

## Exploration of Altruistic Behavior in Early Adult Volunteers: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

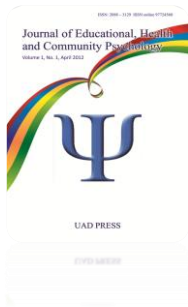
Altruistic behavior is a conduct that prioritizes the interests of others to alleviate their suffering and enhance well-being without expecting any reward for the actions taken. There are still unanswered questions from previous research regarding the motivations that underlie altruistic behavior in disaster relief volunteers. This study aims to explore and delve into the motivations behind altruistic behavior in Indonesian Red Cross volunteers. The phenomenological approach is employed in this research, using semi-structured interviews to gather data. The study participants are individuals aged 18 to 25 who are actively involved as Indonesian Red Cross volunteers in the city of Surakarta. The results of the research indicate that the motivations driving altruistic behavior include the desire to help others, a calling for humanity service to God, enrichment of social interaction, and the influence of family or circumstances. Further discussion is elaborated in this manuscript.

**Keywords:** Altruistic behavior, Indonesian Red Cross volunteers, early adulthood.

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### Introduction

Naturally, humans possess an inherent drive to assist others in communal living (Alfaro et al., 2024; Hubers & Webbink, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). This aligns with the social life in society, synonymous with mutual assistance behaviors (Masroni et al., 2023; Windmann et al., 2024). This helping behavior in social psychology is known as altruistic behavior, prioritizing others' interests to alleviate their suffering and enhance well-being without expecting anything in return for the act (Alfirević et al., 2023; Battu & Rahwan, 2023; Gamble et al., 2023). The desire to help often arises when faced with the suffering of others, compelling individuals to alleviate such distress (Hierro et al., 2023; Ferschmann et al., 2024).



Altruism can be defined as self-sacrificial behavior that provides more benefits to others than oneself (Arman, 2023; Kesenheimer et al., 2023; Schulreich et al., 2023). Individuals engaging in altruistic acts regularly seek to maximize benefits for others while disregarding the costs they incur personally (Alfaro et al., 2024). Existing research indicates that altruistic behavior also elicits feelings of happiness when the assistance provided proves beneficial to those in need (Hubers & Webbink, 2024; Iryana & Asyanti, 2015). This dynamic motivates humans to continue engaging in altruistic behavior toward others.

Altruism as a concept shares semantic proximity with empathy, sympathy, and compassion (Arman, 2023). Meanwhile, altruism and egoism are opposites that reflect people's motivations to act (Castañón et al., 2023; Lenhart et al., 2023; van der Meulen et al., 2023). Egoism implies acting for one's own well-being, while altruism means acting to enhance the well-being of others (Arman, 2023; Kesenheimer et al., 2023; Schulreich et al., 2023). Some researchers also refer to altruism as pro-social behavior (Hanks et al., 2022; Hibino, 2023). Historically, altruism is associated with healthcare professions and volunteer work grounded in love, compassion, and a sense of responsibility to alleviate suffering (McKenna et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Individuals who engage in altruistic behavior tend to understand the conditions of those around them. Furthermore, altruistic behavior contributes to a more meaningful life as their actions can alleviate the suffering of others (Zwick & Fletcher, 2014; Lee, 2019). Thus, altruistic behavior is a tendency that brings various positive values to both personal lives, making human life more meaningful and happier, enrich social life, demonstrating social harmony in communal living (Masroni et al., 2023; Windmann et al., 2024; Alfaro et al., 2024).

Altruistic behavior is commonly observed in early adulthood when individuals encounter others facing difficulties such as begging, accidents, and illness (Ferschmann et al., 2024; Hubers & Webbink, 2024). Most early adults facing such events are seen providing immediate assistance. Additionally, many of these early adults also volunteer to aid disaster victims by providing direct assistance at the disaster site and collecting donations for the victims (Kesenheimer et al., 2023; Ng



& Cheung, 2023; Schulreich et al., 2023). Social activities frequently undertaken by early adults include organizing free medical services, mass circumcision events, or blood donation drives (Ng & Cheung, 2023). However, there are still many unanswered questions about what motivates individuals to engage in altruistic behavior. Some previous studies have not definitively provided answers to these questions. Specifically, in the context of Indonesia, research on the motivation related to altruistic behavior in volunteers has not been extensively conducted, thus leaving unanswered questions.

