Воробьева А.Е.¹, Скипор С.И.² Проверка гипотезы эмпатии – альтруизма среди волонтеров, помогающих бездомным животным

Vorobieva A.E.¹, Skipor S.I.² On testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis among volunteers helping homeless animals

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The empathy-altruism hypothesis is a well-known explanatory model for prosocial behavior. Given certain limitations, we can consider volunteering with homeless animals as a form of prosocial behavior as the society represents a final beneficiary. So far, the research on empathy and altruism among these volunteers is scarce. Therefore, it is unclear whether the empathic concern determines altruism in volunteers with animals. Our aim was to study the ability of volunteers to emotionally empathize with others in general, and to learn if this ability is associated with the altruistic orientation towards animals. The study included 114 volunteers for homeless animals in various Russian charities. The Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy and the Volunteer Functions Inventory were applied. Based on the data obtained two groups were formed: altruists and non-altruists. Next, we compared the level of empathy in the two groups using the Student's t-test (for independent samples). The volunteers showed moderate to low empathy towards people. At the same time, compassion for animals was high among both altruists and non-altruists. No relationship was found between the empathy and altruism among the volunteers with stray animals. It was shown that despite volunteering with animals can be essentially prosocial, they are compassionate primarily for animals rather than people or society. On the other hand, such degree of empathy can relate to emotional burnout and/or compassion fatigue. It can also be determined by the propensity for empathic concern among the volunteers (both to people and animals), or the negative attitude toward people given the context of the volunteers' activities. Further research on the topic is required. Such studies are important for the volunteer movement to be maintained and the emotional burnout prevention.

Keywords: volunteerism, volunteering with nonhuman animals, help homeless animals, empathy, altruism, empathy-altruism hypothesis

Introduction

The results of a number of studies show the high importance of moral factors in the regulation of social behavior and, in general, the activity of the individual [Gorbacheva, Kupreichenko, 2006; Volovikova, 2004; Zhuravlev, Kupreichenko, 2007]. Prosocial behavior is characterized by a tendency of people to share, collaborate, and help others [Penner et al., 2005], it is inherently the opposite of antisocial behavior. In some sources, researchers equate altruism and prosocial behavior, but often altruism is still considered a specific phenomenon of prosocial behavior [Reber, 1995, p.608]. In this case, in addition to altruism, prosocial behavior includes friendship, cooperation, affiliation, and in general any possible help to others (volunteerism, donations, good deeds, etc.). And as noted by the authors, the ability to empathize lies at the heart of a person's prosocial behavior [Haidt, 2001; Trivers, 1971].

Interestingly, that our good deeds can spread not only in relation to representatives of our own species. The fact that a person can feel empathy and perform altruistic acts regard to nonhuman recipients is not questioned in psychology. However, there is insufficient data on empathizing and helping nonhuman animals on a permanent basis. Deeper study on the mechanisms and particularities of such behavior is required.

Literature review

The empathy-altruism hypothesis postulates that altruistic deeds are determined by the empathic concern [Batson, 1987, 2010, 2011; Toi, Batson, 1982]. But before we begin to elaborate and investigate the theory, it is necessary to dissect and define the main terms.

The term 'altruism' is quite widely and liberally used in literature [Dzhus, 2005]. In our paper we rely on the concept of altruism by C.D. Batson. According to the author, altruism is the motivational state which is aimed at increasing welfare of another person [Batson, 2010]. On the contrary, egoism pursues a goal to enhance one's own welfare. Batson and colleagues conducted numerous studies and experiments which approved a hypothesis that empathy causes altruistic behavior [Batson, Ahmad, 2001; Dovidio, 1991]. With that, the author specified namely empathic concern as the main root of altruistic behavior.

There are several widely-used definitions of the phenomenon of empathy, but for this study we relied on the one by C.D. Batson which postulates that empathy or, more precisely, empathic concern

is “an other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need” [Batson, 2019, p. 29].

At first sight, volunteerism can be considered altruism by its core – increasing another’s welfare. But although volunteerism and altruism are examples of prosocial behavior, these two phenomena are not synonymous [Reber, 1995, p.608]. Altruism can be the main motive of volunteerism but not all volunteers pursue altruistic goals in their activity [Ilyin, 2000].

