Altruism as a Function of Age and Deprivation: An Interactional Study

Ashok Kumar Ojha         and                   Ritu Mishra
Tata Motors Finance Ltd.               T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur

The research was planned to investigate the independent as well as interactional effects of age and deprivation on altruism. For this, a 3 × 3 bivariate classification of the sample was made. The ages of the participants was divided into young (over 20 – 40 years), middle (over 40 – 60 years) and old (over 60 – 80 years). Deprivation was categorized on the basis of the scores of the subjects on Deprivation Scale into three–high deprived (HD), medium deprived (MD) and low deprived (LD), and accordingly in each of nine subgroups 40 male urban employees (working/retired) of government or semi government organizations were selected. All the selected subjects were individually interviewed with Altruism Scale. A bivariate analysis of the data revealed that as age and deprivation increase altruism also increases. However, interaction of age X deprivation does not make any significant difference in altruism.

Keywords: Altruism, age, deprivation.

August Comte, a French philosopher and sociologist, first introduced the term, ‘altruism’. Probably, he came to adopt the term from the Italian word, ‘altrui’. For Comte, altruism meant an unselfish regard for the welfare of others. According to Bryan and London (1970), altruistic behaviour refers to those behaviours which are intended to benefit another but which appears to have a high cost to the actor with little possibility of material or social reward. Altruism is generally defined as any form of voluntary act intended to favour another without expectations of rewards (Smith & Mackie, 2000). It refers to a kind of selfless help, which is based on pure desire to help others (Aranson, Wilson, Akert & Fehr, 2004). Examples of altruistic behaviour cover a wide range including expression of support and sympathy, doing special favours to others, acts of generosity, active defence of the rights of deprived, engagement in voluntary activities for the mentally and physically handicapped and martyrdom. It is a desire to help others which expresses itself in many ways through sympathy, philanthropy, etc. A person with strong altruistic want has affection and concern for others and is usually contrasted with the selfish person. According to Hamilton (1978), altruistic behaviour which helps only the recipient can be distinguished from other types of intra specific social interactions, for example, cooperative behaviour which helps both parties, selfish behaviour which helps the donor only, and spiteful behaviour in which both parties lose. Altruistic behaviour involves helping, sometimes, even taking great risks even though the act is not likely to be rewarded, recognized or even appreciated. Thus, an altruistic act is selfless. The same has been stressed by Walster and Piliavin (1972) who say that “altruism is [a] very special form of helping behaviour that is voluntary, costly to the altruist and motivated by something other than the expected one of material or social reward”. Altruism then is selfless rather than selfish. Yarrow Scott and Walter (1973) point out that altruism is not a specific form of behaviour rather it includes a diversity of responses such as helping, sharing, rescuing, sympathizing and undoubtedly more.

The term, deprivation, has stemmed from the verb, ‘to deprive’, which means to dispossess or strip off an individual from certain things. It, thus, implies a felt loss. It indicates a state of certain deficiencies experienced by the individual which relates to certain features of the environment that are absent or inadequate in certain degree which cause an impact on the functioning of the