

A Qualitative Investigation Into the Motivations Behind Charitable Giving in Sri Lanka: Examining the Authenticity of Altruistic Behavior

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This study investigates the psychological and cultural motivations that underpin charitable giving in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to whether such behaviour can be considered genuinely altruistic. While charitable acts are commonly perceived as selfless, this research highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of the motivations involved. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who regularly engage in charitable activities. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching categories of motivation. The first, obliged motives stem from social expectations and religious duty. The second, independent motives reflect personal values and intrinsic satisfaction. The third, ambivalent motives are a novel category that captures the simultaneous interplay between self-serving and other-oriented intentions. The emergence of ambivalent motives is especially significant, as it challenges binary distinctions between altruism and egoism, suggesting that charitable giving frequently serves psychological, social, and existential needs alongside prosocial goals. The findings support established psychological frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, while also highlighting the unique cultural dynamics of Sri Lankan society, particularly the influence of Buddhist ethics and collectivist values. These cultural factors shape both the meaning and practice of giving, embedding it within broader narratives of moral obligation, social harmony, and spiritual merit. Ultimately, the study concludes that while charitable giving in Sri Lanka may outwardly appear altruistic, it is often driven by a complex mixture of internal and external motives, suggesting that authenticity in giving is rarely absolute but rather contextually and psychologically mediated.

Keywords: charitable giving, altruism, motivation, Sri Lanka, thematic analysis

Introduction

Charitable giving is frequently regarded as a representative form of prosocial behaviour. It is broadly defined as a voluntary action intended to benefit others without the expectation of material reward (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and religious studies, charitable behaviour is typically honoured as morally virtuous and indicative of selflessness. However, a deeper psychological and cultural inquiry reveals a more complex set of underlying motives that challenge this conventional perspective. Emerging research in moral psychology, behavioural economics, and cross-cultural

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studies increasingly suggests that acts of giving often reflect a dynamic interplay between altruistic intentions and self-serving motivations (Batson, 2011; Cialdini et al., 1987; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). This study seeks to examine charitable behaviour within the Sri Lankan context by exploring the extent to which such acts are genuinely altruistic or shaped by other psychological and sociocultural forces.

Sri Lanka presents a compelling context for examining charitable giving due to its rich religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, and its deeply rooted collectivist values. Within Buddhist doctrine, generosity is considered one of the foundational practices for spiritual advancement. The act of giving is believed to accumulate merit, which can be transferred to others and has implications for one's current and future lives (Bond, 2003; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). Consequently, charitable giving in Sri Lanka is often motivated not only by compassion or concern for others but also by spiritual considerations such as karma, rebirth, and moral purification. Furthermore, the collectivist nature of Sri Lankan society, which emphasizes family loyalty, social harmony, and community responsibility, creates a cultural environment in which giving is not just a personal choice but a normative expectation (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995).

In this socio-religious atmosphere, the boundary between altruism and egoism becomes increasingly blurred. While charitable acts may appear selfless on the surface, they may also serve psychological functions such as alleviating guilt, managing existential anxieties, fulfilling religious obligations, or enhancing one's social image. Such motivations are not necessarily conscious or overt, yet they complicate the simplistic notion of purely altruistic giving (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Batson, 2011). This study affirms that charitable giving in Sri Lanka, as in many other settings, is shaped by psychological and cultural influences. It challenges the adequacy of universal or individualistic frameworks in capturing the complexities of giving.

Instead, it calls for a more nuanced and contextually grounded perspective that closely examines the associated roles of religion, emotion, social relationships, and the formation of moral identity.

To frame this inquiry, the study draws on key psychological theories of motivation and behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) posits that intention is the most immediate predictor of behaviour, and that intention itself is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the case of charitable giving, attitudes toward giving are likely to be influenced by religious teachings and cultural narratives about generosity, while subjective norms reflect the expectations of family, community, and religious institutions. Perceived behavioural control, meanwhile, relates to individuals' beliefs about their capacity to give, whether financially or in other ways. Together, these factors form a cognitive framework through which giving behaviour can be interpreted.

Complementing this, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provides a valuable distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation refers to actions undertaken out of personal interest or inherent satisfaction, whereas extrinsic motivation is driven by external pressures or expected rewards. In the Sri Lankan context, many acts of charity are apparently extrinsic, driven by religious obligation, karmic concerns, or social approval. However, they may also reflect internalised cultural values, blurring the lines between internal and external motives. This theoretical ambiguity aligns with the concept of integrated regulation within Self-Determination Theory, wherein individuals adopt externally motivated behaviours as part of their identity and value system. Thus, charitable giving may be internally endorsed but still serve self-regulatory or ego-protective functions.

