

## Review

# Psychological barriers to effective altruism: An evolutionary perspective

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## Abstract

People usually engage in (or at least profess to engage in) altruistic acts to benefit others. Yet, they routinely fail to maximize how much good is achieved with their donated money and time. An accumulating body of research has uncovered various psychological factors that can explain why people's altruism tends to be ineffective. These prior studies have mostly focused on *proximate* explanations (e.g. emotions, preferences, lay beliefs). Here, we adopt an evolutionary perspective and highlight how three fundamental motives — parochialism, status, and conformity — can explain many seemingly disparate failures to do good effectively. Our approach outlines *ultimate* explanations for ineffective altruism, and we illustrate how fundamental motives can be leveraged to promote more effective giving.

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## Keywords

Effective altruism, Evolutionary psychology, Parochialism, Conformity, Status.

## (In-)effective altruism

Altruism has been defined as ‘voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another’ ([1], p. 92). However, altruistic acts differ substantially in *how much* they benefit others (a point highlighted by the Effective Altruism movement [2,3]). For instance, providing one blind person in the United States with a guide dog costs around \$40,000 [4]. Donating money to this cause may

seem admirable, but the same amount of money could be used to cure approximately two thousand cases of trachoma — a bacterial infection of the eye that can lead to permanent blindness [4]. Charities differ substantially in their effectiveness (e.g. the number of lives saved or illnesses cured per dollar donated) and donating to the most effective causes can dramatically influence how much others' welfare is improved [4,5].

While many people engage in altruistic acts to benefit others, an emerging body of research suggests that people's altruism is surprisingly ineffective ([5–8], for a comprehensive review, see [9]). People are generally unaware of where their donations would have the largest impact [5]. They do not search for information on charities' impact [10] and often prefer less effective over more effective charities [5,7]. In general, donation decisions are surprisingly unaffected by charities' effectiveness even when this information is explicitly provided [10–12].

What can explain the disparity between people's goal to benefit others and their failure to do so effectively? Previous studies have uncovered various psychological factors that explain ineffective giving [5,7–9]. For example, geographically and socially distant others (e.g. people living in extreme poverty in Africa) evoke less empathic concern even though they often stand to benefit the most from charitable acts [13–15]. People's response to the suffering of others does not scale linearly but diminishes as the number of affected individuals increases, a phenomenon that has been referred to as ‘compassion fade’ [16] or ‘psychophysical numbing’ [17,18]. In fact, people experience more positive affect when helping a single identified individual than when helping the many [16,19]. People also prefer to donate to causes to which they feel emotionally attached even when those causes are less effective [5,7]. These prior studies have mostly focused on *proximate* explanations for ineffective altruism (e.g. empathy, positive affect), leaving open the question of why these motivations operate in the way they do (but see [6,20]). Here, we provide an overview of potential *ultimate* explanations by outlining how fundamental motives (i.e. motives that have likely evolved because they solved key challenges

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in humans' ancestral past [21]) can create psychological barriers to effective altruism.

### Ultimate explanations for ineffective altruism

Why are prosocial emotions and motivations often not sensitive to how much they improve others' welfare? We argue that various aspects of humans' evolved psychology predispose us to give ineffectively. Several fundamental psychological motives that evolved because they aided the survival and reproductive success of individuals may favor ineffective over effective altruistic choices [21,22]. In the present review, we highlight three key motives: parochialism, status, and conformity.

#### Parochialism

Natural selection favors psychological adaptations that promote the survival and reproductive success of individuals [23]. For much of their evolutionary history, humans lived in relatively small, close-knit groups. This has led to the emergence of prosocial emotions and intentions towards kin and other members of an individual's ingroup, but not necessarily towards individuals who fall outside of the group boundaries [24,25]. In other words, humans tend to be parochial. We show concern for 'us' but not 'them'.

Parochialism can lead to ineffective altruism because a lot of human suffering occurs far away. Especially for people who live in affluent societies, donations have a larger impact abroad [4,26]. Yet, people feel less empathy for the suffering of distant others [15] and helping distant others is seen as less obligatory than helping close others [14,27,28]. Instead — as reflected by the maxim that 'charity begins at home' — many people prefer to donate locally and to organizations with which they have a personal connection [2,7]. For example, one study found that Italian participants donated more to victims of an earthquake when they felt more connected to the area in which the earthquake occurred (i.e. central Italy [13]). Participants were also more likely to donate to a child in need when the child was described as living in their neighborhood, rather than living in the same city or country [13].

Parochialism also biases cost-benefit calculations that could lead to effective giving. Findings by Burum and colleagues [6] demonstrate that ineffective giving is not due to a general failure to understand or consider effectiveness information. Participants were willing to give up more of their income when it would save five family members rather than one. However, their willingness to help strangers did not differ depending on whether they would save five rather than one. These results show that people can be sensitive to the impact of their altruistic actions, but they choose not to when actions benefit distant rather than close others. Thus,

parochialism can limit the effectiveness of altruistic acts because (a) people prioritize helping close over distant others, and (b) when they help distant others, people are less likely to consider the potential impact of their altruism.

#### Status

Humans are a social species whose success in survival and reproduction critically depends on their standing within their group. Individuals who are held in high esteem by others and who occupy high-status positions in the group hierarchy experience various positive outcomes, such as privileged access to desirable mates [29]. People are therefore concerned with their reputation. They tend to engage in behaviors with reputational benefits and refrain from behaviors that entail reputational costs [21,22]. Acts of altruism are generally viewed positively by others [30]. As altruists benefit the people around them, they are preferred as social and romantic partners [31,32] and selected as leaders [33]. This can lead people to engage in costly behaviors that benefit others to reap the reputational benefits [34,35].

