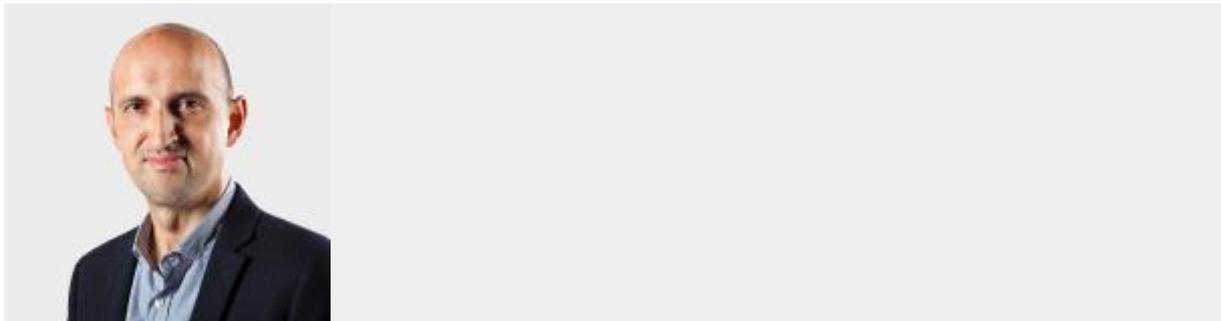


MATTHEW SYED

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It's natural to seek kudos for charity work. I do it, why shouldn't Beckham?

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In 2002 I co-founded a charity that helps kids from deprived areas through sport. This organisation now employs 80 people full time, operates across the capital, and provides coaching, support and mentoring for more than 30,000 young people. It is called Greenhouse Sports.

Do I care about the children helped by the organisation? Yes. Is that part of the driving force behind the time I give to the charity? Yes. But do I also gain personal benefits from being a high-profile member of the organisation, and are these a key part of the reason for being involved? Absolutely.

It is a fool's game to make inferences about character from private conversations

When I wrote my profile for my personal website, I made sure that it referenced the charity. Whenever I am asked to give a public speech, I ensure that Greenhouse is mentioned when I am introduced to the audience. The reason I do this is because I know that giving to others reflects well upon myself. It bolsters my image. And I care about my image.

This admission will come as no surprise to anyone with a passing understanding of psychology, as the recognition that human action emerges from mixed motives has been understood since at least the time of Aristotle. Altruism and self-interest are not mutually exclusive, but often intertwined in the same basic animus. Anyone with a sliver of self-awareness grasps this fact.

Which brings me to David Beckham. For we now know, on the basis of allegedly stolen emails, that he rather hoped to gain a knighthood as a consequence of the considerable time he gives to Unicef. This will strike most people as breathtakingly unexceptional. Many who give to charity hope for recognition of some kind. Even the New Testament widow who

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donated a mite — her left hand not knowing what her right was doing — expected the Lord God to give her a pat on the back.

It is in this context that the outcry against Beckham — mainly, it has to be said, from the sanctimonious and self-righteous — has been astonishing. One person on Twitter described him as a hypocrite: “Real heroes don’t use charity work to get knighthoods.” Jan Moir of the Daily Mail said that Beckham is “now revealed to be a narcissistic schemer who uses the suffering of others to polish his own credentials and promote the one cause dearest to his heart — himself.”



Beckham has been an ambassador for Unicef since 2005
NIGEL FRENCH/EMPICS
SPORT/PA

Piers Morgan even managed to compare Beckham with Jimmy Savile: “I think a person’s motivation for charity work matters. Exhibit One: Sir Jimmy Savile.” One wonders at such faulty (and offensive) logic. Savile worked with kids to abuse them. He wanted to harm the targets of his charitable work. Beckham, on the other hand, wants to help children, and to help himself. This is not just different but the complete opposite.

To expose fully the hypocrisy of those targeting Beckham, consider a famous study that examined some of the world’s most charitable people: winners of the annual Caring Canadian Award, the country’s most prestigious honour for giving, which recognises people who devote years to social causes and community work. Two eminent psychologists spent more

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than a hundred hours interviewing such people to understand their motivations and mindsets, and compared them with a group matched for ethnicity, age, gender and education, but who had not sustained the same duration of giving.