This research aims to explore altruistic behavior in individuals involved in volunteer activities, investigating the motivations that drive their participation in such activities and examining the psychological dynamics experienced by those actively engaged in volunteer work. Both of these questions have been relatively underexplored in previous research, and this study seeks to address this knowledge gap. The research will involve volunteers from the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI), one of the largest humanitarian social organizations in Indonesia. PMI has numerous branches across various provinces in Indonesia, including one in the city of Surakarta. Volunteers from PMI Surakarta consist of voluntary workers (TSR), volunteer corps (KSR), and community-based disaster response teams (SIBAT), with a membership of over 500 volunteers, nearly reaching 1000, predominantly composed of early adulthood volunteers. This number is among the largest compared to other age groups participating in PMI volunteer activities. The research question of this study is *what is the motivation involved in volunteer activity?*

## **Method**

### *Approach design*

The present study's theoretical framework and philosophical orientation were rooted in the interpretive, Heideggerian phenomenological tradition (Frechette et al., 2020; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This perspective posits that 'being' is inherently tied to a specific context (dasein), and thus, any encounter with a phenomenon is intricately linked to its sociocultural and geographic surroundings (Lavery, 2003; Pham, 2022) Moreover, it contends that the meaning of experiences is



shaped and understood through an embodied, subjective lens, both for the individual undergoing the phenomenon and the researcher investigating these experiences (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). While emphasizing an in-depth comprehension of an individual's lived experience as it naturally unfolds within their life, this approach recognizes that knowledge about the studied phenomenon is co-constructed by both the individual and the researcher (Pham, 2022). Consequently, the researcher's personal history and lived experience cannot be set aside when interpreting data. Instead, there is a preference for reflexively acknowledging and maintaining awareness of one's personal perspective and influence throughout the qualitative analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brown, 2019).

#### *Respondents*

The volunteers included in this study are individuals actively engaged as Indonesian Red Cross volunteers for a minimum of 2 years, aged 18-25 years, with a minimum of 3 experiences serving in disaster locations, and willing to sign an informed consent. The research also involves one significant other for each research subject, someone trusted and close to the research subject. The characteristics of significant others in this study include having a good relationship with the research subject, being familiar with and understanding the research subject well, knowing about the activities undertaken by the research subject when volunteering in disaster locations, and frequently communicating with the research subject about their activities as Indonesian Red Cross volunteers in disaster locations.

The research commenced on June 26, 2023, by visiting the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) office with a research permit request letter from the academic institution. After obtaining approval, the researcher contacted the head of volunteers at PMI Surakarta to discuss subjects that met the specified criteria. The study involved four volunteers affiliated with the PMI Youth Red Cross (KSR PMI), who had participated in multiple disaster responses and city-based disaster assistance, such as providing security during demonstrations and football matches. Each volunteer had a significant other chosen based on personal closeness, and the supporting informant's understanding of the subject in this research, either a long-time PMI friend or a community companion.



Interviews commenced on July 27, 2023, with each subject consenting to the provided informed consent. The interviews were conducted at pre-approved locations. The researcher-initiated introductions to build trust before delving into the interview process, ensuring that subjects felt comfortable sharing the requested information without coercion. The aim was to create a comfortable atmosphere during the interview process.

### *Data analysis*

Interviews were recorded in audio format, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. The data analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis adopting an inductive approach for theme generation based on participants' expressed lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Campbell et al., 2021). Two researchers immersed themselves in all transcripts to establish familiarity with the entire dataset. Independently, both researchers coded a subset of 4 transcripts (30%). Following discussions and refinement of the coding approach, along with considerations of potential emerging themes, one researcher coded the remaining transcripts. Both coders independently organized codes into subthemes, allowing for the exploration of latent meanings and contextual nuances in the thematic content interpretation. To enhance trustworthiness, a third independent expert reviewed the organization of 40% of these codes into subthemes. Subsequently, all three researchers collaboratively refined interpretive decisions. The subthemes were then organized into higher-order themes by the original coders and further refined in collaboration with a fourth researcher.

