

# Cross-Cultural Studies of Altruism and Empathy-Based Guilt

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## Abstract

In our first study, we examined the relationship between altruism, empathy-based guilt, and personality traits. Our data revealed that altruism to family was significantly correlated with Separation Guilt, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, and Self-hate among European Americans, but not the other cultures. Altruism to friends was significantly correlated with Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt in European Americans and Hispanic Americans. There was no correlation between guilt and altruism to strangers across all cultures.

A second study was conducted to try to replicate these findings. In this study, components of empathy were also included. Consistent with the first study, altruism to family, friends, and strangers failed to significantly correlate with any of the guilt subscales among Asian Americans. European Americans once again showed significant correlations between altruism to family and Separation and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt. Significant correlations were also found between altruism to friends and Survivor and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt. This difference between cultures was further emphasized by the correlation between Empathy Concern and altruism to family, friends, and strangers; among European Americans, the correlations were highly significant while among Asian Americans there were no correlations.

These results suggest that Asian Americans' proneness to altruistic acts towards friends and family appear unrelated to guilt or empathy, unlike altruism reported by European Americans. Our results point to the need for further investigation of altruism and its relationship to guilt, empathy, and cultural norms.



## Introduction

Altruism has been hypothesized to be a pro-social, fundamental motivation for human behavior (Hoffman, 2000; Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000; O'Connor, 1996, 2000; Preston & de Waal, 2002). Both clinical and experimental studies have since posited a more highly adaptive nonconscious mind than the field's emphasis on an individual's self-centered, competitive, and aggressive drives.

In prior research, we have investigated altruism through the lens of guilt. A series of empirical studies conducted have demonstrated a significant association between excessive guilt and psychological problems

including depression and anxiety (O'Connor, Berry & Weiss, 1999). While inhibitory in excess, guilt can also motivate altruistic behavior as a means of narrowing the discrepancy between one's own well-being and that of others.

The connections between guilt and altruism suggested that these motivations might be a universal construct worthy of broader attention in a non-clinical population. Thus, we have extended our investigation of guilt to ordinary life. Our findings suggest significant differences across cultures.

## Methods

goals will harm others (e.g., "It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with").

**Separation Guilt** – the belief that if a person separates, leads their own life, or differs from their loved ones in some way, they will cause their loved ones to suffer (e.g., "I am reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends").

**Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt** – the belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well-being of others (e.g., "I often find myself doing what someone else wants me to do rather than doing what I would most enjoy").

**Self-hate** – the acceptance of extreme negative self-views in order to maintain a connection to parents and loved ones (e.g., "I do not deserve other people's respect or admiration").

**Brief Big Five Inventory** (BFI; John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991). The BFI-44 is a 44-item self-report inventory for assessing five personality traits: open-

ness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Items from this questionnaire include statements such as "I see myself as someone who is easily distracted."

**Dispositional Altruism Scale** (Berry & O'Connor, 2002). The DAS is a 45-item adaptation of a measure of social support (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). Respondents indicate how frequently they perform acts of altruism for family members, friends, and strangers in a variety of social situations. Items from this questionnaire include how often the participant "gave money for an indefinite amount of time" and "helped them think about a problem."

**Interpersonal Reactivity Inventory** (IRI; Davis, 1983). The IRI is a 28-item self-report instrument measuring four aspects of empathy: perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress, and empathic fantasy. Items from the IRI include statements such as "I am often touched by things that I see happen" and "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the 'other guy's' point of view." Our study did not use the subscale of empathic fantasy.

**Table 1a** presents a comparison between correlations of altruism with guilt and personality subscales among Asian Americans and European Americans found in Study 1. Among European Americans, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt is positively correlated with altruism towards both family and friends while Self-hate is negatively correlated with altruism towards both family and friends. Separation Guilt is also positively correlated with altruism towards family in European Americans. No significant correlations were found between guilt and altruism in Asian Americans. Altruism to family and friends are highly correlated with all personality subscales except Neuroticism in European Americans. Among Asian Americans, only Conscientiousness and Extraversion is correlated to altruism to friends. As can be expected, both Asian American and European Americans are positively correlated between Openness and altruism to strangers. However, whereas Asian Americans' altruism to

strangers is highly correlated to conscientiousness, European American's altruism to strangers is highly correlated with Extraversion and Agreeableness.