Emotional processes are also central to understanding the motivations for giving.

Emotions such as guilt, shame, and compassion are powerful drivers of moral behaviour (Tangney, Stuewig,

& Mashek, 2007; Haidt, 2003). In Buddhist ethics, guilt and karmic fear are particularly salient emotional states. The failure to perform charitable acts may induce a sense of moral deficiency, while the performance of such acts can offer emotional relief or spiritual reassurance. Additionally, giving may be used to repair social transgressions, such as failing to fulfil family related obligations or neglecting community responsibilities. These affective dynamics suggest that giving can function as a form of moral or emotional cleansing, supporting the idea that charitable acts are sometimes instrumental in achieving internal equilibrium rather than entirely focused on others' well-being.

The identity dimension of giving behaviour further complicates the altruism-egoism conflict. Individuals often engage in prosocial behaviours to construct, affirm, or perform certain aspects of their identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In collectivist cultures, such as that of Sri Lanka, identity is relational rather than autonomous. People give not just as individuals but as daughters, sons, neighbours, or Buddhists. These roles come with specific moral expectations, and failure to fulfil them may result in social contradiction or self-criticism. Hence, charitable acts may serve as performances of moral identity within a relational framework. The act of giving is not only about the recipient; it is also a form of self-definition and social communication. This performative dimension of morality suggests that even seemingly altruistic behaviours are embedded within systems of social recognition and identity management (Reed & Aquino, 2003; Shweder, 1991).

Existing empirical research on charitable giving is predominantly centred on Western, individualistic contexts, where giving is often framed as a rational, autonomous choice made by morally motivated individuals (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Andreoni, 1990). Such models frequently overlook the cultural and religious dimensions that influence giving in non-Western societies. In Sri Lanka, acts of giving are not merely expressions of personal morality but are associated with collective rituals, religious observances, and cultural scripts. These elements create a structure of giving that is both obligatory and meaningful. For example, it is customary for families to donate food and other necessities to Buddhist monks during almsgiving ceremonies. These acts are believed to transfer merit to deceased relatives, fulfilling spiritual and family related obligations simultaneously (Gombrich, 2006; Keown, 1992). In such cases, the giver may experience genuine compassion, but the act is also embedded in a framework of duty, reciprocity, and religious expectation.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to explore these intricate motivational dynamics. Specifically, it employs semi-structured interviews with individuals in Sri Lanka who claim that they engage in regular charitable activities. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and latent meanings in the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows for a rich, interpretive understanding of the psychological and sociocultural foundations of giving behaviour, providing insights that quantitative methods may overlook.

Three primary categories of motivation emerged from the data as obliged motives, independent motives, and ambivalent motives. Obligated motives refer to giving behaviours driven by social expectations, religious obligations, and family related responsibilities. These motives highlight the extent to which giving is a normative practice rather than an individual moral choice. Independent motives, by contrast, reflect a more personal and autonomous engagement with charitable acts. Participants in this category often described their giving as a reflection of personal values or a desire to contribute to social welfare. However, even in these cases, cultural values and religious teachings remained influential.

The third and most conceptually significant category is that of ambivalent motives. This category captures the simultaneous presence of selfless and self-serving intentions within the same act of giving. For instance, a

participant may donate to a religious institution out of compassion for the monks but also to accrue merit or enhance their social standing. These ambivalent motives challenge binary conceptualisations of altruism and egoism, suggesting instead that charitable behaviour often exists within a grey zone of complex psychological and cultural influences. This finding aligns with recent work in moral psychology and behavioural ethics that emphasise the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of moral behaviour (Monroe, 1996; Haidt, 2001).

Finally, the question of authenticity in charitable giving emerges as a critical point of reflection. If authenticity is defined as behaviour driven by intrinsic concern for others, then many acts of giving in the Sri Lankan context might be considered inauthentic. However, such a judgement risks imposing Western moral standards on a culturally distinct practice. This study argues that authenticity in giving should not be measured solely by the absence of self-interest but by the degree to which motivations are integrated, culturally meaningful, and reflective of the individual's moral worldview. In this sense, charitable giving in Sri Lanka, while often shaped by obligation, ritual, and social expectation, remains a morally significant practice that reflects deeply held values and beliefs.

