

## Psychological Dynamics and Beliefs of Social Helpers: A Qualitative Exploration

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### ABSTRACT

Helping behaviour commonly exists in our society and is encouraged as a part of moral and religious teaching. However, some people adhere to it and others do not. This study explored the motives of 16 male and female social helpers aged 40–60 years from Kolkata. Data were collected from social helpers giving time and money to orphanage and old age homes for at least 2 years. Data was collected using guided narratives along with certain probes. For data analysis, content analysis was used as a qualitative technique. Helpers in orphanages were driven by feelings like sympathy, poverty awareness, and early exposure to helping, while those in old age homes often cited personal loss and concern for the elderly. Both groups saw their work as connected to their religious beliefs, especially karma. They shared strong emotional support and close relationships to the recipients that made them feel valued and fulfilled. Attachments formed differently—toward children’s innocence or elders’ struggles—shaping meaningful bonds.

**Keywords:** *Prosocial Behaviour, Motives, Attachment, Religion, Social Support*

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."  
— Mahatma Gandhi

Prosocial behaviour refers to voluntary actions intended to benefit others, including acts of helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006). It is often motivated by a combination of internal psychological factors and external social or cultural influences. While traditional psychological theories have focused on helping behaviour as a response to situational triggers or personality traits, contemporary perspectives recognize prosocial behaviour as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by an individual’s values, beliefs, motivations, and social context (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005).

A growing body of research has investigated the various motivations underlying prosocial behaviour. The empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002) suggests that empathic concern for others leads to selfless helping, whereas theories such as the social exchange model (Homans, 1961) propose that helping can also be strategic, where

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individuals aim to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Similarly, the functional approach to volunteerism (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Miene, 1998) posits that people engage in helping behaviour to fulfil various psychological functions, including value expression, personal development, social connection, and protective coping. However, most of these models are grounded in Western cultural contexts and may not fully explain the sustained helping observed in collectivistic cultures like India, where social norms and religious teachings significantly influence helping behaviour (Mohan & Sharma, 1985).

Religion, as an organized system of beliefs, practices, and moral values, often fosters altruistic tendencies by establishing ethical frameworks and spiritual obligations. The Latin root of the word “religion” (religio) denotes reverence for the sacred and a bond between humanity and divinity. Anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as belief in spiritual beings, while Clifford Geertz emphasized religion as a system of symbols that generates enduring motivations by imbuing them with a sense of factuality. Religious doctrines and holy figures often promote compassion, generosity, and moral responsibility, and provide existential meaning and emotional comfort during adversity (Maslow, 1954). Religious beliefs and attitudes often play a profound role in shaping helping behaviours. Across many traditions, including Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, the idea of *seva* (selfless service) is emphasized as a spiritual practice and moral responsibility. Research has found that religious commitment is positively associated with volunteering and charitable giving (Pargament, 1997; Saroglou, 2013). In collectivist societies, religion not only prescribes ethical behaviour but also provides a framework for existential meaning, reinforcing long-term commitment to prosocial actions (Gebauer, Sedikides & Neberich, 2017). Additionally, religion may function as a mechanism of moral regulation through reward and punishment systems (Amalia, Afrianingsih & Damayanti, 2023), thereby reinforcing socially desirable behaviours such as helping.

Social support is another critical variable in shaping prosocial responses. It refers to the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and part of a communicative and mutually responsible network (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Tangible, emotional, informational, and appraisal forms of support have been associated with lower psychological distress, improved coping during stress, and better health outcomes (Uchino, Bowen, Carlisle & Birmingham, 2012). The buffering hypothesis suggests that during high-stress situations, perceived support mitigates the harmful effects of stress by enhancing emotional resilience (House, Landis & Umberson, 1988). This is especially relevant for those engaged in emotionally demanding roles such as caregiving or volunteering in orphanages and old age homes (Barrera, 1986). The encouragement of family members, peer recognition, and organizational backing all contribute to maintaining motivation and psychological resilience among helpers.

