



Altruistic Actions in COVID-19 Corpses Care: Empathy, Modeling, and More

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Abstract. This article aimed to investigate the determinants of altruistic behavior in a small group of volunteers who chose to handle the corpses of COVID-19 patients during the pandemic. The study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach and conducted in-depth interviews with five subjects who were members of Muhammadiyah volunteers in Sidoarjo. The results of the study identified five factors that drove the altruistic actions of the subjects: feeling of empathy, modeling, belief in reciprocal principles, organizational values, and religiosity. However, the study's limitations included a small sample size, which means that the findings may not be generalizable to other cases. The implications of this study suggest that more research is needed to better understand the factors that drive altruistic behavior in different contexts.

Keywords: Factors driving COVID-19 corpse care volunteers: empathy · modeling · reciprocity · values · religiosity

1 Introduction

This article aims to reveal determinants of Muhammadiyah volunteers' involvement in handling COVID-19 corpses in Sidoarjo. These volunteers were organized in a forum known as the Muhammadiyah COVID-19 Command Center (MCCC).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a fatal impact in various sectors experienced throughout the world. In Indonesia, one of those that was quite heavily affected by the pandemic was in Sidoarjo [1]. The second wave of the pandemic, known as the Delta variant of COVID 19, resulted in a significant effect, both in terms of the number of COVID-19 patients and those who eventually had to die.

Interestingly, during this bad situation, many people had avoided direct contact with the COVID-19 patients or corpses caused by the virus infection. But there was a small group of people trying to get involved and took part in helping, especially in the process of returning the bodies of COVID-19 to the funeral. They were volunteers organized by Muhammadiyah. However, the increase of pro-social behavior in this difficult situation has not received much attention from scientists to reveal the motivation behind their

behaviors. Hence, this article is expected to contribute ideas related to the volunteers' issue.

Sidoarjo is one of the areas in Indonesia experiencing a serious impact of the Delta variant attack as the second wave of the pandemic. Even the Indonesian government at that time categorized this area as a "black" zone area, a worst category of this disease [1, 2].

Quantitatively, the number of people who were infected reached at the peak of the pandemic was quite high with a very significant percentage who died. At the end of September 2021, a total of 249.35 infected the COVID-19 virus were recorded; 959 died and 23879 recovered. The following month was 25.067 people; 964 died, and 24088 people recovered. In November 2021, the infected number reached 25,067, 24,088 recovered and 964 died. Even the Sidoarjo Regent also died because of this virus [1-3].

The dark situations described above caused the medical staffs overwhelmed to deal with victims. Interestingly, the above problem encouraged the emergence of volunteers who were ready to help. Several communities developed volunteerism organizations to help in the process of recovering the COVID-19 bodies. One of the organizations that has played vital roles in the activity is Muhammadiyah.

Muhammadiyah through its unit formed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic which the originally name is MCCC takes a strategic role to support efforts to overcome the high number of patients and mortality caused by COVID-19 infections. The involvement includes treatment, baths the bodies, and funerals.

The social concern as afore-mentioned above illustrates that the MCCC volunteers had a high level of altruism. Therefore, this issue raises a question to be investigated, what factors encourage some elements of society to have a strong altruistic spirit.

Theoretically, the term altruistic can be defined as a desire to help others without thinking about self-interest. Santrock defines altruism as an altruistic attitude in helping others. Aronson, Wilson and Akert interpret the term as help that is intended sincerely, without expecting any either return or benefits from other people and does not provide any benefits for themselves [4].

To find out the forms of action in detail, Batson et al. (2002) suggests that altruism can be seen from the way of giving attention, affection, and tenderness because of witnessing the suffering of others [5, 6]. Furthermore, Myers (2012) describes the characteristics of altruistic behavior are those who have five traits in themselves: empathy, belief in a just world, social responsibility, internal self-control, low ego [7].

According to Myers (2012), the characteristics of altruistic behaviors are those who have five traits, these are: Empathy, Belief on A Just World, Social Responsibility, Internal Self-Control, Low Ego [6, 7]. The influencing factors are divided into 2, namely personal and situational factors. Situational factors consist of mood, nature, gender, upbringing, whereas personal factors consist of bystanders, attractiveness, presence of models, time pressures, the nature of the victims' needs.

Empirically, the study of altruistic behavior has attracted a lot of attention from scientists. One of the studies on volunteerism is the description of altruistic behavior in disaster volunteers at the slopes of Mount Merapi by Lilis Kusuma Dewi, (2019). The results of the study highlighted that the subject's volunteerism was shown by their cooperative attitude in helping disasters, helping disaster victims sincerely and selflessly.

As for studies on altruistic behavior in the context of the spread of COVID-19, particularly in Sidoarjo has less attention from the scholars. In addition, until now the pandemic situation has not been completely declared over. Therefore, I consider that this is an urgent study which is expected to be able to contribute to the scientific field of altruistic behaviors.

