

Cultural Altruism in Action: Empathy and Collectivism as Predictors of Volunteerism in Indonesian Disaster Response

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Received : May 14, 2024

Accepted : June 27, 2024

Published : July 25, 2024

Citation: Putrawansyah, (2024). Cultural Altruism in Action: Empathy and Collectivism as Predictors of Volunteerism in Indonesian Disaster Response. *Psychosocia : Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Psychology*, 2(3). 124-134.

<https://doi.org/10.61978/psychosocia.v2i3>

ABSTRACT: This study investigates how empathy and collectivism influence volunteerism in Indonesia's disaster response contexts. Framed within a culturally embedded model of altruism, the research employed a mixed methods design combining surveys from 300 volunteers and interviews with 15 participants across three disaster categories. Empathy and collectivism emerged as significant predictors of altruistic intentions ($R^2 = 0.225$), while belief in a just world showed no effect. ANOVA results indicated consistent altruism across disaster types, pointing to strong cultural stability. Qualitative data reinforced these findings, highlighting the role of gotong royong, spirituality, and communal identity in sustaining volunteer engagement. This study contributes to the literature by challenging Western-centric models of prosocial behavior and demonstrating the importance of culturally grounded strategies such as involving community leaders and integrating traditional values in volunteer management. It advocates for cross-cultural disaster response frameworks that prioritize local knowledge and social cohesion.

Keywords: Volunteerism, Altruism, Collectivism, Empathy, Disaster Response, Gotong Royong, Indonesia.



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INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, reflects a dynamic and complex interplay of cultural traditions, community values, psychological constructs, and sociopolitical frameworks. Positioned within a sociocultural landscape defined by collectivism, shared responsibility, and deeply rooted communal norms, Indonesian volunteerism transcends individual motivation. Rather than being viewed as a discretionary or philanthropic act, volunteering in Indonesia is deeply embedded in the cultural ethos of mutual assistance, or gotong royong. This practice, steeped in generations of communal life, underpins much of the country's social behavior, particularly during times of crisis when solidarity becomes a collective necessity rather than an individual choice.

Indonesia's frequent exposure to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions provides a unique context for examining volunteer behavior. Strong kinship ties, spiritual

beliefs, and social affiliations foster norms where volunteering is expected and socially reinforced. Rooted in shared responsibility, religious obligation, and local wisdom, volunteerism is transformed into a socially binding duty, where participation arises from both empathy and societal expectation (Dulkiah et al., 2023; Permatasari et al., 2021).

Gotong royong operates as a vital and dynamic mechanism of disaster response and community resilience. More than just a symbolic expression of solidarity, it materializes in the form of pooling physical labor, sharing food and other resources, offering emotional and spiritual support, and collaborating in rebuilding damaged infrastructure. This deeply entrenched cultural tradition not only facilitates immediate relief efforts but also strengthens long term preparedness and adaptive capacity in disaster prone regions. It promotes horizontal collaboration and ensures that even marginalized or underserved members of society are not left behind in recovery processes (Nugroho et al., 2022). The enduring presence of gotong royong illustrates how traditional value systems can complement, rather than compete with, modern approaches to disaster governance and emergency management.

From a psychological perspective, altruism in collectivist societies such as Indonesia can be explained through social identity theory, empathy theory, and normative social influence. Individuals internalize communal values and act to strengthen group cohesion. Volunteering thus becomes an expression of belonging and loyalty. Studies confirm that collectivist orientations heighten empathy toward in-group suffering, increasing prosocial engagement during shared hardship (Blasco et al., 2020; Bust et al., 2023).

Empathy, in conjunction with collectivism, plays a central motivational role in shaping prosocial behavior. This emotional resonance is not merely individual; it is cultivated, normalized, and expected within the community. When disasters strike, empathetic impulses are amplified by shared experiences and cultural imperatives to act. Coordinated responses are driven not only by compassion but by the moral and social pressures inherent in communal living. In Indonesia, empathy functions as both an emotional and social construct internal feelings of concern align with external social norms, creating a double impetus for engagement (Nugroho et al., 2022). This synergy ensures a widespread and often spontaneous mobilization of volunteer resources.

