Altruistic, More than Reputational Concerns, Drive Legacy Motives, Values, and Aspirations Across the World

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Abstract

Are humans primarily driven by altruism or self-interest? To address this longstanding debate, we conducted a cross-cultural investigation of altruistic versus egoistic motivation across three key domains: legacy motives, life aspirations, and personal values. Drawing on data from over 900,000 participants from over 100 countries, we find that altruistic motivations (i.e., impact legacy, intrinsic aspirations, and self-transcendence values) were more strongly endorsed than their egoistic counterparts. This pattern held across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts, though variation emerged across nations. Effect sizes were especially pronounced among populations characterized by exceptional real-world altruism (e.g., effective altruists, organ donors). These groups serve as an important benchmark: if participants were primarily motivated by social desirability, typical respondents would be expected to endorse altruistic motivations at similarly high levels; that they do not *suggests* genuine differences. These findings point to a consistent leaning toward altruistic rather than egoistic motivations.

Keywords: Altruism, Egoism, Motivation, Cross-Cultural, Reputation

1. Introduction

The question of whether humans are fundamentally altruistic or egoistic has long characterized philosophical and psychological discourse. Contemporary research largely rejects this dichotomy, instead suggesting that, while humans possess an intrinsic capacity for cooperation and altruism, these behaviors are also shaped by contextual, cultural, and developmental factors and nonetheless often confer social, emotional or reputational benefits to helpers as well as recipients. Therefore, we acknowledge that other-oriented/altruistic and self-oriented/egoistic motivations can operate simultaneously, with social decision-making determined by the relative weight of these dual motivational systems. However, empirical investigations addressing critical questions remains notably limited: (1) Are other-oriented/altruistic motivations endorsed more strongly than self-oriented/egoistic motivations? and (2) How do these motivations vary across cultures? Our study addresses this gap through a large-scale cross-cultural examination of these motivational dimensions.

In psychology and the broader social sciences, much of the egoism-altruism debate has been situated in the literature on prosociality, where scholars have explored the puzzle of why humans would stand to benefit from helping and cooperating with others. Evolutionary theorists have argued that prosocial tendencies emerged as adaptive traits to support the survival and longevity of small cooperative groups (Curry et al., 2019), biologically embedded through mechanisms such as oxytocin and dopamine regulation (Keltner et al., 2014). These systems are thought to have evolved from neural mechanisms underlying parental care (Marsh, 2019), with the oxytocin system in particular adapting in mammals to support caregiving behaviors. Meanwhile, developmental research reveals early-emerging prosocial tendencies, with evidence that infants engage in helping and sharing behaviors (Tomasello, 2009), but also finds that

prosociality in children emerges most strongly in contexts where helping is likely to be reciprocated (Barragan & Dweck, 2014). As such, our current understanding is that humans are simultaneously capable of other-oriented and self-oriented goals but are most likely to cooperate under conditions where their actions can serve both others and themselves. And, because prosociality is understood to arise from both biological factors and socialization, scholars emphasize that culture, hierarchy, and social norms profoundly influence the activation of these predispositions (Henrich & Muthukrishna, 2021).

In this research, we seek to contribute to this longstanding line of inquiry by examining self-reported drivers of human behavior across diverse contexts from a different angle: not by analyzing whether people help more when they stand to benefit, but by probing where their underlying motivations fall along the egoism-altruism continuum. This approach is especially important, as prior research shows that in the domain of helping and harming, people are keenly sensitive to intentions, often making moral judgments based on perceived motivation rather than outcomes (Chakroff et al., 2016). Using validated measures of legacy motives (Syropoulos et al., 2023), life aspirations (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996), and personal values (Schwartz, 1992), we focus on proximate motivations that are accessible to awareness rather than on ultimate drives shaped by evolutionary processes. We also do not seek to resolve whether humans behave in inherently altruistic or egotistical ways. Rather, we ask whether people's *motivations* tend to lean toward other-oriented altruism or self-oriented egotism across three distinct domains and a variety of national contexts. While the altruism-versus-egoism question has typically been approached using behavioral paradigms that vary the presence of personal benefit, our approach instead takes stock of overarching motivational patterns that underlie how people wish to be remembered, what they aspire towards, and the values they hold.

Furthermore, we take a large-scale approach to this inquiry, examining motivational profiles across diverse measures, populations, and cultural contexts to build a more comprehensive understanding not of whether people are more likely to help when they themselves stand to benefit, but of what *drives* their social behavior in the first place. To complement these broader patterns, and acknowledging that measured behaviors are generally less susceptible to social desirability concerns than self-reports, we also assess altruistic versus egoistic intentions in validated populations of exceptional altruists (namely, individuals who have anonymously made living donations of organs to strangers and effective altruists who dedicate their lives to philanthropy) to determine whether the same motivational patterns observed among the general population are amplified in those known for real-world altruism. For the same reason, we also pay close attention to variation in these patterns across samples and nations, as meaningful differences across groups would be unlikely if responses were merely driven by a desire to appear more favorably.

1.1. History of Human Motivation: Altruism and Egoism

As previewed earlier, the question of why humans tend to help and cooperate with others has long puzzled psychologists, philosophers, and evolutionary biologists alike, spurring inquiry into whether the drivers of seemingly other-benefitting behaviors (i.e., prosocial behaviors) can ever truly be motivated altruistically (i.e., solely for the benefit of others). Consequently, we draw on this literature as a theoretical foundation, using the distinction between altruistic and egoistic motivations established in the prosocial domain to ground the present empirical inquiry into the relative strength of these motivations in people's broader life goals and self-attributed orientations. Many prosociality scholars agree that humans are neither exclusively altruistic nor self-serving; rather, they possess an innate prosocial disposition that is influenced by both

biological and contextual factors which serve to benefit both helpers and recipients (Greene, 2014). On the side of innateness, evidence from evolutionary and developmental psychology, biology, and neuroscience supports an ingrained human tendency to help others when both parties can benefit. From an evolutionary perspective, researchers argue that prosocial tendencies evolved through selective pressures such as kin and group selection (Trivers, 1971), which benefit others but ultimately serve to enhance the survival and reproduction of one's own genetic lineage. Relatedly, biological mechanisms, including neurotransmitters such as oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, have been thought to support these mutually-beneficial cooperative dynamics (Keltner et al., 2014). Psychologists have revealed that even young children demonstrate an innate capacity for empathy, helping behaviors, and sharing, suggesting that many prosocial tendencies are intrinsic rather than learned (Dahl, 2015).

Nonetheless, scholars also emphasize the role of culture and environment in shaping prosociality. Guinote et al. (2015) proposed that, while humans are born with cognitive and motivational programs related to prosociality, societal factors, such as social status and hierarchy, determine when and whether these predispositions are activated. Similarly, Henrich and Muthukrishna (2020) have argued that although humans have an innate capacity for cooperation and altruism, cultural influences play a significant role in shaping prosociality. In support of this perspective, Callaghan and Corbit (2018) found that children from diverse cultural backgrounds exhibit varying levels of prosocial behavior, such as sharing, underscoring the impact of socialization and cultural norms, particularly the virtues and values that are emphasized and reinforced within those cultures.

Both lines of inquiry outlined above—on the innateness of prosocial predispositions and the socialization which influences how they manifest—align with the view that prosociality is

shaped not only by altruistic or other-oriented motives but also by egotistical or self-interested goals (Batson, 1987). Nonetheless, few studies have examined altruism versus egoism from a motivational perspective. Most research has focused instead on behavioral outcomes, like whether people help when doing so yields reputational, material, or emotional rewards, and on categorizing individuals based on these behaviors, rather than investigating the motives driving prosociality across contexts. For instance, research shows that even young children, such as preschoolers, engage in prosocial actions strategically to enhance their reputation, secure reciprocal benefits, and strengthen social bonds with close others (Grueneisen & Warneken, 2022). Simpson and Willer (2008) demonstrated that people categorized *a priori* as egoists exhibited prosocial behaviors predominantly in public contexts where reputational considerations were salient, whereas individuals classified as altruists displayed prosocial behaviors irrespective of reputational implications. Cialdini et al. (1987) observed that participants who were informed that their negative affective states could not be changed through helping behaviors engaged in significantly fewer prosocial behaviors despite exhibiting elevated empathy. In environmental psychology, researchers have discovered that egoistic participants demonstrate limited engagement in pro-environmental behaviors when such actions yield exclusively environmental benefits without personal advantages, whereas altruistic ones consistently engage in pro-environmental behaviors for both personal and environmental benefits (De Dominicis et al., 2017).

Although the altruism–egoism debate has traditionally been examined through behavioral outcomes, and particularly in the prosocial domain, people seem to intuitively recognize that this tension is motivational at its core. For example, Kraft-Todd et al. (2023) found that people attribute diminished virtue to public generosity compared to private prosocial acts, highlighting

how observers are attuned to the perceived conflict between self-serving and other-oriented motivations in social evaluation. This intuitive sensitivity to underlying motives underscores the need for research that directly examines the motivational architecture of social behavior more broadly, specifically, whether altruistic or egoistic drivers more strongly guide people's intentions across different life domains and cultures.

This is not to say that large-scale investigations into human motivation have not taken place. International initiatives like Kirkland et al. (2022)'s cross-cultural moral expansiveness examination as well as the European Social Survey, and World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2022) have accumulated extensive data on self-transcendence and self-enhancement values across diverse populations. Relatedly, research on life aspirations has documented consistent cross-cultural trends in the pursuit of extrinsic-intrinsic goals in particular domains, such as parenting, across countries with diverse cultural contexts like the United States, Canada, and China (Lekes et al., 2010). Nonetheless, while prior research has examined dichotomous motivational tendencies, like self-transcendence vs. self-enhancement and intrinsic aspirations vs. extrinsic aspirations, these tendencies have typically been studied without directly addressing the motivational tension between altruism and egoism. Yet, many of these constructs map cleanly onto either other-oriented or self-serving motivations, pointing to their potential utility as a proxy from which to evaluate tensions in motivational underpinnings. Moreover, few studies have systematically compared these two motivational tendencies to each other across both geography and time. As a result, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how the balance between altruistic and egoistic motivations varies across cultural contexts and historical moments.

Here, we utilize three established frameworks, legacy motives, life aspirations, and basic human values, to ask a new question: which type of motivation is more prominent across cultures and over time? By comparing the relative strength of altruistic versus egoistic motives, rather than treating them independently, we provide a more targeted and comprehensive perspective on the underlying drivers of human social behavior and its universality.

1.2. Three Domains of Inquiry: Legacy Motives, Aspirations, and Values

In this research, we will seek to answer the question of whether people's motivations are more inclined toward altruism than egoism focusing on self-reports investigated across a diversity of life domains, time, and geographical contexts. Namely, we focused on three different aspects of human motivation, each of which includes an egoistic (i.e., self-oriented) and altruistic (i.e., other-oriented) orientation: legacy motives, life aspirations, and basic human values.

1.2.1. Legacy Motives

Legacy motives refer to individuals' motivations to leave something behind for future generations, either for others or themselves. Legacy motives have a dual structure (Syropoulos et al., 2023), comprising impact-oriented and reputation-oriented motives to be remembered. Impact legacy motives focus on the prosocial and altruistic aspects of leaving behind a legacy, while reputation motives are driven by self-interest. For example, individuals motivated by impact legacy may aim to leave a legacy for future generations, whereas those driven by reputation legacy seek to preserve their reputation and name.

Research on legacy motives has been particularly prominent in environmental psychology, often in relation to longtermism—a perspective focusing on exceptional concerns for future generations without temporal decline (e.g., considering the impact of actions thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years into the future; Syropoulos et al., 2024a). Syropoulos et

al. (2023) developed the dual legacy motives scale, adapting an earlier measure by Zaval et al. (2015), to more effectively capture both impact and reputation legacy motives. And, consistent with the altruism-egoism duality, research demonstrates that impact legacy motives, but not reputation legacy motives, predict prosocial behavior (Syropoulos et al., 2023).

1.2.2. Life Aspirations

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that individuals are driven by different types of life goals and aspirations, categorized as extrinsic and intrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic aspirations focus on external rewards such as wealth, fame, and social status, while intrinsic aspirations emphasize personal growth, meaningful relationships, and contribution to one's community. Conceptually, extrinsic motivations tend to reflect self-oriented ones, whereas intrinsic motivations are relatively more other-oriented. To assess the degree to which people are driven by these two types of aspirations, Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) developed the Aspirations Index, a widely used measure grounded in SDT.

