

ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens



[Full article](#)

What Motivates Charitable Giving - Effectiveness or Empathy?

Research Note provided by: Shreya Gautam from Santra Consulting

Original publication by: Matthew J. Hornsey – University of Queensland Business School

| Jessica L. Spence – University of Queensland Business School | Cassandra M. Chapman – University of Queensland Business School

The effective altruism movement (championing giving guided by the effectiveness of programs rather than emotions) has grown since the philosophy was incubated at Oxford University in 2009. As more charities and individuals align their strategies with effective altruism (or with empathy-driven giving), they need a better understanding of whether the correlation between effectiveness and giving is as strong as the correlation between empathy and giving, and whether either is as profound as altruists themselves self-report.

Are people's giving driven by effectiveness, empathy, or both?

A meta-analysis of 124 papers sampling 74,797 people revealed that while people self-perceive to give based on effectiveness, their giving behavior may be more influenced by empathy.

[#EffectiveAltruism](#) [#EmpathicAltruism](#) [#CharitableGiving](#) [#CostEffectiveness](#)
[#ResourceAllocation](#)

Background

&

Context



- **Charitable giving behavior has long puzzled scientists.** Understanding why people give has occupied social scientists for decades. Charitable giving sustains a healthy, inclusive society. It funds care and social infrastructure that government and commercial actors cannot easily deliver themselves.
- **Debates have focused on whether people give based on reason (effectiveness) or emotions (empathy).** Critics argue donors rely too heavily on empathy, making impulsive or unfair choices that respond to emotional triggers rather than to which cause does the most good. Effective altruism advocates argue that giving should be guided by reasoning about impact by weighing cost-effectiveness and evidence rather than by how a cause happens to feel.
- **Effectiveness and empathy: friends or foe?** Some propose effectiveness and empathy are opposing poles. Others argue empathy and effectiveness are not inherent rivals. Empathy extended to distant strangers, combined with reasoning about impact, should produce more effective giving, not less.
- **Research rarely differentiates between self-reported perceptions and objective indicators.** Prior reviews of empathy and giving relied only on correlational studies and excluded experiments, leaving it unclear whether these constructs actually cause more giving or simply predict it.



ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Takeaways & Learnings



- **Drawing on 416 effect sizes from 124 papers and 74,797 participants, the authors ran two three-level meta-analyses - one testing effectiveness, one testing empathy.** Pooling both correlational and experimental studies rather than relying on self-reports alone let them directly compare what people perceive as affecting their giving against objective tests of that influence. Empathy holds up under both types of evidence, while effectiveness does not.
- **Empathy, not effectiveness, messaging impacts giving behavior.** Because empathy showed the same effect whether measured or manipulated, campaigns built on emotional, story-driven appeals have real causal backing. Impact statistics and effectiveness ratings showed almost no power to move actual giving.
- **Self-reported surveys can be misleading.** People consistently say effectiveness matters to them but do not change their giving in response to changes in effectiveness information. Professionals should be cautious treating self-reported drivers behind giving as reliable guides to what will actually increase donations.
- **Specificity beats abstraction in appeals.** Empathy tied to an identifiable person or group predicted giving far better than generalized distress or statistics. This might mean leading with concrete, human stories rather than aggregate data or cost-effectiveness figures can drive giving more effectively.
- **Effectiveness transparency serves accountability, not fundraising.** Policies mandating impact reporting or charity ratings are unlikely to increase overall giving levels, even though they remain valuable for informed donor choice and directing funds toward better-performing charities.
- **The evidence base has real gaps.** Experimental studies on effectiveness are scarce and overwhelmingly Western-centric, so conclusions here describe current patterns rather than settling whether effectiveness-based appeals could work under different conditions or in other contexts.

Figure: What drives giving? Comparing the effects of effectiveness and empathy