They then rated two key motivations: self-interest and altruism. In other words, were they interested in what they themselves got out of their work? Or were they motivated by how others benefited from their work? Unsurprisingly, Caring Canadians rated higher than the comparison group on altruism. Indeed, when they listed their goals, they had more than twice as many goals to help other people. But here's the thing: they also scored higher on self-interest. They had about 20 per cent more goals about gaining influence and — wait for it — earning recognition.



Beckham meets Sebenelle, 14, in Swaziland, in June last year. The former footballer's 7 Fund is helping Unicef to provide life-saving treatment, care and support to HIV-positive children UNICEF/GETTY IMAGES

Yes, you heard that last bit right. Caring Canadians, who had spent years helping others, advancing causes, giving their precious time to reduce hardship, had been angling for status and recognition all along. Does this make their work less worthy? Does it mean that the suffering they alleviated is less real? On the contrary. The fact that they were helping others at the same time as helping themselves made it easier to sustain their motivation — and do more good.

This finding is now one of the most well-established in psychology. “Most people assume that self-interest and [altruism] are opposite ends of one continuum,” Adam Grant, professor of psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has said. “Yet in my studies of what drives people at work, I’ve consistently found that . . . you can have both at the same time.” Bill Gates (who has donated billions while receiving a boost to his image, not to mention the Presidential Medal of Freedom) put it this way: “There are two great forces of

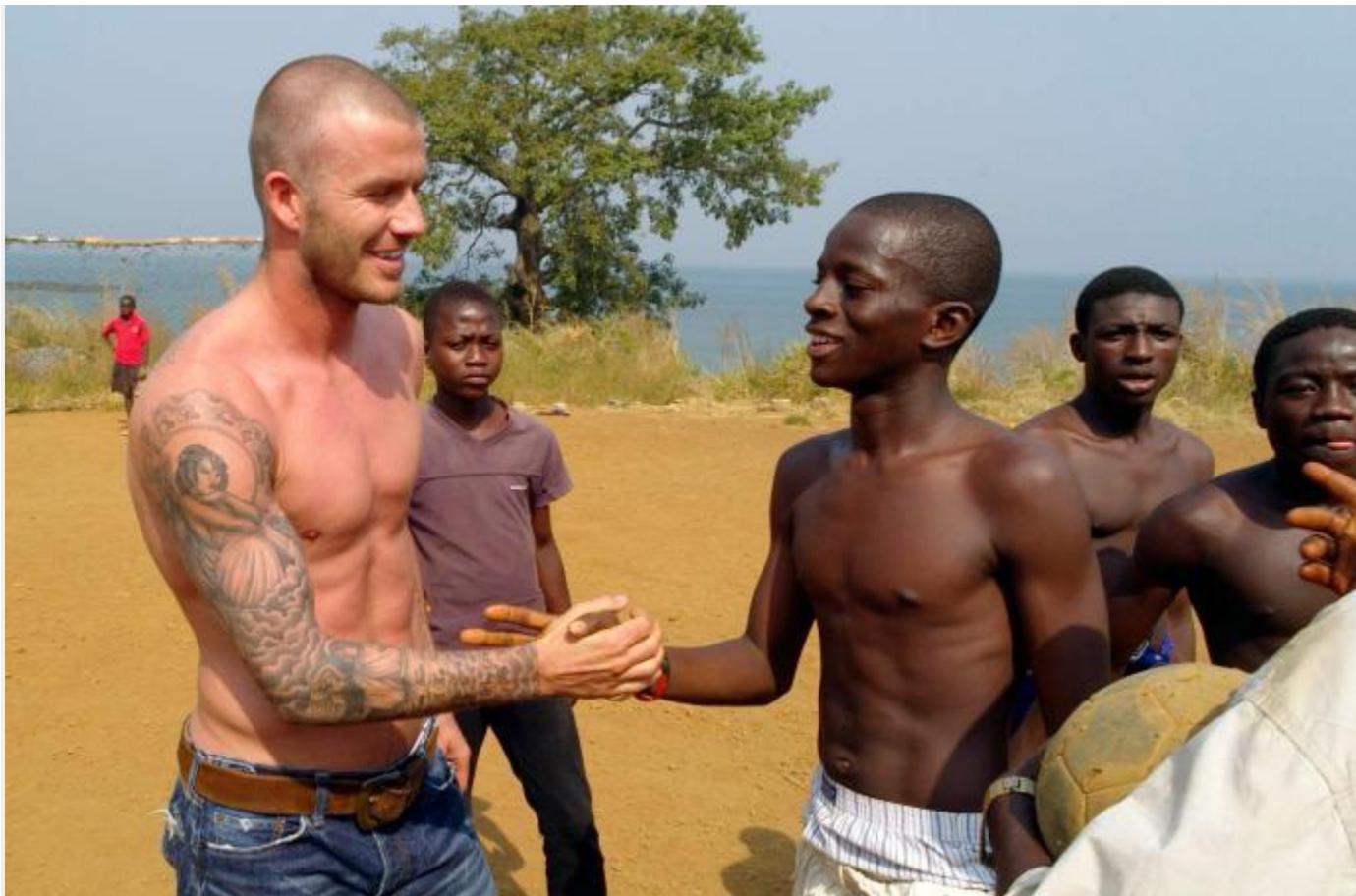
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human nature: self-interest and caring for others.” He also said that people give more when guided by a “hybrid engine” of the two.

