Empathy and reasoning aren't rivals – new research shows they work together to drive people to help more

Kyle Fiore Law, Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Sustainability, Arizona State University

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What motivates people to donate their time or money to make the world better?

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For years, philosophers and psychologists have debated whether empathy helps or hinders the ways people decide how to help others. Critics of empathy argue that it makes people care too narrowly – focusing on individual stories rather than the broader needs of society – while careful reasoning enables more impartial, evidence-based choices.

Our new research, forthcoming in the academic journal PNAS Nexus, a flagship peer-reviewed journal of the National Academy of Sciences, suggests this "heart versus head" argument is too simple. Empathy and reasoning aren't rivals – they work together. Each one on its own predicts more generous, far-reaching acts of assistance. And when they operate side by side, people tend to help in the fairest ways – not favoring some over others – and in ways that touch the most lives.

We studied two groups that regularly help others at personal cost. One consisted of living organ donors who gave kidneys to strangers. The other included "effective altruists," who use evidence and logic to direct substantial portions of their income or careers toward causes that save the most lives per dollar, such as fighting extreme poverty or preventable illness.

All participants completed survey measures of empathy – essentially, how much they care about and are moved by others' suffering. They also completed survey measures of reasoning. These assess how often people slow down, reflect and think through things before deciding what to do.

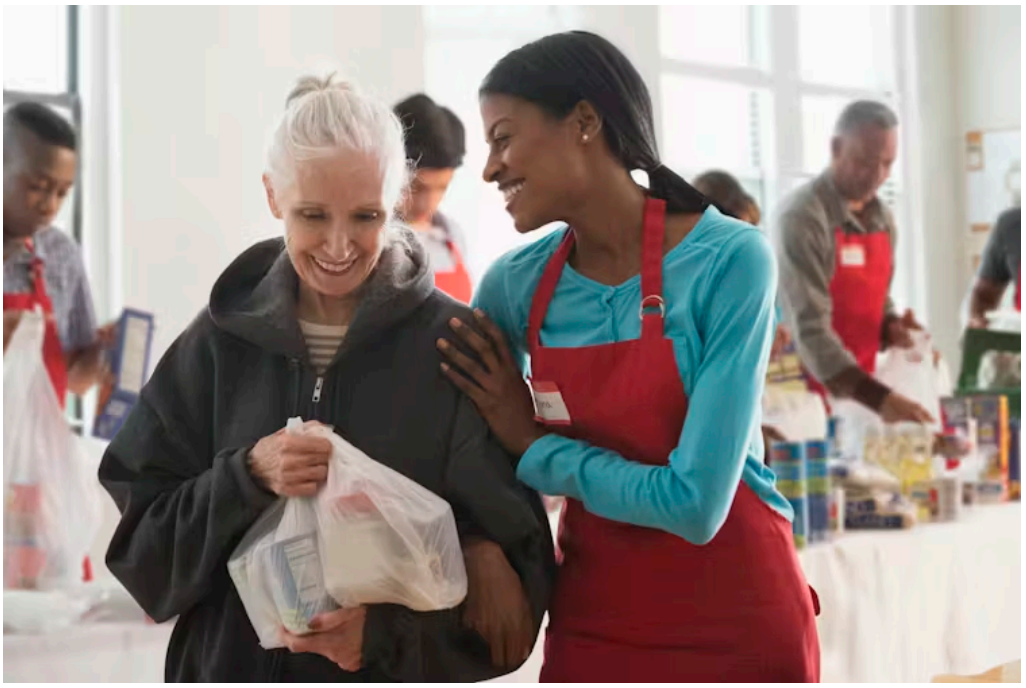
We also examined how these abilities related to a range of altruistic judgments and behaviors, from hypothetical choices – such as deciding whether to help a close friend or a distant stranger – to real-world donations.

On average, organ donors scored higher on empathy, and effective altruists scored higher on reflective reasoning – slowing down and thinking things through. But across all participants, both traits were linked to broader, more outward-looking helping. People with either an elevated heart or head, and especially those with both compared with average adults, tended to support distant others and focus on helping as many people as possible.

Even among organ donors, whose empathic ability is far above average adults', empathy did not make them biased toward those who were close or familiar. When we measured their altruistic judgments and real-world donations, they were just as likely as average adults, and sometimes even more likely, to favor causes that saved the greatest number of lives.

These patterns challenge the assumption that empathy can narrow moral concern. In practice, we found, empathy can broaden it.

Why it matters



Relying on reason alone isn't enough to inspire people to help strangers.

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Many of today's most urgent problems – poverty, climate change, global health – depend on motivating people to care about strangers and to use limited resources effectively.

Appeals to empathy alone may inspire giving but not necessarily the most effective giving. Appeals to reason alone can leave people unmoved, as often facts and numbers don't stir anyone to care. Our findings suggest that the most powerful approach may be to pair empathy's motivation with reasoning's direction.

Empathy provides the emotional spark – a reminder that others' suffering matters. Reasoning helps steer that motivation toward where help will have the greatest impact. Together, they encourage helping that is both compassionate and consequential.

What's next

Future research needs to determine how empathy and reasoning can be strengthened in everyday decision-making. Could emotional stories paired with clear evidence about what works best help people choose actions that do the most good?

We also don't yet know whether people who focus their giving beyond the boundaries of their immediate social circles, like effective altruists, pay any social cost for doing so – perhaps by inadvertently signaling less investment in close others. Promisingly, early evidence from organ donors shows that those who help strangers often maintain strong, stable relationships with their closest friends and family members.

Perhaps most importantly, researchers need to rethink how altruism is understood. Psychology lacks a clear framework for explaining how empathy and reasoning work together, for whom they work best, and the situations where they come apart.

Developing that kind of model would reshape how we think about helping – when helping expands, when it stalls, and why. While such core questions remain, the present findings offer reason for optimism.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

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