In addition to these cultural and emotional factors, volunteerism in Indonesia is influenced by a diverse range of motivations including personal development, skill acquisition, and social mobility. Many individuals view volunteer activities as opportunities to gain practical experience, build networks, and enhance employability. For students and young professionals in particular, volunteering serves dual purposes: fulfilling cultural expectations while accumulating symbolic and human capital. These motivations coexist and often reinforce the foundational values of altruism and collective responsibility (Mbah & East, 2022; Rezeki et al., 2024). Volunteerism thus becomes a hybrid practice anchored in traditional norms while also responding to modern social and economic aspirations.

Volunteerism also plays a crucial role in advancing Indonesia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Volunteers act as key intermediaries between formal institutions and local communities, translating development agendas into culturally resonant practices. They facilitate grassroots movements that support critical SDG targets such as poverty reduction,

gender equality, health access, and environmental sustainability. Programs that leverage volunteer networks not only harness local knowledge and trust but also create spaces for participatory governance and civic empowerment. This helps bridge the often perceived gap between top down policy and bottom up implementation, reinforcing accountability and legitimacy in development interventions (Lestari et al., 2023).

In conclusion, Indonesian volunteerism must be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that is culturally situated, psychologically grounded, and socially embedded. The interdependence of empathy, collectivism, and the deeply held practice of *gotong royong* provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting volunteer behavior during crises. This culturally contextualized model challenges universalist assumptions and underscores the need for policy and research approaches that are sensitive to local traditions and motivations. Ultimately, Indonesian volunteerism illustrates how communities can leverage cultural capital to build resilience, promote social cohesion, and support inclusive development in the face of both chronic and acute challenges.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the influence of empathy, collectivism, and belief in a just world on volunteering behavior during disaster responses in Indonesia. The quantitative component provided generalizable insights, while the qualitative interviews offered contextual depth, capturing the cultural nuances of volunteerism.

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed. Quantitative data were gathered first through standardized surveys to identify predictive relationships, followed by qualitative interviews that elaborated on the lived experiences and cultural meanings behind the statistical trends. This integration enhances the interpretive depth of the findings (Dang & Xiao, 2022).

A purposive sample of 300 active disaster volunteers was recruited from three major cities in Java: Yogyakarta, Magelang, and Semarang. Participants were evenly distributed across three types of disasters flood, earthquake, and landslide. Inclusion criteria required prior experience in volunteer roles related to emergency or post disaster relief within the past five years.

Validated psychometric scales were employed to measure the core constructs:

- Empathy was assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which captures both emotional concern and perspective taking. The IRI is known for its cross cultural applicability and reliability.
- Collectivism was measured through the revised Individualism Collectivism Scale (INDCOL) developed by Triandis, with modifications informed by Lui & Rollock (2018) to reflect Southeast Asian sociocultural settings.
- Belief in a Just World was evaluated using the Lerner BJW Scale, widely validated in various international contexts

- Altruistic Intention was measured via a custom index of five items evaluating intention to help, commitment level, and willingness to volunteer long term.

Surveys were administered during volunteer training sessions or online over a six-week period, with facilitation by local coordinators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants selected for demographic and experiential diversity, focusing on cultural motivations, emotional experiences, and volunteer identity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic and psychological profiles. Multiple regression was used to test the predictive value of empathy, collectivism, and belief in a just world on altruistic intentions. One way ANOVA examined differences in motivation across disaster types.

Qualitative data were thematically coded using NVivo. Coding followed Braun and Clarke's six phase framework to identify dominant themes, patterns of meaning, and cultural narratives. The integration of results occurred at the interpretation stage, allowing qualitative insights to contextualize statistical patterns.

This research received approval from an accredited university ethics board. All participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained throughout, and participants could withdraw at any point without consequence.

This methodological framework enables a culturally nuanced and empirically grounded investigation into the collective roots of altruistic volunteering, with relevance to both academic theory and disaster management practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an in depth account of the study's findings from both quantitative and qualitative components. It is structured into four primary sections: descriptive statistics, regression analysis, ANOVA based on disaster type, and thematically analyzed qualitative insights. Each section is supported by empirical data and enriched by literature based interpretation to offer a robust analysis of the research questions.