In conclusion, this study proposes a more nuanced framework for understanding charitable giving, one that accounts for the emotional, cognitive, relational, and cultural dimensions of moral behaviour. By situating giving within the broader psychological and cultural landscape of Sri Lanka, it moves beyond reductionist accounts of altruism to offer a richer, more contextualised analysis of human generosity. Such an approach is essential for advancing global understandings of prosocial behaviour and for developing more inclusive and culturally sensitive theories of moral psychology.

Literature Review

The motivations behind charitable behaviour have been a central focus of inquiry across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Theoretical models offer competing explanations regarding whether such behaviour is fundamentally altruistic or egoistic in nature. Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis represents one of the most widely recognised perspectives within moral psychology. According to this model, individuals help others when they experience empathic concern, with altruism being defined as a genuine desire to enhance the well-being of others, independent of self-gain. Batson's extensive experimental work demonstrates that empathic responses can lead to helping behaviour even in the absence of direct personal benefit, suggesting that altruism is indeed possible. However, this model has faced considerable critique, most notably from Cialdini et al. (1987), who argue that empathically driven helping may be disoriented with egoistic motives such as the desire to alleviate personal distress. From this view, helping behaviour may still be ultimately self-serving, driven by a need to restore emotional equilibrium or avoid guilt.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) reinforces this egoistic interpretation by conceptualising charitable behaviour as a form of cost-benefit analysis. According to this model, individuals weigh the potential rewards and costs of helping others before deciding to act. The rewards may be tangible, such as social status or reciprocal favours, or intangible, such as moral satisfaction or emotional relief. Supporting this notion, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) highlight how guilt operates as a motivational force in prosocial behaviour, prompting individuals to act charitably to repair perceived moral deficits. Similarly, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) found that individuals are more likely to engage in moral cleansing that means the acts of kindness or generosity following unethical behaviour, which supports the idea that giving can function as a mechanism for self-repair.

Cultural frameworks further complicate the picture. In collectivist societies like Sri Lanka, behaviour is strongly shaped by normative expectations, interdependent self-perceptions, and religious ideologies (Triandis, 1995). The social imperative to follow to communal expectations can make giving a cultural obligation rather than a voluntary choice. Moreover, the integration of Buddhism into everyday moral life has a profound influence on charitable behaviour. Within Buddhist doctrine, giving is one of the most central ethical practices and is believed to accumulate karmic merit that can influence future rebirths and spiritual progress (de Silva & Jayasekera, 2019). In this framework, charitable behaviour fulfills two functions. It helps others and also supports the individual's spiritual development. Even actions that seem altruistic may be influenced by motives such as moral self-interest, fear of karmic retribution, or the aspiration for spiritual growth.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2024) offers a nuanced psychological model for interpreting such mixed motives. The theory proposes a progression of motivation ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic regulation. At one end are behaviours driven by external pressures or obligations, such as giving to avoid social disapproval or fulfil religious duties. At the other are actions aligned with personal values and internalised goals, such as giving out of compassion or a deeply held moral conviction. Importantly, Self-Determination Theory recognises that externally motivated behaviours can become internalised over time through the process of identification and integration. In this way, charitable behaviour in Sri Lanka may initially stem from cultural or religious obligation but become a meaningful expression of personal identity and values. This conceptual flexibility allows for the coexistence of both self-oriented and other-oriented motives within a single act.

Recent empirical work further challenges the binary distinction between altruism and egoism. For example, Aknin, Dunn, and Norton (2013) demonstrate that giving benefits both the recipient and the giver by enhancing the latter's emotional well-being. This phenomenon, referred to as the "warm glow" effect, supports the idea that charitable acts can be simultaneously altruistic and emotionally rewarding. Similarly, Grant and Dutton (2012) explore the role of prosocial sense-making in organisational contexts, showing that individuals engage in helping behaviour construct coherent narratives of moral identity. These findings suggest that charitable behaviour is not reducible to a single motivational source but is instead shaped by a constellation of emotional, cognitive, and social factors.

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature remains focused on Western, individualistic societies. This geographical and cultural bias limits the generalisability of psychological theories of prosocial behaviour. There is a notable scarcity of empirical studies examining how mixed or ambivalent motivations operate in non-Western contexts, particularly those influenced by strong religious traditions. In Sri Lanka, charitable behaviour is deeply entangled with Buddhist ethical teachings, family related roles, and community expectations, yet few studies have examined how these factors interact to produce complex motivational profiles.

