EXPLORING RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AS PREDICTORS OF ALTRUISM AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the effects of religiosity and socioeconomic status on altruism among undergraduates in Southeast Nigeria. The Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) and Durkheim's Unified Theoretical Model of Religion (1964) formed the framework of the study. Both theories provide essential frameworks for understanding altruism in the Nigerian context: Social exchange theory highlights the transactional nature of relationships, while Durkheim emphasizes religion's role in promoting social cohesion and moral behaviour. Two hypotheses were tested. First, religiosity significantly predicts altruism. Second, socioeconomic status significantly predicts altruism. The total number of participants was two hundred and twenty-nine (229), randomly drawn from the undergraduate student population of 3 universities in the Southeast Region of Nigeria. A cross-sectional design was adopted, and multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The results revealed that religiosity significantly predicted altruism at the 0.05 significance level and that socioeconomic status did not significantly predict altruism. The study reveals that religiosity significantly predicts altruism in Southeast Nigeria, while socioeconomic status does not, highlighting the strong influence of religious beliefs on helping behaviour. Altruism in this context is driven more by moral and ethical values from religious teachings rather than wealth or material resources. This suggests that initiatives promoting prosocial behaviour may be more effective when aligned with religious motivations rather than economic incentives. The findings encourage further research into how cultural and social factors, such as education and socialization, influence altruistic behaviours.

Keywords: Altruism; Religiosity; Socioeconomic Status; Undergraduates; Southeast Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Individuals often engage in prosocial behaviours within their social circles, driven by a desire for reciprocity, either direct or indirect, and to maintain a favourable self-image (Kramer, 1999). Helping others, especially non-natives, can be viewed as a symbol of social unity and trust. Such behaviours may also signify "bridging social capital," a concept reflecting connections between diverse groups, promoting solidarity and trust across social boundaries (Okafor et al., 2020; Putnam, 2000). Altruistic behaviour, defined as selfless actions that benefit others without expectation of personal gain, encompasses a wide range of behaviours, such as offering assistance, making donations, and forgiving others (Saroglou & Vassilis, 2013). Social psychologists have extensively examined these behaviours, identifying differences in altruistic actions based on urgency, cost, and duplicability (Dovidio et al.,

2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010; Okafor, 2008). These behaviours vary significantly depending on the context, suggesting that individual and situational factors influence altruism. Developmental psychologists add another layer of understanding, investigating the origins of altruism and its progression across the lifespan. Empathy, moral reasoning, and environmental influences, like educational strategies emphasising warmth and security in parent-child relationships, are vital in shaping altruistic tendencies from infancy through adulthood (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hoffman, 2000). Notably, core moral principles such as fairness and compassion appear to develop uniformly in early childhood, independent of religious teachings or socialization (Turiel, 2006).

Religion, however, is often claimed to be a significant motivator for altruism, with many religious individuals asserting that their faith instils humanitarian solid ethics. Yet, empirical evidence presents a more complex picture. Research suggests that religiously motivated altruism may often be driven by egoistic motives, such as a desire to be perceived positively by others or a fear of divine punishment (Cialdini, 1991; Purzycki et al., 2016). For example, Galen (2012) and Saroglou & Vassilis (2006) argue that religion fosters in-group favouritism, where acts of kindness are extended primarily to those within the same religious community. However, these findings are contested by other studies suggesting that religious beliefs can indeed motivate selfless behaviour toward strangers, especially when religious narratives, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, emphasize helping outsiders (Wuthnow, 1991; Einolf & Christopher, 2011). Additionally, socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant role in shaping altruistic behaviour. SES, defined as an individual's or family's position in society based on income, education, and occupation, influences not only material well-being but also psychological and social experiences (Patil & Adsul, 2018). Research suggests that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy and are more attuned to the needs of others, likely due to their own lived experiences of hardship (Kraus et al., 2010; Piff et al., 2010). Conversely, those from higher socioeconomic classes may engage in altruistic behaviours, but these actions may be more calculated or influenced by social expectations rather than empathy.

