

## Prosocial behavior and well-being in different cultures

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Western conceptualizations of the life well lived focus on the idea that virtue is the path to individual happiness. Living a virtuous life is the key to salvation according to all major world religions (e.g. “do good, lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great”, Luke 6:35), and intentionally practicing altruism is promoted by folk psychology as the way to escape the self and flourish. The link between happiness and virtue can be traced down to the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* (doing and living well) is an activity in accord with virtue (*aretē*) (Aristotle, *trans.* 2011, X). All these perspectives converge in emphasizing that doing good (to others) does not only benefit them, but also the person who does it.

Considering how prevalent the above idea is in Western thought, it is surprising to note that only in the last 20 years has psychology started to investigate systematically whether intentionally enacting prosocial behavior has any positive effects on the actor. A now growing body of literature backs up with scientific evidence the claim that kindness and well-being are closely connected (Curry et al., 2018). However, if doing good actually feels good (as science suggests), why aren't people kind more often? In this paper, we review the literature pertaining to the effects of engaging in prosocial behavior on the well-being of the benefactor, focusing on the mechanisms and moderating factors of this association. First, we review recent correlational, experimental and interventional research investigating the relationship between prosocial behavior and the well-being of the benefactor, as well as its mediating mechanism, and interpret the findings in light of

self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), focusing particularly on the explanatory pathways through satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Throughout, we argue that the claim that kindness improves benefactors' mental health has been overly simplified, as it ignores the moralizing aspect of prosocial behavior. Individuals have different conceptualizations of morality (which are often culturally determined), and might act prosocially for different reasons. Therefore, the motives behind engaging in prosocial behavior play an important role in determining how people feel when acting prosocially. Consequently, we move on to reviewing cross-cultural research on agentic and obligated motivation to engage in prosocial behavior, and the role that motivation plays in determining whether prosocial behavior enactment is conducive to positive affect. Next, we discuss whether moral discourse could stand behind the reviewed cultural moderation effects, contrasting Kantian (Western) and Confucian (Eastern) ethics. Finally, we point out some gaps in the literature and suggest future directions. Revisiting evidence from cross-cultural research in the framework of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we aim to offer a more complex perspective on the science of prosocial behavior and happiness, bringing into discussion the role of motivation, morality, relationship between benefactor and target, and culture.

### Engagement in Prosocial Behavior and Well-Being

The existence of a positive relationship between engagement in prosocial behavior and subjective well-being has been documented by correlational (Meier & Stutzer, 2008), experimental (Martela & Ryan, 2016a), and interventional studies (Layous et al., 2012). Using different

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methodologies, operationalizations of prosocial behavior, and sampling populations, these studies converge in revealing that other-focused behavior has positive effects on the actor (Piliavin, 2003).

Correlational studies have shown that people who are characterized by high kindness are more satisfied with their life (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), those who frequently spend money on others are happier, regardless of culture (Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), those who volunteer report higher well-being (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Meier & Stutzer, 2008; Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998), those with compassionate goals are low in depression and anxiety and high in positive affect (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009), those high in communal strength who make sacrifices for their romantic partners experience more positive emotions and relationship satisfaction (Kogan et al., 2010), along with a host of other benefits for the benefactors (Piliavin, 2003). However, correlational design cannot speak of causation, as it is very likely that happier people are more prone to engage in prosocial behavior in the first place (Isen & Levin, 1972).

Elaborating on the direction of causation, experimental research brings evidence to support the claim that prosocial behavior does lead to an increase in positive affect. For example, merely recalling a past instance of engagement in prosocial behavior improves current mood. Participants who recalled spending money on others versus on themselves were seen to attain a more positive affect state (Aknin et al., 2013; Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2012), as were those who recalled an instance of other-focused helping versus self-focused helping (Wiwad & Aknin, 2017), and those who just counted their acts of kindness over the last week (Otake et al., 2006). Furthermore, in field and laboratory studies, individuals who were randomly assigned to engage in prosocial behavior experienced an increase in positive affect, including those who were given an opportunity to help a confederate (Harris, 1977; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), and those who were randomly assigned to spend money on others (Aknin et al., 2013; Anik, Aknin, Norton, Dunn, & Quoidbach, 2013; Dunn et al., 2008; Geenen, Hohelüchter, Langholf, & Walther, 2014). This effect has been confirmed not only on adults. Toddlers as young as two showed greater happiness when giving treats to others compared

