals and the implications of altruism on areas as diverse as the contribution to public goods, the prevention of COVID, the reduction of corruption, the redistribution of income, and public.

However, the results achieved should be cautiously interpreted and compared since, on the one hand, as mentioned above, the definitions of altruism may differ or lack precision. This is a main issue because the questions selected in the surveys to proxy altruism are assumed to be linked to the definition. Therefore, the results can depend to a great extent both on the survey employed and on the question selected. A precise definition of altruism is therefore first given based on Fehr and Schmidt (2006) and on Monroy et al. (2017). Those economics papers that employ a definition of altruism closely linked to ours are subsequently selected from those that employ at least one of the five surveys mentioned above. The questions that are most frequently used in those selected papers are then chosen. In this respect, it can be seen that there are two types of questions: one type referring to the environment, and another type referring to charitable activities. Thus, we consider both an environmental dimension and a charitable dimension for altruism. Moreover, by focusing on the answers, differentiation is made between various degrees of intensity in the altruism revealed by individuals. These factors enable the five surveys to be jointly exploited in order to describe altruism at an international level.

There are three relevant contributions of our paper to the economic literature on altruism. First, a precise definition of altruism is provided, and this definition is then related with those questions of the five surveys selected that can be employed to proxy the type of altruism defined. Second, five international surveys have been merged, which provides a wide sample of more than 583,000 observations for further studies on altruism and its implications. Third, with this merged survey, and

by considering various degrees for the altruism shown by individuals, and with the inclusion of two dimensions of altruism (environmental and charitable), we can outline a consistent profile of an altruistic individual at an international level. To the best of our knowledge, these issues have not previously been jointly regarded in the literature.

Our results show that for the two dimensions considered, altruism appears to be associated with being female, having a university degree, and being in employment, and is positively related to age. However, when different degrees in altruism are introduced, several differences appear for the two dimensions, that is, the altruism shown by individuals may differ in intensity depending on the way said altruism is proxied, which should be borne in mind when studying the social and economic implications of altruism. Moreover, the relevance of the socio-economic variables considered differs across geographical regions.

In further research, we will analyse the role of social diversity (Buitrago and Caraballo, 2022) in explaining the differences observed in altruistic behaviour at an international level.

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