Attachment theory also provides a valuable framework to understand prosocial motivation. As proposed by Bowlby (1969), attachment is a biologically rooted behavioural system that ensures proximity to caregivers in times of distress. Secure attachment, developed through consistent caregiving, fosters trust, emotional regulation, and empathic sensitivity, which subsequently translate into greater helping tendencies in adulthood. Insecure or disorganized attachment, in contrast, may inhibit the development of such prosocial traits. Studies have consistently found that individuals with secure attachment exhibit more altruism, forgiveness, and compassion in interpersonal relationships. In emotionally intimate contexts, such as sustained caregiving for orphans or the elderly, helpers often report forming bonds that resemble familial ties (George & Solomon, 2008). These bonds may enhance the sense of

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purpose, empathy, and responsibility felt by the helper, making the prosocial behaviour more intrinsic and enduring.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the psychological, spiritual, and social factors influencing prosocial behaviour, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these factors interact in the lives of adult helpers working within institutional caregiving environments in India. Most research has focused on either student volunteers or formally trained social workers, overlooking individuals from the general population who engage in long-term, informal prosocial acts without professional training or financial incentive. Particularly underexplored are the experiences of middle-aged individuals who contribute either time or resources to orphanages and old age homes—populations that require consistent, emotionally engaged, and often physically demanding support. Thus, in the current study, we aim to explore the psychological dynamics of the social helpers in terms of motives, religious beliefs, social support and attachment formation.

### **METHOD**

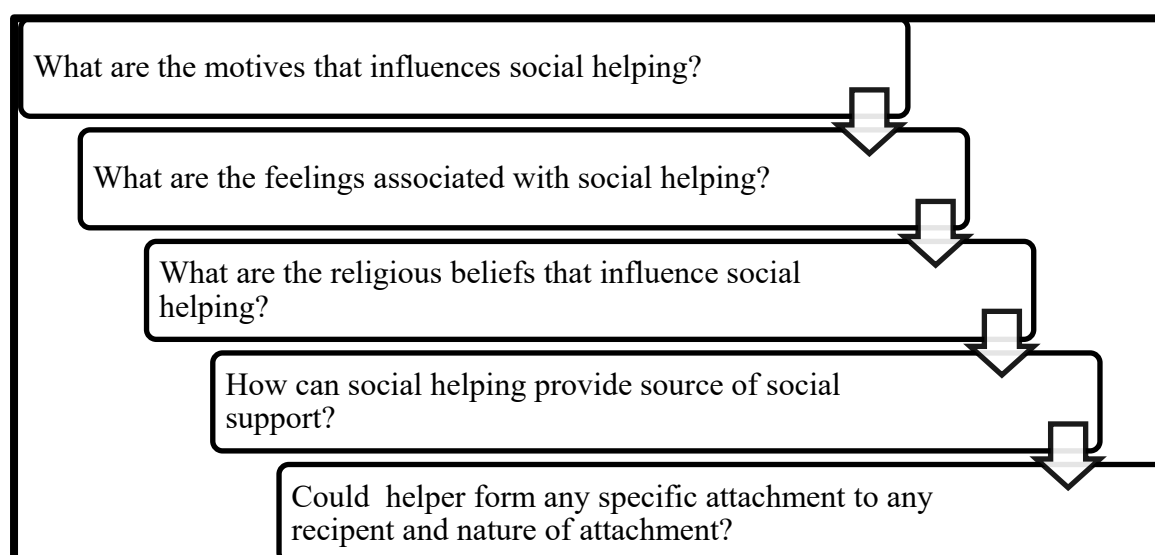
#### *Objectives*

- To determine the motives among the individual that influences them towards pro social behaviour.
- To determine whether the prosocial behaviour is influenced by the religious beliefs and attitudes of the helper.
- To determine whether prosocial behaviour towards old people and orphans is influenced the by social support received by the helpers.
- To analyze the experiences and feelings of the helpers related to their altruistic acts as well as the factors that sustain pro social behaviour.
- To find out the nature of special attachment that develops between the helper and recipient of help.

#### *Design of the study*

In this study, we used, guided narratives in the form of an interview with certain probes from 16 eminent social helpers of the city. Interview was taken from social helpers working for either orphanage or old age home and giving either time or money. Interview was conducted to determine the motives of helpers driving them to engage in social work. The experiences of the helpers along with their perceived social support and religious beliefs were also found out through interview. Any specific attachment with any social helper was determined to analyze the attachment formation process between social helpers and recipients which may further sustain the helping process. The process of content analysis was used to analyze the data.

*Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of interview conducted and variables explored*



### **Sample**

Sixteen social helpers from Kolkata between the age group of 40 -60 years (both males and females) participated in the study. 8 social helpers (4 males – 2 giving time and 2 giving material help; 4 females- 2 giving time and 2 material help) working for old age homes and 8 social helpers (4 males – 2 giving time and 2 giving material help; 4 females- 2 giving time and 2 material help) working for orphanage participated in the study. Individuals satisfying the inclusion and exclusion criteria were advanced to participate in the present study. Purposive or judgmental sampling technique was employed.