to when receiving treats themselves (Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012). Furthermore, direct contact with the beneficiary is not necessary, as even online based prosocial behavior in which the target remains anonymous can boost vitality and well-being. In one study, participants who knew that the points they gained in an online game would be converted to food donations experienced greater well-being versus those who were not aware of such prosocial contribution (Martela & Ryan, 2016a). In summary, studies have employed a wide range of prosocial behaviors, including real-life and online helping, in order to demonstrate that kindness *causes* positive affect.

Given the above, if kindness improves the mood of the benefactors, could intentionally engaging in prosocial behavior promote well-being? Kindness-based positive activity interventions suggest that this is so. In such interventions, participants are randomly assigned to a kindness condition (intentionally conducting acts of kindness for a longer period of time) or a control condition (engaging in an activity that does not have any effects on mood), and report on various measures of well-being throughout the intervention. In one study (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010), participants who were randomly assigned to perform acts of kindness for 10 days reported higher life satisfaction than the control group. Other studies, employing longer interventions, replicate these findings. For example, U.S. and Korean participants who performed acts of kindness over a six-week period of positive activity intervention showed higher well-being upon post-test compared to the control group, and the effects remained at least marginally significant after a one-month follow-up (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). These results suggest that the positive effect of engaging in prosocial behavior does not wear off immediately. Similarly, in a six-week intervention contrasting self-oriented versus other-oriented kindness, participants from a diverse sample (students, adults, and MTurk workers) who performed acts of kindness for others showed increases in positive affect and decreases in negative affect at post-test compared to those who did acts of kindness for the self or engaged in another neutral activity, and the effects remained marginally significant upon a two-week follow-up (Nelson et al., 2016). Furthermore, in another 6-week intervention on U.S. and Korean participants, the biggest boosts in well-being were observed for participants who received autonomy support (Nelson et al., 2015). A kind-

ness intervention carried out in an academic environment showed that engagement in prosocial acts leads to higher positive emotions and academic engagement, suggesting that the benefits of the intervention extend to motivation, as well (Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2014). The positive effects of kindness interventions were replicated with diverse samples, including socially anxious individuals (Alden & Trew, 2013), preadolescents (Layout et al., 2012), and corporate employees (Chancellor, Margolis, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2018). A recent meta-analysis of kindness interventions (Curry et al., 2018) concluded that engagement in prosocial behavior has small to medium effects on the benefactor, and these effects are not moderated by age, gender, or other individual characteristics.

### Mediating Role of Basic Psychological Needs

All research reviewed above suggest that performing prosocial acts has positive effects on the benefactor, leading to greater positive affect, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness. But why? Not many studies have investigated the mediating mechanism of the association between engagement in prosocial behavior and well-being. However, most research focusing on the mediating pathways between kindness and well-being have employed the theoretical framework of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000), showing that satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness explains why prosocial behavior is conducive to positive emotions (Martela & Ryan, 2016a).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a major theory of human motivation which posits that individuals have three fundamental psychological needs whose satisfaction leads to growth and well-being. In self-determination theory, psychological needs are conceptualized as “innate psychological nutrients that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229). Three needs are involved, including need for autonomy (being free to choose and in control of one’s actions), need for relatedness (being connected to others), and need for competence (being capable to carry out difficult tasks). Activities that support satisfaction of the basic psychological needs facilitate performance and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci et al., 2001; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). Consequently, if enactment of prosocial behavior leads to

satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, then it could explain why prosocial behavior promotes subjective well-being. Other-oriented behavior could facilitate the satisfaction of the need for relatedness, because kind behavior necessitates an interaction between the giver and the receiver, interaction which fosters a sense of closeness and connection. Prosocial behavior could also promote the satisfaction of the need for competence, because performing the behavior requires intentional effort, and succeeding in doing something that benefits another could enhance feelings of social competence. Finally, engagement in prosocial behavior could satisfy the need for autonomy, as other-oriented behavior is mostly enacted at the choice of the benefactor, for autonomous reasons.

