

Risking your life without a second thought

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People who risk their lives to save strangers may do so without deliberation, according to an analysis of statements from more than 50 recognized civilian heroes, conducted by David Rand from Yale University and colleagues published October 15, 2014 in the open access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Scientists studying [human cooperation](#) recruited hundreds of participants to rate 51 statements made during published interviews by recipients of the Carnegie Hero Medal, given to civilians who risk their lives to save strangers. Study participants as well as a computer text analysis algorithm analyzed those statements for evidence of whether the medal winners describe their own acts as intuitive or deliberate.

"We wondered if people who act with extreme altruism do so without thinking, or if conscious self-control is needed to override negative emotions like fear. Our analyses show that overwhelmingly, extreme altruists report acting first and thinking later," said David Rand.

The authors found that the statements were judged to be mostly intuitive by both participants and text analysis, even in situations where the "lifesaver" would have sufficient time to deliberate before acting. Participants also rated the medal winners' testimonies as similar to sample "control" intuitive statements, and rated them significantly more intuitive than sample deliberate statements.

While a challenging characteristic to measure, these findings suggest that high-stakes extreme altruism may be largely motivated by automatic,

intuitive processes. However, the findings of this study rely on a few key factors, such as whether participants fully understood the differences between intuitive and deliberate behaviors, and whether the medal recipients were experiencing any kind of bias during the interview that may have affected their description of prior events. Dr. Rand also cautions that intuitive responses are not necessarily genetically hard-coded, and he believes people learn that helping others is typically in their own long-term self-interest and therefore develop intuitive habits of cooperation, rather than having an innate cooperative instinct preserved in social humans by evolution.

More information: *PLOS ONE* [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0109687](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0109687)

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