Although altruism is generally rewarded, several studies suggest that effective altruism is not [6,36,37]. When praising others for their altruistic acts, observers are more sensitive to how costly the behavior was for the actor rather than how beneficial the act was for the target ([38], see also [39]). Altruistic acts lead to more praise if they were more costly to the actor, even if these higher costs did not generate more benefits [40] or any benefits at all [34]. Moreover, altruistic acts do not lead to more praise if they generate more benefits for the same costs [6]. Thus, the outcome of effective altruism — a cost-effective maximization of others' welfare — is not socially rewarded.

The decision-making process that leads to effective altruism is not rewarded either. The Effective Altruism movement advocates for evidence-based reasoning to identify and support the most cost-effective charities [3]. However, in the context of charitable giving, rational decision-making is viewed negatively. A series of studies by Montealegre and colleagues [36] showed that donors who are driven by effectiveness concerns (rather than emotional concerns) were rated as less moral and less desirable partners. This may be due to the fact that people believe emotions to be an honest signal of altruistic intentions. Altruism that is driven by emotions is perceived as more genuine [41]. This incentivizes people to rely on emotions (e.g. feelings of empathic concern) rather than reasoning (e.g. cost-benefit analyses), even though emotion-based altruism is usually less effective [15]. For instance, people are more moved by the plight of a single individual than by the suffering of many [12,16,19]. Natural disasters are often accompanied by extensive media coverage that vividly

communicates others' suffering. This motivates many people to donate to disaster relief, even though donations tend to bring about larger welfare gains when they address other issues, such as extreme poverty or public health [3,42,43]. Thus, reputational concerns can lead to ineffective altruism because others (a) do not reward altruistic acts that do more good, (b) punish altruists who rely on deliberate reasoning, and (c) reward altruists who rely on emotions.

### Conformity

When trying to forge a tool, when deciding whether a berry is safe to eat, and when considering how to best construct shelter, it often pays off to copy others' behavior [42,43]. Conformist tendencies have been observed in many species, including non-human primates [44], fish [45], and even plants [46]. In humans, decades of research on social norms have identified a myriad of behaviors that are influenced by what others do (i.e. by descriptive norms [47]). The power of descriptive norms has also been documented in the domain of charitable giving. People are more likely to donate when they believe, or are explicitly told, that most others have also donated [48–50]. They are also more likely to donate when it is the default, which can be partly explained by the fact that people infer descriptive norms from the presence of defaults [48].

When many people engage in less effective forms of giving (e.g. due to parochial tendencies or reputational concerns), this can create a descriptive norm that leads even more people to give ineffectively. That is, people might choose a less effective option simply because they know (or simply believe) that most others would also choose it. The influence of descriptive norms is likely exacerbated by two features of charitable giving. First, there are many charities that people could donate to. Even if people are motivated by effectiveness concerns, it is often unclear where their contribution would achieve the most good [2,3]. Second, people often make donation decisions without much deliberation [36,51]. These features of the decision-making process — uncertainty about what the best option is and reliance on intuition — have been shown to lead to a stronger reliance on social norms [43,47]. In short, conformist tendencies can increase rates of ineffective giving because people may (a) copy others' ineffective giving or (b) stick to ineffective defaults.

### Summary and implications

Even though donors and charities often highlight their desire to make a difference in the lives of others, an accumulating body of research demonstrates that altruistic acts are surprisingly ineffective in maximizing others' welfare [5–9]. To explain ineffective altruism, previous investigations have largely focused on the role of emotions, beliefs, preferences, and other proximate

causes [5,8,9]. Here, we adopted an evolutionary perspective to understand why these proximate mechanisms evolved in the first place. We outlined how three fundamental motives that likely evolved because they helped solve key challenges in humans' ancestral past — parochialism, status, and conformity — can create psychological barriers to effective giving. Our framework not only provides a parsimonious explanation for many proximate causes of ineffective giving but also provides an ultimate explanation for why these mechanisms exist.

Although parochialism, status concerns, and conformity can explain many forms of ineffective giving, there are additional causes that we did not address here. For example, many people focus too much on overhead costs when deciding where to donate [10,52]. Everyday altruism is multi-faceted. People donate to charity, volunteer, give in church, and engage in various random acts of kindness. These diverse acts of altruism likely require diverse explanations, and more research is needed to understand the relative importance of different psychological factors for explaining different forms of altruism. Moreover, of the three fundamental motives reviewed here, conformity to social norms has probably received the least attention when it comes to explaining ineffective altruism. While there is ample evidence showing that social norms affect the decision of whether and how much to donate [48–50], more research is needed to understand how social norms influence the decision of where to donate and how they can lead to ineffective giving.

How can people be encouraged to do more good with their altruistic acts? Our review highlights three important points. First, ineffective altruism is a complex problem. There are many different psychological barriers and addressing just one will likely have a limited influence [5,11]. Notably, this also means that lab-based experiments may overestimate the impact of interventions if they do not capture the various causes of ineffective altruism that operate in everyday life. Second, interventions will be more successful when they take into account the ultimate causes of ineffective altruism (similar to medical interventions that target the cause of the disease rather than treat its symptoms). Third, the three fundamental motives highlighted here may provide promising targets for encouraging effective altruism. To leverage parochialism, interventions should aim to broaden people's moral circle and encourage them to value the welfare of those that fall outside of their ingroup [53]. To leverage status concerns, individuals, organizations, and societies should confer social rewards on those who do the most good with their donations. To leverage conformity, effective charities should be set as the default, effective altruistic acts by others should be made public, and societies should create a 'culture of giving' in which giving to maximize

the welfare of others is the norm [54]. In short, more good can be achieved when effective forms of giving are compatible with people's fundamental motives.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- \* of special interest
- \*\* of outstanding interest

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