A growing body of research has demonstrated the predictive power of SDT and life aspirations across various domains, such as subjective well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2021) parenting (Lekes et al., 2010), and education and achievement (Davids et al., 2017). Recent meta-analyses (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2023) confirm that these effects are robust. Notably, studies have found that intrinsic aspirations are more strongly associated with higher subjective well-being and life satisfaction than extrinsic aspirations (Anic & Tončić, 2013). Additionally, parents who endorse intrinsic life goals tend to positively influence their children's well-being (Lekes et al., 2010), and intrinsic life aspirations have been linked to academic achievement among college students (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Consistent with these findings, intrinsic aspirations have also been positively associated with prosocial behaviors, with this relationship appearing to

be moderated by individuals' emphasis on other versus self-oriented orientations (Fu et al., 2015).

1.2.3. Basic Human Values

Values play a fundamental role in shaping human thoughts and social behaviors. Influencing emotional responses and goal-directed actions (Schwartz, 2012), values vary in their importance across individuals and cultures. Schwartz (2012) identified ten universal basic values: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism. These values are measured using the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992) and the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001). This paper focuses specifically on hedonism, achievement, power, benevolence, and universalism, as they align with a broader dimension capturing conflicts between self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Self-enhancement values (including power, achievement, and hedonism) prioritize personal success, material wealth and social status, reflecting a self-oriented motivational orientation. In contrast, self-transcendence values (including universalism and benevolence) emphasize concern for the well-being of others and are conceptually aligned with other-oriented or altruistic motivations.

Research on basic human values has been applied to diverse lines of inquiry, including religiosity (Saroglou et al., 2004), academic performance (Gamage et al., 2021), occupational achievement (Ros et al., 1999), and well-being (Schwartz & Sortheix, 2018). For example, religious individuals tend to favor self-transcendence values while rejecting hedonism and self-enhancement, as they prioritize social stability and adherence to tradition (Saroglou et al., 2004). In the academic domain, Gamage et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review showing that value orientations influence students' learning approaches and academic levels. Relatedly, in

the occupational domain, Ros et al. (1999) categorized values into intrinsic, extrinsic, social, prestige types, finding that self-enhancement values (e.g., prestige) are more common among individuals pursuing higher social status, whereas self-transcendence values (e.g., social values) are associated with prosocial career choices. Furthermore, values such as stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, and achievement have been found to promote self-growth and subjective well-being (Schwartz & Sortheix, 2018).

To summarize the research above, three distinct theoretical constructs comprise separate altruistic and egoistic components. Impact legacy motives represent other-benefitting behavioral orientations, while reputation legacy motives reflect a more egoistic and self-oriented dimension of human motivation, concerns about one's personal reputation (Syropoulos et al., 2023). Self-Determination theory (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) mirrors the same egoism-altruism dualism as legacy motivation, with intrinsic life aspirations demonstrating a stronger orientation toward prosocial values, particularly in the pursuit of community contribution and collective welfare. In contrast, extrinsic life aspirations are fundamentally rooted in self-oriented motivational drives, such as the accumulation of wealth, fame, and social recognition. Finally, Schwartz's value theory (Schwartz et al., 2001) provides an additional theoretical dimension through the constructs of self-transcendence and self-enhancement. Self-transcendence values encompass prosocial orientations, emphasizing cooperation, benevolence, and concern for others' well-being. Conversely, self-enhancement values prioritize egoistic motivations, including personal pleasure, power acquisition, and social status attainment.

1.3. WEIRD-Psychology and Need for Cross-cultural Studies

Historically, psychological and behavioral research has predominantly focused on WEIRD societies, or those that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic

societies (Henrich et al., 2010b). These societies constitute a remarkably narrow demographic slice that may not accurately reflect the broader human experience across global contexts. A persistent and substantive critique has emerged regarding the limited representativeness of WEIRD populations in psychological research (Henrich et al., 2010b). This systematic bias in research challenges the universal claims of psychological theories and underscores the critical necessity for more comprehensive, culturally diverse research methodologies.

Research in psychological and behavioral sciences has begun to explore cross-cultural variations in altruistic and self-oriented motivations. Klein et al. (2015) conducted a comparative study across seven countries—Austria, China, Denmark, Turkey, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States—revealing cross-cultural similarities in asymmetric prosocial reputation evaluations. The research demonstrated a consistent pattern wherein evaluations of selfish actions were more influenced by the magnitude of selfishness, while assessments of generous behaviors exhibited relatively less sensitivity to gradational variations. Henrich et al. (2010a) proposed a theoretical framework suggesting that modern prosociality is fundamentally shaped by historical norms and institutions, rather than solely by intrinsic psychological dynamics. This perspective implies the potential for substantive cross-cultural variations in altruistic versus egoistic motivations.

Despite these endeavors to comprehensively examine cultural differences in altruism and egoism, significant methodological limitations persist. The current body of research has not yet achieved a global representational breadth. Moreover, much of the research to date has examined cross-cultural variability in the relative prevalence of egoism versus altruism through the lens of behaviors rather than their underlying motivations. Consequently, the universality of altruistic

motivations for social behavior merits further comprehensive investigation across a more extensive range of cultural contexts.

Several cultural factors have drawn scholarly attention as potential drivers of cross-cultural differences in altruistic and egoistic motivation. These include motivation towards achievement, individualism, indulgence, and Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI). Individualism has been identified as a fundamental dimension differentiating Eastern and Western cultural frameworks: East Asian countries are predominantly characterized by collectivistic values, whereas Western countries typically emphasize individualistic orientations (Rhee et al., 1995). Furthermore, extrinsic motivational factors, such as academic achievement or social status, receive greater emphasis in East Asian countries compared to Western ones (Zhu & Leung, 2011). Indulgence, the third moderating variable examined in this investigation, has been conceptualized as the emphasis on self-control and the valuation of personal liberty and freedom. Indulgence has also been identified as a significant predictor of subjective well-being, with individuals in more indulgent cultures reporting higher subjective well-being than those in more restrained cultures (Li et al., 2022). Finally, the IHDI, a measure of human development, is a critical indicator of development across three crucial main dimensions: health, education, and standard of living.

1.4. The Present Research

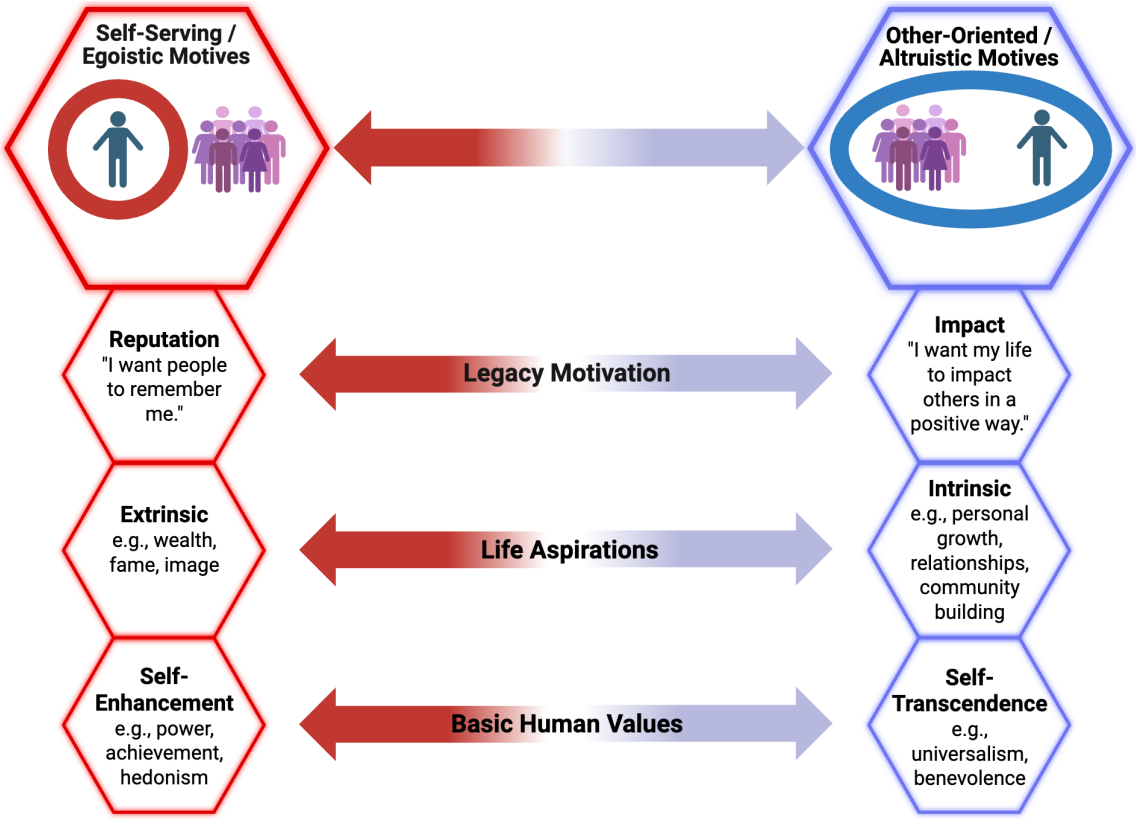
The present research examines differences in the relative prominence of altruism and egoism through three key motivational domains: legacy motives, life aspirations, and basic values. Specifically, we address two central research questions: (1) Are other-oriented/altruistic motivations endorsed more strongly than self-oriented/egotistical motivations? and (2) How do these concerns vary across cultures? Figure 1 illustrates these two types of motivations along a

"continuum" to highlight the *relative endorsement* of one over the other; however, this framing *is not meant to suggest* that the motivations are mutually exclusive or strictly oppositional, as individuals may endorse both self-oriented and other-oriented motives simultaneously.

To explore the questions above, we analyzed data from 904,516 participants across over 100 countries through three large-scale studies. Our sample was designed to maximize cross-cultural representativeness, encompassing nations with diverse socioeconomic development levels, cultural orientations, and geographical regions. This diversity enables a robust investigation of both universal prosocial motivational patterns and culture-specific variations. Methodologically, we employed meta-analyses to synthesize findings across different variables and cultural contexts. Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare scoring on the various dimensions of altruism and egoism within each sample and country, and standardized effect sizes (i.e., Cohen's *d*) were calculated to assess the magnitude of these differences. In Study 3, we also examined whether altruistic and egoistic motivations across countries were moderated by motivation towards achievement, individualism, indulgence, and IHDI. By integrating large-scale, cross-cultural analyses with fundamental motivational constructs, this research advances longstanding debates on human nature. Our findings contribute to understanding the universality of altruistic and egoistic motivational inclinations across three separate domains. Data and code for all studies can be found on OSF: https://osf.io/dmzny/?view_only=2771dda440c041b9b0df1993b505d64f.

Figure 1

The "continuum" of relative endorsement for motivations underlying each domain studied in the present investigation



Note. We present these motivational dimensions along a "continuum" to visually illustrate how each domain includes both an egoistic and altruistic manifestation. However, this should not be taken to imply that these motivations are mutually exclusive or oppositional. For example, individuals may score high (or low) on both self-oriented (reputation) and other-oriented (impact) legacy motives.

We began our investigation by examining legacy motivations, specifically focusing on the relative endorsement of egoistic versus altruistic motives within a narrowly defined context. In Studies 2 and 3, we expanded our analytical scope to explore whether similar patterns emerged across more fundamental human motivations, life aspirations and basic human values. This methodological approach allowed us to assess the consistency of altruistic motivations

relative to egoistic values, while also examining cross-cultural variability using large and diverse samples.

Given that the present study focuses on motivation, it relies predominantly on self-report measures. As such, the potential influence of social desirability bias merits consideration. However, correspondence between self-reported motivations and objectively quantifiable behaviors (e.g., financial or organ donations) would corroborate the validity of our measurements. Additionally, the identification of heterogeneity in observed patterns across samples and nations—with some populations deviating from the general trend—would mitigate concerns regarding social desirability bias. We elaborate on these considerations in greater detail in the General Discussion.