Nevertheless, it can be said that altruism and empathy are the crucial spots in volunteerism. From the standpoint of the theory of altruism, the basis of volunteering is altruism and empathy [Nezhina et al., 2014]. Batson writes that while observing people's suffering, empathic concern arises in addition to discomfort and is based on empathy for those who suffer [Batson, Weeks, 1996]. These emotions force people to act impulsively to help others in pain. Volunteerism, in turn, is a planned and consistent behavior which cannot be based only on temporary and impulsive actions due to particularities of the activity. Although it is evident that situational empathic concern is a cause for a variety of prosocial behavior, dispositional empathy is deemed by some authors to be a quite reliable predictor of altruistic, helping deeds including volunteering [Unger, Thumhuri, 1997].

Volunteerism is not characterized as an activity with the main goal to gain benefits. However, since this activity is an example of prosocial behavior, it can bring some rewards for volunteers (career advancement, obtaining skills and experience, etc.), or it can be extremely selfless, altruistic. According to the results of the analysis of the literature, it can be said that research by Russian authors almost equally revealed both selfish and altruistic motives among volunteers, with a slight margin in the direction of altruistic orientation [Stegniy, Nikonov, 2017]. Western authors also revealed controversial results on the altruistic nature of volunteers [Clary et al., 1998; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008; Holdsworth, 2010]. Empathy, on the one hand, is called by some authors a professionally important quality of a volunteer and is considered by default [Azarova, Yanitskiy, 2008]. On the other hand, there is no definite agreement among the researchers on this quality among volunteers.

A number of authors found significant differences in the level of empathy between volunteers and individuals not included in the activity [Azarova, Yanitskiy, 2008; Claxton-Oldfield, Banzen, 2010; Paterson et al., 2009; Penner, 2002; Rodina, Prudkov, 2018]. At the same time, other studies show that in the group of volunteers a normal level of empathy prevails, not very different from the con-

Vorobieva A.E, Skipor S.I. Testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis on animal shelter volunteers... trol group [Garbay et al., 2015], or volunteers differ from non-volunteers only in certain types of empathy [Bogacheva, Logvinova, 2018; Zaskodna et al., 2013].

C.J. Einolf (2008) based on the processing of data from a large-scale social sample found that empathy is positively associated with certain types of prosocial behavior but not so much with volunteering. It is said that empathic concern may not be a huge factor for planned volunteering behavior and decisions to help others who are not present in the moment. This study presents the idea that individual differences in empathy may not have a great impact on whether one helps others or not.

Studies on altruism and empathy of volunteers with homeless animals are limited [Ferrari et al., 1999; Maki, Snyder, 2017; Neumann, 2010; Nikolskaya et al., 2020; Prudkov, Rodina, 2016; Rodina, Prudkov, 2018]. O.N. Rodina and P.N. Prudkov (2015, 2018) conducted studies on volunteers who serve companion animals. It was revealed that this type of volunteer is inclined to feel empathetic emotions and sincere compassion to nonhuman animals. A. Maki and M. Snyder (2017) revealed that individuals who are interested in volunteering with stray animals on average are not so much altruistic but are empathetic. Studies on volunteers serving companion animals [Neumann, 2010; Zasloff, Hart, 1998] showed that the volunteers help because of attachment and closeness toward nonhuman animals in general; the animals themselves represent worth for the volunteers and produce a desire to protect them.

In comparison with the general population, volunteers with homeless animals advocate animal rights even more commonly than those of humans and apparently are more disposed and empathetic toward nonhuman animals [Signal, Taylor, 2007; Taylor, Signal, 2006]. Also, there is a tendency for volunteers with companion animals to be mainly motivated by a desire to help animals and represent their interests in general [Polutin, Samoilova, 2020]. Moreover, it seems that the volunteers do not like people much, due to consequences of animal abuse which they deal with on a daily basis [Samoilova, 2018].