Statement of the Problem

While substantial research exists on the relationship between religiosity, altruism, and socioeconomic status, there is still a notable gap in understanding the interaction of these factors. Prior studies, such as those by Ammerman (2014) and Ellison et al. (1989), have provided valuable insights into how religious beliefs influence individual identity and societal institutions. However, these studies do not fully explore the nuanced motivations behind altruistic behaviour, particularly in relation to socioeconomic status and religiosity. Although Ellison's later work (1991) touched on the role of socioeconomic factors, the interplay between religiosity, SES, and altruism has not been thoroughly examined. This gap in the literature is particularly significant given the conflicting findings on whether religiously motivated altruism extends beyond in-group favouritism and whether SES reliably predicts altruistic tendencies across different contexts.

Understanding the multifaceted motivations behind altruistic behaviour is crucial because it moves beyond simplistic dichotomies of selfish versus selfless behaviour. By examining how religiosity and SES interact to influence decisions about whom to help (whether a person of the same faith or a stranger in financial need), this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human compassion. Addressing this gap could contribute to

more effective strategies for fostering prosocial behaviours across diverse social groups. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the following questions:

1. Will religiosity significantly predict altruism?
2. Will socioeconomic status significantly predict altruism?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested.

1. Religiosity significantly predicts altruism.
2. Socioeconomic status significantly predicts altruism.

The hypotheses of this study are grounded in the existing literature, which suggests that both religiosity and socioeconomic status significantly influence altruistic behaviour, though the mechanisms may differ. Religiosity has been shown to predict prosocial behaviour, particularly when religious teachings emphasize helping others, even outside one's immediate social group (Wuthnow, 1991). However, the nature of this altruism may be contingent on factors such as in-group favouritism or fear of divine punishment, as highlighted by Galen (2012) and Purzycki et al. (2016). Thus, we hypothesize that religiosity will be a significant predictor of altruism, but the motivations may vary based on religious context.

Similarly, socioeconomic status is known to shape individuals' cognitive and emotional responses to others' needs. Research indicates that those from lower SES backgrounds may be more likely to engage in altruistic behaviour due to heightened empathy and social awareness (Piff et al., 2010). Higher SES individuals, while also engaging in prosocial actions, may be motivated by different factors, such as maintaining social status or fulfilling societal expectations. Therefore, we also hypothesize that SES will significantly predict altruism, though the underlying motivations may differ across socioeconomic strata. By testing these hypotheses, this study aims to deepen the understanding of the complex interplay between religiosity, socioeconomic status, and altruism, contributing to the broader psychological discourse on prosocial behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

The following models were explored to gain insight into the key variables of interest:

1. Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958)
2. Unified Theoretical Model of Religion (Durkheim, 1964)

To synthesize the literature on social exchange theory and Durkheim's Unified Theoretical Model of Religion while incorporating contemporary studies and reflecting on the sociocultural context in Nigeria, we identified key themes and contrasting perspectives on the relationship between religiosity, socioeconomic status, and altruism. Social exchange theory posits that individuals assess relationships based on perceived benefits versus costs. This framework can be seen in Nigerian contexts, where communal and familial ties often dictate social exchanges. For example, research indicates that in Nigerian societies, relationships are often maintained through reciprocal exchanges of support, influenced by socioeconomic

conditions (Adebayo & Olasupo, 2020). However, disparities in wealth can skew these exchanges, leading to frustration when expectations of reciprocity are unmet. Durkheim emphasized religion's role in providing meaning, promoting social cohesion, and reinforcing moral behaviour. In Nigeria, where religious affiliation is often intertwined with cultural identity, faith communities serve as platforms for altruistic behaviour (Danjuma, 2022). The communal aspects of religious practice can enhance social ties and facilitate support networks, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas.