2. Study 1 - Legacy Motivation

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants

Data from a total of 8,313 participants across 22 different samples were analyzed for Study 1 (N_{female}=4,126, M_{age} =39.6, SD_{age}=13.69). All samples used in this study were previously collected by some of the present authors for other research projects; here, we conducted only a secondary analysis of this existing dataset. For more information on each sample, see Table S1 in the Appendix. The majority of participants were Americans recruited via Prolific (16 samples) and MTurk via CloudResearch (3 samples). One sample was recruited from the Global South via Toloka, and two samples consisted of individuals who have demonstrated exceptional altruism through their actions: effective altruists (individuals who endorse the philosophy of effective altruism and donate a sizable portion of their income to effective charities) and non-directed altruistic living organ donors (individuals who have donated a kidney or portion of their liver to a

stranger) (Law et al., 2025b). This design provides a robust test of our theoretical framework by examining motivational patterns not only in general populations but also among people whose extreme altruistic behaviors provide behavioral validation of their self-reported motivational orientations. Specifically, we aimed to investigate whether individuals who have taken costly altruistic actions (providing objective evidence of their prosocial commitment) report stronger altruistic than egoistic motivations. By including these exceptional altruist samples, we address potential limitations of relying solely on self-report data from general populations, where social desirability bias may inflate endorsement of altruistic motivations. This study presents a reanalysis of previously collected data. In each of the original studies, informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants in the reanalysis.

2.1.2. Measures

Following emerging research suggests legacy motives fall into two discrete categories: (1) altruistic concerns about one's positive impact on society (i.e., "impact legacy motivation") or (2) egoistic concerns about being remembered in a positive light (i.e., "reputation legacy motivation"), we operationalized legacy motives using the following subscales of the Dual Legacy Motives Scale (see Syropoulos et al., 2023).

2.1.2.1. Impact Legacy Motivation. Participants responded to items ranging in number from two to eight depending on the sample in question (e.g., "It is important to me that my actions help future people.", "I want my life to impact others in a positive way."). Depending on the sample in question, these items used either a 6- or 7-point scale (α=.89).

2.1.2.2. Reputation Legacy Motivation. Participants responded to a series of items ranging in number from two to eight, depending on the sample in question (e.g., "I want people

to remember me.", "I want people to be thinking of me after I die."). Depending on the sample in question, these items used either a 6- or 7-point scale (α=.94).

2.2. Results

All analyses were conducted in R. We first excluded any missing data. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted for each sample comparing impact to reputation legacy motives with α set to .001 to account for multiple tests. Respondents endorsed Impact legacy motives (M=5.67, SD=1.23) to a greater extent on average than reputation legacy motives (M=4.95, SD=1.53) in each of the 22 samples (d=0.52, 95% C.I. [0.43, 0.62], Z=10.89, p<.001) (see Figure 2). Descriptive statistics and results of the paired sample *t*-test for each sample are shown in Table 1. Among the 22 samples, the samples of effective altruists and organ donors had the largest effect sizes, d=1.15 and d=1.08 respectively. While self-report methods are susceptible to social desirability bias, the magnitude of this effect among truly exceptional altruists provides compelling support for the validity of the present findings.

Table 1

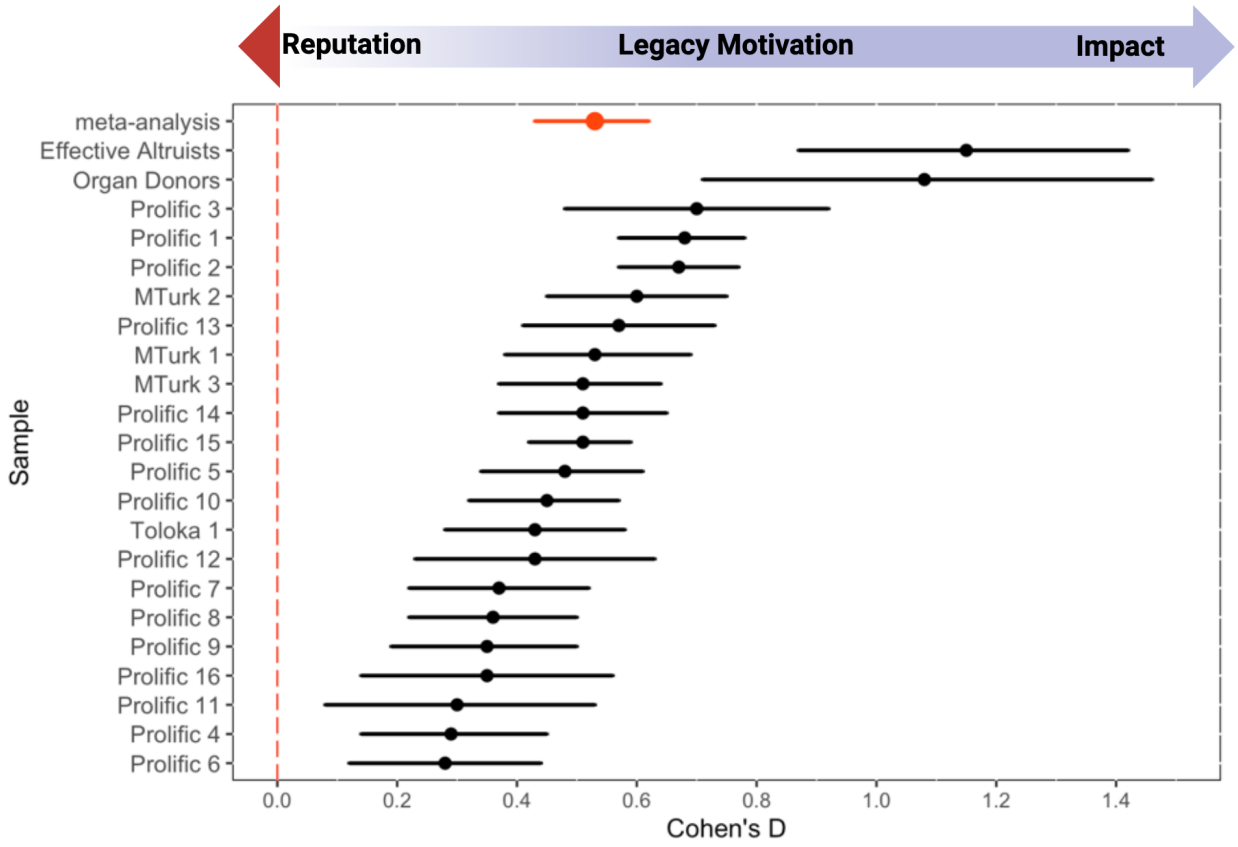
Descriptive statistics of paired sample t-test in Study 1

	Impact Legacy		Reputation Legacy		
Sample	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Prolific 1	5.54	1.09	4.68	1.44	$t(786)=21.52^{***}$, $d=0.68$
Prolific 2	5.70	0.96	4.90	1.38	$t(799)=20.35^{***}$, $d=0.67$
Prolific 3	6.82	1.40	5.75	1.65	$t(162)=8.94^{***}$, $d=0.70$
Prolific 4	6.92	1.48	6.43	1.85	$t(328)=6.51^{***}$, $d=0.29$
Prolific 5	6.84	1.70	5.94	2.06	$t(451)=10.56^{***}$, $d=0.48$
Prolific 6	6.91	1.47	6.47	1.61	$t(304)=5.95^{***}$, $d=0.28$
MTurk 1	5.47	1.26	4.72	1.56	$t(335)=10.12^{***}$, $d=0.53$
MTurk 2	5.42	1.15	4.60	1.55	$t(359)=11.49^{***}$, $d=0.60$
MTurk 3	5.36	1.22	4.67	1.50	$t(426)=11.20^{***}$, $d=0.51$
Prolific 7	5.10	1.14	4.65	1.31	$t(343)=7.82^{***}$, $d=0.37$
Toloka 1	5.51	1.41	4.86	1.59	$t(360)=7.86^{***}$, $d=0.43$
Prolific 8	5.41	1.26	4.91	1.50	$t(398)=9.57^{***}$, $d=0.36$
Prolific 9	4.79	1.20	4.30	1.58	$t(328)=6.51^{***}$, $d=0.35$
Prolific 10	5.32	1.24	4.71	1.46	$t(499)=12.64^{***}$, $d=0.45$
Prolific 11	5.15	1.25	4.76	1.34	$t(150)=5.19^{***}$, $d=0.30$
Prolific 12	5.42	1.12	4.89	1.35	$t(203)=6.69^{***}$, $d=0.43$
Prolific 13	5.38	1.09	4.63	1.51	$t(299)=10.37^{***}$, $d=0.57$
Prolific 14	5.20	1.16	4.54	1.40	$t(402)=12.21^{***}$, $d=0.51$
Prolific 15	5.35	1.16	4.67	1.49	$t(1002)=17.75^{***}$, $d=0.51$
Prolific 16	5.26	1.26	4.79	1.43	$t(175)=5.13^{***}$, $d=0.35$
Effective Altruists	5.98	1.06	4.50	1.48	$t(118)=11.07^{***}$, $d=1.15$
Organ Donors	5.89	0.87	4.47	1.65	$t(64)=8.47^{***}$, $d=1.08$

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Figure 2

Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for each comparison of impact and reputation legacy motives by sample



Note. This figure shows Cohen's *d* values of each sample with 95% confidence intervals in Study 1. The red point on the top indicates the meta-analysis coefficient across 22 samples. The red vertical line is on the 0 value along the x-axis. All the points except the meta-analysis coefficient were arranged in descending order, from top to bottom.

3. Study 2 - Life Aspirations

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Participants

Relying on a recent meta-analytic investigation focusing on life aspirations (Bradshaw et al., 2022) and utilizing a dedicated website that allows researchers to track studies using life aspiration measures (https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/research/), we conducted a review to

find candidate studies that included both a measure of intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations. Intrinsic aspirations focus on personal growth, positive relationships with other people, and prosocial behaviors/helping one's community, whereas extrinsic aspirations focus on improving one's wealth, fame, and image. Such aspirations are fundamental pursuits in life according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Ultimately, we were able to obtain relevant values for 59 samples, which were collected from 1996 to 2023 (N_{total}=38,623 N_{female}=19,508, M_{age} =26.76, SD_{age}=13.75). Importantly, these samples spanned 22 countries and covered a range of population types, including adult, adolescent, college student, and senior citizen samples. Sample-specific descriptive information is provided in Table S2 in the Appendix. This study presents a reanalysis of previously collected data. Informed consent was obtained either in writing or electronically from all participants in the reanalysis.

3.1.2. Measures

3.1.2.1. Intrinsic Aspirations. The Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) was used to measure participants' intrinsic aspiration scores. Intrinsic aspirations comprised personal growth, relationships, physical health, and community giving. There has been ongoing debate regarding whether physical health should be categorized as an intrinsic aspiration. In our analysis, we adhered to the original taxonomic frameworks employed in the source studies from which we extracted descriptive statistics. This approach resulted in some variability, as certain studies incorporated health as an element of intrinsic aspirations, while others excluded it entirely from their data collection protocols. The intrinsic aspiration scores were calculated by summing or taking an average of these four subcomponent scores, which vary across studies. Reliability was good (α=.85).

3.1.2.2. Extrinsic Aspirations. Wealth, fame, and image comprised the extrinsic aspirations. Depending on the study in question, the overall extrinsic aspiration scores were calculated by summing or taking an average of three subcomponent scores. Reliability was good (α=.87).

3.1.3. Analysis

Unlike Study 1, for which we had direct access to all samples, for Study 2, we relied on summary statistics available from each study. Thus, we first calculated the difference scores between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Aspirations. Since half of the samples did not provide a correlation between two constructs, we decided to calculate a common correlation value across all the samples, using the samples with known correlation values. To estimate the meta-correlation coefficient, we relied on the methodology recommended by Goh and colleagues (2016). The meta-correlation coefficient suggested an overall small but positive association (d=0.19, 95% C.I. [0.18, 0.20], Z=34.04, p<.05). We also calculated the pooled standard deviation between the two constructs for each sample. The effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated by dividing the mean difference score by the pooled standard deviation. The t-statistics were calculated by multiplying the effect size by the square root of the sample size.

