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Positive feelings reward and promote prosocial behavior

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Humans are extraordinarily prosocial. What inspires and reinforces a willingness to help others? Here we focus on the role of positive feelings. Drawing on functional accounts of positive emotion, which suggest that positive emotional states serve to alert actors to positive experiences and encourage similar action in the future, we summarize evidence demonstrating that positive feelings promote and reward prosocial behavior throughout development. Specifically, we highlight new and classic evidence from both child and adult research showing first, that various positive states prompt prosocial behavior, and second, prosocial action leads to positive states. We also consider the possibility of a positive feedback loop, wherein the emotional rewards of giving promote future prosociality.

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Humans are exceptionally prosocial, commonly incurring personal costs to give their time, money, and skill for the benefit of others — even those they do not know and are not related to. This willingness to engage in costly prosocial behavior emerges early in life [1–4], raising questions about what factors predict and reinforce this pleasant but peculiar behavior. Here we summarize research with adults and children demonstrating that positive feelings (for instance, positive affect and emotions, such as feelings of happiness, gratitude, and empathy) both cause, and result from, prosocial behavior. Finally, we consider the possibility of a positive feedback loop, in which the emotional rewards of giving promote future prosocial action.

Affect and emotion as information for the actor

Affect and emotion are valuable sources of information that allow humans to rapidly evaluate the environment and adaptively guide their subsequent action. Just as disgust alerts actors to a spoiled or vulgar stimulus that should be expelled or avoided, positive affect and emotions — denoted here as ‘positive feelings’ to capture brief or longer lasting positive states — typically alert actors to their engagement with positive experiences or stimuli and serve to reinforce similar behavior in the future [5–9]. Indeed, while negative emotions often prompt specific and immediate responses to aid an individual’s survival, positive emotions are thought to illicit a more general response, broadening an actor’s mindset and promoting advantageous behavior (i.e. building physical, cognitive, and social resources to manage future threats [7]).

Positive feelings predict engagement in prosocial behavior

If positive emotions broaden an individual’s mindset, their attention may be drawn away from themselves and toward others. If so, people may be more likely to enact kind deeds when experiencing positive feelings. Consistent with this logic, numerous studies conducted with adults and children have shown that positive states inspire prosocial behavior.

Adults

A large body of evidence suggests that adults reporting greater well-being spend more time volunteering [10]. This association is also observable when looking at the behavior of large groups rather than individuals: Geographic differences in well-being predict rates of extraordinary acts of prosociality such as organ donation [11]. Importantly, the impact of positive feelings on prosocial behavior is causal: Adults randomly assigned to experience positive affect provide more help to others than those who do not. This finding has been documented across a myriad of positive feeling manipulations, including reading positive mood statements [12], listing happy thoughts [13], thinking about a Hawaiian vacation [14], receiving a surprise payment [15], or experiencing a recent success [16], and predicts prosocial behavior on a variety of tasks, such as donating blood [13], or helping an experimenter [15]. For instance, adults assigned to find a dime in a payphone picked up more fallen papers for a confederate than those who did not find a dime, presumably because only those receiving a surprise windfall experienced a boost in positive affect [15]. Interestingly, subsequent work suggests that this relationship between

positive feelings and kindness may be qualified by the source of affect (i.e. oneself or others). Specifically, the highest levels of generosity follow positive affect stemming from self-relevant experiences, such as thinking about a personal success, but follow negative affect stemming from other-relevant experiences, such as thinking about another's pain or loss [14].

Along similar lines, adults who experience higher levels of *empathy*, defined as the ability to understand and share the emotions of others, are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior than those who do not [17,18; but see 19]. While vicariously experiencing others' emotions would only be pleasant when a target is experiencing a positive state, empathy is a robust predictor of prosocial action. For instance, adults reporting higher levels of trait empathic concern are more likely to engage in costly helping behavior, while motivations to reduce one's *own* personal distress do not correlate with prosocial acts [20]. Interestingly, new accounts highlight how empathy can be a motivated emotion, and as such, may vacillate depending on the target and situation [21]. This may explain why people do not empathize with all needy individuals (e.g., out-group members [22]), and forgo the opportunity to help disliked others [23].

Other positive feelings appear to promote prosocial behavior among adults. *Awe*, a positive emotion experienced when encountering vast and expansive stimuli such as the Grand Canyon, tends to make people feel small, which in turn minimizes self-focus and inspires generosity. For instance, adults assigned to view an awe-inducing nature video subsequently donated more raffle tickets to another participant than those who watched an amusement-inducing nature video [24].

Elevation, a positive emotion prompted by witnessing the kind acts of others, has also been demonstrated to promote prosocial action [25,26]. Adults assigned to watch a video in which individuals improve others' well-being were more likely to offer assistance on an onerous task than participants who watched a control video [27].

Finally, *gratitude*, the emotion one feels after recognizing that they have benefitted from another person's kindness, inspires prosocial behavior. For example, adults assigned to receive assistance from another person (as opposed to simply interacting with another person), engaged in more costly economic behavior toward both the helper and a stranger — a finding that was fully mediated by feelings of gratitude [28,29].

Children

Although fewer studies have examined whether positive feelings promote prosocial behavior in children, the existing evidence is consistent with adult research. In particular, greater happiness has a causal impact on subsequent

generosity. Seven-year-olds and 8-year-olds assigned to think about things that made them happy donated more money to another child than children assigned to think about things that made them feel sad or neutral [30]. Again, the source of positive feelings influenced generous action; children give more to others after thinking about a self-relevant success and others' challenges [31]. Similarly, among 4-year-olds and 6-year olds, some components of empathic responding predict prosocial action both immediately and two years later [32].

Researchers have not yet examined whether awe, elevation, and gratitude, if detectable in young children, predict engagement in prosocial behavior. These are interesting avenues for future work.

Prosocial behavior promotes positive feelings

Positive feelings seem to spur prosocial action, but do acts of prosociality generate positive feelings? A growing body of evidence suggests that they do.

Adults

Supporting this claim, adults assigned to commit kind acts for others or the world were significantly happier at the end of a 6-week study than adults assigned to commit kind acts for themselves [33,34*]. Similarly, using money to benefit others by engaging in *prosocial spending* yields emotional rewards [35*,36]. In one study, students randomly assigned to spend \$5 or \$20 on others reported higher positive affect at the end of the day than students assigned to spend the same amounts on themselves [37]. Importantly, this relationship is observable in rich and poor countries outside North America [38]. Even adults in a small-scale rural village express greater positive affect after purchasing items for others than after purchasing the same items for themselves [39*]. The positive feelings derived from giving can be detected both when givers do not have direct contact with the beneficiary, and when participants believe that experimenters are unaware of condition assignment, suggesting that happiness is not simply a result of building social relationships or anticipating social praise [40,41].

Children

Recent research suggests that young children experience the positive emotional consequences of engaging in prosocial acts as well. For instance, in one study, 23-month-olds were given several edible treats and then asked to engage in costly giving by providing one of their treats to a puppet. Each child was also asked to engage in non-costly giving by providing an identical treat that did not belong to them to the puppet. Toddlers' facial expressions were later coded for happiness. Analyses revealed that children were happier after giving away treats (by engaging in costly or non-costly giving) than when receiving treats themselves. Crucially, children appeared happiest after engaging in costly giving, suggesting that generosity is not

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