**Table 1b** presents a comparison between correlations of altruism with guilt, empathy, and personality subscales among Asian Americans and European Americans found in Study 2. Once again, Responsibility Guilt is positively correlated with altruism towards both family and friends. Separation Guilt is positively correlated with altruism towards both family and friends. In this study, Separation Guilt is positively correlated with altruism to family and Survivor Guilt is positively correlated with altruism to friends and strangers among European Americans. Once again, significant correlations are not found between guilt and altruism for Asian Americans. In Study 2, we added an empathy measure, which we did not use in Study 1. The results of the measure appear to support our findings of differences among Asian Americans and European Americans. Empathic Concern is positively correlated in a significant way with altruism to family, friends, and strangers and Empathic Perspective Taking is positively correlated with altruism to friends among European Americans. No significant correlations are found between empathy and altruism among Asian Americans. Altruism to family and friends are positively correlated with Extraversion and Agreeableness among European Americans. Altruism to family is positively correlated with Conscientiousness for both Asian Americans and European Americans. Unlike the previous study, only altruism to strangers is positively correlated to Openness among European Americans and altruism to friends rather than to strangers is positively correlated to Openness among Asian Americans. Once again, Extraversion is positively correlated with altruism to friends among both Asian Americans and European Americans.

**Table 1a**  
Correlations of Altruism with Personality in Study 1

	Altruism Towards Family			Altruism Towards Friends			Altruism Towards Strangers		
	Asian American	European American	r	Asian American	European American	r	Asian American	European American	r
Survivor Guilt	-.40	-.06	.07	-.05	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03
Separation Guilt	-.17	.17**	.17	.02	.06	.07	-.07	-.13	.00
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	.11	.18**	.16	.20**	.14**	.01	-.07	-.07	-.07
Self-hate	-.11	-.17**	-.08	-.08	-.01	-.01	-.07	-.07	-.07
Openness	-.01	.14**	.21	.24**	.28**	.28**	.28**	.28**	.28**
Conscientiousness	.12	.12	.12	.20**	.23**	.23**	.23**	.23**	.23**
Extraversion	.07	.32**	.31**	.30**	.30**	.16	.30**	.30**	.30**
Agreeableness	.01	.29**	.20	.31**	.31**	.14	.31**	.31**	.31**
Neuroticism	.06	-.01	-.07	-.07	-.01	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.04

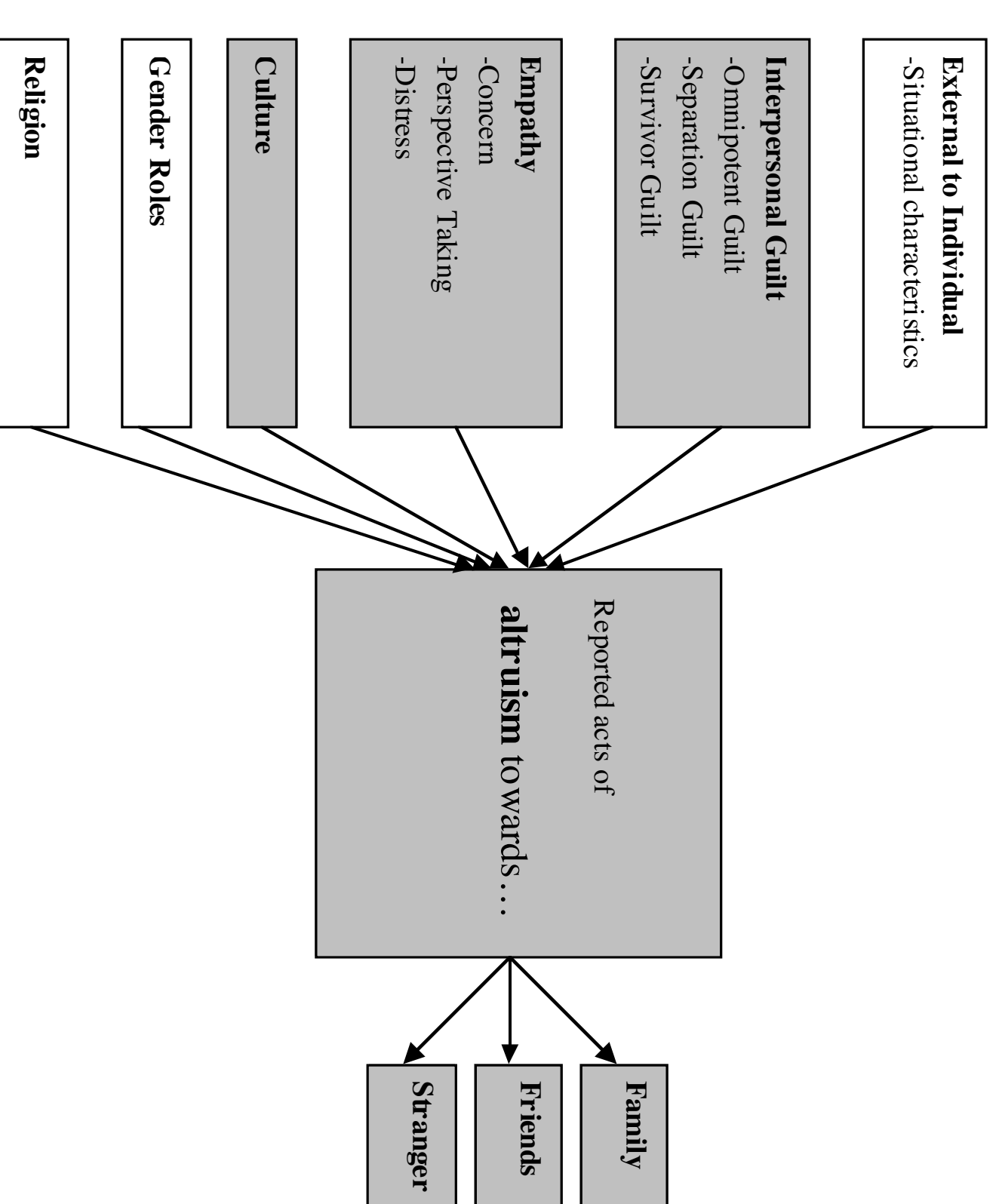
\*\*Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed)  
\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the .005 level (2-tailed)

