

# Charity: it's all in our genes

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A University of California-Santa Barbara scientist believes he's discovered why we give to charity: It's in our genes.

A new study by anthropologist Michael Gurven examines the origins of holiday giving and finds our early human ancestors were frequently altruistic.

"Reciprocity is arguably the foundational basis of cooperation in humans," said Gurven. "A core feature of reciprocity is the contingent relationship between acts of giving and receiving among social partners. Contingency is important because it sets the rules for who qualifies as a free-rider or cheater in exchange relations."

Strict forms of contingency require tit-for-tat, while more forgiving forms emphasize the work effort or relative contributions of others.

"Without some kind of payback, altruism can be a very costly endeavor in small-scale societies subsisting on wild foods," Gurven writes. "This study shows that people indeed share more with those who give more to them .. (but) families who cannot produce much food, close kin, and nearby neighbors sometimes receive more than they give."

The study is to appear in the February 2006 issue of *Current Anthropology*.

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