This study seeks to address this gap by analysing charitable behaviour within the Sri Lankan cultural context. It aims to explore how individuals reconcile spiritual obligations, emotional needs, and social norms when engaging in acts of charity. By employing a qualitative approach, the study allows for a deeper understanding of how ambivalent motivations are experienced, rationalised, and enacted in everyday life. Ultimately, it contributes to the development of a more context-sensitive and theoretically integrative model of charitable motivation that can account for cultural specificity without leaving the psychological richness of existing theoretical frameworks.

Method

A qualitative research design was selected to explore the depth and complexity of participants' motivations for charitable giving. Data were collected through 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with adults (aged 18 and above) who reported regular engagement in charitable activities. Participants were recruited via convenient sampling and included individuals from a range of age groups, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to maximise variation and capture a diversity of perspectives.

An interview schedule was developed to explore themes such as personal reasons for giving, past experiences, cultural influences, emotional triggers, and perceived outcomes.

Interviews were conducted in either Sinhala or English, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Audio files were then transcribed to prepare the data for analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Codes and themes were developed inductively, based on patterns emerging from the data rather than pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

Although the findings are not intended to be generalised to the wider population, the richness and context-specific nature of the data provide valuable insights into charitable motivation within Sri Lanka.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's affiliated institute, prior to the commencement of the study. Participants were fully informed of the aims and procedures of the research and were provided with a consent form detailing their rights. Participation was voluntary, and individuals had the right to decline to answer specific questions or to withdraw at any point without any consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all personal identifiers. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts where required, and all audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely. Data were destroyed following the completion of the study.

Analysis and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three superordinate categories of motivation as obliged motives, independent motives, and ambivalent motives. These categories collectively illustrate the complex interplay between personal, emotional, cultural expectation, and moral reasoning in charitable behaviour.

Table 1

Themes Table

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Initial themes
Obliged motives	Negative emotions	Fear-based giving, guilt, annoyance
	Personal beliefs	Karmic repayment, grief reduction
	Social leverage	Social identity, reciprocity, mutual exchange, cultural pressure
	Moral concerns	Moral cleansing, duty
Independent motives	Altruism	Genuine concern
Ambivalent motives	Delusional altruism	Masked self-interest
	Self-enhancement	Moral validation, growth
	Reducing attachment	Letting go, flourishing

This study aimed to investigate the psychological and cultural motivations behind charitable giving in Sri Lanka, with a particular emphasis on examining the authenticity of altruistic behaviour. The findings offer a rich and layered understanding of why individuals engage in charitable acts, revealing a broad spectrum of motivations ranging from obligated giving to more independent and ambivalent forms. These insights both affirm and challenge existing psychological theories, illustrating the profound influence of sociocultural contexts, particularly religious doctrines and collectivist norms, on prosocial behaviour.

Obliged Motives

Obliged motives emerged as the most dominant category among participants. These motives were organized into four subordinate themes as negative emotions, personal beliefs, social leverage, and moral concerns. Many participants reported emotional discomfort including guilt, fear, and annoyance, which supports Baumeister et al.'s (1994) claim that guilt plays a critical role in driving prosocial behaviour. Acts of giving in response to karmic anxiety or the burden of witnessing suffering align closely with Cialdini et al.'s (1987) critique of the empathy-altruism hypothesis, suggesting that charitable acts can be ego-defensive or palliative in nature rather than purely altruistic.

The role of personal beliefs, particularly regarding karmic merit and commemorative giving, reinforces the deep connection of Buddhism and moral behaviour in Sri Lankan society. As de Silva and Jayasekera (2019) note, the act of giving is not only a religious obligation but also a spiritual investment, offering the giver metaphysical returns in this life and beyond. This supports Self-Determination Theory's (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2024) concept of introjected regulation, whereby individuals engage in behaviours due to internalised social and religious imperatives.

Social leverage, in the form of family related and communal pressure, exemplifies the collectivist spirit described by Triandis (1995), wherein personal identity is intricately tied to social obligations. In this context, giving is less an individual act and more a communal performance, sustaining one's social status and respectability. Reciprocity, although subtly expressed, hints at the operation of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), where generosity is embedded within networks of mutual obligation and moral economy.

Moral concerns such as moral cleansing and duty serve as mechanisms for preserving one's self-concept. The findings align with the moral identity literature, which suggests that individuals often engage in prosocial behaviour to maintain or repair a moral self-image (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). In this way, charitable giving becomes an act of self-regulation as much as moral concern for others.

