

Selfish people have fewer children and earn less money

October 18 2018



Handing over money Credit: Andy Dean

What happens to those who behave unselfishly and make sacrifices for the sake of others? According to an interdisciplinary study by researchers from Stockholm University, the Institute for Futures Studies

and the University of South Carolina, unselfish people tend to have more children and to receive higher salaries, in comparison to more selfish people. The results have now been published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"The result is clear in both the American and the European data. The most unselfish people have the most [children](#) and the moderately unselfish receive the highest salaries. And we also find this result over time—the people who are most generous at one point in time have the largest [salary](#) increases when researchers revisit them later in time," says Kimmo Eriksson, researcher at the Centre for Cultural Evolution at Stockholm University and one of the authors of the study, titled "Generosity pays: Selfish people have fewer children and earn less money."

The result is contrary to theories that selfish people earn more money through their selfishness, as suggested in previous research.

Previous psychological and sociological research has shown that unselfish people are happier and have better social relationships. The new study focuses on unselfishness from an economical and evolutionary perspective. In this collaboration with the Institute for Futures Studies and the University of South Carolina, researchers at Stockholm University looked at how selfishness relates to income and fertility. Selfishness was measured partly through attitudes and partly through reported behaviors. The results are based on analyses of four major studies of Americans and Europeans.

"In a separate study, we examined the expectations of ordinary people to see if their expectations aligned with our data. The results of this study showed that people generally have the correct expectation that selfish people have fewer children, but erroneously believe that selfish people will make more money. It is nice to see that generosity so often pays off

in the long run," says Pontus Strimling, a researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies, who is also one of the authors behind the study.

The authors themselves believe that improved social relationships may be the key to generous peoples' success from an economic perspective, but note that their research does not definitely answer this question.

"Future research will have to delve deeper into the reasons why generous people earn more, and look at whether the link between unselfishness, higher salaries and more children also exists in other parts of the world. And it is of course debatable how unselfish it really is to have more children," says co-author Brent Simpson of University of South Carolina.

More information: Kimmo Eriksson et al, Generosity pays: Selfish people have fewer children and earn less money., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000213](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000213)

Provided by Stockholm University

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