### **Result**

The results of the reflexive thematic analysis based on individual verbatim data reveal five dominant themes related to the motivation and personal meaning of individuals involved in disaster volunteer activities. [Table 1](#) below presents the categories and themes that emerged from the data analysis.



**Table 1**  
*Finding from reflexive thematic analysis*

<b>Rangking</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Theme group</b>
1	To help others	Impact others' lives
2	Calling for humanity	Personal decision
3	Service to God	Spiritual value
4	Enrichment of social interaction	Social value
5	Influence of family or circumstances	Support from family/circumstances

The first theme identified from the analysis is the motivation of individuals to help others, especially those who have become victims of disasters. This theme is most prominent in the statements provided by respondents when asked about their motivation for engaging in volunteer activities. As expressed by respondents 3 and 4 below:

*"Continuously, if we volunteer, the reason is that we want to help because someday we remember that we will definitely need help, so if there is someone who needs help, as much as possible, we can help..." (R3)*

*"If there are people who need help, we definitely want to help, even though we can only help them a few percent to prevent the suffering of the victims. For me, it's already something amazing if we can help others like that..." (R4)*

The second theme found as a result of the analysis is individuals engaging in volunteer activities due to a soulful calling for humanity. This theme is a personal and fundamental motivation for individuals involved in volunteer activities. The calling of the soul is the second theme found, as expressed by respondents 2 and 4 below:

*"Maybe the first thing is a soulful calling. More because since childhood in the volunteer environment, especially with my uncle... for example, if there's a disaster, I*



*participate, and over time, it feels joyful meeting people, meeting the community, especially new people, it's like enthusiasm... especially when helping..." (R2)*

*"A direct self-call to leave... especially when some materials have been obtained, especially when we join the PMI post. It's definitely a balance between campus materials and what is in the field, so it can be practiced, not just theories. Practically, we can also get involved if there is a disaster." (R4)*

The third theme that emerged is the transcendental spiritual reason, which is helping others as a form of service to God. Statements such as helping sincerely and expecting rewards from God indicate that individual motivation is based on transcendental values. This is expressed by respondents 1, 2, and 3 below:

*"When he recovered, I, as a helper, was happy without expecting any rewards... just sincerely" (R1)*

*"Helping with sincerity will be rewarded in the end, right? No matter how small the act, the impact is always significant..." (R2)*

*"...and the third one must receive rewards, sister, when helping people in distress..." (R3)*

The fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis is volunteer activities enriching individual social interactions. This motivation is social in nature, where individuals enjoy meeting new people, communicating with the community, and helping each other with the community. This is expressed by respondents 1 and 2 below:

*"At first, once or twice, it turns out it's more enjoyable, many friends, starting from BPBD to PMI, there are many, and then it continues until now... we are social beings,*

*so we need others, for example, those helped can also become relations, and those helped can help us after they recover" (R1)*

*"Meeting people, meeting the community, especially new people, it's like joy... so enthusiastic... especially when helping..." (R2)*

The fifth theme that emerged is motivation derived from family influence or family environment. Family support factors have a significant influence on individuals deciding to engage in volunteer activities. This is expressed by respondents 2 and 4 below:

*"Since childhood, in the volunteer environment, especially with my uncle, even though my parents weren't involved, my uncle was more into volunteering, so I was involved since childhood, participating in activities, helping in case of disasters, so over time, it became enjoyable" (R2)*

*"I also like social activities, and it's also from the family background, sister... If my father is also in social affairs... in social affairs... many NGOs, community organizations related to disasters, so I also joined there... coincidentally... because my father shaped it, so I know the process a bit, the flow of it..." (R4)*

## **Discussion**

This study intends to investigate why individuals participate in disaster volunteer activities and what significance they ascribe to such involvement. The outcomes from Red Cross volunteers coincide with various theoretical frameworks that elucidate why individuals engage in altruistic and humanitarian endeavors. One theoretical viewpoint congruent with these results is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Wahbah & Bridwell, 1976). According to Maslow, once individuals have satisfied basic physiological and safety needs, they aspire to meet higher-level needs like belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Montuori & Purser, 2015). In this context, the





foremost motivations, "To help others" and "Impact others' lives," can be interpreted as manifestations of the need for self-actualization — a longing to contribute to others' well-being and have a meaningful influence on the world. This also signifies a yearning to make a substantial difference in others' well-being, aligning with the inherent human inclination to seek social approval and instigate positive social change.