2 Methodology

This study used a qualitative method through a phenomenological approach to explore information that departs from individual perspectives about subject's particular experiences of the events that occurred. Specifically, this method aims to dig individual experiences of volunteers encouraging their altruistic behavior.

The selection of the subjects was purposive sampling based on the following criteria: involvement in handling the COVID-19 Corpses in Sidoarjo and registered as a Volunteer Member of Muhammadiyah COVID-19 Command Center (MCCC). Based on the above criteria, 5 subjects were included as the participants.

Data collection techniques established in-depth interviews. To achieve the degree of validity, this study uses a triangulation technique. Triangulation is a data collection technique that combines various methods used to examine interrelated phenomena from different points of view and perspectives [8]. To apply triangulation, theoretically it can be done through several approaches; 1. method triangulation, 2. inter-researcher triangulation (if the research is conducted with groups), 3. data source triangulation, and 4. theoretical triangulation [8]. This research used source triangulation. For this purpose, this study involved five (5) subjects that met the criteria as subjects as previously described. This technique is intended to produce a high degree of data validity and can be scientifically justified.

To analyze the collected data, this study used the Miles and Huberman approach [8], which includes four main stages. First, data collection was carried out through interviews the 5 subjects based on their experience regarding their involvement in handling the COVID-19 Corpses in Sidoarjo. Second, data reduction, which is an activity of sorting and filtering data to specialize in data related to the research focus which in this case are the factors that encourage the subject to carry out these volunteer activities. Third, data presentation which is a follow-up stage after filtering the data. Fourth, the stage of building conclusions based on the data that had been collected and associated with the theories used as analytical tools in viewing this altruistic phenomenon.

3 Results and Discussion

The empirical investigation found altruistic behaviors determinants of the Muhammadiyah's volunteers on handling COVID_19 corpses in Sidoarjo, namely empathy, modeling, belief in reciprocal principles, organizational values, and religiosity.

3.1 Empathy

Feeling of empathy can be defined as “an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else” [5]. To make the definition clear, Daniel Batson et al, (2012) emphasize four points; First, “congruent” here refers to the valence of the emotion which means positive when the perceived welfare of the other is positive and negative when the perceived welfare is negative. Second, the empathic emotion felt when another is perceived to be in need is hypothesized to evoke altruistic motivation. Third, empathic emotion as defined includes a whole constellation of feelings, not just a single, discrete emotion. It can include feelings of sympathy, compassion, soft heartedness, tenderness, and the like—feelings that are inherently other-oriented [5].

The empirical evidence shows that Muhammadiyah’s involvement in handling the COVID-19 corpses is heavily influenced by empathic feelings. Generally, they are involved in the humanitarian acts as a dilemma situation during the pandemic. On the one hand, the number of people who died caused by the COVID-19 infection. Many cases did not get a well treatment due to the overwhelm of the medical staffs. Even some of the corpses were displaced. There were those who just got treatment after more than 12 hours since his death. There were also the corpses who were found at home after few days. Unfortunately, some of them were the backbone of their family, which means their family’s life will potentially be insecure after their deaths. On the other hand, the public tended to be reluctant to get involved in helping the Covid-19 patient case. The dominant reason was a fear of contracting the virus while, at the same time, the number of skilled workers were insufficient.

The following statements are best to explain how the volunteers’ positive emotion encourages them to participate in addressing the corpses with the COVID-19 infection.

“To be honest, I was called to be involved in this activity because so many people died from the COVID-19 but from the neighbors’ side, no one dared to come close to help, therefore, I was very sad, what if this happened to us?” (Subject 4, 12 December 2021).

In Waru was my first time of the voluntary activity involvement. At that time, I felt like I wanted to cry, or what, because I heard stories from the family that the body had died at 6 am and we could handle it after we arrived at 4 pm. This was just because no one around him took action, and that’s why I felt so sad (Subject 5, 13 December 2021).

The feelings of empathy among the volunteers due to the dilemmatic situation had encouraged them to help others, even though it was too risky. This finding confirms what was revealed by Daniel Batson et al, (2012) that there is a strong correlation between empathy and altruism. In line with the findings, Myers (2012) also suggests that empathic feelings are one of the altruistic behavior determinants.

An experiment conducted by Limecki et al. (2016) to assess altruistic behaviors through a standard economic game called “Dictator Game” show that participants’ behavioral choices were preceded either by an empathy induction or by a control condition without empathy induction. The results also indicate that empathy induction substantially increased altruistic behavior. Moreover, the feeling of empathy can be a key motivator for altruistic behavior in the sense of economic interactions.

The relation between empathy and altruistic behaviors is basically unsurprising as they have similar goals which are doing something for other-oriented. While empathy

is associated with an emotional reaction to seeing another person in need [5], altruistic is acts that the ultimate goal increases another's welfare [5].