Some of the reviewed literature brings empirical evidence to support the mediating role of basic psychological need satisfaction. Satisfaction of all three basic psychological needs fully mediated the relationship between daily autonomous helping and well-being in a diary study, while autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction mediated the relationship between engagement in autonomous helping and well-being in three experimental studies (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, in the latter studies, competence need satisfaction had only marginally-significant indirect effects. In a kindness-based intervention, satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness independently mediated the effect of kindness with autonomy support on well-being (Nelson et al., 2015). Furthermore, in an online experiment in which participants played for food donations (Martela & Ryan, 2016a), satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence mediated the relationship between engagement in prosocial behavior and positive affect, but the indirect effect of relatedness need was not significant, possibly because there was no contact with the beneficiaries. In another study, global satisfaction of psychological needs (the three needs were not assessed separately) mediated the effect of prosocial spending on well-being, exclusively for individuals high in self-transcendence (Hill & Howell, 2014). Finally, in another study, Martela and Ryan (2016b) tested the mediating effect of beneficence (the feeling of making a contribution to others), and uncovered that all three basic psychological needs mediated the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being, alongside beneficence. This study suggests an alternative explanation to why proso-

cial behavior promotes well-being, while bringing further evidence of the role played by satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Although these studies bring support to the idea that autonomy, competence, and relatedness have independent explanatory power, and significantly mediate the effect of engagement in prosocial behavior on well-being, it is important to note that in some experiments, not all needs were observed to have significant indirect effects (Martela & Ryan, 2016a; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). This suggests that empirical evidence is still inadequate for drawing a conclusion pertaining to the independent contribution of the three psychological needs.

### Prosocial Behavior and Well-Being in Different Cultures

As most research in psychology, a majority of studies investigating the effect of prosocial behavior on the well-being of the benefactor has dealt with WEIRD samples (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Only some cross-cultural research has provided support for the universality of the positive effect of engagement in prosocial behavior. For example, Aknin and her colleagues have replicated the association between prosocial spending and well-being in 136 countries, and showed that spending money on others causes happiness in experiments involving participants from Canada and South Africa (Aknin et al., 2013), as well as in a small isolated rural society in Vanuatu (Aknin, Broesch, Hamlin, & Van de Vondervoort, 2015). As for the positive effect of kindness interventions on well-being, two studies provided evidence from both the U.S. and Korea (Layous et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2015), one study involved Japanese undergraduates (Otake et al., 2006), and one study was carried out on Spanish participants (Chancellor et al., 2018). Another study, conducted in China, showed that charitable behavior is associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and that the relationship is mediated by relatedness need satisfaction (Jiang, Zeng, Zhang, & Wang, 2016). However, in this study, satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence was not measured, so it remains unclear whether all three basic psychological needs have similar significant mediating effects in non-Western cultural contexts.