The aforementioned studies allow us to assume that motives for helping among the volunteers were mostly selfless. Also, it should be noted that the majority of the respondents with homeless animals displayed an extreme level of concern, compassion, and sympathy toward nonhuman animals in the studies. Thus, it seems that volunteers helping companion animals can be defined as altruistic and empathetic to their recipients. Since studies on testing the hypothesis empathy – altruism among

Vorobieva A.E, Skipor S.I. Testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis on animal shelter volunteers... volunteers with animals have not been conducted directly, we cannot claim a certain correlation. But with some restrictions the data can be considered to support and prove our assumption.

The question is whether or not volunteering with animals is an example of prosocial behavior, since the apparent goal is the welfare of nonhuman animals instead of humans. In our opinion, volunteers serving companion animals also help ecosystems and society as a whole. Indeed, they assist employees of shelters and foster homes, veterinarians, administration of charitable organizations, etc., as well as helping those who adopt animals into families providing them assistance, training, and support. This type of volunteer rescues animals from the streets which is a service to the neighborhood and community. In addition, the volunteers set an example to others normalizing such social practices and providing a good role model of a responsible member of society for children and youth. Thus, we can say with some certainty that volunteers with homeless animals help animals practically, but conceptually they serve people and benefit society, which is their ultimate recipient. Then, with some restrictions, we can legitimately view this phenomenon in the context of prosocial behavior with its features, principles, and mechanisms.

According to the prior studies, empathy of volunteers with companion animals in relation to their nonhuman recipients is beyond doubt. Also, there is some evidence that such volunteers have even less empathy for people than animals. But we do not have any direct information about a lack of empathy toward people among the volunteers. Moreover, it can be perceived that such strong compassion toward animals in conjunction with implicit benefit to people is produced by a high level of capability to understand and share others' emotions. It can be assumed that volunteers serving animals tend to have increased/expanded empathy. A similar assumption in the context of extended altruism was tested earlier [Prudkov, Rodina, 2016; Rodina, Prudkov, 2015, 2018] and was not confirmed. But the studies did not utilize recognizable methods on empathy and altruism; a relationship between altruism and empathy also was not investigated. To understand more comprehensively the key principles of empathy and altruism among volunteers with homeless animals, additional studies are required.

The aim of our empirical study was to learn the general capacity for empathy of volunteers with companion animals and whether a level of emotional empathy is associated with altruistic orientation of the volunteers. Taking into account the above studies and unsolved issues, as well as the fact that there is no Russian-language validated questionnaire on empathy toward animals, we considered the questionnaires on general empathy to be appropriate in this case.

Thereby, H0 was: there is no correlation between altruism and a level of emotional empathy among volunteers with companion animals. H1: altruism correlates with a level of emotional empathy among volunteers with homeless animals.

Method

For examining altruism among volunteers, we asked our respondents to continue a phrase “I volunteer because of...” with an opportunity to choose an unlimited number of preassigned answers. The following answers were created according to VFI [Clary et al., 1998]:

- I. I think that helping people is important. I feel sincere compassion toward whom I assist. I suppose that it is necessary to help someone less fortunate than me.
- II. Volunteerism helps me to know a lot of new things, to learn something, to obtain useful skills.
- III. There are a lot of volunteers among my friends. My close circle of friends encourages me to be a volunteer.
- IV. The activity opens new career opportunities, increases my value on the job market, expands a circle of useful business contacts.
- V. Volunteering distracts me from sad thoughts, allows me not to think about my problems. I feel less lonely.
- VI. Volunteerism maintains my self-respect and self-esteem. I am more self-satisfied, feel important and necessary. The activity allows me to make new friends.

The motive I (motive of values) is considered as truly altruistic, the rest of the motives are seemingly egoistic.

To investigate a level of empathy of volunteers with animals we used the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE) by A. Mehrabian, N. Epstein, adapted in Russian by U. Orlov and U. Emelianov, 1986 [Soldatova et al., 2008].

Sample

The research sample consisted of 114 Russian volunteers with homeless animals from 18 to 64 years with an average age of 38.5 years. 96% of respondents were women, and 4% were men. 75% had at least one university degree, and 87% of volunteers had a permanent job. The majority of respondents volunteered once a week or more.