3.2. Results

All analyses were conducted in Microsoft Excel. A paired sample t-test was conducted for each sample comparing intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations with α=.001 to account for multiple tests. On average, participants from each sample reported Intrinsic Aspirations more (M=25.64, SD=3.66) than Extrinsic Aspirations (M=15.59, SD=4.32) in each of the 59 samples (d=1.55, 95% C.I. [1.34, 1.75], Z=14.75, p<.001) (see Figure 3). Table 2 shows each sample's descriptive statistics and the results of the paired sample t-test.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of paired sample t-test in Study 2

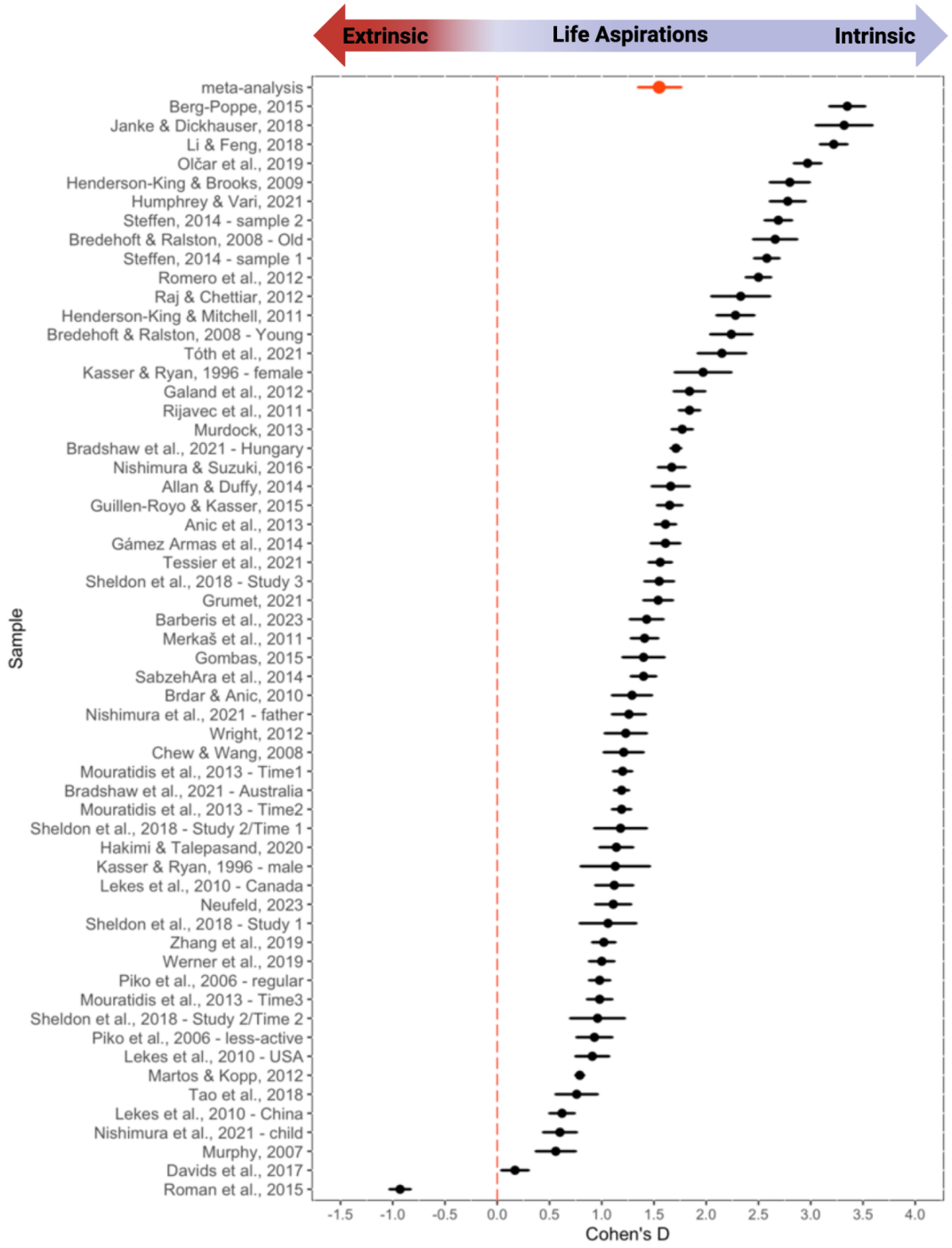
	Intrinsic Aspirations		Extrinsic Aspirations		
Sample	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Allan & Duffy, 2014	1.02	0.90	-0.89	0.88	$t(229)=25.18^{***}$, $d=1.66$
Anic et al., 2013	5.87	0.68	3.90	1.14	$t(768)=44.65^{***}$, $d=1.61$
Berg-Poppe, 2015	6.08	0.65	2.80	0.85	$t(279)=56.06^{***}$, $d=3.35$
Bradshaw et al., 2021 - Hungary	6.11	0.60	4.64	0.72	$t(3369)=99.27^{***}$, $d=1.71$
Bradshaw et al., 2021 - Australia	6.05	0.82	4.37	1.30	$t(1567)=47.12^{***}$, $d=1.19$
Bradshaw et al., 2021 - USA	5.84	0.96	3.98	1.28	$t(6062)=90.32^{***}$, $d=1.16$
Brdar & Anic, 2010	5.91	0.72	4.08	1.35	$t(217)=19.05^{***}$, $d=1.29$
Davids et al., 2017	2.94	1.07	2.75	0.57	$t(456)=3.63^{***}$, $d=0.17$
Galand et al., 2012	5.70	0.80	3.40	1.10	$t(332)=33.58^{***}$, $d=1.84$
Gámez Armas et al., 2014	7.96	0.70	5.71	1.34	$t(388)=31.75^{***}$, $d=1.61$
Gombas, 2015	26.05	2.65	20.62	3.31	$t(197)=19.70^{***}$, $d=1.40$
Grumet, 2021	3.96	0.67	2.54	0.75	$t(375)=29.86^{***}$, $d=1.54$
Guillen-Royo & Kasser, 2015	3.85	0.38	2.78	0.59	$t(499)=36.90^{***}$, $d=1.65$
Hakimi & Talepasand, 2020	79.52	10.01	62.52	12.85	$t(284)=19.25^{***}$, $d=1.14$
Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011	6.09	0.61	3.49	1.07	$t(231)=34.73^{***}$, $d=2.28$
Humphrey & Vari, 2021	5.05	0.64	2.35	0.85	$t(259)=44.83^{***}$, $d=2.78$
Janke & Dickhauser, 2018	5.92	0.61	2.70	0.86	$t(106)=34.34^{***}$, $d=3.32$
Kasser & Ryan, 1996 - male	4.30	0.44	3.40	0.75	$t(70)=9.52^{***}$, $d=1.13$
Kasser & Ryan, 1996 - female	4.60	0.43	3.10	0.71	$t(106)=20.38^{***}$, $d=1.97$
Lekes et al., 2010 - USA	4.20	0.65	3.32	0.84	$t(318)=16.25^{***}$, $d=0.91$
Lekes et al., 2010 - Canada	4.07	0.60	2.95	0.91	$t(247)=17.64^{***}$, $d=1.12$
Lekes et al., 2010 - China	3.96	0.69	3.33	0.87	$t(514)=14.07^{***}$, $d=0.62$
Li & Feng, 2018	114.45	14.55	52.88	15.17	$t(492)=71.50^{***}$, $d=3.22$
Martos & Kopp, 2012	3.94	0.74	3.15	0.81	$t(4840)=54.97^{***}$, $d=0.79$
Merkaš et al., 2011	6.00	0.73	4.17	1.21	$t(467)=30.50^{***}$, $d=1.41$
Murphy, 2007	4.14	0.46	3.75	0.61	$t(222)=8.36^{***}$, $d=0.56$
Nishimura & Suzuki, 2016	3.95	0.62	2.51	0.71	$t(460)=35.86^{***}$, $d=1.67$
Nishimura et al., 2021 - father	3.23	0.73	2.07	0.70	$t(309)=22.18^{***}$, $d=1.26$
Nishimura et al., 2021 - child	3.20	0.75	2.59	0.83	$t(309)=10.56^{***}$, $d=0.60$
Olčar et al., 2019	5.99	0.64	2.96	0.98	$t(479)=62.00^{***}$, $d=2.83$
Piko et al., 2006 - less-active	79.70	23.40	57.60	10.20	$t(258)=14.97^{***}$, $d=0.93$
Piko et al., 2006 - regular	79.60	27.90	49.80	17.40	$t(849)=28.57^{***}$, $d=0.98$
Raj & Chettiar, 2012	121.04	15.65	71.94	17.00	$t(99)=23.30^{***}$, $d=2.33$
Rijavec et al., 2011	5.88	0.75	3.63	1.10	$t(834)=53.17^{***}$, $d=1.84$

Roman et al., 2015	2.84	0.47	3.34	0.36	$t(852)=-27.16^{***}$, $d=-0.93$
Romero et al., 2012	6.29	0.54	3.61	1.02	$t(582)=60.36^{***}$, $d=2.50$
SabzehAra et al., 2014	6.38	0.60	4.77	1.09	$t(501)=31.37^{***}$, $d=1.40$
Sheldon et al., 2018 - Study 1	4.42	0.83	3.21	0.93	$t(108)=11.07^{***}$, $d=1.06$
Sheldon et al., 2018 - Study 2/Time 1	4.40	0.73	3.13	0.95	$t(120)=12.98^{***}$, $d=1.18$
Sheldon et al., 2018 - Study 2/Time 2	4.17	0.91	3.01	0.99	$t(115)=10.34^{***}$, $d=0.96$
Sheldon et al., 2018 - Study 3	4.32	0.78	2.65	0.91	$t(397)=30.92^{***}$, $d=1.55$
Steffen, 2014 - sample 1	19.10	1.70	10.20	3.30	$t(539)=59.95^{***}$, $d=2.58$
Steffen, 2014 - sample 2	19.20	1.50	10.10	3.30	$t(484)=59.24^{***}$, $d=2.69$
Tao et al., 2018	4.20	0.50	3.60	0.70	$t(193)=10.59^{***}$, $d=0.76$
Tessier et al., 2021	5.63	0.79	3.73	1.07	$t(644)=39.62^{***}$, $d=1.56$
Tóth et al., 2021	6.13	0.63	3.76	1.01	$t(148)=26.24^{***}$, $d=2.15$
Werner et al., 2019	5.72	0.98	4.23	1.30	$t(575)=24.00^{***}$, $d=1.00$
Zhang et al., 2019	5.70	0.77	4.36	1.21	$t(654)=26.10^{***}$, $d=1.02$
Neufeld, 2023	5.88	0.71	4.71	0.91	$t(260)=17.93^{***}$, $d=1.11$
Barberis et al., 2023	4.47	0.48	3.30	0.75	$t(305)=25.01^{***}$, $d=1.43$
Bredehoft & Ralston, 2008 - Old	255.60	34.23	129.43	39.19	$t(182)=35.98^{***}$, $d=2.66$
Bredehoft & Ralston, 2008 - Young	252.51	26.57	148.53	42.93	$t(185)=30.55^{***}$, $d=2.24$
Chew & Wang, 2008	5.92	0.76	4.28	1.27	$t(204)=17.32^{***}$, $d=1.21$
Henderson-King & Brooks, 2009	6.19	0.46	3.56	0.90	$t(217)=41.34^{***}$, $d=2.80$
Mouratidis et al., 2013 - Time1	4.14	0.50	3.12	0.78	$t(885)=35.72^{***}$, $d=1.20$
Mouratidis et al., 2013 - Time2	4.12	0.52	3.10	0.78	$t(884)=35.40^{***}$, $d=1.19$
Mouratidis et al., 2013 - Time3	4.09	0.57	3.20	0.81	$t(525)=22.48^{***}$, $d=0.98$
Murdock, 2013	229.26	25.46	143.63	45.71	$t(837)=51.24^{***}$, $d=1.77$
Wright, 2012	5.98	0.80	4.24	1.17	$t(199)=17.39^{***}$, $d=1.23$

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Figure 3

Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for each comparison of intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations by sample



Note. This figure shows Cohen's *d* values of each country with 95% confidence intervals in Study 2. The red point on the top indicates the meta-analysis coefficient across 59 samples. The red vertical line is on the 0 value along the x-axis. All the points except the meta-analysis coefficient were arranged in descending order, from top to bottom.

4. Studies 3a-3c - Personal Value Orientations

4.1. Methods

4.1.1. Participants

4.1.1.1. Study 3a: Undergraduate students. We used a multinational study dataset including 42 different countries (Kirkland et al., 2022). After excluding any missing data, the data of 7,008 participants were retained for analysis (N_{female}=4,487, M_{age} =21.79, SD_{age}=5.61). Although analyses focusing on specific variables from this study have been published (Kirkland et al., 2022), the analyses reported here have not been conducted before this investigation and have not been reported in an existing publication.

4.1.1.2. Study 3b: European Social Survey. Data from 458,177 participants (N_{female}=246,056, M_{age} =47.38, SD_{age}=18.35) collected as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) were utilized for Study 3b. This dataset, comprising ESS rounds 1 to 11 (data were collected every two years from 2002 to 2024), includes nationally representative data from 39 countries of participants aged 15 and over. Population weights were used in analyses.