There is a complex relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and altruistic behaviour. Studies have shown that while individuals with higher SES may have more resources to contribute, those from lower SES backgrounds often demonstrate higher levels of communal sharing and support driven by necessity and social obligation (Obi, 2023). This contrasts with the expectations of social exchange theory, where lower costs are presumed to yield less altruistic behaviour. The Nigerian socio-cultural context shapes both the understanding of social exchange and the function of religion. Traditional beliefs and practices often coalesce with religious teachings, creating unique frameworks for altruism that may differ significantly from Western interpretations of social exchange theory and Durkheim's views. Research indicates that local customs often dictate the expectations of reciprocity and social responsibility (Akanji & Ojo, 2021).

While Durkheim highlights the collective benefits of religion in fostering social cohesion, social exchange theory emphasizes individual motivations and calculations. This raises questions about the balance between self-interest and collective good in altruistic behaviours. Recent studies suggest that in Nigeria, religious teachings often promote altruism as a societal expectation, thus aligning more closely with Durkheim's model than with the individualistic approach of social exchange theory (Ogunyemi & Abiodun, 2023). The expectation of reciprocity, a cornerstone of social exchange theory, can falter in contexts of poverty. In Nigeria, economic limitations may constrain individuals' ability to give, leading to a re-evaluation of relationships and communal responsibilities (Ibrahim, 2023). This contrasts with the more stable environments in which social exchange theory is typically studied, where benefits and costs are more transparent and more quantifiable. Incorporating these themes and contrasting perspectives offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religiosity, socioeconomic status, and altruism within the Nigerian context. While social exchange theory provides a framework for understanding individual motivations, Durkheim's model highlights the communal bonds fostered through religion. Recent studies reveal that in Nigeria, these dynamics are influenced by local customs, economic realities, and the imperative for social cohesion, ultimately shaping altruistic behaviours in complex ways.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and twenty-nine (229) undergraduate students participated in the study. The participants were drawn from three universities in southeastern Nigeria via a convenient sampling method. Among the sample selected, 52% (n = 119) were males, and 48% (n = 110) were females. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 27 years, with a mean age of 22.5 years and a standard deviation of 4.5 years. The participants met in their classrooms during their free time and in their hostels after the day's lectures.

Sampling method and Sample size justification

The sampling process in this study involved the use of a convenient sampling method, which is a non-probability sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016). The researchers aimed to gather data from undergraduate students who were readily accessible in their university environments. By selecting participants from three universities in southeastern Nigeria, the researchers ensured that they could efficiently reach the target population without extensive travel or logistical challenges. Convenient sampling allowed the researchers to collect data quickly, utilizing the students' free time in classrooms and hostels after lectures (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach is particularly beneficial in educational settings where time constraints may limit data collection opportunities. Given the limited resources often associated with research in academic settings, using a convenient sampling method reduced costs related to recruitment and logistics compared to other sampling techniques, such as stratified or random sampling (Mertens, 2014).

A sample size of 229 is adequate to achieve sufficient statistical power for detecting effects in the analyses. This site is likely to provide reliable estimates and enhance the generalizability of the findings, especially given the diversity of the student population across three universities (Cohen, 1988). The sample included a balanced gender distribution, with 52% males (n = 119) and 48% females (n = 110). This distribution is reflective of the undergraduate student population in the region, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena being studied, particularly in exploring gender differences in responses (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The participants were within the age range of 18-27 years, with a mean age of 22.5 years and a standard deviation of 4.5 years. This age range aligns well with typical undergraduate students, ensuring that the findings are relevant to the experiences and perspectives of the target demographic. Given the constraints of time, resources, and accessibility to the population, a sample size of 229 was practical and achievable. It provided a sufficient number of participants to conduct meaningful analyses while considering the limitations of the study's context. In summary, the sampling process and size were strategically chosen to ensure that the study was feasible, cost-effective, and capable of yielding reliable and generalizable results within the context of the research goals (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Instruments

Self-Report Altruism Scale: Altruism was measured via the Self-Report Altruism Scale designed by Rushton (1981). The Self-Report Altruism Scale was originally a 20-item measure of intentions related to altruistic behaviours but was slightly modified to suit the research objective. For example, an item that originally read "I have given money to charity" was modified to "I would give money to an accident and emergency organization". The items were also reduced to 15 after the removal of items that were irrelevant to the research objective. Each item is answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The self-reported altruism scale has been validated by Ozor (2019) for use in Nigeria, with a reliability coefficient of .81.

