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## Traits of Extraordinary Altruists



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### Synonyms

[Attributes of altruists](#); [Characteristics of altruists](#); [Features of altruists](#); [Traits of extreme altruists](#)

### Definition

Extraordinary altruists are people who have engaged in rare risky or costly behaviors to benefit another person. Such behaviors include living organ or stem cell donation or acting to save another person in a life-threatening emergency.

Altruism refers to behaviors that benefit another person without any foreseeable extrinsic benefit—and often a cost—to the actor and without an expectation of any concrete personal benefit (Batson and Powell 2003; de Waal 2008). Altruistic behaviors can vary in terms of how costly or risky they are to the altruist. In general, costlier and riskier acts of altruism are rarer. For example, holding a door open for someone or

giving directions is a relatively low-cost and common form of altruism. Volunteering at a homeless shelter for a day is relatively costlier (in terms of time and effort) and also less common. Extraordinary altruistic behaviors are those that are very costly or risky and tend to be very rare. They include donations of organs or stem cells to strangers or saving someone from a burning building (Marsh 2016; Marsh et al. 2014; Rhoads et al. 2023a, b).

In general, stable dispositional traits are most likely to drive behavior in novel contexts lacking strong norms (Caspi and Moffitt 1993; Peysakhovich et al. 2014). The rarity of extraordinary acts of altruism renders contexts in which these acts occur novel and without strong norms by definition. Thus, it is unsurprising that extraordinary altruism is associated with stable traits that may promote costly and risky helping. Several lines of evidence indicate that the traits that most consistently characterize extraordinary include reduced social discounting, reduced personal distress during emergencies, and increased honesty-humility (Rhoads et al. 2023a, b; Vekaria et al. 2017).

### Reduced Social Discounting

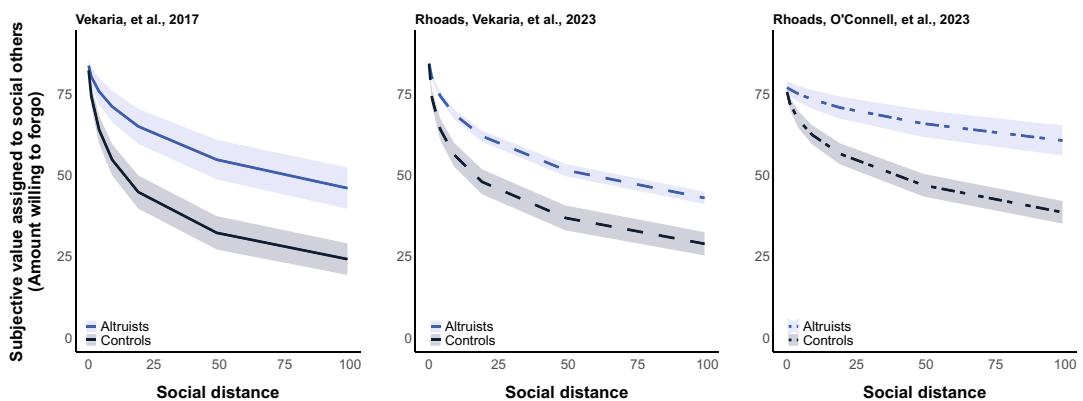
Extraordinary altruists engage in *less social discounting* than other people (Rhoads et al. 2023a, b; Vekaria et al. 2017). Social discounting describes how people tend to become less willing

to sacrifice resources to benefit others as the social distance between them and the beneficiary increases (Jones and Rachlin 2006). For example, people are more willing to sacrifice money to help close family members and friends than distant strangers.

Findings from three different studies show that extraordinary altruists exhibit this bias to a lesser extent. Available evidence suggests that this pattern reflects the fact that they genuinely value the welfare of both close others and distant strangers to an almost equal degree (Rhoads et al. 2023a, b; Vekaria et al. 2017). This characterization is supported by interviews and behavioral data as well as the results of functional brain imaging. These studies indicate that extraordinary altruists' generosity results from differences in the way brain regions involved in social decision-making encode how others' welfare is valued (Rhoads et al. 2023a). There is no evidence that altruists are simply suppressing selfish biases (Rhoads et al. 2023a). Thus, people who show reduced social discounting, like extraordinary altruists, prioritize the well-being of everyone, including strangers (Fig. 1). This finding is consistent with extraordinary altruists being willing to sacrifice their own safety or possessions to benefit distant strangers.