4.1.1.3. Study 3c: World Values Survey. A total of 392,395 participants' data were analyzed in Study 4 (N_{female}=201,592, M_{age} =41.39, SD_{age}=16.3). The data were obtained from the World Values Survey (WVS; Inglehart et al., 2022), which has been running since 1981 in nearly 100 countries. Data from only 78 countries were included in this study, as these were the only countries for which data on self-transcendence and self-enhancement values were available. All of the samples included in this dataset are nationally representative. Population weights were used in analyses.

Studies 3a-3c present reanalyses of previously collected data. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants in the original data collection efforts.

4.1.2. Measures

All samples included measures of self-transcendence and self-enhancement value dimensions (Schwartz, 2012). Although the specific measures differed between each study, all were variations of the revised Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-RR) (Schwartz et al., 2001).

4.1.2.1. Study 3a: Undergraduate students. All items were measured with a 7-point scale. Self-transcendence was measured by capturing Universalism (with a single item "Equality, a world at peace, wisdom, social justice, broadmindedness, to enjoy the beauty of nature and the arts, to feel unity with nature and to protect the environment") and Benevolence (also a single item: "to be loyal, helpful, responsible, and forgiving.") Participants indicated the extent to which they believed each item represented themselves (α=.54). Relevant to self-enhancement were items capturing Power ("social power, authority, wealth"), Achievement ("success, capability, ambition, and influence on people and events"), and Hedonism ("to have pleasure, enjoy life, and do pleasant things"). Reliability was mediocre (α=.59).

4.1.2.2. Study 3b. European Social Survey. All items were captured on a 6-point scale. Self-transcendence was again captured with the average of Universalism and Benevolence. Universalism had three items while Benevolence had two. Reliability was good (α=.73). Self-enhancement (α=.70) was captured by averaging items capturing Achievement (2 items) and Power (2 items). No items were included for Hedonism in this study.

4.1.2.3. Study 3c: World Values Survey. Self-transcendence was captured by averaging items for Universalism and Benevolence, which had one item each (α=.52): Respectively, "It is important to this person looking after the environment" and "It is important to this person to help the people nearby." Some countries, including Armenia, Belarus, Estonia, etc, had missing Benevolence scores. Therefore, only Universalism scores were used to calculate self-

transcendence scores for these countries. Self-enhancement was captured by averaging items for Power, Achievement, and Hedonism, which had one item each: Respectively, “It is important to this person being very successful”, “It is important to this person to be rich”, and “It is important to this person to have a good time”. Reliability was mediocre (α=.55). All items were measured on a 6-point scale.

Considering that Study 3c included national representative data from a multitude of countries across the world, we also explored how national differences in cultural values could potentially moderate any observed differences between self-transcendence and self-enhancement. To that end, we pre-registered that we would explore the following indices as moderators: Motivation Towards Achievement, with higher scores indicating a culture driven by competition, achievement, and success; Collectivism-Individualism, with higher scores indicating greater independence in the population (and lower scores indicating greater interdependence); Indulgence, with higher scores indicating encouragement within the culture for people to freely enjoy their lives (and lower scores indicating greater encouragement within the culture of restraint). Each of these indicators had scores ranging from 0 to 100 and were indexed from the Hofstede country comparison tool (https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool). Finally, we also examined IHDI, which is a comprehensive indicator of a country’s level of human development adjusted for the level of inequality between nations. The higher the score, the less inequality and more development a country has. Scores range from 0 to 1 (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2024).

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Study 3a: Undergraduate Students

Students on average reported greater valuation of self-transcendence than self-enhancement (see Figure 4). This was noted in 34 out of 42 countries (d=0.79, 95% C.I. [0.62, 0.97], Z=9.07, p<.001). In five countries/regions (China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Uganda, and the Northern part of the United States), self-transcendence scores were higher than self-enhancement scores, but the difference was not significant (p>.001). Participants in Japan, South Korea, and Turkey showed greater valuation of self-enhancement than self-transcendence, a difference that was only significant in South Korea. Table 3 shows detailed results for each sample.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of paired sample t-test in Study 3a

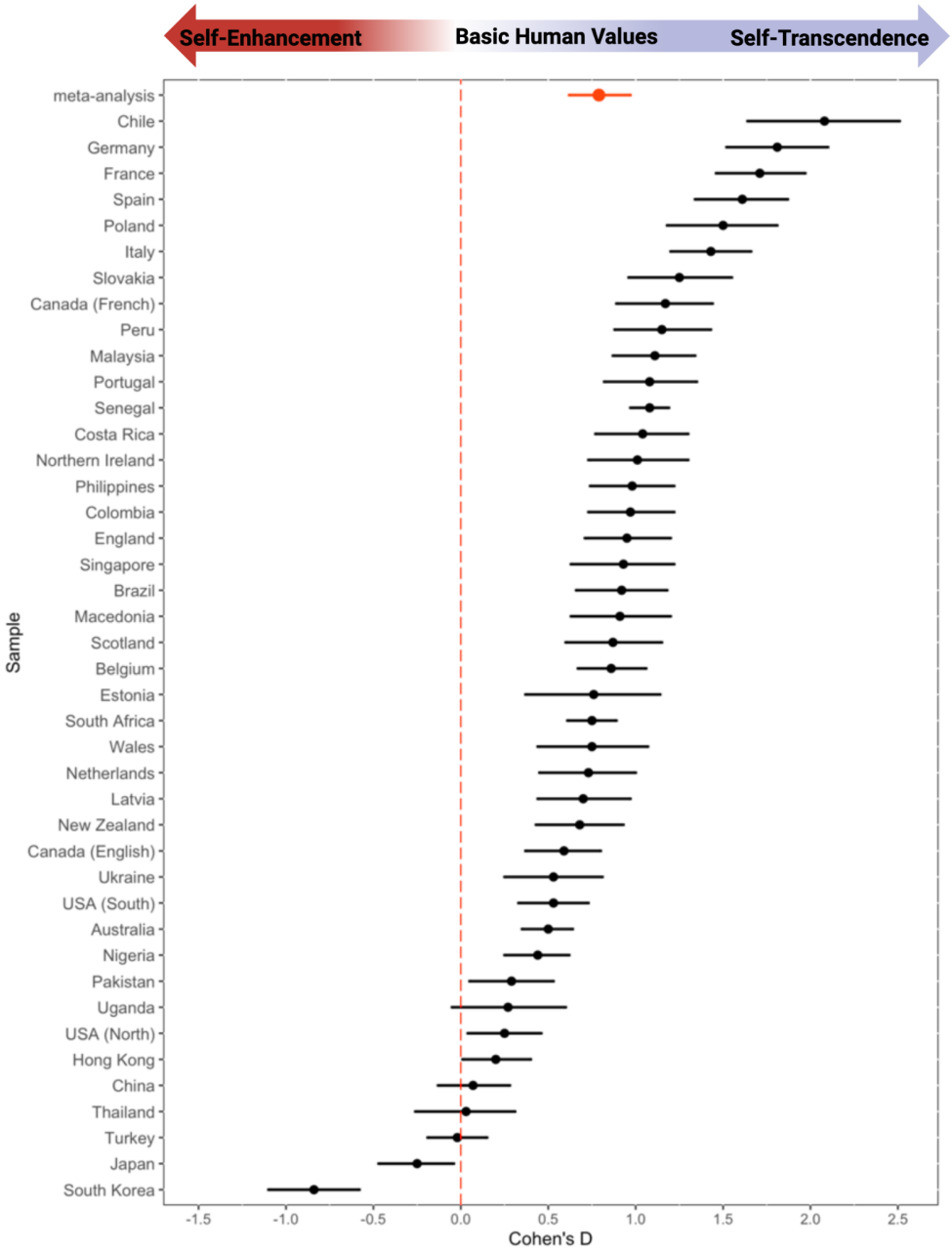
	Self-transcendence		Self-enhancement		
Country	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Australia	4.90	1.50	4.18	1.38	*t*(378)=7.11***, *d*=0.50
Belgium	5.18	1.38	4.05	1.22	*t*(216)=9.86***, *d*=0.86
Brazil	5.86	1.33	4.59	1.44	*t*(122)=8.71***, *d*=0.92
Canada (English)	4.99	1.56	4.12	1.44	*t*(175)=5.09***, *d*=0.59
Canada French)	5.35	1.39	3.84	1.18	*t*(119)=9.13***, *d*=1.17
Chile	5.87	1.02	3.22	1.49	*t*(62)=11.72***, *d*=2.08
China	4.80	1.41	4.57	1.21	*t*(229)=1.95, *d*=0.07
Colombia	5.56	1.42	4.16	1.45	*t*(142)=9.23***, *d*=0.97
Costa Rica	5.43	1.41	3.93	1.47	*t*(122)=8.42***, *d*=1.04
England	5.18	1.35	3.91	1.32	*t*(143)=7.36***, *d*=0.95
Estonia	4.94	1.60	3.91	1.08	*t*(56)=4.00***, *d*=0.76
France	5.89	1.16	3.78	1.30	*t*(158)=15.77***, *d*=1.71
Germany	5.61	1.16	3.53	1.13	*t*(130)=15.00***, *d*=1.81
Hong Kong	4.45	1.44	4.16	1.36	*t*(209)=2.47*, *d*=0.20
Italy	5.60	1.25	3.78	1.29	*t*(183)=13.33***, *d*=1.43
Japan	4.16	1.70	4.55	1.36	*t*(169)=-2.57*, *d*=-0.25
Latvia	4.97	1.31	4.07	1.24	*t*(118)=5.45***, *d*=0.70
Macedonia	5.49	1.36	4.25	1.35	*t*(105)=6.87***, *d*=0.91
Malaysia	5.52	1.22	4.19	1.17	*t*(163)=11.98***, *d*=1.11

Netherlands	4.98	1.43	3.98	1.33	$t(109)=5.39^{***}$, $d=0.73$
New Zealand	4.96	1.47	4.04	1.23	$t(132)=5.35^{***}$, $d=0.68$
Nigeria	5.72	1.25	5.15	1.35	$t(232)=6.26^{***}$, $d= 0.44$
Northern Ireland	5.24	1.47	3.82	1.32	$t(104)=7.99^{***}$, $d=1.01$
Pakistan	5.36	1.73	4.89	1.49	$t(135)=3.40^{***}$, $d=0.29$
Peru	5.56	1.43	3.84	1.55	$t(120)=9.46^{***}$, $d=1.15$
Philippines	5.49	1.19	4.33	1.18	$t(148)=9.02^{***}$, $d=0.98$
Poland	5.43	1.06	3.71	1.23	$t(100)=10.66^{***}$, $d=1.50$
Portugal	5.63	1.23	4.29	1.25	$t(128)=9.65^{***}$, $d=1.08$
Scotland	4.83	1.45	3.64	1.28	$t(108)=5.67^{***}$, $d=0.87$
Senegal	5.69	1.33	4.25	1.34	$t(764)=26.28^{***}$, $d=1.08$
Singapore	4.87	1.34	3.52	1.56	$t(97)=6.38^{***}$, $d=0.93$
Slovakia	5.20	1.28	3.60	1.26	$t(106)=8.66^{***}$, $d=1.25$
South Africa	5.74	1.39	4.70	1.40	$t(422)=16.30^{***}$, $d=0.75$
South Korea	3.93	1.55	5.05	1.05	$t(124)=-6.43^{***}$, $d=-0.84$
Spain	5.70	1.16	3.64	1.39	$t(140)=13.89^{***}$, $d=1.61$
Thailand	4.93	1.54	4.89	1.12	$t(95)=0.18$, $d=0.03$
Turkey	5.18	1.45	5.21	1.23	$t(262)=-0.33$, $d=-0.02$
Uganda	5.01	1.78	4.55	1.66	$t(74)=2.41^{*}$, $d=0.27$
Ukraine	5.07	1.27	4.37	1.37	$t(104)=3.89^{***}$, $d=0.53$
USA (North)	4.91	1.76	4.51	1.40	$t(177)=2.90^{**}$, $d=0.25$
USA (South)	5.00	1.49	4.22	1.44	$t(204)=5.10^{***}$, $d=0.53$
Wales	4.84	1.37	3.86	1.21	$t(82)=4.53^{***}$, $d=0.75$

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Figure 4

Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for each comparison of self-transcendence and self-enhancement values for Study 3a by country



Note. This figure shows Cohen's *d* values of each country with 95% confidence intervals in Study 3a. The red point on the top indicates the meta-analysis coefficient across 42 countries. The red vertical line is on the 0 value along the x-axis. All the points except the meta-analysis coefficient were arranged in descending order, from top to bottom.

