

How classic psychology warped our view of human nature as cruel and selfish—but new research is more hopeful

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There are a number of classic experiments and theories that every psychology student learns about, but more recent research has questioned their findings so that psychologists today are reevaluating human nature.

One example is Philip Zimbardo's 1971 [Stanford prison experiment](#), in which 24 participants were randomly separated into groups of would-be prisoners and guards. Within days, the research recorded that the guards were mistreating the prisoners, who began to display signs of distress. The abuse and distress became so acute the experiment had to be curtailed after six days.

Another classic psychological theory is the "[bystander effect](#)," which suggests that people are reluctant to help out in [emergency situations](#) if others are nearby. This theory dates back to 1964, when a woman was raped and murdered in the [early morning](#) in New York.

It was reported that 38 people witnessed the attack, without intervening. According to the bystander effect, the more people that witness an event, the less likely a person is to intervene, since responsibility becomes more diffused.

Such theories and studies from the 1960s and 1970s implied that the "evil" sides of our character lie just below our civilized surface, while the moral and altruistic side is a thin veneer. They encouraged a view that human beings are essentially callous and selfish. The problem is that the findings of these [experiments have now been contested](#) and even discredited by other researchers.

[Recent research](#) found the [cruelty of Zimbardo's prison guards](#) didn't emerge spontaneously; some behavior was encouraged. Some of the "prisoners" later admitted that they were pretending to be distressed.

Similarly, a study published in 2007 found that the 1964 incident [that inspired the theory](#) of the bystander effect was [distorted](#). According to the paper, archive material shows far fewer people witnessed the incident than was reported at the time, and some people could only hear screams, without seeing the location of the incident. At least one person

did try to intervene.

Recent research indicates that bystanders are much more likely to intervene than the theory suggests. A [2019 study](#) of 219 violent situations from cities around the world caught on CCTV showed that bystanders—not just one, usually several—intervened to help victims 90% of the time.

The study also found that the more people were present, the more likely passers-by were to intervene. In the words of the study's lead researcher, Richard Philpot: "It shows that people have a natural inclination to help when they see someone in need."

Heroism and altruism

The burgeoning field of "[heroism studies](#)" also questions the [bystander effect](#). A recent article for The Conversation describes how acts of heroic altruism are common during terrorist attacks, when people often risk their own lives to help others.

Consider the following situation: you're standing on a train platform. The person next to you suddenly faints and falls on to the track, unconscious. In the distance, you can see a train approaching. What would you do?

You might doubt whether you would act heroically. But don't underestimate yourself. There is a strong possibility that, before you knew it, you would find yourself on down on the track, helping the person to safety. There is a growing awareness among researchers that heroism is [natural and spontaneous](#), and by [no means exceptional](#).

Google "person jumps down on to train track to save life" and you'll find dozens of cases from around the world, including some moving [video footage](#). There is a [recent video](#) of the New York City subway, when a

wheelchair-bound man fell on to the track. A bystander jumps down, pushes the wheelchair to one side, and hauls the man up, with the help of others on the platform. A train arrived ten seconds later.

[Another dramatic video](#) shows an incident in 2015, when a cyclist was trapped under the wheel of a doubledecker bus in London. A crowd of around 100 people gathered, and lifted the bus. According to a paramedic who treated the man, this was a "miracle" which may have saved his life.

As I point out in my book [DisConnected](#), these acts of impulsive altruism suggest an empathic connection between human beings.

A new view of human nature

In my view, early psychologists may have been unconsciously tailoring their experiments to confirm a view of human nature as innately cruel. These studies were carried out less than 20 years after the second world war and the Holocaust, when the horrors of WWII were still fresh in people's minds.

Around the same time, genetic theories were published that suggested that human beings are biological engines, caring for nothing but replication and survival.

For example, in 1976, Richard Dawkins' book [The Selfish Gene](#) was published, which portrayed human beings as "survival machines" who treat other survival machines as "something that gets in the way, or something that can be exploited." He wrote, "Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish."

Now, research from a variety of areas points to a more positive view of humanity. Along with the study of heroism, the field of [positive](#)

[psychology](#) (established during the early 2000s) studies human well-being and researches traits such as wisdom, courage, gratitude and resilience. Positive psychologists like [Martin Seligman](#) argue conventional psychology had for too long been essentially "the study of unhappiness" and that a new field was needed to study what "is good or virtuous in human nature."

The consensus from anthropologists is that, for the vast majority of the time that we've inhabited this planet, human societies have been egalitarian and [peaceful](#). This challenges the neo-Darwinist idea that human life has always been a competitive struggle for survival, conditioning us to be selfish and individualistic.

As the forerunner of positive psychology, Abraham Maslow, [said in 1968](#): [human nature](#) has been "sold short" by psychology. Human beings can be brutal and selfish. But we can be heroically kindhearted too.

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