Descriptive Statistics

Participants exhibited consistently high levels of empathy ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.65$) and collectivism ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.59$), closely aligning with normative ranges identified in prior studies conducted within Indonesian contexts (Cahyanto et al., 2021; Soetanto et al., 2022). These elevated scores are indicative of a culturally embedded predisposition toward prosocial orientation and community centered behavior. Additionally, the average altruism score was measured at 4.19 ($SD = 0.62$),

which is comparatively higher than reported averages from Western samples, where cultural norms often prioritize individual agency (Arianti & Koentjoro, 2023; Adi et al., 2023).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Empathy	4.21	0.65
Collectivism	4.34	0.59
Altruism Score	4.19	0.62
Belief in Justice	3.88	0.72

Demographic analysis showed that female participants scored higher on empathy and collectivism (Mandala & Pujiati, 2020). Respondents under 30 also reported higher altruistic orientation and group commitment (Lestari et al., 2023). Urban participants scored slightly higher in collectivism than rural participants (Rahiem, 2024). These demographic insights contextualize the broader social tendencies influencing volunteer engagement.

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis revealed that empathy ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$) and collectivism ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .001$) were both statistically significant predictors of altruistic intention. These results confirm the foundational hypothesis that cultural and emotional factors drive volunteer behavior. Conversely, belief in a just world, while culturally relevant, did not show a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.243$), suggesting that immediate social norms and interpersonal values may carry more influence than abstract moral philosophies in shaping action.

Table 2. Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	p
Empathy	0.42	0.08	0.39	<.001
Collectivism	0.35	0.09	0.32	<.001
Belief in Justice	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.243

The regression model explained 22.5% of the variance in altruistic intention ($R^2 = 0.225$), consistent with prior models estimating 20–30% explanatory power in similar cross cultural analyses (Roitman, 2019; Suwignyo, 2019). Moreover, an interaction term was tested and found significant, indicating a synergistic relationship between empathy and collectivism. Volunteers who scored high on both variables demonstrated amplified altruistic tendencies, highlighting the compounded motivational impact of emotional and social orientation (Radyati & Tjahjono, 2021).

ANOVA by Disaster Type

To evaluate whether the type of disaster influenced altruistic motivation, a one way ANOVA was conducted comparing volunteers responding to floods, earthquakes, and landslides. Results indicated no statistically significant difference across the groups ($F(2, 297) = 0.21$, $p = 0.81$). This

reinforces the theoretical claim that deeply held cultural norms such as gotong royong transcend contextual variations in the type of crisis (Dewantara, 2018).

Table 3. ANOVA Results: Altruism by Disaster Type

Disaster Type	N	Mean Altruism	SD
Flood	100	4.22	0.61
Earthquake	100	4.17	0.63
Landslide	100	4.18	0.62

However, qualitative data provided nuanced insights. Several participants emphasized that proximity to the disaster site or familiarity with affected communities intensified their motivation to engage. This suggests that while altruism is uniformly present, its emotional salience may fluctuate with spatial and relational closeness (Marta et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2019).

Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis of interviews identified four key themes: (1) emotional and moral fulfillment, (2) spiritual values, (3) community bonding, and (4) symbolism of *gotong royong*. These themes highlight that Indonesian volunteerism is sustained by cultural, emotional, and spiritual imperatives, complementing the quantitative findings.

Cultural Foundations of Volunteerism

The results of this study affirm the significance of cultural and emotional foundations particularly empathy and collectivism in predicting and sustaining volunteerism among Indonesian disaster response volunteers. These findings extend current theoretical models of altruistic behavior by embedding them within the socio cultural fabric of a collectivist society where traditions like gotong royong constitute a powerful mobilizing force. In the Indonesian context, volunteerism is deeply intertwined with everyday cultural practices, rather than being isolated or exceptional behavior. It reflects a shared moral compass, often expressed through communal narratives passed down generationally.

The Role of Collectivist Cultural Frameworks

Collectivist cultural frameworks underpin Indonesia's volunteer landscape, emphasizing group obligations and shared responsibility (Aksa & Afrian, 2022; Hamid et al., 2023). This study shows that prosocial action functions less as an individual choice and more as a reaffirmation of collective identity. Participants consistently viewed volunteering as an expected contribution to community integrity, reinforcing the idea of altruism as a collective imperative (Arianti & Koentjoro, 2023).

Social Capital and Habitual Engagement

This cultural orientation is further reinforced through social networks and local traditions that facilitate repeated engagement. As Yuhertiana et al. (2022) highlight, collectivist systems build social capital, not just in the form of relational trust, but as operational networks that accelerate and amplify volunteer participation. These networks are often interwoven with religious groups, neighborhood associations, and educational institutions that act as recruitment grounds and motivators for collective action. In this way, Indonesian volunteerism becomes less of an isolated behavioral outcome and more of a habitual, culturally reinforced social mechanism. Volunteers are frequently motivated not only by shared values but by the direct encouragement of peers and respected community figures, making prosocial action a norm rather than an exception. These findings are emblematic of a deeper sociological truth that volunteerism in collectivist societies transcends crisis contexts and becomes embedded in the very architecture of everyday life.

