



How does childhood trauma impact an adult's inclination toward altruistic behavior?

Pooja Tanvi Kurupati

Context

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 64% of American adults in 2023 self-reported having experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (A.C.E.), which they define as a traumatic event that occurs between birth and the age of 18 (Centers for Disease Control And Prevention, 2023). Daniel Lim and David DeSteno, psychology professors at Northeastern University, found a causal relationship between childhood trauma and “increased psychiatric morbidity, increased substance abuse, increased criminal offending, and poorer educational and vocational performance in adulthood,” demonstrating that experiences of childhood adversity decrease social standing in adulthood (Lim and DeSteno, 2016). This is an important issue given contemporary findings suggest that the average number of A.C.E.s experienced by a child is increasing (Gao et al., 2023). Adults with a high incidence of adverse childhood experiences also have an increasing probability of “falling into the disadvantaged or least successful trajectory” socially and academically into adulthood (Wang, 2023). However, researchers such as Yiyuan Li, a psychology professor at the University of Florida, argue that varying kinds of traumatic experiences have varying impacts on a child’s psychological development. She maintains certain instances of trauma can almost double altruistic tendencies in adults, concluding that in some cases, childhood trauma has positive outcomes on the development of empathy in adults, addressing the issue from the perspective of altruistic development. Altruism is defined by Elizabeth Nair, a psychologist at the Singapore Psychological Society, as a selfless act of helping others without expecting anything in return (Nair, 2002). This demonstrates that childhood trauma has a significant impact on behavior in adulthood by impacting an individual’s emotional, vocational, and educational capabilities. Specifically, altruism is an aspect of development that is highly impacted by childhood trauma.

The experience of childhood trauma impacts the development of personality traits that are determinants for levels of altruism in adulthood. A study done by Liana Y. Zanette found that exposure to predator sounds (threats) had “significantly increased the level of c-Fos immunoreactivity” (an indicator of cells being activated or stimulated in some way, such as when they receive a signal from the environment) in the brain for at least seven days, leading to increased hypervigilance in prey. Although a limitation of this study is that it was done on animals, “hypervigilance is one of the characteristic consequences of PTSD [(post-traumatic stress disorder)] in humans. And indicating an enduring exaggerated fear response” is a psychological response that humans and animals share (Zanette et al., 2019). The higher rates of hypervigilance found by Zanette are indicative of less altruistic behavior, as found by Graham Music, an Adolescent Psychotherapist at the Tavistock and Portman Clinics. Music states that maltreated children, or children who grew up experiencing A.C.E.s, failed to develop abilities such as capacity for altruism. He claims that this is due to being in a constant state of “heightened arousal, anxiety or fear;” in other words, hypervigilance. The results of his study demonstrate that “when anyone is over-aroused and dysregulated, [(in a state of hypervigilance,)] it is almost impossible to feel empathy or be altruistic” (Music, 2011). Therefore, trauma/adversity impacts the ability to display altruistic behavior in adulthood by decreasing an individual’s inclination towards altruistic actions. Altruistic patterns of behavior are, according to psychologist Zofia Fraćzek, an effective counterbalance to the commonly encountered indifference to the needs of other people (Fraćzek, 2016). This means that the loss

of altruism results in the loss of mutual empathization and support in communities, demonstrating that the loss of altruistic tendencies in society is an issue that needs to be addressed. However, the dispute in perspectives and arguments begs the question: How does childhood trauma impact an adult's inclination toward altruistic behavior?

Psychological Lens

Katrina Prior, a psychology professor at the University of Sydney, attributes the decrease in altruistic behavior to trauma to a psychological mechanism named "The Cycle of Violence." Her study included 511 adults who were given a questionnaire regarding the A.C.E.s they had faced, if any. Following that, they were given a second questionnaire, which was used to determine the extent of their altruistic behaviors. She found that exposure to trauma often normalized aggressive behavior and inhibited altruistic tendencies. The Cycle of Violence insinuates that individuals who have experienced trauma would primarily display combative behaviors, reflecting the adversity they were exposed to. She concluded that the more A.C.E.s are experienced, the less altruistic tendencies emerge as a result of certain neurobiological processes not being able to fully develop due to the trauma (Prior, 2021). David Greenberg, a psychology professor from the City University of New York, supports this argument but adds a different perspective by claiming that trauma hinders altruistic tendencies due to a different psychological mechanism called the "Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis." He suggests that experiencing trauma as a child severely impacts the development of a child's emotional processes. These changes can lead to negative psychological changes as a result of learning to cope with adversity (Greenberg, 2018), supporting Prior's conclusion regarding how increased exposure to trauma decreases altruistic tendencies.