4.2.2. Study 3b. European Social Survey

All aspects of Study 3b (sample size, variables, and analyses) were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/8c4y-dzc9.pdf). Across each of the 39 countries, each with a nationally representative sample, respondents reported greater valuation of self-transcendence (M=4.87, SD=0.69) self-enhancement (M=3.75, SD=0.95) (d=1.07, 95% C.I. [0.95, 1.19], Z=17.77, p<.001) (see Figure 5). Table 4 shows detailed results for each country.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of paired sample t-test in Study 3b

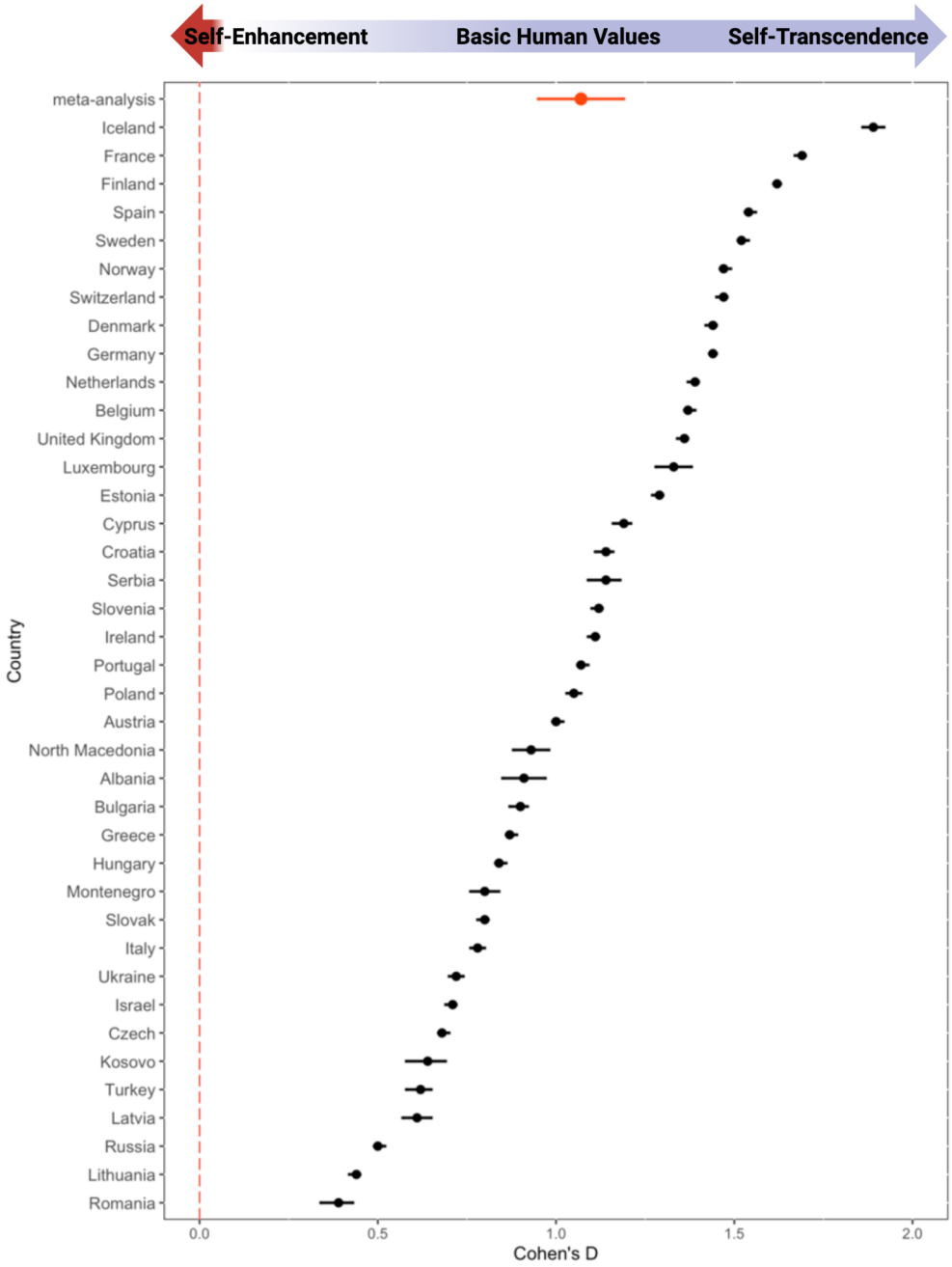
	Self-transcendence		Self-enhancement		
Country	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Albania	5.09	0.60	4.26	0.93	t(1077)=29.91***, d=0.91
Austria	4.97	0.70	3.87	0.94	t(15007)=123.06***, d=1.00
Belgium	4.98	0.56	3.59	0.88	t(17181)=180.19***, d=1.37
Bulgaria	4.83	0.76	3.99	0.91	t(11621)=97.55***, d=0.90
Croatia	4.93	0.75	3.67	0.99	t(7658)=99.51***, d=1.14
Cyprus	5.16	0.58	3.88	1.02	t(4976)=83.84***, d=1.19
Czech	4.49	0.78	3.70	1.03	t(18035)=91.61***, d=0.68
Denmark	4.99	0.62	3.45	0.93	t(11931)=156.90***, d=1.44
Estonia	4.73	0.63	3.29	0.99	t(16384)=164.57***, d=1.29
Finland	4.96	0.64	3.06	0.97	t(19183)=224.46***, d=1.62
France	4.90	0.74	2.97	0.97	t(18254)=228.13***, d=1.69
Germany	5.00	0.60	3.45	0.93	t(27251)=237.88***, d=1.44
Greece	5.04	0.68	4.17	0.97	t(12267)=96.77***, d=0.87
Hungary	4.83	0.74	3.98	0.97	t(17586)=11.87***, d=0.84
Iceland	5.05	0.61	3.05	0.91	t(3750)=115.73***, d=1.89
Ireland	4.89	0.75	3.63	1.01	t(22038)=164.26***, d=1.11
Israel	5.01	0.72	4.33	0.94	t(13199)=81.04***, d=0.71
Italy	4.83	0.72	4.11	0.84	t(8347)=71.20***, d=0.78
Kosovo	5.33	0.58	4.77	0.91	t(1167)=21.73***, d=0.64
Latvia	4.70	0.71	3.98	1.09	t(2774)=32.07***, d=0.61

Lithuania	4.23	0.85	3.80	1.01	$t(12138)=48.09^{***}$, $d=0.44$
Luxembourg	4.95	0.70	3.40	0.99	$t(1547)=52.40^{***}$, $d=1.33$
Montenegro	4.79	0.85	3.92	0.95	$t(2388)=37.98^{***}$, $d=0.80$
Netherlands	4.85	0.59	3.43	0.89	$t(19343)=193.13^{***}$, $d=1.39$
North Macedonia	4.81	0.79	3.96	0.87	$t(1363)=34.33^{***}$, $d=0.93$
Norway	4.77	0.64	3.27	0.90	$t(16269)=187.57^{***}$, $d=1.47$
Poland	4.86	0.63	3.84	0.91	$t(14590)=126.95^{***}$, $d=1.05$
Portugal	4.62	0.76	3.62	0.84	$t(17271)=141.19^{***}$, $d=1.07$
Romania	4.49	0.82	4.16	0.93	$t(2040)=17.51^{***}$, $d=0.39$
Russia	4.66	0.79	4.13	1.01	$t(11347)=53.70^{***}$, $d=0.50$
Serbia	5.03	0.71	3.74	1.00	$t(1862)=49.10^{***}$, $d=1.14$
Slovenia	4.98	0.60	3.98	0.84	$t(14153)=132.69^{***}$, $d=1.12$
Slovak	4.67	0.68	3.83	0.97	$t(12060)=87.40^{***}$, $d=0.80$
Spain	5.15	0.62	3.39	1.00	$t(16480)=197.93^{***}$, $d=1.54$
Sweden	4.84	0.67	3.17	0.94	$t(14323)=182.18^{***}$, $d=1.52$
Switzerland	5.11	0.55	3.61	0.93	$t(17521)=194.48^{***}$, $d=1.47$
Turkey	4.98	0.69	4.52	0.83	$t(3928)=38.63^{***}$, $d=0.62$
Ukraine	4.56	0.88	3.74	1.07	$t(8231)=65.14^{***}$, $d=0.72$
United Kingdom	4.92	0.66	3.42	0.99	$t(21559)=199.30^{***}$, $d=1.36$

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Figure 5

Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for each comparison of self-transcendence and self-enhancement values for Study 3b by country



Note. This figure shows Cohen's *d* values of each country with 95% confidence intervals in Study 3b. The red point on the top indicates the meta-analysis coefficient across 39 countries. The red vertical line is on the 0 value along the x-axis. All the points except the meta-analysis coefficient were arranged in descending order, from top to bottom.

4.2.3. Study 3c: World Values Survey

All aspects of Study 3c, including sample size, variables, and analyses, were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/r5rq-mtm3.pdf). Similar to the ESS, but this time in a much more geographically diverse set of countries, a very similar pattern of results emerged. Specifically, across the 78 countries, respondents on average reported greater valuation of self-transcendence (M=4.60, SD=.98) than self-enhancement (M=3.64, SD=1.01) (d=0.78, 95% C.I. [0.69, 0.87], Z=17.67, p<.001) (see Figure 6). Tunisia was the only country with a statistically significant difference in which self-enhancement values were endorsed more strongly than self-transcendence values. In three countries, Algeria, Pakistan, and Tunisia, the differences between self-transcendence and self-enhancement were not statistically significant (p>.001). Table 5 shows detailed results for each country.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics of paired sample t-test in Study 3c

	Self-transcendence		Self-enhancement		
Country	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Algeria	4.49	1.25	4.43	1.11	t(2480)=1.01, d=0.03
Andorra	5.00	0.68	3.47	0.84	t(2005)=38.83***, d=1.39
Argentina	4.65	0.94	3.24	1.03	t(7399)=38.84***, d=1.34
Armenia	4.29	1.21	3.09	1.00	t(4321)=22.68***, d=0.76
Australia	4.47	0.90	2.92	0.97	t(7985)=44.34***, d=1.22
Azerbaijan	4.16	1.39	3.62	1.13	t(3002)=8.68***, d=0.31
Burkina Faso	4.77	1.06	3.84	1.10	t(1532)=25.61***, d=0.70
Belarus	4.02	1.24	3.39	1.10	t(4640)=14.06***, d=0.37
Brazil	5.03	0.76	3.38	0.91	t(7671)=76.37***, d=1.42
Bulgaria	4.41	1.01	3.04	1.09	t(2071)=30.40***, d=1.02
Canada	4.95	0.80	3.18	0.99	t(8111)=46.84***, d=1.33
Chile	4.77	1.06	3.86	1.05	t(6698)=19.26***, d=0.73
China	4.50	0.97	3.45	1.01	t(10825)=47.68***, d=0.90
Colombia	5.21	0.83	3.81	1.04	t(12080)=43.35***, d=1.12
Cyprus	5.07	0.86	3.63	1.14	t(3048)=33.69***, d=1.14