### Motives Behind Prosocial Behavior and Their Relationship to Well-Being

Past research suggests that engagement in prosocial behavior promotes well-being by satisfying individuals' basic psychological needs. However, is prosocial behavior always intrinsically satisfying, and does it lead to the experience of positive affect no matter the conditions under which it has been performed? Some of the above reviewed studies suggest that only autonomously motivated kindness is conducive to positive affect (Nelson et al., 2015; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Therefore, the motivation underlying prosocial behavior might play an important role in determining whether benefactors experience positive affect by engaging in other-oriented behavior.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasizes the importance of autonomous motivation in determining the degree of satisfaction derived from engaging in an activity. From the perspective of self-determination theory, behaviors vary in the degree to which they are self-determined, on a continuum from intrinsic (or autonomous) to extrinsic (or controlled) motivation, reflecting the extent to which the person has internalized the regulation of the activity. If an action is autonomously motivated (the person enacts it with a sense of choice), more satisfaction will be derived than when it is motivated by controlled, external reasons, which reduce the sense of "owning" the act (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Consequently, feeling pressured into acting prosocially, or doing so because of external social regulations and expectations that have not been integrated into one's sense of self and accepted as one's own, could lead to feeling less satisfaction and positive affect. Therefore, the extent to which motivation underlying prosocial behavior is self-determined directly influences the strength and direction of the association between prosociality and well-being.

Research supports this claim, bringing empirical evidence to show that individuals who are motivated by external pressures do not experience positive affect by engaging in prosocial behavior. First, correlational studies suggest the existence of an association between autonomously motivated prosocial behavior and well-being. For example, although no well-being measure was used, in Gagné, (2003), autonomy support and autonomy orientation predicted engagement in prosocial behavior and need satisfaction. In another study, participants who

reported they help others to gain pleasure showed higher life satisfaction and positive affect, while participants who reported helping out of obligation or in order to fulfill one's duty showed higher negative affect (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, & Maio, 2008). The role of motivation in determining whether prosocial behavior has well-being boosting effects has also been replicated using experimental designs. In a series of experiments (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), participants who were given the choice whether to help or not (therefore being autonomously motivated to do so) experienced more positive affect after helping than participants who were told they should do so (therefore being motivated by external, controlled reasons). Similarly, in a kindness intervention (Nelson et al., 2015), simply performing kind behavior did not lead to a boost in well-being. Only when participants were provided with autonomy-supportive messages, emphasizing it is their choice to engage in kind behavior, a significant increase in well-being was observed. The effects of autonomous and controlled motivation were replicated on younger samples, too. For example, Chinese preschoolers who shared a reward for autonomous (they could do so if they wanted), compared to obligated reasons (they had no choice but to do so), were rated to be happier, but the difference was only marginally-significant (Wu, Zhang, Guo, & Gros-Louis, 2017). Consequently, agency is required for positive effects to be observed, while helping out of obligation might not lead to benefactors' experience of positive affect.

### Agency and Obligation in Different Cultures

Past studies have concluded that agency is an important determining factor of individual well-being, while obligation has detrimental effects (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, what is perceived as agentic or obligatory might differ by culture. Personal choice is the core element of agency, but does lack of it equal obligation, and are social expectations obliging and coercive, as Western psychology emphasizes? In support of the idea that having a choice is an important foundation of well-being, research on self-concordant individuals evidences that people who pursue life goals reflecting their personal choices rather than goals controlled by external forces exhibit higher well-being, regardless of their cultural background (Sheldon et al., 2004). However, lack of personal choice has a negative relationship

with performance and well-being only for individuals from Western cultures (Gebauer et al., 2008; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). In cultures in which people strive to fulfill the wishes of important members of the group, responding to other people's expectations is not perceived as obligatory, and having a choice is less important (Buchtel et al., 2018; Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002; Miller et al., 2011). For example, comparing Euro-Americans to Asian Americans, the former showed high intrinsic motivation and performance when choosing the task by themselves, while the latter performed better when choices were made by a significant other, such as their mother or ingroup peers (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). More recently, Tripathi and her colleagues (Tripathi, Cervone, & Savani, 2018) showed that Indians prefer messages invoking obligations to autonomy-supportive motivational cues, performing better and exhibiting higher motivation when having to engage in a task because it was expected of them, a pattern opposite to that of Euro-American participants. Together, these results challenge the idea that lack of personal choice has a negative effect on performance and satisfaction in Asian cultures.