Social Lens

Analyzing how various types of trauma affect altruism clarifies the dispute in perspectives. Experiences of trauma such as facing oppression and/or discrimination often increase altruism, as shown by Jacob Lawrence's artwork titled *Confrontation at the Bridge*. The picture is interpreted by the Washington State Arts Commission as the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights that "would enable African Americans to register and vote without harassment" ("Confrontation at the Bridge, 1975"). During peaceful protests for freedom, African-American marchers faced state troopers who attacked them using weapons, tear gas, and aggressive animals ("Confrontation at the Bridge, 1975"). The events that led up to the marches (the oppression of colored Americans) and the violence at the marches themselves are trauma and adversity, faced by African-American protestors. Despite the violence and hardships faced, protests continued marching for their cause. The protestors put themselves at risk for the benefit of not just themselves, but all African-Americans that would be gaining the right to vote, displaying altruism as the protestors were endangering themselves in a selfless act of bravery to benefit many people. A limitation of this analysis is that art can be interpreted in many different ways, and this analysis only addresses the interpretation of the painting regarding the adversity it portrayed. Although this source does not address childhood trauma, African-Americans who participated in the marches experienced oppression and discrimination during their childhoods, having grown up in a post-slavery period filled with racism. The work demonstrates how experiencing adversity as a group, whether it be the violence at the marches or the oppression they faced growing up, can increase displays of altruism, introducing nuances to the arguments made by Greenberg and Prior regarding trauma decreasing inclination towards altruism.

However, experiencing violence, abuse, and/or neglect in the household (forms of adversity different from those displayed in *Confrontation on the Bridge*,) has a different impact on altruism; Graham Music argues that experiences of abuse in childhood hinder an individual's capacity to care for others, adhere to social expectations, and empathize with peers in adulthood (Music, 2011), suggesting that experiencing adversity hinders an individual's ability to display altruistic behavior due to losing the ability to empathize.

Environmental Lens

Environmental-based adversities are different from the adversities previously presented as they are traumatic events that are natural/unintentional. These types of adversities can have different impacts on altruistic behavior than events such as violence and discrimination. Yiyuan Li argues that trauma stemming from natural and/or unintentional traumatic events decreases the ability to display altruistic behavior in adulthood. Her research, which studied the impact of natural disasters on altruism, found that immediately after witnessing devastations caused by a major earthquake, children become more altruistic as a result of learning to help others through grievance as a coping mechanism. In addition, the more empathic they were, (which was determined by an empathy exam taken by the subjects before the actual study) the more they gave. Three years after the earthquake, the results of behavioral tests taken by the subjects found that the same children's altruistic tendencies returned to pre-earthquake levels, and ten years after the earthquake, the individuals' altruistic tendencies were shown to be lower than pre-earthquake. When compared to individuals who had not experienced as much adversity in their childhood, the people who experienced the devastations showed a more significant decrease in altruism ten years after the incident (Li, 2013), suggesting that changes in children's altruistic giving are limited to just the immediate aftermath of environmental-based adversity.

Furthermore, Hanjing Gao, a psychology professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, conducted a study aiming to examine the impacts of trauma stemming from growing up with a low socioeconomic status. A total of 658 teenagers were a part of the study and their altruism was collected through a survey taken every six months for five years. His study revealed that childhood trauma stemming from growing up with a low socioeconomic status was significantly negatively correlated with altruism once the adolescents came of age. This study indicated that low socioeconomic status can affect adolescents' altruism by influencing the formation of adolescents' life history strategies, which is how an individual divides resources and energy between survival and growth (Gao et al., 2023). Overall, environmental-based trauma has a negative long-term impact on altruism through the interrupted development of empathy as a child transitions into adulthood.

Solution Proposal

A potential way to address the issue of childhood trauma impacting altruism is by setting up a way to reduce the impact of trauma as a way to try and mitigate its psychological effects on an individual. Holly Wethington, a health scientist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, evaluated the impact of seven different interventions on individuals under 21 years old exposed to individual/mass, intentional/unintentional, or manmade/natural traumatic events. Out of the evaluated interventions, she found that individual and group cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) was shown to have the most positive impacts on subjects (Wethington, 2018). CBT is a psychotherapeutic approach that aims to change both cognition and behavior. It is rooted in cognitive and behavioral science and is often used by psychologists and therapists to

treat anxiety disorders and depression (French, 2017). It has been shown to reduce psychophysiological activation associated with stress and improve coping skills (French, 2017), which is what makes it an appropriate treatment for trauma and mental health issues associated with it. Wethington found that young adults who went through CBT had less severe psychiatric morbidities, with CBT having the biggest effect on these mental health issues than the other forms of treatment in the study. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry recommends CBT to treat trauma-induced mental disorders. Similarly, the National Institute of Mental Health reports that CBT is effective for children and adolescents suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric morbidities that were caused by trauma (Task Force on Community Preventive Services, 2008). Furthermore, in 2001, the U.S. Departments of Defense, Justice, and Health and Human Services; Veterans Affairs; and the American Red Cross held a conference on early interventions for child and adult victims of trauma in the form of mass incidence (terrorism, natural disasters, etc.) and the consensus was that cognitive-behavioral approaches can reduce the incidence, duration, and severity of acute stress disorder and PTSD in trauma survivors (Task Force on Community Preventive Services, 2008). Providing more healthcare workers and psychologists with education on CBT would increase the chances of PTSD and other trauma-induced disorders being detected in victims, and increase an individual's chances of getting one of the best treatments possible for them as well. Addressing these trauma-induced disorders and reducing their impact on an individual would reduce the change in inclination towards altruism that usually occurs after trauma as a result of psychiatric morbidity associated with adversity.