Limitations of Western Centric Models

Importantly, the results draw attention to the limitations of Western centric models of prosocial behavior in Southeast Asian contexts. Western paradigms often prioritize internal motivations moral reasoning, personal satisfaction, or psychological benefit as central to explaining altruism. However, this study underscores that such frameworks insufficiently account for the role of social cohesion, moral obligation, and communal identity in driving prosocial acts (Hakim, 2021; Sumarto, 2017). In the Indonesian setting, volunteerism is less about individual agency and more about relational continuity and cultural obligation (Fatimah et al., 2023; Tomo et al., 2020). Furthermore, Western methodologies often emphasize measurable outcomes, overlooking the qualitative depth of spiritual and emotional fulfillment that drives sustained participation. The application of Western centric metrics to evaluate community engagement may thus misrepresent or undervalue culturally specific forms of altruism, leading to flawed assessments and misguided policy recommendations.

Policy Implications for Volunteer Management

These gaps have direct implications for policy and program design. Volunteer management should be rooted in local values, engaging community leaders and integrating *gotong royong* into training and practice (Siradjuddin, 2023). Contextualized strategies improve legitimacy, retention, and trust, ensuring programs align with evolving community needs.

Cross Cultural Relevance and Disaster Relief Strategies

The findings also offer insights into how cultural models of altruism can inform cross cultural disaster response strategies. By shifting from a donor recipient model to one emphasizing local leadership and shared responsibility, disaster relief can harness the existing communal networks that already support resilience. Programs grounded in cultural empathy and localized training emphasizing tradition, mutual obligation, and community authority are more likely to be embraced and sustained (Setiadia et al., 2020). These models recognize that meaningful engagement requires

honoring local narratives and delegating authority to community actors who understand the sociocultural nuances of their environment. International organizations must adopt a learning posture, allowing local traditions such as *gotong royong* to inform the implementation process. Community mapping, capacity building workshops, and cultural immersion practices should be embedded in international relief strategies to ensure alignment with local values.

Global Implications and Reframing Altruism

In this regard, the Indonesian case provides a compelling blueprint for international engagement. Altruism here is not just emotional it is structural, spiritual, and reciprocal. These dimensions create a robust system that connects personal conviction with community obligation, religious duty, and historical memory. By understanding and integrating these dimensions, cross cultural partnerships and interventions can become more equitable, effective, and ethically sound (Nainggolan et al., 2021; Suryanti et al., 2021). Reframing altruism through the lens of collectivism allows practitioners to move beyond simplistic models and toward a more sophisticated understanding of human motivation. Such reframing necessitates new frameworks that accommodate shared identity, collective consciousness, and ritualized cooperation. The study ultimately affirms that any meaningful engagement with volunteerism particularly in culturally complex societies requires humility, cultural fluency, and the willingness to reframe altruism as a communal, rather than purely individual, endeavor. This reconceptualization opens pathways to designing policies and partnerships that not only respect but are driven by the cultural logic of the communities they aim to serve.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that empathy and collectivism are central drivers of altruistic volunteerism in Indonesia's disaster response contexts. By embedding altruism within cultural traditions such as *gotong royong*, the findings challenge Western-centric models that emphasize individual motivations and highlight the necessity of frameworks grounded in communal obligation, spirituality, and relational duty. For policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders, these results point to the importance of designing volunteer management strategies that align with local cultural logics. Practical steps include co-developing programs with community leaders, incorporating cultural narratives into training, and fostering participatory planning mechanisms that respect local wisdom. Such culturally resonant approaches are crucial for sustaining volunteer engagement, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing disaster resilience.

Looking ahead, future research should expand this inquiry through longitudinal designs, cross-regional comparisons, and intersectional analyses that examine the influence of age, gender, and socio-economic factors. These directions would deepen understanding of how cultural frameworks interact with institutional and global dynamics in shaping volunteer behavior. Ultimately, Indonesian volunteerism illustrates that altruism is not merely an act of individual kindness but a cultural expression of unity and identity. Recognizing and leveraging these collective

dimensions will be critical for scholars and practitioners seeking to build more inclusive, resilient, and ethically grounded disaster response systems worldwide.

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