**Table 1b**  
Correlations of Altruism with Empathy and Personality in Study 2

	Altruism Towards Family			Altruism Towards Friends			Altruism Towards Strangers		
	Asian American	European American	r	Asian American	European American	r	Asian American	European American	r
Survivor Guilt	-.27	.06	-.11	.17	.17	.03	.14	.14	.14
Separation Guilt	.18	.24**	.13	.13	.13	.05	.18*	.18*	.18*
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	-.09	.20**	-.02	.28**	.28**	.03	.06	.06	.06
Self-hate	-.14	-.14	-.14	.05	.05	-.10	-.14	-.14	-.14
Empathic Perspective Taking	.09	.14	.17	.18**	.18**	.03	.14	.14	.14
Empathic Concern	-.07	.27**	.16	.35**	.35**	.01	.20**	.20**	.20**
Empathic Distress	-.30	-.19	-.22	-.09	-.08	-.06	-.05	-.05	-.05
Openness	.08	.00	.32*	.09	.08	.21	.22**	.22**	.22**
Conscientiousness	.32*	.16*	.32*	.32*	.32*	.12	.05	.05	.05
Extraversion	.23	.23**	.38**	.23**	.23**	.19	.02	.02	.02
Agreeableness	-.23	.26**	-.28	.22**	.22**	-.04	.02	.02	.02
Neuroticism	-.05	-.05	-.06	.07	.07	-.11	-.03	-.03	-.03

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed)  
\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the .005 level (2-tailed)

## Theoretical Constructs Under Investigation



## Results

findings of differences among Asian Americans and European Americans. Empathic Concern is positively correlated in a significant way with altruism to family, friends, and strangers and Empathic Perspective Taking is positively correlated with altruism to friends among European Americans. No significant correlations are found between empathy and altruism among Asian Americans. Altruism to family and friends are positively correlated with Extraversion and Agreeableness among European Americans. Altruism to family is positively correlated with Conscientiousness for both Asian Americans and European Americans. Unlike the previous study, only altruism to strangers is positively correlated to Openness among European Americans and altruism to friends rather than to strangers is positively correlated to Openness among Asian Americans. Once again, Extraversion is positively correlated with altruism to friends among both Asian Americans and European Americans.

## Discussion

Our findings suggest that there are cultural variations in the motivations for altruism. We found that European Americans reported acts of altruism towards family, friends, and strangers corresponded with their levels of guilt and empathy. This is in contrast to the findings regarding the same constructs among Asian Americans. These results emphasize the importance of taking culture into consideration.

Only the differences between European Americans and Asian Americans were considered in our analyses due to the limited sample size of the other ethnic groups. We intend to continue with our online data collection in order to complete our analyses of the five cultures. In future studies, we would like to examine the implications that other factors (i.e., religion, gender, and age) may have on the relationship between altruism, empathy, and guilt.