### **Source of data collection**

- Social helpers were contacted with the help of management committee of various orphanages and old age homes of the city
- Social helpers were even contacted with the help of various reputed charitable trusts of the city.
- Some of the social helpers were even contacted through personal, family and friends contacts.

### **Inclusion criteria**

- Age between 40-60 years.
- upper middle- or upper-income socio-economic status group.
- A minimum of secondary level of education was required
- Social helpers who do not take tax exemption certificate for their material help.
- Social helpers who have been into helping behaviour for at least 2 years
- Social helpers who are giving time or material help into either old age home or orphanage.

### **Exclusion criteria**

- Social helpers taking tax redemption certificate
- Individuals who are qualified in social work.

### *Tools used*

#### **Consent form**

Consent form was prepared to seek consent from the social helpers and recipients for their participation in the present study.

#### **Qualitative measures**

Content analysis also, known as document analysis, is a method of systematic examination of communications or of current records or documents. Instead of questioning respondents according to some scale items or observing their behaviour directly, content analysis finds out the frequency or proportion of the appearances of any communication.

Purposes of Content Analysis: the following major purposes are served by content analysis:

1. To explain and describe the prevailing practices or conditions.
2. To identify concepts, beliefs, thinking and literary style of a writer.
3. To locate and explain the possible causal factors related to some outcome or event.
4. To analyze the different types of errors in work.
5. To find out the relative importance of some topics or problems.
6. To make careful evaluation of bias, prejudice and propaganda.

Methods of Content Analysis: There are different ways or methods of content analysis. Of these various methods, Berelson's (1952) method is the most useful and has been applied in the current study. This method can be presented under the following three heads:

- **Specification of the Universe-** in Berelson's method, the first step is to define the universe or U of the content.
- **Unit of Analysis-** unit of analysis refers to the measure in terms of which content analysis can be carried out. Berelson (1952) has suggested five major units of analysis, namely, words, themes, items, character and space and time measures.
- **Quantification-** it is the third important aspect in content analysis. It refers to the process of assigning numerals to the objects of the content analysis. Ordinarily, this process can be completed in any of the three ways, namely, nominal measurement, ordinal measurement and rating. In nominal measurement, each object after being assigned to a proper category is counted. Ordinal measurement consists of ranking of objects done by subjects according to some fixed criterion. Rating is another form of quantification, wherein the whole reproduction or the object may be rated on several dimensions.

### ***Procedure***

Interview was taken from 16 eminent social workers of the city, working for either orphanage or old age home and giving time or money. Social workers were contacted through orphanages and old age homes. Some of the helpers were approached through personal and family contact. One to one appointment was fixed with each helper.

Firstly, consent was taken from them to conduct an interview. Interview was conducted in the form of guided narratives with specified probes. Social helpers were asked about their reasons to engage in social work. They were even asked about their religious beliefs and attitudes and how social work is related to their future existence. They were enquired about the reaction and support of the family in their endeavour. Since helpers who were interviewed, were at least into this field for five years, they were asked about their special attachment if formed with any particular inmate and the nature of the relationship. All the interviews were recorded whereas behavioural gestures were noted down. From the

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recordings, verbatim was transcribed for analysis. After the conduction of all the interviews, data was analyzed using content analysis. For the present study, firstly, u was defined and then coding was done “u” for the present study included motives, religious beliefs, social support, feelings and experiences and attachment formation. After all the coding were done, “u” was arranged as a unit in themes along with the interpretations. From the interpretation tables, tally was done. Themes were arranged in the table along with their frequencies in a rank order.

Randomly, 4 interviews were selected and a xerox copy of the interview was given to a second rater. The second-rater analysis was compared and consensus was reached through mutual understanding.

From the frequency tables, the comparison between motives, religious beliefs, social support, attachment formation and feelings and experiences of orphanage and old age home helpers was drawn.

### RESULTS

All social helpers matched in terms of age, education and socio-economic status. Mean age of male social helpers was 48.72 years and female helpers were 47.90 years. Below are the frequency tables for each variable under study. Frequency tables are divided according to the institute, that is orphanage and old age home in the current study.