## Reduced Personal Distress During Emergencies

Extraordinary altruists also exhibit *low personal distress* during emergencies and in response to others' distress (Rhoads et al. 2023b). Although extraordinary altruists are not insensitive to risk and are no less likely than other adults to experience anxiety in general (Rhoads et al. 2023b), they experience less self-focused distress in emergencies or in response to the suffering of others. Several lines of evidence indicate that personal distress is inversely associated with altruism (Bloom 2017). First, altruists self-report less personal distress than other adults on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Rhoads et al. 2023b). Also, studies in college-age adults link high personal distress to an egoistic motivation to protect one's own safety or to reduce one's own unpleasant feelings when observing someone else in distress (Kim and Han 2018). By contrast, people who are more focused on reducing others' suffering experience more empathic concern or compassion—responses that reflect a focus on the other person, not the self (Batson et al. 1983). This characterization is consistent with extraordinary altruists' heightened empathic sensitivity to the pain or distress of others (Brethel-Haurwitz et al. 2018; Marsh et al. 2014; O'Connell et al.



**Traits of Extraordinary Altruists, Fig. 1** Reduced social discounting among altruists across three published studies. Note. Altruists consistently show reduced social discounting across three studies: (left) Altruists (non-directed kidney donors) versus controls; (middle)

Altruists (heroic rescuers, non-directed and directed kidney donors, liver donors, marrow or hematopoietic stem cell donors, and humanitarian aid workers) versus controls; (right) Altruists (non-directed kidney donors) versus controls during neuroimaging

2019). Low personal distress may be a prerequisite for extraordinary altruism, as people with this trait might be better able to take action to help others in need or distress because they are able to manage their own emotional reactions.

### Increased Honesty-Humility

Extraordinary altruists exhibit *increased honesty-humility* (Rhoads et al. 2023b). Honesty-Humility is one of six factors assessed by the HEXACO model of personality, which also includes the factors assessed by five-factor inventories (emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience) (Ashton and Lee 2007, 2009). Honesty-Humility encapsulates qualities like fairness, modesty, sincerity, and lack of greed. It is the only major personality factor that distinguishes extraordinary altruists from typical adults. Altruists are no different from other adults in terms of agreeableness, conscientiousness, or other major traits (Rhoads et al. 2023b). Honesty-humility has also been linked to various forms of self-reported and laboratory-measured prosociality (Thielmann et al. 2020). For example, people who exhibit high levels of honesty-humility are less willing to exploit others for personal gain, are fair in social interactions, and do not feel special entitlement or self-importance. By contrast, low levels of honesty-humility have consistently been linked to narcissism, grandiosity, and antisocial behaviors (Zettler et al. 2020). Their humility may explain why extraordinary altruists often do not report themselves to be unusually altruistic (Brethel-Haurwitz et al. 2016; Rhoads et al. 2023b; Vekaria et al. 2020) and often state in interviews that they are not unusual in any way, but simply acted as anyone with the same information and opportunity would have (Marsh 2017). High honesty-humility—in tandem with low personal distress and reduced social discounting—may explain why altruists are more willing to act in ways that benefit others even when it comes at a personal cost.

### Conclusion

The traits that best characterize extraordinary altruists—low personal distress, reduced social discounting, and increased honesty-humility—are unified by the fact that they are all closely linked to unselfishness. Each of these traits reflects the fact that altruists prioritize others' welfare relative to their own more than do typical people. Although these traits do not comprise an exhaustive list, these traits correspond to real-world extraordinary altruism more to a much greater degree than other traits that have been previously linked to self-reported and laboratory-measured altruism, including agreeableness, fearlessness, risk insensitivity, and self-reported empathy. These patterns are particularly noteworthy because the general population does not predict them. Instead, most people associate altruism with a wide range of positive traits not closely related to actual altruism, including extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Rhoads et al. 2023b). Thus, typical people appear to believe altruists are all-around “better” people (Henderson et al. 2003). But the evidence suggests altruists are not in fact “saints,” they are only less selfish. That altruism is linked to unselfishness whereas exploitative and antisocial behaviors (e.g., greed, cheating, manipulativeness, aggression) are linked to greater selfishness (Zettler et al. 2020), supports the notion of a caring continuum along which individuals vary in the degree to which they subjectively value (care about) the welfare of others (Marsh 2019), and the high end of which is anchored by extraordinary altruists.

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