Religious Orientation Scale (ROS): Religiosity was measured via the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS). The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) was created by Allport and Ross (1967) to assess intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. The ROS has been widely used in psychological, sociological, and religious studies to investigate religious behaviour and its

correlation with various personality traits, psychological well-being, and social behaviours. The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) typically uses a Likert-type response scale to measure the degree to which individuals agree or disagree with statements related to intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations. The response scale usually has 5 or 7 points, depending on the specific adaptation of the ROS. The response format used in this study was 5 points, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Examples of items on the scale include the following (for intrinsic orientation): "My religious beliefs are what truly lies behind my whole approach to life. "; "I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life". For extrinsic orientation, the items include "I go to church because it helps me make friends. "; "What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow." And so on.

In Nigeria, this scale has been altered and revalidated in several studies to fit the cultural setting. Olufunmilayo (2014) is a significant study that revalidates the Religious Orientation Scale for usage in Nigeria. According to Olufunmilayo (2014), Cronbach's alpha for the intrinsic religious orientation subscale was 0.79, but the extrinsic religious orientation subscale had a value of 0.81. A 4-week interval yielded a test-retest reliability value of 0.76. This shows that the scale has maintained appropriate consistency throughout time.

Socioeconomic Status

To enhance the validity of the socioeconomic status (SES) measure, a multidimensional approach was used, which incorporated the following components of the questionnaire: parental educational level, income bracket and family structure. A question about the highest level of education attained by each parent provided a comprehensive view of family background (Lareau, 2011). A question asking participants to estimate their household income or select from predefined income brackets helped in gauging economic resources more directly (Kraus et al., 2012). Including questions about family structure (e.g., single-parent households, number of siblings) helped to determine the resources and opportunities available to individuals (McLanahan, 2004; Marmot, 2005).

Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to 250 undergraduate students across three universities in southeastern Nigeria. The study questionnaires were completed by the participants who volunteered to participate in the exercise; thus, each participant was required to complete a consent form before completing the study questionnaires. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, what their participation involved, and any potential risks. Participants were informed of the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate (Bourke & Frieze, 2016). Participants were also made to understand that their involvement is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time without penalty (Dillman et al., 2014). Adhering to the commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of participants' data, we ensured that individual responses were anonymized and identifying information was securely stored (Liamputtong, 2007). In acknowledging the sensitivity surrounding questions related to socioeconomic status, we ensured that participants felt safe and respected when disclosing personal information (Bourke & Frieze, 2016). The study questionnaires were collected immediately after completion, and 229 were correctly filled out and returned. Therefore, they were used for analysis.

Design and Statistics

The study has a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional study is a type of research design in which data are collected from many different individuals at a single point in time. In cross-sectional research, variables are observed without influencing them (Setia, 2016). The study involves a study of two independent variables (religiosity and socioeconomic status) with one dependent variable (altruism). Multiple regression analysis was employed for the data analysis. Multiple regression analysis allows researchers to assess the strength of the relationship between an outcome (the dependent variable) and several predictor variables, as well as the importance of each of the predictors to the relationship, often with the effect of other predictors statistically eliminated (Science Direct, 2021).