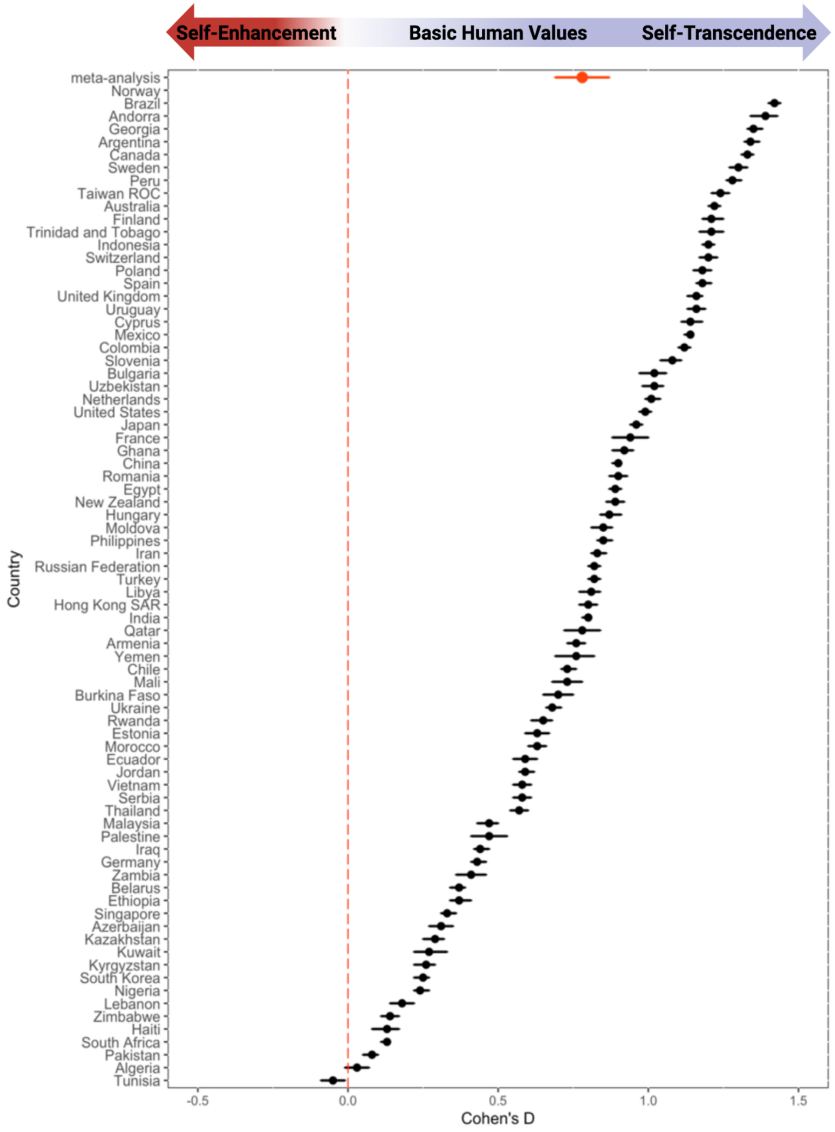
Vietnam	4.66	0.82	4.11	0.90	$t(3693)=21.49^{***}$, $d=0.58$
Ecuador	4.68	1.03	4.01	0.93	$t(2400)=20.52^{***}$, $d=0.59$
Egypt	4.81	0.96	3.84	1.09	$t(8772)=49.37^{***}$, $d=0.89$
Estonia	4.15	1.18	3.09	0.99	$t(2552)=24.20^{***}$, $d=0.63$
Ethiopia	4.32	1.25	3.81	1.04	$t(2728)=14.21^{***}$, $d=0.37$
Finland	4.52	0.85	3.03	0.93	$t(3002)=38.30^{***}$, $d=1.21$
France	4.54	0.99	3.34	0.97	$t(999)=28.99^{***}$, $d=0.94$
Ghana	5.11	0.82	4.22	0.91	$t(3084)=35.38^{***}$, $d=0.92$
Germany	4.26	0.99	3.64	0.94	$t(7662)=17.96^{***}$, $d=0.43$
Georgia	5.09	0.74	3.39	1.11	$t(4708)=68.17^{***}$, $d=1.35$
Haiti	4.08	1.00	3.91	0.89	$t(1994)=5.66,^{***}$, $d=0.13$
Hong Kong SAR	4.48	0.88	3.61	0.93	$t(4325)=25.35^{***}$, $d=0.80$
Hungary	4.71	0.86	3.75	0.93	$t(3119)=25.91^{***}$, $d=0.87$
India	4.70	1.04	3.62	1.25	$t(14311)=29.34^{***}$, $d=0.80$
Indonesia	4.88	0.83	3.44	1.14	$t(6213)=52.15^{***}$, $d=1.20$
Iran	4.88	0.84	3.75	1.05	$t(6696)=42.51^{***}$, $d=0.83$
Iraq	4.80	0.97	4.29	0.90	$t(7424)=15.12^{***}$, $d=0.44$
Jordan	5.21	0.79	4.67	0.88	$t(4824)=28.25^{***}$, $d=0.59$
Japan	3.66	0.92	2.59	0.76	$t(9521)=52.81^{***}$, $d=0.96$
Kuwait	4.74	1.08	4.42	1.01	$t(1301)=9.39^{***}$, $d=0.27$
Kyrgyzstan	4.30	1.39	3.88	1.03	$t(3741)=9.84^{***}$, $d=0.26$
Kazakhstan	3.97	1.25	3.49	1.06	$t(2774)=10.76^{***}$, $d=0.29$
Lebanon	4.53	1.11	4.32	0.99	$t(2398)=6.02^{***}$, $d=0.18$
Libya	5.16	0.94	4.11	1.02	$t(3325)=23.24^{***}$, $d=0.81$
Malaysia	4.19	0.89	3.70	1.01	$t(3812)=16.13^{***}$, $d=0.47$
Mexico	4.85	0.99	3.54	1.01	$t(11712)=43.49^{***}$, $d=1.14$
Moldova	4.47	0.94	3.34	1.08	$t(3036)=27.03^{***}$, $d=0.85$
Mali	5.13	0.93	4.18	1.21	$t(1532)=26.50^{***}$, $d=0.73$
Morocco	4.61	1.04	3.71	1.71	$t(4849)=28.81^{***}$, $d=0.63$
New Zealand	4.25	1.22	2.92	0.93	$t(4051)=25.46^{***}$, $d=0.89$
Nigeria	4.79	1.13	4.47	0.98	$t(8013)=8.44^{***}$, $d=0.24$
Norway	4.71	0.77	2.89	0.87	$t(2150)=48.90^{***}$, $d=1.53$
Netherlands	4.20	0.97	2.90	0.90	$t(5095)=51.21^{***}$, $d=1.01$
Pakistan	4.51	1.10	4.43	0.97	$t(5926)=2.52^{*}$, $d=0.08$
Peru	4.61	0.97	3.27	0.97	$t(6820)=47.88^{***}$, $d=1.28$
Philippines	4.93	1.07	3.80	1.01	$t(4798)=27.25^{***}$, $d=0.85$
Poland	4.71	0.78	3.40	0.95	$t(4055)=35.78^{***}$, $d=1.18$
Palestine	4.54	1.03	4.01	1.08	$t(998)=14.52^{***}$, $d=0.47$
Qatar	5.50	0.78	4.69	0.90	$t(1058)=25.32^{***}$, $d=0.78$
South Korea	3.72	1.07	3.49	0.97	$t(8313)=6.45^{***}$, $d=0.25$
Romania	4.35	0.90	3.31	1.14	$t(5773)=35.07^{***}$, $d=0.90$

Russian Federation	4.50	0.96	3.71	1.07	$t(10342)=32.34^{***}$, $d=0.82$
Rwanda	4.38	1.07	3.64	0.90	$t(3032)=35.00^{***}$, $d=0.65$
South Africa	4.51	0.99	4.34	1.01	$t(16784)=7.95^{***}$, $d=0.13$
Singapore	4.21	0.91	3.83	1.03	$t(5494)=13.97^{***}$, $d=0.33$
Slovenia	4.87	0.85	3.54	0.95	$t(3111)=33.93^{***}$, $d=1.08$
Spain	4.75	0.82	3.48	0.85	$t(6317)=56.60^{***}$, $d=1.18$
Serbia	4.12	0.98	3.32	1.08	$t(4744)=19.60^{***}$, $d=0.58$
Sweden	4.73	0.80	3.15	0.96	$t(3216)=38.84^{***}$, $d=1.30$
Switzerland	4.77	0.78	3.28	0.86	$t(3851)=38.07^{***}$, $d=1.20$
Taiwan ROC	4.61	0.88	3.10	0.94	$t(4466)=39.29^{***}$, $d=1.24$
Thailand	4.17	0.99	3.67	0.91	$t(4232)=29.35^{***}$, $d=0.57$
Trinidad and Tobago	4.83	0.91	3.33	1.00	$t(1999)=35.07^{***}$, $d=1.21$
Tunisia	4.42	1.16	4.49	1.07	$t(2411)=-1.60$, $d=-0.05$
Turkey	4.99	0.84	4.17	0.93	$t(11702)=28.67^{***}$, $d=0.82$
United Kingdom	4.65	0.88	3.10	1.01	$t(4741)=35.19^{***}$, $d=1.16$
Ukraine	4.38	0.98	3.31	1.09	$t(6598)=18.11^{***}$, $d=0.68$
Uruguay	4.52	1.03	3.13	1.03	$t(3998)=36.05^{***}$, $d=1.16$
United States	4.31	0.92	2.95	1.02	$t(8817)=27.29^{***}$, $d=0.99$
Uzbekistan	5.11	1.04	3.76	1.03	$t(2748)=37.59^{***}$, $d=1.02$
Yemen	4.78	0.97	3.77	1.16	$t(998)=22.13^{***}$, $d=0.76$
Zambia	4.48	1.10	3.90	1.08	$t(1498)=15.09^{***}$, $d=0.41$
Zimbabwe	4.43	1.28	4.37	1.06	$t(3715)=4.12^{***}$, $d=0.14$

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Figure 6

Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for each comparison of self-transcendence and self-enhancement values for Study 3c by country



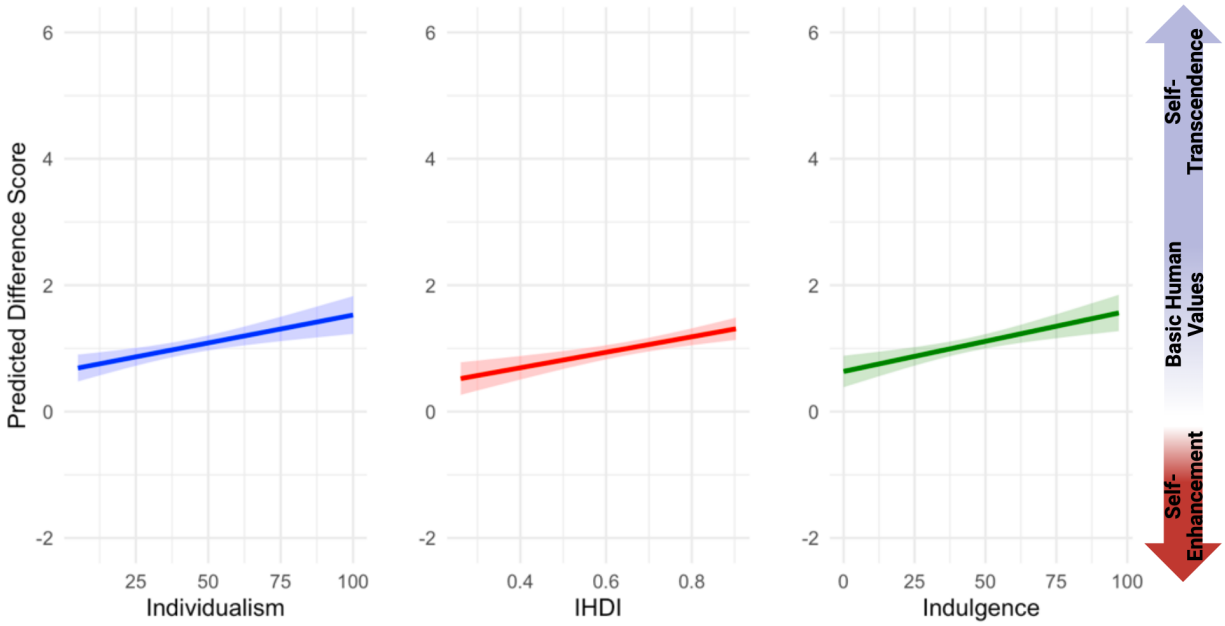
Note. This figure shows Cohen's *d* values of each country with 95% confidence intervals in Study 3c. The red point on the top indicates the meta-analysis coefficient across 78 countries. The red vertical line is on 0 value along the x-axis. All the points except the meta-analysis coefficient were arranged in descending order, from top to bottom.

4.2.4. Differences based on National Culture

Considering the observed variability, and in line with our pre-registered analytical plan, we also investigated whether national-level variables (e.g., motivation toward achievement, individualism, indulgence, and IHDI) predicted the tendency of people to endorse prosocial motivations more than egoistic ones. We estimated a separate random-intercept mixed regression model for each of the four national indicators. In each model, difference scores (self-transcendence – self-enhancement) were regressed on the national indicator in question and participants (level 1) were nested in countries (level 2). Results suggested that differences between self-transcendence and self-enhancement became larger (i.e., a stronger leaning towards self-transcendence) in more individualistic countries (b=0.01, SE=0.00, 95% C.I. [0.00, 0.01], p<.001), and in countries with greater human development (IHDI; b=1.22, SE=0.30, 95% C.I. [0.64, 1.81], p<.001) (see Figure 7). People from countries with higher indulgence also showed stronger endorsement of self-transcendence than self-enhancement (b=0.01, SE=0.00, 95% C.I. [0.00, 0.01], p<.001). However, motivation toward achievement was not statistically significant (b=0.00, SE=0.00, 95% C.I. [-0.01, 0.01], p=.716).