*Table 1: Motives of orphanage helpers*

SRL. NO.	MOTIVES	FREQUENCY
1.	Perception of poverty/ deprivation	10
2	Feeling of pity/ sympathy	8
3	Inclination/ observation from childhood	8
4	Social norms of equity	7
5	Social norms of responsibility	7
6	Social influence	4
7	Personal experience/ empathy	3
8	Personal loss compensation	2
9	Sense of purpose	2
10	Loneliness	1
11	Depression	1

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**Table 2: Motives of old age home helpers**

<b>SRL. NO.</b>	<b>MOTIVES</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Compensation for parental loss	10
2	Exposure/ observation from childhood	7
3	Feeling of pity sympathy	7
4	Perception of and sensitivity to needs of old people	6
5	Loneliness	4
6	Distress/ frustration	3
7	Personal experience of suffering	3
8	Norms of social responsibility	2
9	Value/social inclination	2
10	Norm of reciprocity	2
11	Idol influence	1

**Table 3: Religious attitude and beliefs of orphanage helpers**

<b>SRL. NO.</b>	<b>RELIGIOUS VIEWS</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Social work is a part of religion. Source of serving god	4
2	Believe in Karma	4
3	Positive religious view	3
4	Moderately religious	3
5	Secular view	3
6	Belief in equality	2
7	Spiritualism	1
8	Preach religious belief	1
9	Against idol worship	1
10	Non ritualistic	1

**Table 4: Religious attitude and beliefs of old age home helpers**

<b>SRL. NO.</b>	<b>RELIGIOUS VIEWS</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Social work is a part of religion	6
2	Very religious	5
3	Believe in karma	5

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4	Against ritualism	2
5	Follow all religious rituals	1
6	Spiritualism	1

***Table 5: Social support in orphanage helpers***

<b>SRL NO</b>	<b>SOCIAL SUPPORT</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Child support/ respect/ participation	4
2	Satisfying marital life	4
3	Positive emotional social support	3
4	Conflicting family view	3
5	Lack of social support	3
6	Moderate support	2
7	Tangible support	2
8	Informational support	1
9	Disturbed inter personal relationship	1

***Table 6: Social support in old age home helpers***

<b>SRL NO</b>	<b>SOCIAL SUPPORT</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Positive emotional support	8
2	Satisfying marital life	7
3	Child participation	6
4	Tangible support	2
5	Disturbed interpersonal relationship	1

***Table 7: Feeling/ experiences of orphanage helpers***

<b>SRL NO</b>	<b>FEELINGS/ EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	High self esteem/ sense of worth/ pride	7
2	Meaning in life	6
3	Sense of achievement/ satisfaction/ self boost	6
4	Happiness/ pleasure	5
5	Self actualization/ fulfillment	4
6	Sense of belongingness/ reduction in loneliness	3
7	Sense of individual identity	2

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8	Sense of self confidence	2
9	Reduction in stress/ anxiety	1

**Table 8: Feelings/ experiences of old age home helpers**

<b>SRL NO</b>	<b>FEELINGS/ EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Sense of worth/ pride/ achievement	6
2	Sense of self satisfaction/ completeness	4
3	Happiness	3
4	High meaning in life	2
5	Stress reliever	2
6	Compensation for loss	2
7	Strong self belief/ personal strength	2
8	Personal Enrichment	1

**Table 9: Attachment formation in orphanage helpers**

**A. Causes of attachment**

<b>SRL. NO.</b>	<b>CAUSES</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Small, tender age	2
2	Dependence/ helplessness	2
3	Innocence	2
4	Need for love/ affection	2
5	Bright student	2
6	Desire of recipient to improve	2
7	Special talent	2
8	Physical disability	1

**B. Nature of attachment**

<b>SRL. NO.</b>	<b>NATURE OF ATTACHMENT</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Sharing of experiences/ problems	4
2	Solving problems	4
3	Regular communication	2
4	Educational support	2
5	Over all developmental support	2

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6	Better life provided	2
7	Regular meets	2
8	Symbolic relationship	2
9	Cheering mood	1

*Table 10: Attachment formation in old age home helpers*

**A. Causes of attachment**

<b>SRL.NO</b>	<b>CAUSES</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Physical disability/ suffering	4
2	Feeling of pity/ sympathy	4
3	Dependence	2
4	loneliness	2
5	Spending time from childhood	2
6	Identification with family member	2
7	helplessness	1
8	Negative life events/ loss	1
9	Common interest	1
10	Positive traits of inmate	1

**B. Nature of attachment**

<b>SRL. NO</b>	<b>NATURE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Sharing problems/ experiences	5
2	Positive view for interaction	5
3	Symbolic relationship	4
4	Problem solving	4
5	Supportive relation	2
6	Care/ attention/ love	2
7	Medical help	2
8	Void in absence of inmate	2
9	Respect for each other	2
10	Sense of belongingness	2