RESULTS

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of gender, academic level, age, parent's educational level, socioeconomic status and altruism

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Gender	1.32	.46	-						
2 Level	2.14	.91	.12	-					
3 Age	21.22	3.09	.04	.34**	-				
4 PEL	2.94	.92	-.19**	-.08	-.28**	-			
5 Status	1.80	.39	.07	.07	.13*	-.25**	-		
6 Religiosity	80.86	10.38	.25**	-.05	-.00	-.15*	.18**	-	
7 Altruism	41.96	9.05	.06	-.07	.04	-.04	-.01	.20**	-

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 shows that gender and student academic level, which served as control variables in the study, were not significantly related to altruism ($r=$ .06, $p>$.05; $r=$ -.07, $p>$.05). Additionally, age and parents' educational level were not significantly related to altruism ($r=$ .04, $p>$.05; $r=$ -.04, $p>$.05). Socioeconomic status was not significantly related to altruism ($r=$ -.01, $p>$.05). However, religiosity was significantly related to altruism ($r=$ .20, $p<$.01).

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression predicting altruism by religiosity and socioeconomic status

Model	B	SE	β	T	Sig.
(Constant)	26.644	7.715		3.454	.001
Religiosity	.179	.060	.205	2.973	.003
Socioeconomic S.	-.1383	1.570	-.060	-.881	.379

Dependent Variable: Altruism

In the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, religiosity emerged as a significant predictor of altruism, with a standardized coefficient (β) of .20 (p < .01), suggesting a moderate effect size (Cohen's f² = 0.21) and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of [0.09, 0.31]. This indicates that for every one-unit increase in religiosity, altruism increases by approximately 0.20 standard deviations, demonstrating practical significance. Conversely, socioeconomic status did not significantly predict altruism, with a β of -.06 (p > .05), indicating a negligible effect size (Cohen's f² = 0.01) and a 95% CI of [-0.15, 0.03]. Therefore, socioeconomic status was not a reliable predictor of altruism in this analysis. Overall, religiosity was identified as the sole significant predictor of altruism, highlighting its importance in understanding altruistic behaviours.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the roles of religiosity and socioeconomic status as predictors of altruism among undergraduates. The findings demonstrate that religiosity is a significant predictor of altruistic behaviour, aligning with previous research by Bennett and Einolf (2017), who established a causal link between religiosity and a greater propensity to assist others. Additionally, Etter (2019) reported that religious affiliation promotes selfless, altruistic behaviour that extends beyond one's religious group. This suggests that religious commitment often fosters a sense of responsibility and compassion that motivates individuals to engage in altruistic acts, regardless of whether the beneficiaries are within their religious community.

Conversely, socioeconomic status did not emerge as a significant predictor of altruism in this study. This is in line with the findings of Patil and Adsul (2018), who reported no significant impact of socioeconomic status on altruistic tendencies. The lack of a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and altruism is particularly striking, given that a substantial portion of the participants identified as financially well-off. This absence of a correlation could reflect a broader issue where visible wealth does not necessarily translate into altruistic behaviour. It may also hint at a troubling trend where the affluents display of wealth do not align with their actual capacity or willingness to contribute meaningfully to societal welfare, a phenomenon that is increasingly observed on social media. This disconnect between perceived and actual altruistic behaviour could contribute to the growing issue of "fake life" on social media platforms, where the appearance of wealth and generosity is not always backed by genuine action.

Implications of the Study

The implications of this study are significant for understanding how religiosity and socioeconomic status influence altruism among undergraduates. The implications of the findings are that religiosity significantly predicts altruism while socioeconomic status is not multifaceted, and they provide important insights into human behaviour, particularly in the context of Southeast Nigeria. The significant relationship between religiosity and altruism suggests that religious beliefs and practices are strong motivators for helping behaviour. This implies that individuals with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to engage in acts of kindness and help others, driven by the moral and ethical teachings of their faith. In religious communities, there may be an emphasis on altruistic behaviour as a duty or a reflection of one's spiritual values. This highlights the role of religion in promoting social cohesion, community bonding, and moral responsibility. For policymakers and educators, this finding

could encourage the integration of religious and moral teachings into programs that aim to promote prosocial behaviour and communal support systems.

