



EMPATHY, SOCIAL INTEREST, AND ALTRUISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN NATIONAL SERVICE SCHEME PARTICIPANTS AND NON-PARTICIPANTS

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ABSTRACT

The National Service Scheme (NSS) is a structured volunteer program in India designed to promote social responsibility, civic engagement, and holistic personality development among college students. The present study aims to comparatively examine levels of empathy, social interest, and altruism among NSS participants and non-NSS students. Empathy, social interest, and altruism are core psychological constructs underlying prosocial behaviour and community engagement, and are particularly relevant during young adulthood. Using a comparative research design, the study included full-time college students aged 18–25 years, categorized into NSS volunteers and non-NSS students based on defined inclusion criteria. Standardized self-report measures were used to assess empathy, social interest, and altruism. Findings from the reviewed literature and comparative analysis indicate that NSS students consistently demonstrate higher levels of empathy, stronger social interest, and more stable altruistic tendencies than their non-NSS counterparts. These differences are attributed to sustained engagement in structured community service, direct interaction with marginalized populations, and the internalization of service-oriented values emphasized by the NSS motto “Not Me, But You.” The study highlights the psychological and therapeutic potential of NSS participation in enhancing emotional regulation, social connectedness, and overall well-being among students. Despite limitations such as cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures, the findings underscore the importance of integrating service-learning and volunteer-based programs within higher education curricula. The study contributes to Indian context-specific literature on youth volunteering and emphasizes the role of experiential learning in fostering empathy, social interest, altruism, and responsible citizenship.

Index Terms - National Service Scheme (NSS), Empathy, Social Interest, Altruism, Prosocial Behavior, Volunteerism

Introduction

The National Service Scheme (NSS) is a valuable community service initiative that actively engages college students in social welfare activities, fostering empathy, social interest, and altruism among participants. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, plays a crucial role in enhancing interpersonal relationships and promoting prosocial behaviour. A study by Boyapa and Chandan (2025) found that NSS volunteers exhibited significantly higher empathy levels compared to non-NSS students, attributed to their direct exposure to marginalized communities through service activities. Social interest, reflecting an individual's concern and active participation in societal welfare, is another key area positively influenced by NSS engagement. Research has shown that NSS volunteers develop stronger social interest, as their involvement in diverse community programs increases their awareness and commitment to social justice and collective well-being. Altruism, the selfless concern for the welfare of others, is profoundly nurtured through NSS experiences. Studies indicate that students participating in the NSS demonstrate higher altruistic behaviours than their non-volunteering peers due to the empathetic and socially engaged environment cultivated by the scheme. The integration of empathy, social interest, and altruism through NSS participation contributes to shaping compassionate, socially responsible individuals who are prepared to lead and support inclusive communities. This introduction sets the foundation for exploring the impact of NSS on these psychological constructs by comparing NSS and non-NSS students through empirical research. Such studies highlight the importance of experiential learning in higher education for fostering moral and social development in youth. The findings emphasize the need to promote service-based programs like NSS to cultivate empathy, social interest, and altruistic attitudes, thereby advancing societal harmony and youth empowerment.

Background of the study

Introduction:

Empathy, Social Interest, and Altruism as Psychological Constructs.

Understanding helping behavior and prosocial orientation among college students has become increasingly important in educational and developmental psychology. Three interconnected psychological constructs—empathy, social interest, and altruism—form the foundation of prosocial behavior and community engagement. Empathy refers to the capacity to understand and share the emotional experiences of others; it represents primarily an emotional process that enables individuals to recognize and respond to others' distress. Social interest, a concept rooted in Adlerian theory, refers to the sense of community feeling and the natural capacity for cooperation and contribution to the welfare of others; it is a primary indicator of psychological health and must be developed through education and positive social experiences. Altruism, defined as voluntary helping intended to benefit others with minimal expectation of external reward, represents a broad personality trait characterized by consistency across situations and contexts. Research consistently demonstrates that these three constructs are positively interrelated. For instance, Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis posits that when individuals experience empathic concern toward others in distress, this emotional response activates genuine altruistic motivation, leading to helping behavior independent of personal gain or social approval. Furthermore, individuals with high social interest tend to pursue personal growth in ways that benefit their communities, embodying the integration of empathy, altruism, and community orientation.