Independent Motives

A smaller subset of participants articulated motivations that were more aligned with intrinsic values and authentic altruism. These respondents described charitable acts as arising from a spontaneous desire to help others, suggesting a form of internalised moral reasoning consistent with identified regulation in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

However, even these apparently altruistic motives are not free from cultural conditioning. As Aknin et al. (2013) argue, prosocial behaviour often results in emotional gratification, blurring the boundary between altruism and egoism. In Sri Lanka, deeply internalised religious and social values appear to shape what might be perceived as spontaneous altruistic impulses, indicating that even independent motives are situated within a broader moral framework.

Ambivalent Motives

Perhaps the most novel and conceptually rich contribution of this study lies in the identification of ambivalent motives. These motives illustrate the simultaneous presence of other-oriented and self-oriented incentives within single acts of giving. Delusional altruism was particularly revealing; participants believed they were acting out of selflessness, yet their narratives exposed implicit benefits such as psychological relief, clarity, or empowerment. This form of self-deception underscores the complexity of prosocial behaviour and supports Batson's (1991) contention that altruism and egoism are not mutually exclusive but may coexist in intricate ways.

Self-enhancement, another aspect of ambivalent motivation, links giving to the construction and reinforcement of moral identity. This supports Grant and Dutton's (2012) assertion that helping behaviours contribute to a coherent narrative of the self as moral and socially valuable. Finally, the theme of reducing attachment reflects the influence of Buddhist teachings, wherein giving becomes a form of spiritual discipline aimed at overcoming ego and impermanence. Here, prosocial behaviour serves not only interpersonal aims but also intrapersonal transformation, merging altruistic intentions with self-purification.

These findings problematise the division between altruism and egoism, highlighting that the same act can simultaneously serve others and fulfil internal needs. This is particularly evident in cultural contexts like Sri Lanka, where spirituality and sociality are deeply entangled. The data challenge Western-centric models of prosocial behaviour by illustrating how motivations are embedded in culturally specific moral ecologies.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings extend several key psychological theories. Self-Determination Theory is validated through the presence of both extrinsic (e.g., obligation, guilt) and intrinsic (e.g., value alignment) motivations, as well as ambivalent forms that sit between the two poles. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) is also supported in the way behavioural intentions are influenced by normative beliefs (e.g., social expectations), control beliefs (e.g., perceived ability to help), and attitudes (e.g., perceived moral duty).

Moreover, the data speak to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in which giving reinforces group membership and in-group solidarity. In Sri Lanka, acts of charity serve as expressions of communal belonging and moral alignment with Buddhist and collectivist values. By reinforcing cultural norms and religious duties, charitable behaviour becomes a mechanism of both identity affirmation and moral performance.

From a practical perspective, these findings have implications for social policy and development work. Understanding that giving is not purely altruistic, but shaped by complex emotional, cultural, and social factors, can inform more effective strategies for charitable engagement and public appeals. Campaigns that acknowledge emotional rewards, spiritual returns, and social recognition may resonate more deeply with local donors.

Conclusion

This study has examined the psychological and cultural underpinnings of charitable giving in Sri Lanka, revealing that such behaviour is seldom driven by fluctuating altruism. Instead, it is shaped by a constellation of factors including emotional regulation, moral identity, social expectation, and spiritual doctrine. The categorisation of motives into obliged, independent, and ambivalent types provides a more nuanced framework for understanding the multiplicity of reasons behind giving.

Ambivalent motives, in particular, offer a novel theoretical insight by capturing the moral and psychological ambiguity of charitable acts. This category challenges binary models of altruism versus egoism and instead

proposes that giving often involves a strategic or unconscious interplay of self-benefit and other-regard.

The study also underscores the importance of culturally grounded research. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist cosmology and collectivist social structures profoundly shape not only the behaviour of giving but also the subjective interpretations and emotional experiences that accompany it. By embedding the study within this specific cultural context, the findings move beyond universalist psychological models and contribute to a more contextually rich understanding of human prosociality.

Future research should explore how these findings apply across different religious and cultural settings, as well as within institutional and organisational contexts. Comparative studies might reveal how cultural values interact with broader economic and political structures to shape charitable norms. Additionally, examining corporate charitable and institutional giving in Sri Lanka may uncover how strategic and performative elements of generosity replicate the psychological patterns observed at the individual level.

Ultimately, this study invites a rethinking of how we conceptualise and evaluate charitable behaviour. By acknowledging its emotional complexity, cultural embeddedness, and moral ambivalence, we can develop a more honest and comprehensive account of why people give.

Declarations

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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