

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Everyone Thinks Americans Are Selfish. They're Wrong.

May 26, 2021

By Abigail Marsh

Dr. Marsh is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Georgetown University, where she directs the Laboratory on Social and Affective Neuroscience.



Vendors at the Ozark Empire Fair in Springfield, Mo., in 2012. Far from being our worst trait, individualism may be among our best. Credit...Jesse Rieser

The United States is notable for its individualism. The results of several large surveys assessing the values held by the people of various nations [consistently rank](#) the United States as the world's most individualist country. Individualism, as defined by behavioral scientists, means valuing autonomy, self-expression and the pursuit of personal goals rather than prioritizing the interests of the group — be it family, community or country.

Whether America's individualism is a source of pride or concern varies. Some people extol this mindset as a source of our entrepreneurial spirit, self-reliance and geographic mobility. Others worry that our individualism is antithetical to a sense of social responsibility, whether that means refusing to wear masks and get vaccinated during the pandemic or disrupting the close family bonds and social ties seen in more traditional societies.

Everyone seems to agree that our individualism makes us self-centered or selfish, and to disagree only about how concerning that is.

But [new research](#) suggests the opposite: When comparing countries, my colleagues and I found that greater levels of individualism were linked to more generosity — not less — as we detail in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*.

For our research, we gathered data from 152 countries concerning seven distinct forms of altruism and generosity. The seven forms included three responses to survey questions administered by Gallup

about giving money to charity, volunteering and helping strangers, and four pieces of objective data: per capita donations of blood, bone marrow and organs, and the humane treatment of nonhuman animals (as gauged by the [Animal Protection Index](#)).

We found that countries that scored highly on one form of altruism tended to score highly on the others, too, suggesting that broad cultural factors were at play. When we looked for factors that were associated with altruism across nations, two in particular stood out: various measures of “flourishing” (including subjectively reported well-being and objective metrics of prosperity, literacy and longevity) and individualism.

The fact that countries in which people are flourishing are also those in which people engage in greater altruism is in keeping with [earlier research](#) showing that people who report high levels of personal well-being tend to engage in more positive, generous social behaviors.

That individualism was closely associated with altruism was more surprising. But even after statistically controlling for wealth, health, education and other variables, we found that in more individualist countries like the Netherlands, Bhutan and the United States, people were more altruistic across our seven indicators than were people in more collectivist cultures — even wealthy ones — like Ukraine, Croatia and China.

On average, people in more individualist countries donate more money, more blood, more bone marrow and more organs. They more often help others in need and treat nonhuman animals more humanely. If individualism were equivalent to selfishness, none of this would make sense.

How does individualism manage to promote altruism? One possibility, supported by other research, is that people in individualist cultures generally report greater degrees of “thriving” and satisfaction of life goals — and as noted above, such subjective feelings are meaningfully correlated with greater amounts of altruism. (Indeed, research has shown that being altruistic, in turn, promotes greater feelings of personal well-being, [creating a virtuous circle](#).)

Another possibility is that individualism boosts altruism by psychologically freeing people to pursue goals that they find meaningful — goals that can include things like alleviating suffering and caring for others, which [studies suggest](#) are widespread moral values.

A third possibility is that individualism promotes a more universalist outlook. In focusing on individual rights and welfare, it reduces the emphasis on groups — and the differences between “us” and “them” that notoriously erode generosity toward those outside one’s own circle.

To be sure, people in more individualist countries are not uniformly altruistic. Plenty are not — and plenty of people in more collectivist countries are. But it seems that individualism is fundamentally misunderstood.

Political liberals, for example, often express concern that individualism begets selfishness, but they may not realize that individualism actually promotes the values they most prize, as opposed to more traditional “binding” values like obedience to authority and in-group loyalty.

Political conservatives, for their part, often argue that there is a contradiction between individualism and strong social welfare policies — that you must choose between them. But the data don’t support that. The United States is an outlier among wealthy, individualist countries in failing to guarantee its citizens health insurance, sick leave, parental care leave and child care. By comparison, countries like Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand all have strong social welfare programs and are ranked among the 10 most individualist nations in the world — as well as some of the most altruistic.

America has many problems, including political polarization, plummeting trust in institutions and economic inequality — some of which result from true selfishness on the part of citizens and government leaders. But none of these problems is a result of our individualism. Far from being our worst trait, individualism may be among our best.

Abigail Marsh ([@aa_marsh](#)) is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Georgetown University and the author of “The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, and Everyone In-Between.”

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).

A version of this article appears in print on May 27, 2021, Section A, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: We Aren't as Selfish as We Think. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)