The above studies focused on task performance, a domain incorporating fewer moral values and standards considering duties and obligations compared to prosocial behavior. How does agency and obligation relate to satisfaction across cultures when it comes to prosocial behavior engagement? Research brings evidence that feeling obliged to help someone else does not undermine satisfaction derived from fulfilling that obligation in some cultures. First, compared to Westerners, individuals from collectivistic cultures perceive greater moral obligation to help someone in need (Baron & Miller, 2000; Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). However, they also feel more sense of choice when fulfilling their obligation (Miller et al., 2011), showing higher desire to act in accordance with the obligation, and more satisfaction as a result (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). In one study comparing the responses of Americans and Brazilians to various scenarios depicting situations in which they had the opportunity to engage in prosocial behavior, Brazilians reported higher intention of doing what was expected of them, and reported they would feel more satisfaction from meeting those expectations (Bontempo & Lobel, 1990). Similarly, in another study investigating individuals' responses to helping scenarios (Janoff-Bulman &

Leggatt, 2002), Latino-Americans reported they feel more obligation (*should*) and more desire (*want*) to help acquaintances (more distant family and friends), than their Anglo-American counterparts. Furthermore, while desire to help was associated with life satisfaction in both cultural groups, sense of obligation (*should*) predicted life satisfaction only for Latino-Americans. However, there were no significant differences in the responses of the two cultural groups for the scenarios involving close family and friends, suggesting that both Anglo-Americans and Latino-Americans had internalized their obligation to help close others to the same degree. Similar results were obtained when comparing Euro-Americans to Asians. For example, Miller and her colleagues (Miller et al., 2011), showed that compared to Americans, who exhibited less sense of personal choice and satisfaction when helping someone who was strongly expected, there were no differences in the degree of satisfaction and choice felt by Indians in strongly versus weakly expected helping cases. Therefore, social expectations to help others are more fully internalized by Indians than Americans. In another study, an obligation-motivated benefactor was judged more negatively by Westerners than participants from Confucian heritage cultures, who revealed a higher congruence between their agentic and obligated motivations to help, and associated positive emotions with fulfilling their obligations (Buchtel et al., 2018). Together, these results suggest that, compared to Westerners, individuals from collectivistic cultures experience more obligation to help others, more sense of choice when doing so, and derive more satisfaction from fulfilling those obligations.

The above cross-cultural studies reveal that Asian and Latino participants feel autonomous when acting in accordance with social expectations, while social expectations decrease Westerners' satisfaction and sense of agency (Chirkov et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2011). How can this be explained from the perspective of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)? Even though most Western participants experience social expectations as controlled (extrinsic) reasons, individuals from cultures that moralize behaving dutifully perceive choice and feel satisfaction when fulfilling these social obligations, and therefore, might not experience them as controlling. Self-determination theory suggests that fulfilling role-related obligations can be experienced in an agentic way (Chirkov et al., 2003). Although in Western folk psychol-

ogy, social expectations are conceptualized as coercive and limiting individual autonomy, for individuals from collectivistic cultures in which a duty-based morality discourse is prevalent, social expectations are internalized, therefore, not heteronomous.

### Duty-Based versus Autonomy-Based Moral Discourse

Research reviewed above concludes that individuals from collectivistic cultures internalize their obligations to help others more than Westerners do. However, what is the reason behind these cultural differences? Miller (1997) makes a distinction between Western conceptualization of *duty* and the Indian concept of *dharma*. For Westerners, *duty* is conceptualized as constraining and artificial, compelling individuals to engage in action they would not engage in spontaneously. The self is seen as separate and in opposition to the surroundings, and fulfilling role-based obligations, unnatural. In contrast, *dharma*, the Indian concept of moral duty and right action, portrays duty as congruent with individual nature and agency. While from the Western cultural viewpoint, working for the benefit of others is an unnatural social obligation which constrains individuals' sense of agency and freedom (Becker, 1980), *dharma* is the expression of the congruence between individual choice and social expectation. An action governed by *dharma* can be motivated endogenously and exogenously at the same time (O'Flaherty & Derrett, 1978), and fulfilling one's duty can be personally satisfying. Consequently, Indians might internalize social obligations more than Westerners due to a culturally-determined conceptualization of moral duty as congruent with human agency.

