

Sharing Is Caring: The Power and Tradition of Reciprocal Altruism  
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**Abstract**

The Ohlone, a hunter-gatherer Native American tribe that occupied central California three hundred years ago, lived altruistically until the coming of the Europeans. Manifesting generosity and mutual help, they practiced Reciprocal Altruism, a concept defined as the “act of helping someone else although incurring some cost for this act” (Trivers, Coultas 35). This way of living produced enough trust and loyalty that there was practically no crime, no poverty, and no need for government (Margolin 90). Could modern Americans adapt Ohlone values and the principles of Reciprocal Altruism? The neuroscience of the human brain reveals that this is a completely possible adaptation, one that could overcome contemporary issues of wealth inequality and its outcomes such as hunger, unemployment, and lawbreaking. This study emphasizes the importance of unity, reminding us that it is possible that we can come together and use our individual skills for the benefit of all.

Peter Singer, moral philosopher and fan of the theory of Reciprocal Altruism, in his book *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* wrote: "Human beings are social animals. We were social before we were human" (3). He explained that long before we evolved to Homo Sapiens, the species to which all modern human beings belong, we had been living in groups, rather than isolated from each other and caring only for our own sake (Singer 4). Following that thought, it becomes easy to believe that being social really is in our blood. History of one particular tribe can both illustrate and prove that it is in human nature to belong and care for a community.

The Ohlone, a Native American tribe that lived the hunter-gatherer lifestyle in today's area between San Francisco Bay and Point Sur over three hundred years ago, created a society in which they lived in harmony, practicing mutual help and generosity (Margolin 89). Before Europeans occupied their land and began missionizing, Ohlone people managed to produce enough trust and loyalty that there was practically no crime, no poverty, and no need for government (Margolin 90).

In their world, everything was treated as it were alive, had character, and power. Everything--fish, deer, and even trees--had to be dealt with properly because they were believed to have intelligence, willfulness, and demanded personal relationships (Margolin 142). People were appreciative, respectful and caring to a point that strangers were able to give up their possessions for the sake of somebody in need. Needless to say, there was not much room left for egoism in that society (Margolin 142).

Due to the fact that selfishness was not one of the common characteristics for the Ohlone people, what naturally comes to mind while searching for a right way to refer to their tribe is that they were a community of people who lived outside of themselves. In *The Ohlone Way*, Malcolm Margolin argues that working together for a greater good, rather than focusing on individual needs, was what the Ohlone did best (89). Putting someone else's well-being before their own was an honorable thing in their community (89).

After having studied Margolin's work about this native tribe, as well as talking to Patrick Orozco, who identifies himself as an Ohlone, knows Margolin, and confirms his conclusion about the tribe, connection has formed in my head which linked the Ohlone to an ethical philosophy of Reciprocal Altruism. It caused me to believe that the members of this tribe had been living altruistically until the coming of the Europeans, manifesting altruism's principles in their daily lives. Following this belief, I began asking questions about American history and American future. Could modern Americans adapt Ohlone values and the principles of Reciprocal Altruism? Before giving a possible answer to this question, it seems appropriate to explain why such adaptation would, in any way, contribute to the modern societies.

There are things our world needs to start caring about before things go too far. Wealth inequality is one of them. It is a serious issue of the present day. According to Oxfam, an international confederation of 17 organizations that work on finding solutions for poverty, "In the US the share of national income going to the top one percent has doubled since 1980". The way that we live, and the way that we manage our money, needs to change because it is damaging to our economy. One percent of people on Earth have most of the wealth. One-third of world's population lives in poverty due to such distribution of money (Oxfam). We are struggling with

inequality every day. We can observe its consequences in rates of crime, unemployment, and hunger (Oxfam). It is important to acknowledge that overcoming these problems is crucial and that changes need to be made in order to do so successfully. People need to become conscious of their surroundings and reflect on the fact that more and more of us are getting more and more self-centered. The principles of Altruism should start being adapted by modern Americans as a first step to fight the outcomes of wealth inequality.

In 1971, a socio-biologist Robert Trivers defined Altruism as “an act of helping someone else although incurring some cost for this act.” He extended his definition and explained the evolution of a reciprocal form of this concept as well. “Reciprocal Altruism could have evolved since it might be beneficial to incur this cost if there is a chance of being in a reverse situation where the person whom I helped before may perform an altruistic act towards me.” More recently, in 2009, social psychologist Daniel Batson updated the definition, changing it from the “act of helping” to a “motivational state with the goal of helping”. He wrote: “By Altruism I mean a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare” (3). Familiar with the definitions, let’s now connect them to the Ohlone history.