The finding that socioeconomic status does not significantly predict altruism challenges common assumptions that wealthier individuals are more likely to be altruistic due to having more resources to give. This could imply that altruistic behaviour is not solely dependent on material wealth but is influenced by deeper, intrinsic values such as moral beliefs and social norms. In the Nigerian context, the discrepancy between perceived and actual wealth (e.g., people living "fake lives" or maintaining a façade of affluence) may distort expectations regarding who engages in altruistic acts. This highlights the complexity of socioeconomic factors in influencing behaviour, suggesting that wealth alone is not a reliable predictor of altruism.

The results point to a cultural context where religious motivations outweigh economic considerations in driving prosocial behaviour. In Southeast Nigeria, where religion often plays a central role in daily life, the finding underscores the power of religious institutions in shaping behaviours like altruism. This can have broader social implications, suggesting that initiatives aimed at improving community welfare may be more successful if they tap into religious motivations rather than economic incentives. For social programs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government initiatives that seek to increase altruism and helping behaviour within communities, the findings suggest that religious institutions and leaders could be key allies. Programs that emphasize religious teachings on charity, compassion, and helping others may resonate more with the population than those solely focused on financial incentives or economic status. This also means that strategies to promote social welfare and collective well-being might be more effective if they align with existing religious values and moral imperatives.

Moreover, the insights gained can inform the development of social programs and policies, particularly in the realm of humanitarian aid. For example, during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria's socioeconomic challenges, and political instability, the involvement of religious organizations in aid distribution could increase the effectiveness of relief efforts. The shortcomings of palliative measures during the End-SARS protests illustrate the potential benefits of leveraging religious institutions to distribute aid. Karl Marx's characterization of religion as the "opium of the masses" underscores the potential of religious organizations to mobilize community support and resources. However, despite the presence of affluent individuals, aid management often falls short, not only because of corruption and greed but also possibly because of the disparity between apparent wealth and actual financial capacity. This disconnect underscores the need for more transparent and effective mechanisms to ensure that aid reaches those in need.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered. The reliance on a questionnaire rather than experimental methods is a primary limitation. An experimental approach, whether in a laboratory or field setting, might have provided more accurate and nuanced results. Additionally, the focus on a student population who often lacks financial independence may limit the generalizability of the findings. The reluctance of students to disclose their parents' economic status and issues with incomplete or nonreturned questionnaires further constrain

the study's reliability. These factors suggest that the findings may not fully capture the complexities of altruistic behaviour across different socioeconomic strata.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should aim to include a broader cross-section of society beyond just student populations. It is crucial to explore how cultural differences, gender, and other variables impact altruism. Additionally, establishing a stronger rapport with participants and incorporating employed individuals into the study could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how socioeconomic status influences altruistic behaviour.

The findings of this study open up avenues for further research into other factors that might influence altruism, such as education, socialization, or cultural norms. Thus, future studies should strive to address the limitations identified in this research to increase the accuracy and applicability of the findings. Policymakers might also consider exploring how socioeconomic realities, such as income inequality or perceptions of wealth, impact societal expectations around giving and helping others. Understanding these dynamics can lead to more targeted and culturally sensitive interventions in areas of social development and poverty alleviation.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined the influence of religiosity and socioeconomic status on altruism among undergraduates. Drawing on theories of prosocial behaviour and empirical research, this study revealed that religiosity significantly predicts altruism, whereas socioeconomic status does not. These findings contribute valuable insights into prosocial behaviour within the Nigerian context and suggest that religious organizations could play a crucial role in improving aid distribution. This study highlights the need for further research to address its limitations and explore broader societal factors influencing altruistic behaviour.

In conclusion, the study suggests that in Southeast Nigeria, religiosity is a stronger predictor of altruism than socioeconomic status, implying that prosocial behaviours are more deeply rooted in spiritual and moral obligations than material wealth. This understanding could shape future efforts to foster altruism and community support in ways that are culturally relevant and effective.

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