Another explanation, proposed by Buchtel and her collaborators (Buchtel et al., 2018), distinguishes between Western European post-Kantian moral philosophy and Confucian Role Ethics. In Kantian philosophy, autonomy plays a central role, as moral action must be free from external coercion and determined by individual choice. Humans are considered to be complete, free beings, and their wills independent of the will of others. The autonomy of the will lies at the foundation of morality, so action based on reasons other than one's will (such as interests and incentives) leads to heteronomy, which is incompatible with moral action, autonomy, and freedom (Bacin & Sensen, 2018). On the other hand, fulfilling role-

defined obligations is virtue in Confucian Role Ethics (Rosemont & Ames, 2016). Although Confucius does not see social responsibilities as freely chosen, freedom can be achieved only when wanting to meet one's responsibilities. Personal cultivation in Confucianism is not only meeting social expectations, but wanting to do so, and feeling joy when meeting them (Rosemont, 2015). Therefore, in Confucianism, meeting social responsibilities can be an expression of agency as long as individuals want to do what should be done. From the Confucian Role Ethics point of view, responding to social expectations does not undermine intrinsic motivation, as actors can be motivated both by agency and by duty, thus being *willingly obliged* (Buchtel et al., 2018).

Both the Indian concept of *dharma* and Confucian Role Ethics develop a moral discourse focused on duty, role-fulfillment, and obligation, while the focus of Western thought on the promotion of freedom from exterior constraints could be traced back to a moral discourse in which rights, freedom, and autonomy are key concepts. Moral discourse, and therefore, the values and concepts used in moral judgement differ across cultures (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2008; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Therefore, what people from different cultures consider to be moral could shape their reasons to engage in prosocial behavior and determine the degree of satisfaction derived from doing so.

## Future Directions

### Prosocial Behavior and Well-Being Across Cultures: Clarifying the Mediating Mechanism

Although scarce, cross-cultural research on the effect of prosocial behavior enactment suggests that the relationship between kindness and well-being might be universal, and so could the mediating effect of satisfaction of the need for relatedness. However, there is not enough evidence to conclude that the needs for autonomy and competence have significant indirect effects. Although in some research perceived need satisfaction predicted well-being similarly across cultures (Church et al., 2013), other studies suggests that the predictors of well-being differ by culture (Kitayama, Karasawa, Curhan, Ryff, & Markus, 2010), independence (personal control) being a more powerful predictor in independent cultures (United States), while interdependence (absence of relational

strain) is a more powerful predictor of well-being in interdependent cultures (Japan). If this pattern holds regarding the predictive power of the three psychological needs, then the effects of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness might differ by culture. For example, in interdependent cultures, satisfaction of the need for relatedness could have strong mediating effects on the relationship between kindness and well-being, because prosocial behavior contributes to the maintenance of relationship harmony, an important cultural task. In addition, in interdependent cultures, children are socialized to cooperate with peers rather than compete or strive for individual achievement (Stevenson, 1991). Therefore, being able to benefit others could be interpreted as a sign of social competence, thus satisfying the need for competence, which in turn promotes well-being. However, as people from interdependent cultures tend to consider helping behavior as more obligatory than people from Western cultures (Baron & Miller, 2000), engaging in prosocial behavior might not satisfy their need for autonomy. In contrast, in independent cultures, the satisfaction of the need for autonomy might be the strongest mediator of the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being, because it could lead to the enhancement of a sense of personal agency, an important predictor of well-being for independent individuals. However, as there are no studies comparing the explanatory power of the three basic psychological needs across cultures, it is difficult to draw a conclusion concerning their mediating effects. Future research should clarify whether satisfaction of the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness functions similarly across cultures or not.