### DISCUSSION

From the qualitative analysis, it has been found that main motives of the social helpers of orphanage for indulging into helping behaviour are perception of poverty, feeling of sympathy, and exposure to social work from childhood through parents or family members and social norms of equity and responsibility; whereas in case of old age home helpers the main motives highlighted through analysis are compensation for personal loss, exposure to altruistic behaviour from childhood, feeling of sympathy and perception of the needs of old people. It is evident that in case of both the categories of helpers, motives to engage in prosocial behaviour triggers through childhood exposure to social work, i.e. altruistic acts are learned through modelling or observational learning (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006). He stated that prosocial behaviour can be learned from childhood through observing teachers and parents or through exposure to prosocial acts in television or media. Another important motive revealed by both orphanage and old age home helpers is feeling of sympathy is an important factor determining prosocial behaviour. Research has found positive relationship between empathy and prosocial behaviour (Grueneisen & Worneken, 2021). Apart from these prior motives, other motives expressed by orphanage helpers are social influence, personal experience of deprivation, empathy, compensation for personal loss. Prosocial behaviour gives a sense of purpose, reduces loneliness and depression. In case of old age home helpers, other motives include loneliness, distress, personal experience of suffering, norms of social responsibility and reciprocity. Norm of reciprocity is found to be a universal component of moral codes. It simply means investing in others and expecting dividends (Gouldner, 1960). Thus, in case of old age home helpers, norm of reciprocity operates as one of the major motives for engaging in social work.

Religious beliefs and attitude for orphanage and old age home helpers share common characteristics. Both the helpers consider social work as a part of religion that is meant to serve god, have positive religious view and believe in karma. Religious views expressed by the helpers are supported by the findings of Bonner, Koven and Patrick (2003). They found that religiosity and general spirituality are positively correlated with pro social behaviour. According to them religiosity involves organization behaviour such as participation in religious services. It also involves non organization elements such as prayers and religious readings. Though, a few social helpers have reported to be against ritualism, idol worship and have said to believe in equality. Majority of social helpers are found to be religious, believing in good deeds.

Social helpers of both orphanage and old age home have expressed having high positive emotional support, satisfying interpersonal relationships and the active participation of their child in altruistic acts. Some of the helpers have even supported having tangible and informational support. This analysis is in accord with the study of Krueger (2001) who found that individuals living with positive family environments, with constant support tended to be more altruistic than individuals who live in negative family environment.

Prosocial behaviour has resulted in positive feelings and experiences such as high sense of worth, achievement, and sense of self-satisfaction along with immense happiness among the orphanage and old age home helpers. This revelation is in accord with the findings of Beaumont (2008), who found positive correlation between self-esteem, recognition and altruistic behaviour. Dullin and Hill (2001) found that prosocial behaviour is a significant predictor of positive affect. Social helpers even reported feelings of self actualization, sense of belongingness, sense of individual identity, sense of confidence, high meaning in life and personal enrichment as a result of their altruistic behaviour.

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In case of orphanage helpers, main cause of attachment with inmates were tender age of orphans, helplessness, dependence, innocence of child, perception of need for love and affection. Some helpers even formed specific attachment with bright students having special talent, desire to improve or children with physical disability. The nature of relationship between orphanage helpers and orphans involved sharing your experiences, problem solving, regular communication, and meets educational and overall developmental support. Some helpers even shared symbolic relationship with the orphans.

In case of old age home helpers, the main cause of attachment with inmates were physical disability and inmate, suffering of old people, feeling of pity, loneliness and identification of an inmate with any family member. Some helpers formed attachment due the helper and inmate included sharing common interests or positive traits of the inmates. The nature of relationship between the helper and the inmate included sharing of problems, regular interaction, symbolic and supportive relationship along with provision of medical care, expressed care, respect for each other and a sense of belongingness.

The present study has certain limitations which if considered would have led to higher degrees of sophistication. The study was limited to an urban upper-class population in Kolkata and lacks broader representation. Not all qualitative interviews were double-coded; only a subset underwent second-rater analysis.

### CONCLUSION

The main motives for orphanage helpers included perception of poverty, modeling, sympathy, and social responsibility, while old age home helpers were often driven by personal loss and sympathy. Social helpers expressed a positive religious worldview, particularly a belief in karma. Helpers reported high emotional support, meaningful child participation, and satisfying interpersonal relationships. Prosocial behaviour resulted in positive emotions such as a sense of worth, achievement, satisfaction, and happiness. Attachment formation was influenced by the age and condition of the recipients: helpers felt emotionally attached to orphaned children due to their tender age and to old age home residents due to their physical suffering. Thus, from the results of the study we can conclude that dynamics to helping is multi-faceted and this study gives us broader insight into the sustenance of helping behaviour existent in the community.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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