The data was collected from the following funds and organizations: The Charitable Foundation for Homeless Animals “The Forest Shelter” (“Lesnoy priyut”), The Charitable Foundation for Homeless Animals “Kotodetki”, a closed Russian community on volunteering with animals on a social network, and The Urban Animal Protection Fund (Moscow). All organizations and volunteers provide help mainly to so called companion animals – primarily cats and dogs.

Respondents were surveyed on Google Forms. The link to the survey primarily was sent to curators, managers of charitable organizations, and directly to volunteers. The survey was conducted mainly anonymously with the possibility of obtaining feedback from the study participants on the results of the methods passed.

Data collection conducted in two stages:

- I. 17.12.2019 - the pilot study at an event of searching home for homeless animals.
- II. From 11.12.2019 to 10.04.2020 - the main period of collecting the responses of volunteers.

Despite the fact that, to collect the responses of the volunteers, the link to the questionnaire was mainly sent to the curators, administrators of the communities and organizations, we additionally screened the answers of the respondents. Hence, the answers of respondents who involved in volunteering less than once a year, irregularly or recently (less than a year at the time of the study), providing only material assistance to the recipients, as well as answers from uncertain sources without specifying the types of help were excluded from the sample.

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables used in the study using Excel. It was found that the average level of empathy in the group of volunteers was 69.8 points (SD = 9.56) with a minimum of 35 and a maximum of 94 points out of 100. In consideration of the gender composition of the sample, we took scores between 68 and 79 as moderate, according to results of the survey on the general population [Soldatova et al., 2008].

According to Figure 1, most volunteers had a moderate (45.61%, $n = 52$) and low level of empathy (39.47%, $n = 45$); a high level with more than 80 points was rare in the sample (14.91%, $n = 17$).

Figure 1. Levels of emotional empathy among volunteers.

50% ($n = 57$) of volunteers were actuated by altruistic motive I, another 50% ($n = 57$) pointed out different motives or a combination of them on the form.

Surveyed volunteers with not entirely altruistic motives were mostly actuated by 2 ($n = 29$; 51%) or 3 ($n = 14$; 25%) functional motives.

It was found that approximately 20% ($n = 12$) of respondents volunteered because of the opportunity to express their own values toward companion animals and maintain their self-esteem and self-respect. For another 20% ($n = 12$) of volunteers the activity provided an option for obtaining new skills, gaining new perspectives on life, and declaring the importance to help homeless animals. These motives are considered as egoistic in general.

The non-altruistic volunteers showed a moderate level of emotional empathy (70.3 points out of 100) on average with a minimum mark of 46 and maximum 86.

As it is shown in Figure 2, approximately 44% ($n = 25$) of non-altruistic respondents had a moderate level of emotional empathy, almost 39% ($n = 22$) tend to be less empathetic than the general population on average. Around 17% ($n = 10$) of our volunteers demonstrated a high level of emotional empathy with scores above 80.

It is noteworthy that volunteers of this group responding to this statement about compassion toward animals in the questionnaire (“I get really upset when I see animal suffering”), demonstrated an ex-

tremely high level of empathy with 3.85 points out of 4 on average. 89.5% (n = 51) of respondents reported the highest level of emotional discomfort from being a witness of animals in pain.

Figure 2. Levels of emotional empathy among non-altruistic volunteers.

The sample of respondents with the altruistic motive demonstrated a moderate level of empathy (69.4 points out of 100) with a minimum mark of 35 and maximum 94, showing the wider range of scores in comparison with the non-altruistic volunteers.

According to Figure 3, around half of the volunteers (48%, n = 27) demonstrated a medium level of emotional empathy, approximately 40% (n = 23) showed a lack of empathy, and 12% were highly empathetic.

Figure 3. Levels of emotional empathy among altruistic volunteers.

Also, our data showed that volunteers serving companion animals with altruistic traits were even more empathic toward them in comparison with the other group. The majority of the respondents (95%, $n = 54$) reported feeling immense compassion toward animals with 3.9 points out of 4 on average.