Volunteerism and the Development of Prosocial Traits Among Young Adults.

Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that sustained volunteerism plays a significant role in shaping empathy, altruism, and social responsibility among young adults. Nowakowska et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study of 224 non-volunteers and 178 volunteers aged 18–35 years and found that volunteers scored significantly higher on empathy and altruistic social value orientation than non-volunteers. This finding aligns with a broader body of research indicating that prolonged engagement in prosocial activities not only attracts individuals with these predispositions but also strengthens and develops these traits over time. Among college students specifically, a significant positive relationship exists between prosocial behavior and empathy; higher empathy levels consistently correlate with higher prosocial behavior. The development of altruism as a personality trait among college students has been linked to specific psychological variables, including empathy, a sense of personal responsibility, moral reasoning grounded in justice and care, and the ability to maintain optimism and construct meaning under stress. Furthermore, parenting practices emphasizing warm yet firm involvement foster the development of these traits, suggesting that educational institutions and community service programs can similarly cultivate altruistic orientations through structured, meaningful service experiences.

The National Service Scheme (NSS): India's Framework for Youth Development and Community Engagement.

In the Indian context, the National Service Scheme (NSS) represents a comprehensive national initiative designed to inculcate values of social responsibility, national integration, and community service among college and university students. Established as a centrally coordinated program, NSS aims to: (i) promote personality development and leadership qualities, (ii) encourage students' active participation in community service and national development, and (iii) foster national integration and social harmony. NSS operates through structured activities including rural community camps, health promotion and blood donation drives, environmental conservation initiatives, adult literacy programs, and adventure activities designed to build teamwork and leadership. The program's underlying philosophy, encapsulated in the motto "Not Me, But You," emphasizes selflessness, civic duty, and service-oriented altruism. Importantly, NSS provides sustained engagement rather than isolated helping episodes, creating ongoing opportunities for developing prosocial habits and internalizing community-oriented values. Recent evaluation of NSS's impact reveals substantial positive outcomes. A comprehensive survey by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (2016) and subsequent case studies (Singh & Patel, 2018) found that NSS participants reported significant improvements in leadership skills, civic engagement, and social awareness compared to non-participants. Studies by Nikam et al. (2020) and Lal (2015) specifically documented that NSS participation cultivates empathy, resilience, and an ethical foundation through service-learning, as well as improved decision-making and problem-solving skills. These findings underscore NSS's role as a structured institutional mechanism for developing prosocial psychological traits.

Social Interest in the Indian Cultural Context

Adler's concept of social interest aligns particularly well with traditional Indian values and educational philosophy. Social interest—defined as the capacity for cooperation, contribution to others' welfare, and sense of belonging to community—is foundational to psychological health and development. Importantly, Adler theorized that social interest is not innate but must be actively cultivated through education and positive social relationships; individuals with higher social interest report greater life satisfaction, better mental health outcomes, and more fulfilling relationships. In the Indian educational and cultural context, this concept resonates deeply with the traditional practice of "seva" (selfless service) and the emphasis on collective family and community structures that prioritize interdependence and communal welfare over individualistic pursuits. NSS's mission and activities can be understood as a deliberate institutional effort to foster precisely this form of social interest among students during a formative developmental period. Students who participate in NSS-organized community engagement are provided with structured opportunities to experience the connection between personal development and community contribution, thereby developing a strong orientation toward collective welfare.

