

The warm glow of kindness is real, study confirms

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Psychologists at the University of Sussex have confirmed that the warm glow of kindness is real, even when there's nothing in it for you. In their study, published in *NeuroImage*, they undertook a major analysis of existing research showing the brain scans relating to over 1000 people making kind decisions. For the first time, they split the analysis between what happens in the brain when people act out of genuine altruism—where there's nothing in it for them—and when they act with strategic kindness—when there is something to be gained as a consequence.

Many individual studies have hinted that generosity activates the reward network of the brain but this new study from Sussex is the first that brought these studies together, and then split the results into two types of kindness—altruistic and strategic. The Sussex scientists found that reward areas of the brain are more active—i.e. use up more oxygen—when people act with strategic kindness, when there is an opportunity for others to return the favour.

But they also found that acts of altruism, with no

hope of personal benefit, activate the reward areas of the brain too, and more than that, that some [brain regions](#) (in the 'subgenual [anterior cingulate cortex](#)') were more active during altruistic generosity, indicating that there is something unique about being altruistic with no hope of gaining something in return.

Dr. Daniel Campbell-Meiklejohn, the study's lead and Director of the Social Decision Laboratory at the University of Sussex, said:

"This major study sparks questions about people having different motivations to give to others: clear self-interest versus the warm glow of altruism. The decision to share resources is a cornerstone of any cooperative society. We know that people can choose to be kind because they like feeling like they are a 'good person', but also that people can choose to be kind when they think there might be something 'in it' for them such as a returned favour or improved reputation. Some people might say that 'why' we give does not matter, as long as we do. However, what motivates us to be kind is both fascinating and important. If, for example, governments can understand why people might give when there's nothing in it for them, then they can understand how to encourage [people](#) to volunteer, donate to charity or support others in their community."

Jo Cutler, the Ph.D. student who co-authored the study at the University of Sussex, added:

"The finding of different motivations for giving raises all sorts of questions, including what charities and organisations can learn about what motivates their donors. Some museums, for example, choose to operate a membership scheme with real strategic benefits for their customers, such as discounts. Others will ask for a small altruistic donation on arrival. Organisations looking for contributions should think about how they want their customers to feel. Do they want them to feel altruistic, and

experience a warm glow, or do they want them to enter with a transactional mind-set?"

"Given that we know there are these two motivations which overlap in the brain, charities should be careful not to offer something which feels like a token gesture, as this might undermine a sense of altruism. Sending small gifts in return for a monthly donation could change donors' perceptions of their motivation from altruistic to transactional. In doing so, charities might also inadvertently replace the warm glow feeling with a sense of having had a bad deal."

"The same issues could also apply when we think about interactions between family, friends, colleagues or strangers on a one-to-one basis. For example, if after a long day helping a friend move house, they hand you a fiver, you could end up feeling undervalued and less likely to help again. A hug and kind words however might spark a warm glow and make you feel appreciated. We found some [brain](#) regions were more active during altruistic, compared to strategic, generosity so it seems there is something special about situations where our only motivation to give to others is to feel good about being kind."

Jo Cutler and Dr. Campbell-Meiklejohn analysed 36 existing studies relating to 1150 participants whose brains were scanned with fMRI scans over a ten-year period.

More information: Jo Cutler et al, A comparative fMRI meta-analysis of altruistic and strategic decisions to give, *NeuroImage* (2018). DOI: [10.1016/j.neuroimage.2018.09.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2018.09.009)

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