As it is presented in Table 1, there was a difference between two groups of volunteers in marks of standard deviations. The sample of more selfless volunteers demonstrated a wider range of spreading the values and the lower mean of emotional empathy.

Table 1

Emotional empathy of altruistic and non-altruistic volunteers with animals

Volunteers	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Non-altruistic	57	46	86	70.26	8.798
Altruistic	57	35	94	69.40	10.333

In order to test the empathy-altruism hypothesis on our sample we applied statistical analyses. According to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test, data was normally distributed. Statistical analysis was performed by using the Student's t-test (for independent samples). All statistics were calculated by using software IBM SPSS Statistics, version 22. We encoded non-altruistic volunteers as 1, and respondents with altruistic qualities as 2.

It was revealed no statistical differences on levels of empathy between altruistic and non-altruistic volunteers with companion animals ($t = .478$; $p = .633$). So, we accepted the null hypothesis.

Discussion

We studied the parameters of the emotional empathy of the volunteers and found that the volunteers were generally moderately empathetic with a tendency to low empathy. They were able to recognize and respond to the emotional states of others, but were likely to have difficulty identifying and dealing with complex emotions. Presumably, they have an average ability to make contacts and communicate with people, sometimes struggling with an interlocutor's state of mind or conflict resolutions.

According to prior findings [Nikolskaya et al., 2020; Rodina, Prudkov, 2018], volunteers helping stray animals are predominantly independent, stubborn, and introverted. They are not inclined to

Vorobieva A.E, Skipor S.I. Testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis on animal shelter volunteers... cooperate and work closely with other volunteers [Vorobieva, Skipor, 2020]. Moreover, it was learned from conversations with the volunteers that their activity is not frequently supported by society; they are often perceived as eccentric [Rodina, Prudkov, 2018]. This data may explain such a level of empathy toward people among volunteers with nonhuman animals and support the received results on empathy in our study.

The results also may be associated with a negative experience of the volunteers related to physical and psychological abuse to nonhuman animals from humans [Samoilova, 2018], signs of burnout, which is a serious issue for charitable organizations, or the original specialization of empathy and altruism of such volunteers in the direction of animals [Rodina, Prudkov, 2015]. These factors can contribute to reducing the level of empathy for people and increasing empathy for nonhuman animals.

At the same time, such volunteers demonstrated an unequivocal consensus on compassion toward nonhuman animals. All surveyed volunteers were extremely empathetic toward nonhuman animals and got upset being a witness of animal suffering. Another detail worth mentioning is that volunteers who noted themselves as altruists were even more inclined to feel empathic concern toward animals in pain.

Also, one of the explanations for the results obtained can be the specificity of the questionnaire we have chosen to measure empathy. This tool has a number of its limitations and cannot differentiate, for example, empathic concern associated specifically with altruistic actions. Further research is required on specifically empathic concern among this type of volunteers.

The received results tie well with prior studies wherein volunteers with companion animals tend to have empathic emotions toward them more often than toward people, meanwhile being altruistic [Polutin, Samoilova, 2020; Samoilova, 2018; Signal, Taylor, 2007; Taylor, Signal, 2006].

Our study has also revealed that there is no evidence on the relationship between altruism and the level of emotional empathy among volunteers serving homeless animals. It can be said that despite the fact that the volunteers demonstrate prosocial behavior and help people and society by rescuing animals, the main point of application of their efforts is nonhuman animals. It is interesting that this activity meets the needs of society as a whole, even if the volunteers themselves are primarily and solely concerned with the well-being of stray animals.

As in the case of the hypothesis of extended altruism [Rodina, Prudkov, 2015], the hypothesis of extended and increased empathy in volunteers with homeless animals was not confirmed in our study. We can see that mechanisms of general emotional empathy do not work on altruists toward nonhuman animals.

It can be assumed that not all the exact phenomena and qualities of prosocial behavior can be found in volunteering with nonhuman recipients. Additionally, the fact of the extremely high means of compassion with animals in the questionnaire can be considered a pointer to further studies on empathy toward nonhuman animals of this type of volunteer. The study on attitudes and empathic response toward animals, conducted by T.D. Signal and N. Taylor (2007), revealed a correlation between the parameters. Perhaps having studied empathy toward animals among such volunteers, the empathy-altruism hypothesis would be applied and confirmed as well in relation to animals.