A limitation of this solution is that there is no guarantee that victims will be able to access mental health care, and the only way to access CBT is through a licensed mental health care worker or a doctor (French, 2017). Furthermore, multiple factors go into how effective forms of therapy are to consumers, and there is no guarantee that one form of therapy will work for all victims of trauma, although it has been shown that it works for a majority of victims. Furthermore, CBT is a short-term treatment, and the research on its long-term impacts on trauma-induced disorders is limited.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the prevalence of childhood trauma needs to be addressed due to the negative impacts it has on one's mental health and psychological development. Childhood trauma heavily impacts neurobiological processes that are responsible for the development of empathy, and therefore, altruism. Addressing the psychological impacts of trauma is a more viable option than trying to stop the trauma before it happens as many factors of trauma are uncontrollable. Therefore, CBT is a more realistic option as it has been shown to decrease the severity of trauma-induced mental health disorders in a majority of cases.

References

- Confrontation at the Bridge, 1975*. (n.d.). ArtsWA. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.arts.wa.gov/artwork/?request=record;id=1874;type=101>.
- Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences |Violence Prevention|Injury Center|CDC*. (n.d.). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>
- Fraćzek, Z. (2016). Altruism as an attitude desirable for society – upbringing demands. *Sociology and Psychology, 11*(5), 24-28. Science Direct. <https://repozytorium.ur.edu.pl/items/a70854b3-c032-47f5-9066-8839674295b2>
- French, P. (2017). Cognitive–behavioural therapy. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine, 47*(6), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1201/B13572-61>
- Gao, H., Liu, Q., & Wang, Z. (2023). Different adverse childhood experiences and adolescents' altruism: The mediating role of life history strategy. *Journal of Adolescence, 96*(1), 5-17. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12248>
- Greenberg, D. M., Baron-Cohen, S., Rosenberg, N., Fonagy, P., & Rentfrow, P. J. (2018). Elevated empathy in adults following childhood trauma. *PLoS ONE, 13*(101), 56-69. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0203886>
- Li, Y., Li, H., Decety, J., & Lee, K. (2013). Experiencing a Natural Disaster Alters Children's Altruistic Giving. *Association for Psychological Science, 24*(9), 1686-1695. [10.1177/0956797613479975](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613479975)
- Lim, D., & DeSteno, D. (2016). Suffering and Compassion: The Links Among Adverse Life Experiences, Empathy, Compassion, and Prosocial Behavior. *American Psychological Association, 16*(2), 175-182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000144>
- Music, G. (2011). Trauma, helpfulness and selfishness: the effect of abuse and neglect on altruistic, moral and pro-social capacities. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy, 18*(7), 112-129. [10.1080/0075417X.2011.581466](https://doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2011.581466)
- Nair, E. (2002). Altruism Or Social Exchange? *Altruistic Reveries, 3*(4), 85-98. Springer Link. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-0809-0_7
- Prior, K., Carvalheiro, M., Lawler, S., Stapinski, L. A., Newton, N. C., Mooney-Somers, J., Basto-Pereira, M., & Barrett, E. (2021). Early trauma and associations with altruistic attitudes and behaviours among young adults. *The International Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect, 29*(13), 145-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105091>
- Task Force on Community Preventive Services. (2008). Recommendations to reduce psychological harm from traumatic events among children and adolescents. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 35*(3), 314-317. [10.1016/j.amepre.2008.06.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2008.06.025)
- Viner, R. M., & Taylor, B. (2008). Adult Health and Social Outcomes of Children Who Have Been in Public Care: Population-Based Study. *American Academy of Pediatrics, 153*(4), 894-899. [10.1542/peds.2004-1311](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2004-1311)
- Wang, D. (2023). The Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Trajectories to Adulthood of Chinese Youth: A Retrospective Study. *Journal of Family Issues, 24*(6), 42-47. Sage Journals. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x231204021>
- Wethington, H. R., Hahn, R. A., Fuqua-Whitley, D. S., Sipe, T. A., & Crosby, A. E. (2018). The effectiveness of interventions to reduce psychological harm from traumatic events among children and adolescents: a systematic review. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine, 22*(8), 102-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2018.06.024>
- Zanette, L. Y., Hobbs, E. C., Witterick, L. E., MacDougall-Shackleton, S. A., & Clinchy, M.



(2019). Predator-induced fear causes PTSD-like changes in the brains and behaviour of wild animals. *Scientific Reports*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-47684-6>