3.2 Modeling

Modeling is one way in which behavior is learned. When someone observes another behavior and then imitates that behavior, he or she is modeling the behavior. This is sometimes known as observational learning or social learning. Modeling is a kind of vicarious learning in which direct instruction need not occur. Indeed, one may not be aware that another is modeling his or her behavior. Modeling may teach a new behavior, influence the frequency of a previously learned behavior, or increase the frequency of a similar behavior [9].

Banduro (1977) introduces four steps of behavioristic modeling. The first step is an attention referring to how subjects pay attention to the model behavior before replicating the behavior. The Second is retention which means the ability to remember or retain the observed behavior. The next one is reproduction the process of translation of another's behavior the images into his or her own behavior. In short, one must have the ability to reproduce the behavior. The final stage is motivation to imitate the behavior [9].

Thus, in the context of altruistic behavior on the COVID-19 volunteers, it is necessary to see how the role models had been able to influence the volunteers. The empirical study shows that the existence of role models had a power to influence the altruistic behavior of volunteers. The chairman of *Pimpinan Daerah Muhammadiyah* (the Muhammadiyah Regional Board of Sidoarjo), and also the chairman of the Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC) became the volunteers' role models.

According to the volunteers, even though the Muhammadiyah chairmen were no longer young, they had strong enthusiasm for helping others. The following statements are best to describe the power modeling from the examples to the followers.

"....when we look at his age, we can say that Mr. PDM is no longer young, but his passion in helping others is wonderful. He is also a wise person.....mm and yes, the point is to bind and not to discriminate one another. This is the point..... (Subject 3, 15 January 2022).

Besides the leaders, the director of the Siti Fatimah Hospital, dr. Tjatur, who was very active in handling COVID-19 cases, was another motivator for the volunteers. As stated by subject 5: ".....my idol was dr. Tjatur, because he invited me and motivated me to take part in this humanitarian activity (Subject 5, 12 January 2022).

Regarding the existence of the models as figures that can influence people's behavior, Bandura has suggested deeply through his learning theory approach [9]. Recently, the effectiveness of figures as examples in affecting other behaviors has also been formulated by other scholars, such as Myers (2012), dan Sarwono, Sarlito W & Meinarno (2011).

3.3 Belief in Reciprocal Principles

The idea of reciprocal acts is a belief that "if we help other people now, they will return the favor should we need their help in the future". This means we could help others who are expected to return for helping us in the future when we need the help. Thus, by helping

others will increase the chances of survival and reproductive success [10]. Furthermore, reciprocal altruism could occur for those who even may help total strangers, based on the assumption that doing so is useful because it may lead others to help them in the future [10].

Those people who have a good reciprocal altruism believe that whatever they do is understood as an investment for themselves. This perspective is held by the interviewed subjects. Most subjects believe that whatever they do will return to themselves. When we invest a goodness, we deserve to get a goodness, even though it comes from different people. Likewise, when doing something bad, the impact will return to us.

The belief in the existence of the reciprocal principle makes them strived to be able to do as good as possible. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic causing a lot of people died from the virus was a good momentum to perform well of kindness. As it can be seen in the following statements:

“So yeah, emmm, when we doing good thing to other people, surely everything will return for us too, depending on our intentions” (Subject 1). Similar to the statement, the subject 3 stated: “In my opinion, who wants to be affected by a disaster? so,.... while someone is affected by a disaster and really needs help, yes”, we are also ready to help with pleasure, which in the future will definitely return to us”. These points in line with what the subject 4 said; “yes, I believe that if I do a good thing to other people, help people who are in trouble, even though I only help them as much as I can, but I believe that one day my kindness and help will bear good fruit for me”.

Prosocial behaviors that arise from the encouragement of a belief in the reciprocal principle in a psychological approach is often called “reciprocal altruism”. The belief that each individual will get good or bad things because of his actions too.

Similar to this concept, Lerner and Simmons in 1966 introduced a concept of “belief in a just world” was initially introduced (Dalbert & Donat, 2015). This term reveals, people need to believe that everyone gets what they deserve and deserves what they get. This belief enables them to deal with their social environment as though it were ostensibly stable and orderly and thus serves an important adaptive function. Therefore, people are encouraged to defend their belief in a just world when threatened by injustices, either experienced or observed (Dalbert & Donat, 2015).

Recently, the topic has attracted some scholars to conduct empirical investigation the concept of “belief on a just word” especially experimental research. For instance; Hafer & Bègue (2005) focusing primarily on the maladaptive functions of the belief in a just world, such as disdain for the victim. However, another strand of research has examined individual differences in the belief in a just world and found that it also serves important adaptive functions. In the context of the altruistic behaviors, Myers (2012) suggests that “belief on a just word” is one of the altruistic determinants. This means that it matches with my study finding.