In *The Ohlone Way*, Malcolm Margolin argues that not keeping things, but giving them away, was what the Ohlone were respected for, and what gave them social status (89). He describes the benefit of such behavior as follows:

When a man killed a deer, for example, he did not bring the meat home, dry it, and store it for personal use, acquisition was not an Ohlone’s idea of wealth or security. Instead the hunter kept very little, perhaps even none of the meat, but rather distributed it along very formal lines to family and community. The people in turn gave him honor. (89)

Besides honor and praise from the community, the hunter also gained obligations for reciprocity. Margolin described what these obligations resulted in:

Other people would in the course of time bring him [the hunter] fish, fowl, rabbits, acorn mush, roots, and seed cakes. These gifts would come to him even if he broke a leg, became too sick to hunt deer, or if he run into bad luck. The gifts would continue to come to him even when he grew old. (89)

Therefore, sharing the deer meat gained him more security and wealth than if he had kept all the meat for himself. All of that led to something that many countries in the modern world could be jealous of--no need for government. “They had no powerful chief to give orders, nor any police force to enforce those orders (...) the way of sharing worked so well that there was absolutely no robbery among the Ohlone” (Margolin 90). Stealing was unnecessary in such generous and bonded society; there was a strong sense of intensive loyalty and love. Father Arroyo de la Cuesta endorsed that by saying “filial affection is stronger in these tribes than in any civilized nation on the globe” (Margolin 93).

The way modern world functions today looks nothing like the way Ohlone people lived, therefore the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that Americans should go back to hunting and gathering, but to address the issue of mutual help and the benefits that come from practicing it. According to Maia Szalavitz, a neuroscience journalist, altruism is in our nature. In her article for

*Time* called "Is Human Nature Fundamentally Selfish or Altruistic?" she explained how kindness and altruism have been evolutionarily valued in mates, and even the youngest children unconsciously do it:

Studies of 18-month-old toddlers show that they will almost always try to help an adult who is visibly struggling with a task, without being asked to do so: if the adult is reaching for something, the toddler will try to hand it to them, or if they see an adult drop something accidentally, they will pick it up.

She also talks about another study, in which older children, who are already conscious of their actions, practice not only altruism, but exactly reciprocal kind of altruism:

Another study found that 3- to 5-year-olds tend to give a greater share of a reward (stickers, in this case) to a partner who has done more work on a task — again, without being asked — even if it means they get to keep less for themselves.

While knowing that humans have the ability to act altruistically is fascinating, it also raises another question. What exactly causes altruistic behavior to occur? Daniel Batson, who spent most of his life putting people in fMRI machines, developed the Empathy-altruism hypothesis which states that "It is an empathic concern felt for a person in need that produces altruistic motivation to relieve that need"(9). There are critics to this theory who claim that relieving the empathy-inducing need enables the helper to avoid punishments, and gain rewards, so it is not selfless. However, advocates of the empathy-altruism hypothesis say that these benefits to self are not the ultimate goal of empathetic helping, but only unintended consequences (Batson 9). So after all, is Reciprocal Altruism selfish or is it an unintended consequence? Thinking of it as an unintended consequence is more idealistic, but even if it is a selfish act, in the end, it causes very selfless results.

To sum it up, modern Americans are indeed able to adapt altruistic behaviors, which are formed because of built-up empathy, but how did empathy evolve in humans? Many scientists believe that empathic concern evolved as part of the parental instinct among higher mammals, especially humans (Batson 15). Human empathic concern extends well beyond one's own children, though, and according to Daniel Batson, as long as there is no preexisting antipathy, people can feel empathic concern for a wide range of targets, including non-humans (15). This would suggest that there is another explanation for this. According to a James Kalat, what is involved in our ability to empathize with the emotions of other people is the mirror neuron system (243). These neurons are involved in learning how to imitate the actions of others. For example, when we see a facial expression of an emotion, we unconsciously imagine ourselves making that expression. What is interesting is the fact that the same neurons fire when we watch somebody cut their finger, as if our own finger got cut. These neurons are located in the ventral premotor cortex of the frontal lobe. They receive input from the superior temporal sulcus and the posterior parietal cortex (Kalat 243).

Then could modern Americans adapt Ohlone values and the principles of Reciprocal Altruism? Yes. The neuroscience of the human brain reveals that this is a completely possible adaptation. It is an adaptation that could overcome contemporary issues of wealth inequality and its outcomes such as hunger, unemployment, and lawbreaking by making people realize that when they help

each other, the sense of warmth spreads within them, connecting everybody's hearts. Desmond Tutu perfectly describes it in his book *No Future without Forgiveness* saying:

(...) when for a little while we are bound together by bonds of a caring humanity  
(...) then we experience fleetingly that we are made for togetherness, for  
friendship, for community, for family, that we are created to live in a delicate  
network of interdependence (264-265).

If one hundred billionaires decided to give away their annual income for charity, today's world would win the war against poverty (Oxfam). According to statistics published by Forbes in March 2015, there are 1,826 billionaires in the world (Dolan). Annual income is a lot to ask for but there are other things people can do to help out. Just recently, Dan Price, CEO of Gravity took 90% pay cut to give his workers a raise. He has heard from almost 100 other CEOs who said they support his move. Price told CNN: "I don't know if we'll see enough to move the needle, but I think people of my generation are committed to making a change (Isidore)." He called his act a moral imperative, hoping the raises gained by his pay cut would increase his workers levels of comfort, happiness, and therefore productivity (Isidore).

As individuals, we should work on our altruistic acts, exercising living outside of ourselves. We should help others, volunteer, unite, and treat well those who can do nothing for us. The Ohlone knew about it and maintained it by living altruistically. That should inspire every single one of us to apply the principles of altruism, which can evolve to its reciprocal form, therefore creating a world full of people who can develop themselves and their societies by benefiting from each other.

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