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Deterministic Emergency Altruism: A Neurobiological Model of Stress-Induced Helping

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Current scientific explanations for **altruism toward non-kin strangers** face a fundamental problem: evolutionary models explain cooperation among kin or reciprocators but not one-time, high-cost rescues of anonymous individuals; psychological accounts describe empathic arousal but not why it systematically **overrides self-preservation**; and neurobiological studies identify correlated brain activity **but lack** a causal mechanism linking acute stress, executive failure, and the selection of helping actions.

Aim: To establish a novel theoretical lens for non-kin emergency altruism as deterministic, self-directed physiological regulation—wherein costly helping is reconceptualized not as deliberate virtue but as an automatic stress-terminating response, executed via subcortical action selection under transient prefrontal suppression.

METHOD

We employed a **multidisciplinary synthesis** of neurobiological and evolutionary literature to construct a mechanistic model of emergency altruism:

- **Axis Integration**: Analysis of the 'HPA and SAM axes' roles in generating internal aversive states specifically upon encountering a vulnerable non-kin stranger. This physiological distress acts as the primary motivator for selecting the helping behavior.
- **Circuit Mapping & Thresholds**:
  - ***Low-Moderate Activation***: The PFC utilizes the **hyperdirect pathway** to the subthalamic nucleus to inhibit actions that violate learned history, personal safety, or social norms.
  - ***High Activation***: Acute stress triggers PFC impairment **(Arnsten, 2009)**, suspending top-down inhibition. The Basal Ganglia selects an action to terminate the internal aversive signal; this action is temporarily executed without PFC monitoring, prioritizing immediate stress relief.
- **Post-Action Restoration**: Once the distress is terminated and the aversive signal subsides, PFC function restores. This accounts for the common subjective report: ***"I didn't even think, I just did it,"*** as the PFC was offline during execution.
- **Evolutionary Origination**: This mechanism evolved for **kin-protection** in ancestral small groups. Due to an evolutionary mismatch **(Li et al., 2018)**, it is now activated indiscriminately by vulnerable human stimuli; because of this, the initial altruistic response can occur even without prior negative reinforcement.
- **Behavioral Modeling & Variability**:
  - ***Reinforcement***: If an altruistic act successfully terminates internal stress, the behavior is reinforced, increasing the probability of future helping.
  - ***Inhibition***: Conversely, some individuals may ignore the need for help due to a lack of SAM axis activation (physiological blunting) or a prior learned history where helping failed to reduce internal distress.

RESULTS

The Deterministic Sequence:

- ***The Priming Phase*** (Physiological Trigger): Upon encountering a high-distress non-kin stimulus, the SAM axis initiates a rapid spike in systemic arousal. This generates an internal aversive signal that the organism is biologically driven to terminate.
- ***The Execution Phase*** (Executive Suspension): As catecholamine levels rise, Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) function is acutely impaired. This suspends the hyperdirect pathway's inhibitory "brake," allowing the Basal Ganglia to execute a helping action—optimized for immediate stress relief—without PFC monitoring.
- ***The Resolution Phase*** (Homeostatic Restoration):
  - **Post-Action**: Once the external distress (and thus the internal stressor) is removed, PFC function restores, leading to the subjective realization: "I acted before I thought."
  - **Reinforcement**: If the intervention successfully terminates the aversive state, the action is coded as an optimal survival strategy via negative reinforcement, increasing the probability of future altruistic interventions.

Key Findings & Predictions

- ***Prediction***: The model predicts that **high-risk** altruism frequency will correlate more strongly with SAM axis reactivity than with self-reported moral values.
- ***Distress Effect***: High-risk altruistic behavior remains "inhibited" (via the PFC) during low-moderate stress, where the hyperdirect pathway is utilized. However, it becomes "deterministic" (reflexive) once a specific physiological distress intensity is reached, overriding long-term self-interest for immediate stress reduction.
- ***The Mismatch Outcome***: Altruism toward strangers is a functional "byproduct" of a kin-preservation system that cannot differentiate between modern strangers and ancestral kin under high-distress conditions.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This model ***reconceptualizes*** high-risk altruism as a deterministic, self-directed regulatory response rather than a deliberate virtue. It identifies the underlying mechanism driving high-risk helping behaviors. **Future work** should focus on experimentally verifying this deterministic sequence and monitoring the frequency of altruistic behavior via real-time physiological tracking to observe the transition from stress-induced spike to the helping action.

Conflicts of Interest: None declared.