Conclusion

The first study on testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis among Russian volunteers with companion animals has been conducted.

It has been found that the classic empathy-altruism hypothesis cannot be applied directly to volunteers with nonhuman animals yet.

Our research has established that there are no relationships between general emotional empathy and altruism among volunteers assisting nonhuman animals. The volunteers had an average level of emotional empathy whether they tend to be altruistic in their activity or not.

Therefore, volunteers who help stray animals are not necessarily highly empathetic in general but can still demonstrate truly altruistic intentions and a high level of empathy specifically toward nonhuman animals in the activity.

The sample size and the use of self-report forms in our study may cause potential limitations for our work. The questionnaire we used could also influence the results obtained, since it does not differentiate the specific components and types of empathy associated with altruism and volunteering.

The future studies might be focused on indicating an ability of empathic concern to nonhuman animals among volunteers who serve the animals. It may be promising to juxtapose results of level of empathy to companion animals with a level of altruism among volunteers with companion animals. For these purposes it would be advisable to develop and validate a specialized questionnaire on emotional empathy and empathic concern in relation to various nonhuman animals. Also, future research on volunteers with homeless animals might extend particularities and explanations of quite low empathy to people in conjunction with a great level of empathy and altruism toward nonhuman animals.

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Воробьева А.Е.¹, Скипор С.И.² Проверка гипотезы эмпатии – альтруизма среди волонтеров, помогающих бездомным животным

Vorobieva A.E.¹, Skipor S.I.² On testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis among volunteers helping homeless animals

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Гипотеза эмпатии-альтруизма – распространенная объяснительная модель просоциального поведения. С некоторыми ограничениями мы можем говорить о том, что волонтерство с бездомными животными является феноменом просоциального поведения, так как конечный благополучатель подобной деятельности – общество. К настоящему моменту у нас есть только единичные данные об эмпатии и альтруизме зоодобровольцев. Вопрос о том, детерминирует ли уровень эмпатии альтруизм у таких добровольцев по отношению к животным, по-прежнему остается открытым. Целью нашей работы было изучить способность добровольцев эмоционально сопереживать другим в целом, а также выяснить, связана ли эта способность с альтруистической ориентацией. Мы протестировали 114 добровольцев, помогающих бездомным животным, из различных российских благотворительных организаций с помощью опросника «Шкала эмоционального отклика» А. Мехрабиана, Н. Эпштейна (в

адаптации Ю.М. Орлова и Ю.Н. Емельянова) и анкеты, разработанной нами в соответствии с методикой VFI и теорией мотивов Э.Дж. Клари (Clary et al., 1998). На основании полученных данных мы разделили добровольцев на две группы: альтруисты и не альтруисты. Далее сравнили уровни эмпатии в двух группах, используя t-критерий Стьюдента (для независимых выборок). Добровольцы показали умеренную (с тенденцией к низкой) эмпатию по отношению к людям. В то же время сострадание к животным было чрезвычайно высоким как среди альтруистов, так и среди не альтруистов. Связи между общей способностью к эмоциональной эмпатии и альтруизмом зооволонтеров не обнаружено. Наши результаты свидетельствуют о том, что, несмотря на то, что волонтерство с животными может быть по сути просоциальным, зооволонтеры сопереживают в первую очередь животным, а не людям или обществу в целом. С другой стороны, подобный уровень эмпатии может быть связан с эмоциональным выгоранием, усталостью от сочувствия, а также указывать на некоторую специализацию в эмпатии у таких индивидов (по отношению к людям или животным) или проявление негативного отношения к людям с учетом особенностей зооволонтерства. Требуются дальнейшие исследования по данной теме. Работы, подобные нашей, могут быть полезны для удержания зооволонтеров и профилактики их эмоционального выгорания.

Ключевые слова: волонтерство, зооволонтерство, помощь животным, эмпатия, альтруизм, гипотеза эмпатии – альтруизма

Финансирование

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