

ALTRUISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Rod Matthews

Humans are the most intelligent and the most deeply social of all species. Our intelligence and social cohesion have enabled us to survive harsh and threatening times in the past. So, our ability to survive and flourish into the future, to avoid threatened social and global disasters, and ensure a stable world, is in part at least dependent on social cohesion and altruism.

Altruism

In its most simple definition, altruism means unselfishness. Dig a little deeper, however, and you might define it, as the free online dictionary does, as ‘unselfish concern for the welfare of others’.ⁱ Interestingly this source has a zoological take on the word as well: ‘instinctive behaviour that is detrimental to the individual but favours the survival or spread of that individual’s genes, as by benefiting its relatives.’ And a philosophical definition: ‘the philosophical doctrine that right action is that which produces the greatest benefit to others.’

For the purposes of this article, I will define altruism as the concern for others over and above oneself, as well as any acts that stem from that concern.

We can measure these acts by looking at:

- the number of altruistic organisations and structures in a society, for example not-for-profit organisations, non-government-organisations and philanthropic foundations
- the dollar amounts of donations made to these organisations and/or claimed as tax-deductible donations, and where (at home or overseas) those dollars are donated
- the number of hours spent in volunteer or unpaid work.

Altruism in Australia, for Australia

Number of organisations

According to the Philanthropy Australia website,ⁱⁱ philanthropy in Australia is on the rise. Current statistics indicate that there have been more than 340 Prescribed Private Funds (PPFs) established since 2001. There is no indication, however, of how many PPFs have ceased operation.

Dollar amounts

According to the Philanthropy Australia website,ⁱⁱⁱ there was a 16.2% increase from the previous year in tax-deductible donations in the 2000/01 financial year; a 3.5% increase in the 2001/02 financial year; and a 5% increase in the 2002/03 financial year.

A study completed by Professor Myles McGregor-Lowndes and Kristy Hoffmann at The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies^{iv} shows that while the increase in actual numbers in dollar donations claimed as tax deductions is impressive (from less than \$100m in 1978/79 to more than \$2300m in 2007/08), the CPI adjusted figures are less impressive (less than \$100m in 1978/79 to about \$240m in 2007/08). The percentage of donating taxpayers has fluctuated from 34% in 1992/93 to 36% in 2007/08, with no upward trend appearing. There was a notable jump after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

Hours volunteered

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics,^v in 2010, 6.4 million people (or 38%) aged 18 years and over had undertaken some form of voluntary work in the previous 12 months; this was up from 34% in 2002.

Patterns can be seen when we look at the age groups of those who volunteer: those in younger age groups most commonly volunteered with sport- and recreation-related groups; volunteering for parenting groups is relatively common in 25–44-year-olds; while volunteering for welfare and community type groups is common among the older population.

Altruism in Australian for the global population

Locating levels of Australian altruism for fellow Australians (as noted above) is a relatively simple task, but it becomes much more difficult to find statistics that show the actual number of organisations, dollar amounts donated and hours of volunteering, when it is divided into Australian-based and internationally based groups.

A review of the website www.aidwatch.org suggests the following:

- Most overseas spending is done by the Australian government on our behalf, through organisations attached to the UN.
- Only \$135m of Australia's \$4.3b 2010/11 aid budget is allocated to non-government organisations and community engagement programs.

Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests an increase in global awareness and altruism. This can be seen in:

- the growth in volunteer tourism and responsible travel
- our response to one-off events like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami
- our increased awareness of issues and activities through instant reporting, YouTube and social networking sites
- the corporatisation of giving.

Supporting the case that there is an increase in altruism are the following:

- the number of existing altruistic organisations has increased
- the total number of dollars donated to and spent by these organisations has increased
- the number of hours people have spent in volunteer work has increased
- corporate organisations have increased the profiles of their altruistic activities
- developed nations are increasingly aware of the benefits to be found in doing meaningful work, through things like the positive psychology movement.

However, some of the above could be questioned due to the following:

- increases in the amount of tax-deductible donations could be overblown due to:
 - a) an expansion of the type of gift that may be tax deductible to include property
 - b) Prescribed Private Funds – these are a new legal structure and as such will show an increase in numbers
 - c) two taxation incentives that were added in the 2002/03 year that streamlined employee payroll giving
- we have an increased ability to track and measure quantifiable criteria around altruism and so the increase could be an increase in the data that we are capturing rather than an actual increase in altruism
- it could mean that as we become a richer society we have more interest, ability and opportunity to assist others. A person whose own wellbeing or that of his or her family is threatened by poverty, security, or lack of shelter, water or food will not display the kind of altruism that someone in a more comfortable situation would.

Vote 1 Danny Wallace!

Danny Wallace, a writer and modern-day English eccentric, started an organisation he called ‘Join Me’ in which he simply asked people to join! He started the old-fashioned way by standing at busy intersections with a sandwich board and flyers – and the response was underwhelming. Then he turned to the internet to drum up business and, as you would have guessed, membership skyrocketed. Danny’s members asked him, ‘What do you want me to do?’ It was a question that troubled Danny until he arrived at the idea that people should

commit random acts of kindness every Friday. Danny's story is documented in his book *Join Me*,^{vi} and it is a heartwarming and very funny read. The critical difference is the internet: Danny's uncle had tried to start a commune pre-internet and attracted only three people; Danny started his group post-internet and now boasts thousands of members worldwide.

The Boxing Day tsunami

On Boxing Day in 2004 an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered a series of tsunamis that beached in an arc from Indonesia around to Sri Lanka. News of the tsunamis and their devastation travelled the globe almost immediately and for days we watched countless video clips on both TV and youtube.com of the water's inundation and its trail of destruction. Over US\$10b was raised and, in what is described by Ethan Watters in his book *Crazy Like Us*^{vii} as 'possibly the largest international psychological intervention of all time', countless well-meaning trauma counsellors travelled to assist the victims. It is hard to imagine the same size and speed of response happening back in 1960 in response to the Valdivia earthquake.

The reasons behind increasing levels of altruism are far from being an open-and-shut case, but there is certainly truth that:

- we are now more aware of others who need help
- an increased awareness leads to an increase in wanting to help
- an increase in wanting to help leads to an increase in altruistic actions.

Margaret Mead once said. 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

ⁱ www.thefreedictionary.com

ⁱⁱ www.philanthropy.org.au

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} McGregor-Lowndes, Professor Myles and Hoffmann, Kristy (2010), An Examination of Tax Deductible Donations Made By Individual Australian Taxpayers in 2007 – 08, The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, Queensland University of Technology

^v Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), *Item 4159.0 – General Social Survey: Summary Results*, Australia

^{vi} Wallace, Danny (2004), *Join Me: The True Story of a Man Who Started a Cult by Accident*, Ebury Press, UK

^{vii} Watters, Ethan (2010), *Crazy Like Us – The Globalization of the American Psyche*, Scribe, Australia & New Zealand