Trait Consistency in Altruism and the Role of Personality Development

Foundational research by Rushton (1981) established that altruism operates as a broad-based, stable personality trait rather than a collection of isolated, context-dependent behaviors. Through his development of the Self-Report Altruism Scale (containing 20 items measuring the frequency of specific altruistic behaviors), Rushton demonstrated that individuals consistently demonstrate prosocial tendencies across diverse situations and contexts. Crucially, self-reported altruism was found to predict behavioral altruism, including peer ratings of altruism, organ donation completion, and actual volunteer work engagement. This research trajectory highlights that college-age students are at a developmental stage where altruistic personality traits can be meaningfully shaped through institutional engagement and deliberate mentoring.

Research Gaps and the Present Study's Rationale

While extensive literature documents the benefits of NSS for student development and establishes empathy, social interest, and altruism as important psychological constructs, a notable research gap remains: few empirical studies have undertaken comprehensive comparative analysis of NSS participants versus non-NSS students simultaneously across all three psychological variables (empathy, social interest, and altruism). Most existing research examines these constructs independently or focuses on NSS's impact on broader outcomes such as leadership or civic awareness, without detailed measurement of specific prosocial psychological traits. Furthermore, the moderating or mediating relationships among empathy, social interest, and altruism in the context of sustained volunteering remain underexplored. For instance, while Nowakowska et al. (2021) found that volunteers score higher on empathy and altruism, the role of social interest as an integrating construct was not examined. Additionally, most international volunteerism research originates from Western contexts; Indian research specifically examining NSS's psychological impact through validated measurement scales is limited, creating a need for context-specific empirical evidence that can inform educational policy and practice in Indian higher education institutions.

Methodology**Aim**

To examine the Comparative Study On NSS and Non NSS students on Empathy, Social Interest and Altruism

Objectives

To assess the impact of NSS participation & relationship among variables.

To measure the empathy, social interest, & altruism.

To identify the groups difference and pattern correlates.

Hypothesis

Participation in the National Service Scheme positively impacts the development of prosocial characteristics such as empathy, social interest, and altruism among college students compared to those not involved in the program.

Inclusion Criteria

Age range (e.g., 18–25 years)

Enrolled as full-time students.

For NSS group: registered NSS volunteers with minimum defined participation (e.g., attending NSS activities regularly for 1 year).

For non-NSS group: not enrolled in NSS or other structured volunteer programmes.

Exclusion Criteria

Students with active participation in multiple formal service organizations (for non-NSS group).

Incomplete responses or refusal of consent

Procedure

This review follows a structured and systematic approach to understand and analyze the relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025. The databases Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were searched using keywords such as NSS, empathy, social interest, altruism, volunteering, student development. Studies were screened based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, focusing on the psychological impact of NSS Students and NON-NSS students. Each study was then compared to identify consistent patterns, methodological strengths, and existing research gaps.

Discussion

Psychological Consequences: Role Overload, Anxiety, and Perceived Stress

Research in your review shows that NSS volunteers consistently score higher on empathy than non-NSS peers, largely because repeated, first-hand contact with marginalized groups (through camps, blood donation, village adoption, literacy drives) creates strong emotional resonance and perspective-taking, preventing the usual decline in empathy seen across college years. This ongoing empathic activation becomes a habit of mind, so volunteers begin to automatically notice others' feelings and needs, which improves relationships, reduces social distance between urban–rural youth, and strengthens cooperative self-concept. Altruism also shifts from occasional helping to a more stable personality trait among NSS students. Studies you cited indicate that volunteers not only report more frequent helping behavior but also show greater readiness to help without rewards, stronger emotional intelligence, and a willingness to sacrifice time or comfort for others. Repeated positive experiences of making a difference, combined with the NSS motto “Not Me, But You,” reinforce a service-oriented identity, so helping becomes part of “who I am” rather than just a requirement, thereby protecting against the ego-centric and competitive pressures of college life. Social interest—the Adlerian sense of belonging, community feeling, and responsibility for collective welfare—deepens significantly in NSS participants. Evidence in your review shows they develop stronger civic-mindedness, better community interaction skills, and a clearer sense that their personal growth is tied to society's well-being, while non-NSS students are more likely to remain classroom-focused and individually oriented. Psychologically, this means NSS volunteers experience a broader sense of “we,” higher life satisfaction, and more meaning in their roles as citizens, which together support resilience and mental health.

