Urban-Rural Differences in Social Interest and Altruistic Behavior

P. N. Dixon
Richard A. Stevick
Messiah University, rstevick@messiah.edu

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Research on altruism has often focused on the effects of altruistic vs. selfish modeling on S altruism.\(^1\) Hansson, Slade, and Slade\(^2\) found that urban Ss were more likely than were rural Ss to respond selfishly in the presence of a selfish model, and to act altruistically when presented with an altruistic model. The authors explain their results in terms of Milgram's urban-overload theory.\(^3\) In complex urban societies individuals behave on the basis of economy rather than more complicated considerations such as social interest.

The present research is a partial replication of the Hansson \textit{et al.} study with both behavioral and attitudinal measures of altruism for urban and rural Ss. Undergraduate student Ss were categorized as urban (populations greater than 100,000, \(N = 41\)) and rural (populations less than 100,000, \(N = 80\)) for the modeling and self-report data.

While waiting to perform a learning study task, Ss were asked to volunteer aid to a bogus social welfare organization. A confederate, ostensibly also waiting to perform the task, modeled either of two conditions: volunteering or refusing to fill in the information card needed of all volunteers.

A chi square analysis of urban vs. rural by positive vs. negative modeling influence and volunteering vs. nonvolunteering yielded a significant value, \(\chi^2 = 10.12, p < .05\). An inspection of the table revealed that urban Ss followed the model significantly more often than did rural Ss in the negative influence condition. However, under the positive modeling condition, rural Ss more closely followed the model by volunteering significantly more often than did urban Ss.
Thus, there is mixed support for the Hansson et al. findings. Their conclusion regarding urban Ss' susceptibility to model influence coincides with the present findings for the nonaltruistic condition but not for the altruistic condition. In the latter, rural Ss showed a greater inclination to follow the model. This suggests the likelihood that rural persons may demonstrate greater altruism than do Ss from urban populations.

In order to measure urban-rural differences in altruistic attitudes, the Social Interest Index⁴ was administered to all Ss. This scale measures the Adlerian concept of social interest, defined, in part, as a feeling of cooperation or empathy. No significant differences in social interest were obtained \( [F(1, 119) = 2.48, p > .05] \).

Certainly the emphasis of the Hansson et al. study on the importance of the urban-rural factor as a useful mediator variable is also supported by the present study, which confirms the complexity of the variable.

Department of Educational Psychology
P. O. Box 4560
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas 79409

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