The second-ranked motivation, "Calling for humanity," aligns with the concept of intrinsic motivation, as proposed by self-determination theory (SDT) (Guay et al., 2003; Stanley & Schutte, 2023). SDT suggests that individuals are motivated by internal factors, such as personal values and a sense of autonomy. The volunteers' personal decision to answer a "calling for humanity" reflects an internalized commitment driven by a genuine sense of purpose and autonomy. The volunteers' commitment to humanitarian service driven by a personal sense of responsibility resonates with the idea that internal motivations are powerful determinants of sustained engagement in prosocial behaviors.

The third-ranked motivation, "Service to God," corresponds to the integration of spirituality and altruism. Various religious and spiritual frameworks emphasize the importance of selfless service and helping others as a means of fulfilling higher moral or divine obligations (Guay et al., 2003; Stanley & Schutte, 2023). This finding resonates with the idea that individuals may be motivated by a sense of duty to a higher power or spiritual principles. Studies have shown that individuals with strong religious beliefs are often motivated to engage in acts of kindness and service as a way of fulfilling religious duties and expressing compassion, contributing to the welfare of others.

The fourth-ranked motivation, "Enrichment of social interaction," aligns with social exchange theory, which posits that individuals engage in relationships and activities that provide rewards (Jauncey & Strodl, 2018; Shtatfeld & Barak, 2009). In the context of volunteering, the enrichment of social interaction serves as a significant reward, highlighting the social value derived from connecting with others who share similar values and goals. Social exchange theory posits that individuals engage in social interactions to maximize rewards and minimize costs. In the context of



volunteering, the desire for enriched social interactions suggests that volunteers derive intrinsic rewards from connecting with others.

Finally, the fifth-ranked motivation, "Influence of family or circumstances," reflects the impact of external factors on individual behavior, as described by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Crawford, 2020; Derksen, 2010; Koller, 2017). This theory emphasizes the influence of various environmental systems, including family and societal contexts, on an individual's development and choices. In this case, the support from family or circumstantial factors contributes to the motivation to volunteer. Social support factors become prominent external factors that influence an individual's decision to engage in prosocial activities.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of the research results sheds light on the intricate motivations that propel individuals towards altruistic behavior. A comprehensive analysis reveals a diverse range of driving forces, showcasing the multifaceted nature of human altruism. At the core of these motivations is a genuine desire to extend a helping hand to others. This intrinsic inclination towards benevolence highlights a fundamental aspect of human nature – the instinct to contribute positively to the well-being of others. Simultaneously, a profound sense of duty towards humanity emerges as a compelling motivator, suggesting that individuals feel a calling to serve a greater purpose beyond themselves.

Religious convictions play a significant role in steering altruistic behavior, with a notable motivation being the desire to serve God. This underscores the intricate relationship between spirituality and selflessness, as individuals draw inspiration from their faith to engage in acts of kindness and compassion. Social dynamics also emerge as influential factors, as altruistic behavior is seen as a means of enriching social interactions. The desire for connection and community underscores the importance of relationships in shaping one's inclination towards altruism. Furthermore, family ties and life circumstances wield considerable influence, acting as catalysts for altruistic acts. The impact



of upbringing and personal experiences becomes evident, illustrating how familial and circumstantial factors contribute to the development of a pro-social mindset.

In essence, the research findings paint a nuanced picture of altruistic motivations, encompassing a rich tapestry of influences. This understanding not only deepens our comprehension of human behavior but also provides valuable insights for the cultivation and promotion of altruism. The detailed exploration within the manuscript opens avenues for further discussion, encouraging a closer examination of the interplay between these motivations. It sets the stage for future research to unravel the complexities surrounding altruistic behavior in diverse cultural, social, and demographic contexts.

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