The Therapeutic Potential

This has a strong therapeutic potential because it examines how NSS participation cultivates psychological resources that protect and promote student mental health. Evidence from youth volunteering research shows that engaging in structured helping activities is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems, along with better overall well-being, positive outlook on life, and a stronger sense of “mattering” to others. In your review, NSS volunteers already show higher empathy, altruism, and social interest than non-NSS peers, and these traits are known to predict more sensitive, consistent helping, lower aggression, and improved psychological and physical health over time. Therapeutically, empathy enables students to form deeper, more supportive relationships and reduces interpersonal conflict, which buffers stress and loneliness—two major risk factors in the National Mental Health Survey data for Indian youth. Altruism and social interest shift focus from self-preoccupation to meaningful contribution, which volunteering studies link to reduced rumination, enhanced life satisfaction, and increased self-esteem and resilience, especially among adolescents and college students. NSS-based service can therefore be framed as a low-cost, culturally congruent preventive mental health intervention: by embedding regular, reflective community work into campus life, institutions can systematically strengthen students' emotional regulation, purpose in life, and social connectedness. Your study's findings could justify integrating NSS or similar service-learning components into mental health promotion programs on campuses, positioning structured volunteering as a complementary, non-stigmatizing pathway to enhance psychological well-being alongside academic development.

The Need for Further Research and Cultural Adaptation

There is a clear need for further research and cultural adaptation arising from your project and the reviewed studies. Existing work shows that NSS volunteers tend to score higher on empathy, altruism, and social interest than non-NSS students, but most of these studies are cross-sectional, rely on self-report scales, and are concentrated in specific states or single institutions, which limits causal inference and generalizability. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs are needed to track how these traits develop over time in NSS and non-NSS students, to disentangle self-selection from true program effects, and to examine whether gains in empathy and altruism translate into long-term community engagement and reduced psychological distress in adulthood. Culturally, most instruments and many theoretical models were originally developed in Western contexts and only later applied to Indian students, so further research should focus on validating the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, Self-Report Altruism Scale, and Social Orientation Index across diverse Indian subcultures, languages, and educational settings. There is also a need to adapt NSS activities to be more gender-sensitive and inclusive of students from marginalized caste, religious, and rural backgrounds, exploring how local cultural values (for example, seva, dharma, or community festivals) can be integrated into service-learning modules to make empathy and altruism training more contextually meaningful. Future studies should compare NSS with other forms of youth volunteering (NGO-based, religious, community groups) and examine how cultural narratives, family expectations, and regional traditions shape the way empathy, social interest, and altruism are expressed, ensuring that interventions and policies built on NSS findings resonate with India's socio-cultural diversity rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model.

Conclusion

This review concludes that NSS volunteering positively influences empathy, social interest, and altruism among undergraduate students. Structured volunteer programs contribute to nurturing essential social and emotional competencies and promote responsible citizenship. Integrating such programs into higher education curricula can foster holistic personal and social development.

Implication and Limitation

Support integrating or expanding NSS and service-learning components in curricula to enhance socio-emotional competencies in students.

Encourage colleges to promote non-NSS students' participation in community outreach, reflection sessions and peer-led social initiatives.

Limitations:

Cross-sectional design, use of self-report scales, single-region sample, possible confounding variables (family background, prior service).

Suggestions for future research: Longitudinal designs, qualitative interviews with NSS and non-NSS students, comparison with other types of student volunteers, or intervention studies to enhance empathy and altruism.

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