Figure 7

Visualization of mixed regression models depicting the effect of individualism, human development and indulgence on valuing self-transcendence more than self-enhancement in Study 3c



Note. The x-axis indicates each moderator, and the y-axis shows the predicted difference in score, subtracting self-enhancement from self-transcendence. The predicted line is shown with 95% confidence intervals of predicted scores.

5. Discussion

Across three studies, we find consistent support for the hypothesis that people are driven more by other-oriented motives than by egoistic ones across numerous conceptualizations of both constructs. In Study 1, using the Dual Legacy Motives Scale, we find that people prioritize leaving a legacy defined by positively influencing others' lives (impact legacy motives) over merely being remembered favorably after death (reputation legacy motives), underscoring a deeper inclination toward meaningful, prosocial contributions in making a lasting change beyond their lifetime. In Study 2, findings from the Aspiration Index reveal that people prioritize

intrinsic life aspirations—seeking growth, fulfillment, and meaning—over extrinsic aspirations centered on external recognition and achievement. Finally, across Studies 3a to 3c, analyses of multinational datasets, including student samples, the European Social Survey (ESS), and the World Values Survey (WVS), show that individuals place greater emphasis on self-transcendence values, which promote societal well-being, and the greater good, over self-enhancement values focused on personal gain and self-promotion. Importantly, these findings emerge consistently across established, well-validated, and theoretically driven measures, bolstering the conclusion that people are more strongly motivated by altruistic than egotistical motivations.

The second major goal of this investigation was to determine the generalizability of these findings across (a) variables, (b) countries, (c) development, (d) unique populations, and (e) time. The studies encompassed diverse measures, including legacy motives, life aspirations, and human values. To maximize cross-cultural representation, we analyzed multinational student datasets, ESS, and WVS in Study 3. We also conducted moderation analyses to pinpoint cultural and national factors that widen or shorten the gap between altruism and egotism. Furthermore, our samples included a wide range of populations, from adolescents and college students to adults, older individuals, and even rare, hard-to-reach samples of exceptional altruists. Additionally, the datasets were collected at different time points across studies or samples, reinforcing the temporal consistency of our findings.

In Study 1, we found that participants consistently endorsed impact legacy motives more than reputation legacy motives across all 22 samples. While it is possible social desirability bias may have played a role, the robustness and magnitude of the observed effects provide strong support for our conclusion. Moreover, an intriguing pattern in the data further helps to alleviate

social desirability concerns: the largest effect sizes emerged in samples of Effective Altruists and living organ donors—individuals who actively engage in exceptional and costly prosocial behavior in the real world, such as donating income or having donated organs to complete strangers. To qualify as living organ donors, prospective donors undergo clinical evaluations to ensure that their motivations are genuinely altruistic. Prior work has demonstrated that an enhanced proclivity and capacity to empathize with suffering strangers and honesty-humility trait are what distinguish these donors from the general population (Amormino et al., 2025; Law et al., 2026). Importantly, these donations are made without expectations of media attention or public recognition, as it requires the recipient's consent. Thus, the decision to donate is unlikely to stem from reputational benefits. In fact, some donors report receiving skeptical reactions from others, consistent with the idea that non-normative altruism may rather elicit reputational penalties (Kawamura & Kusumi, 2020). This suggests that the self-report measures used in the present research are sensitive to real-world prosocial concerns—populations whose commitment to helping others manifests in their real-world behaviors also *report* being driven by other-oriented motives rather than egotistical ones to a greater extent than anyone else surveyed.

Further evidence that the present findings are unlikely to be driven solely by social desirability bias comes from consistency in patterns that deviate from the general trends found across studies and measures. Namely, while Study 2 replicated the general pattern of results from Study 1, with 58 out of 59 samples reporting stronger intrinsic than extrinsic life aspirations, the only exception was a sample from South Africa (Roman et al., 2015). Notably, the two samples with the smallest effect sizes—one of which had a negative effect size, suggesting stronger emphasis on extrinsic than intrinsic aspirations—were also from South Africa (Davids et al., 2017). This trend persisted in Study 3c, where South Africa again showed among the smallest

effect sizes in the WVS. All in all, the convergence of findings across different measures and datasets underscores the consistency of our results while also revealing meaningful cross-national variability in these motivational patterns.

Study 3 extended the findings from Studies 1 and 2 to large-scale, multinational datasets. In Study 3a, which analyzed multinational student datasets, respondents from East Asian countries—including South Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, and Turkey—exhibited negative or near-zero effect sizes. This pattern may be linked to collectivistic values and the highly competitive environments within these countries, particularly those driven by extrinsic motivations such as achievement, social status, and success. The apparent contradiction between collectivistic cultural orientations and heightened competitiveness may initially appear paradoxical, given predominant perceptions associating collectivism with harmonious social relations. However, contemporary research has elucidated how these seemingly disparate characteristics can coexist. Wu and Talhelm (2024) demonstrated that people in collectivistic societies exhibit a greater propensity for social comparison and derive their self-worth primarily from collectively established standards rather than individually defined goals. This reliance intensifies competitive dynamics within the group context. Moreover, these collectivistic competitive processes typically manifest through indirect and implicit mechanisms that preserve interpersonal harmony while simultaneously facilitating competitive behavior, thereby allowing the coexistence of outward social cohesion and underlying competitive motivations. Additionally, cross-national research demonstrates that altruism thrives in environments where people have the resources and cultural framework to pursue personally meaningful goals rather than in collectivistic societies with competitive extrinsic motivations (Rhoads et al., 2021). Study 3b, which focused exclusively on European countries, found that participants from all 39

countries endorsed self-transcendence more than self-enhancement. Similarly, Study 3c, based on the WVS dataset, revealed that individuals from 78 out of 79 countries favored self-transcendence over self-enhancement, with Tunisia being the only exception.

To further explore potential moderators of these patterns, we conducted moderation analyses using four variables: individualism, motivation towards achievement, IHDI, and indulgence. Consistent with our interpretation above, our results indicated that individualism, IHDI, and indulgence significantly moderated the relationship between self-transcendence and self-enhancement. Specifically, countries that were more individualistic, more developed, and promoted greater personal autonomy exhibited stronger endorsements of self-transcendence compared to countries that were less individualistic, less developed, and where authority exerted greater control over individuals.

Additionally, we observed that seven countries exhibiting minimal or reversed differences between self-transcendence and self-enhancement (i.e., Tunisia, Algeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Haiti, Zimbabwe, and Lebanon) shared histories of colonialism, had low IHDI scores, and experienced significant internal strife. One possible interpretation is that nations with a history of colonialism may have fewer resources available for collective well-being, as their economic and social development has been historically hindered compared to nations without such histories (Heldring & Robinson, 2012).

5.1. Implications

These studies offer several implications. First, by illustrating that people inherently exhibit more other-oriented motives, our findings contribute to the advancement of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), the Theory of Human Values (Schwartz, 2012), and research on legacy motives (Syropoulos et al., 2023) by suggesting that most people are driven

more by altruistic than egoistic motivations. However, it is important to acknowledge that a stronger altruistic inclination does not always necessarily translate into prosocial behavior. Nevertheless, our findings suggest people are at least inclined toward altruistic motivations.

This emphasis on motivations rather than behavioral outcomes represents a crucial distinction in the current research. While prior literature examining behaviors in egoism-altruism paradigms predominantly suggests that individuals are more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviors when personal benefits are attainable (Cialdini et al., 1987), our findings reveal a more nuanced motivational landscape. The consistent finding that people perceive themselves as primarily motivated by other-oriented concerns rather than self-oriented ones shows the potency and pervasiveness of innate altruistic motivational structures even beyond the domain of prosociality where these distinctions are typically studied and discussed.

Second, the universality of these results implies the strength of fundamental altruistic values or virtues that underpin human motivation and psychology. Across three studies, 904,516 participants and 101 countries, we consistently found that people are driven more strongly by other-oriented and altruistic motivations than by self-oriented ones, regardless of variable types, cultural contexts, age ranges, or levels of socioeconomic development.

Third, cultural factors seem to play a significant role in shaping these motivational patterns. Our moderation analyses in Study 3c revealed that variations in cultural dimensions—including individualism versus collectivism, indulgence, and development indices—affect the extent to which altruistic motives are endorsed. This suggests that shifts in cultural values over time could influence the inclination between self-transcendent and self-enhancing values.

Finally, our findings contribute to the long-standing debate regarding the nature of humans as altruistic or not. Our cross-cultural self-report data indicate that people are more

inclined toward other-oriented altruistic motives than self-oriented egoistic ones. Rather than making claims about the essential nature of human behavior, we delicately shift the focus toward the types of motivations people tend to prioritize. This perspective offers insights into the motivational landscape of human social behavior and sets the stage for future research in this vein.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strengths of these studies, further research is warranted to reconcile several limitations. First, all findings in this research are based on self-report measures, raising the possibility that social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses. However, the significantly larger differences observed among exceptionally altruistic people—such as Effective Altruists and Organ Donors—suggest that our results are not merely an outcome of social desirability bias, as these groups engage in prosocial behaviors to a greater extent than others, even at great costs to themselves. Moreover, we observed a consistent pattern across a variety of motivational domains, including legacy motives, life aspirations, and values. Yet, the fact that not all countries exhibited this pattern on average further reinforces the robustness of our findings. Additionally, emerging research indicates that social desirability bias is less pronounced in anonymous online surveys compared to laboratory-based studies on ethical beliefs (Tan et al., 2021). Given that most of our datasets were collected through online surveys, our findings—particularly regarding legacy motives and human basic values—are likely less susceptible to this bias. Nonetheless, future research should further examine this limitation by incorporating behavioral measures, such as resource allocation tasks, text analysis of open-ended responses on social media, or third-party ratings. Future research may also examine the

evolutionary basis of these motivational tendencies, exploring whether these orientations reflect adaptive processes related to cooperation and group survival.

Second, despite our best effort to conduct this research across the world, some constructs (e.g., legacy motives and life aspirations) were examined in a more limited set of countries compared to others (i.e., human basic values), for which we had more diverse samples. Future studies should aim to expand the investigation of legacy motives and life aspirations across a broader range of cultural and national contexts to enhance the generalizability of these findings. Extant evidence suggests that, for instance, intergenerational values are widely endorsed across the Western world (Syropoulos et al., 2024b) and that intergenerational interventions targeting sustainable outcomes (see Vlasceanu et al., 2024) are equally effective across political (Berkebile-Weinberg et al., 2024) and cultural divides (Goldwert et al., 2024). In tandem with evidence that intergenerational values are a form of prosocial concerns (Law et al., 2025a), it stands to reason that we would expect similar findings for legacy, and potential intrinsic aspirations. Nevertheless, future research should test these predictions using theoretically grounded cross-cultural measures that more fully and directly capture other-oriented versus self-oriented motivational dimensions.

Finally, while our results indicate that individuals self-reported stronger inclinations toward altruistic over egoistic motivational orientations across three consequential domains, previous research suggests that people tend to discount the virtue of others when it comes to third party judgements in vignettes (Kraft-Todd et al., 2023). Given the well-documented limitations of self-report measures, our findings may not fully capture the nuances that would emerge from third-party assessments of people's motivations. Nevertheless, our results reveal that people consistently report prioritizing altruistic over egoistic motivations across diverse samples and

measures, suggesting a genuine inclination toward other-oriented concerns. An important question for future research is whether people hold similar beliefs about *others'* motivations. That is, do individuals predict that most people prioritize altruistic over egoistic motivations, as our participants reported for themselves?

6. Conclusion

Across three studies, 101 countries and nearly 900,000 respondents, we found that individuals are predominantly driven by altruistic rather than egotistical motivations. This pattern emerged consistently across three different motivational domains, diverse samples, and a wide range of national contexts, encompassing not only differences in health, education, and income, but also cultural value orientations such as individualism and indulgence. While the potential influence of social desirability bias cannot be ruled out, the notable variability observed in our results reinforces the robustness, generalizability, and wide-spread nature of this motivational tendency, and moderation analyses begin to tap into the cultural influences that may modulate it.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT and Claude for grammar check and editing. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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