3.4 Organizational Values

Organizational values can be defined as “beliefs about socially or personally desirable end states or actions that are explicitly or implicitly shared by members of an organization” [11]. The values function to guide what is seen as good and important in

the organization. Hence, they are affecting the selection and evaluation of decisions, programs, and actions in an organization [11].

In this regards, the empirical evidences show that some of the volunteers' involvement in addressing the COVID-19 in Sidoarjo were determined by organizational values where they were fellows of it which was Muhammadiyah. As subjects said:

"I have been active in IPM, HW (the autonomous organizations of Muhammadiyah). I was taught to give a lot, help a lot to other people, mmm... but yes... giving is according to our capacity". (Subject 1, 12 December 2022). Another subject (2) also stated: "I am a retired person who is committed after retirement, I don't want to be a bonded worker, but alhamdulillah, I am friends with many Muhammadiyah people as someone who engage in humanitarian activities (Subject 2, 16 December 2022).

Indeed, Muhammadiyah is a social-religious organization that concerns on humanitarian issues and provides social services, especially on education, health, public empowerment [12]. This organization teaches its fellows to have altruistic behaviors derived from the Quran and Hadith.

Many messages from the holy verses call for a balance between religious behavior and social care. One of them is contained in the Al-Quran sura *al-ma'un*, which later is known as *al-ma'un* theology. In this Surah, Allah SWT aligns people behavior who do not care about the *mustad'afin* as acts that belie religion.

This theological foundation can drive some Muhammadiyah fellows to have serious attention for the humanitarian issues. In addition, the building process altruistic behaviors can be formed through formal or informal training in this organization. Organizationally, there are a lot of humanitarian values internalized to the Muhammadiyah members, such as sincerity, generosity, usefulness, dedication. These prosocial messages seem to be daily menus for the Muhammadiyah's fellows.

Those messages were conveyed through formal forums; trainings, workshops, seminars, as well as internalized through daily organizational environment in the organization. The example of Muhammadiyah's predecessors is another factor that strengthens the internalization of pro-social values within the fellows. In terms of role models, Muhammadiyah has rich stories. A heroic example is what was done by KH. A Dahlan auctioned off all his assets, including his clothes, just to pay off the salary debt to the Muhammadiyah School teachers at that time. Similar stories are also frequently heard with different levels and cases. Hence, it is unsurprising when someone joins Muhammadiyah, the spirit of altruism can be internalized to its fellows.

3.5 Religiosity

Religiosity means A term refers to excessive involvement in religion or religious activity. Such involvement goes beyond the norm for a person of a similar faith and is often driven more by individual beliefs than the content of the actual religion [13]. To see the extent to which religiosity, Glock, C. Y., & Stark (1965) develops five dimensions; beliefs, rituals, experiences, knowledge, and consequences [14].

Belief dimension contains the agreement with basic belief contents of a religion, e.g. the belief in God; the ritualistic dimension includes formal religious practices, such as pray; experiences refers to a feeling of communication with a supernatural agency; knowledge to measure the religious understanding. In Islam, for instance, how the fellows

understand the Quran and the sunnah as the main sources of Islamic and consequences aims to see the impact of a religion on the everyday life. Due to the dimensions, most of the subjects believe that what they do is because it is based on one religious belief that if you do good you will get good both directly in the world and in the hereafter. It is this belief that drives the subjects to have a strong enthusiasm to be involved as volunteers in humanitarian activities related to COVID-19.

This finding reinforces previous studies which show a positive correlation between a person's religiosity and helping behavior. As Rubiantari & Hazim (2023) point out that there is a significant relationship between religiosity and pro-social behaviors of volunteers who are members of Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Centre (MDMC) in response against COVID-19 in Sidoarjo. The study conducted by (2018) also confirms the positive relationship between the two variables above [15].

4 Conclusion

There were a small group of people who actively engaged in helping patients or corpses with the COVID-19 infection when most people attempted to avoid direct contact with them. Hence, this article aims to reveal the altruistic behavior determinants of Muhammadiyah volunteers involved on this humanitarian activities.

This qualitative investigation through phenomenological approach during the second wave of the pandemic in Sidoarjo had been able to reveal some altruistic behaviors' determinants. This study found that philanthropic action of the Muhammadiyah's volunteers were driven by five factors, namely feelings of empathy, modeling, belief in reciprocal principles, organizational values, and religiosity.

However, this article is insufficient to explore the altruistic behaviors among the Muhammadiyah volunteers comprehensively. There are several issues that have not been discussed. The mode of altruistic behaviors on the COVID-19 involvement is an example that needs to be paid attention to the future investigation. In addition, because this study uses a qualitative approach involving a limited number of subjects, it may not be generalizable to explain the factors of altruistic behavior in different cases and places.

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