Beckham deserves little of the abuse coming his way, and none at all for wishing for recognition for his charity work

Beckham has given many weeks to Unicef. He has personally donated millions, and his fund has raised millions more. He also donated his Paris Saint-Germain wages of about £1.5 million to a French children’s hospital in 2013. OK, so he wanted kudos. He wished for a knighthood, too, and expressed anger in private emails when he didn’t get one. But this isn’t hypocrisy; it is human. Those who dislike the honours system may wonder why anyone would want one of these baubles, but that is a different issue. True hypocrisy consists of judging those who wish to be recognised for their good works, for it contains the implication that only they are motivated by pure, untainted altruism.

As for the other allegations in the so-called “Beckham files”, the one pertaining to his involvement in a tax-avoidance scheme along with 1,300 other people — including a member of the Bank of England’s financial policy committee — was well known in 2014 and, while regrettable, was believed by many experts to be sound. Moreover, Beckham has since changed his tax affairs and, according to sources, has paid £11 million in 2015-16. You might say he has learnt his lesson.



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Beckham in Sierra Leone in 2008, greeting players of a roadside football game in Freetown
DAVID TURNLEY/UNICEF/REUTERS

As for the other “revelations” gleaned from 18.6 million emails and documents allegedly hacked from servers of Simon Oliveira, Beckham’s friend and PR adviser, they are nothing more than tittle-tattle. Beckham’s criticism of Katherine Jenkins (he referred pejoratively to her drug use) was a private remark, emailed to a confidant, and may have borne no comparison to Beckham’s considered view. Indeed, for all we know, it may have been intended as a joke, perhaps in the context of a previous conversation of which none of us are aware.

Isn’t that the point about private life? We shoot from the hip, we let off steam, particularly to close friends, not least so that they can bring us into a calmer and more rational state of mind. Making inferences about a person’s character from private conversations, digital or otherwise, is a fool’s game. It is a grievous indictment of our culture that so many are playing it.

On the wider point, it is a curious world when a footballer, who has risen from humble beginnings through hard work and resilience, and who gives time and money to charity, is attacked with gusto on the basis of private information allegedly stolen by a criminal gang that reportedly then sought to extort £1 million as the price of their silence, allegedly leaking the information when a blackmail attempt did not work.

On the basis of what we have seen so far, Beckham deserves little of the abuse coming his way, and none at all for wishing for recognition for his charity work. When we do good things in the hope of kudos, we are doing nothing wrong, whether we are involved with Unicef, Greenhouse, or the local soup kitchen. There is nothing more natural, or more human.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/critics-of-david-beckham-for-knighthood-ambition-are-hypocrites-3lgg7d55f?shareToken=58662a2d48c10207a2203905487a5813>