### Obligation Not Incompatible with Agency: Review of Self-Determination Measures

Although in most Western research exterior pressures and social expectations are conceptualized as diminishing self-determination and satisfaction, obligation is not viewed as incompatible with agency in collectivistic cultures (Buchtel et al., 2018; Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002), individuals being motivated both by personal will and by social expectations at the same time. Although self-determination theory proposes that social expectations can be experienced in agentic ways as long as they are internalized (Chirkov et al., 2003), in some research, social expectations are placed at the opposite end of au-

tonomy on the self-determination continuum. For example, items such as “I am pursuing this goal because other people expect me to” are scored as controlled items (Jiang & Gore, 2016). Furthermore, the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI; e.g. Grolnick & Ryan, 1989), which calculates a relative index of autonomy by subtracting controlled reasons (including meeting social expectations) from more autonomous reasons (interest) is still being used. Considering that meeting social expectations is not perceived as coercive and limiting personal choice by participants with collectivistic cultural backgrounds, aggregated self-determination measures such as RAI should be used with caution in cross-cultural studies, as these measures cannot distinguish between individuals who internalize their role-related obligations (feeling both high obligation and high agency), and individuals who just comply to social obligations without endorsing them (high obligation but low agency). In future cross-cultural research, new measures of the degree of self-determination of behavior that are capable of capturing this distinction are necessary.

### Role of Relationship with Beneficiary

Research on the effects of social expectation to help across cultures has shown that doing what one is expected to do reduces satisfaction and sense of choice in Western cultures, but not in collectivistic cultures, as collectivistic individuals have internalized social expectation to a higher degree (Buchtel et al., 2018; Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002; Miller et al., 2011). However, some studies suggest that the relationship between beneficiary and benefactor must be taken into account when discussing these cultural differences (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). For example, while both Westerners and individuals from collectivistic cultures (Indians, Latino) perceive they are obligated to help close friends and family, only the latter report a sense of obligation to help strangers (Baron & Miller, 2000; Miller, Bersoff & Harwood, 1990), and life satisfaction is associated with perceived obligation to help distant others only for the latter (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). These studies suggest that individualists and collectivists internalize their obligations to help close others to the same degree, but collectivists internalize social obligations to help distant others more. However, in Miller et al. (2011), cultural differences between Americans and Indians emerged even when

the beneficiary was a close family member or friend. As more recent research (e.g. Buchtel et al., 2018) did not focus on the relationship between benefactor and target, future work should clarify whether cultural differences in the degree of internalization of social expectations to help exist only when the beneficiary is a distant other.

### Moral Discourse and Obligation in Different Cultures

Another issue that remains yet to be clarified by empirical research is why cultural differences in how social obligation is perceived by individuals exist. Explanations based on differences in moral discourse across cultures have been proposed (Buchtel et al., 2018; Miller, 1997), but no empirical evidence has been brought to support these claims. If the greater congruence between what should be done and what one wants to do in collectivistic cultures is due to greater endorsement of a duty-based morality discourse, then the degree to which people endorse moral views such as *dharma* or Confucian Role Ethics should explain away the cultural differences observed. However, until now, no studies have actually measured individuals’ endorsement of duty-based morality discourse, so future research should address this gap and investigate how morality shapes motivation to engage in prosocial behavior and satisfaction derived from doing so in different cultures. Furthermore, neither the concept of *dharma*, nor Confucian Role Ethics can explain the higher congruence between agency and obligation observed among Brazilians (Bontempo & Lobel, 1990) and Latino-Americans (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002), as the prevalent moral philosophical tradition in these cultures is mainly influenced by Western-European thought. Consequently, the role played by moral discourse in determining motivation for people from Latin America needs to be addressed in future research, alongside other possible explanatory cultural factors.

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## ABSTRACT

## Prosocial behavior and well-being in different cultures

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In this paper, research investigating the positive outcomes of engaging in prosocial behavior on the well-being of the benefactor is reviewed. We focused on mediating (basic psychological need satisfaction) and moderating factors (culture, motivation, moral discourse), interpreting findings from the perspective of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the first part, literature probing for the association between prosocial behavior engagement and well-being was reviewed. Correlational (e.g. Meier & Stutzer, 2008), experimental (Martela & Ryan, 2016a) and interventional studies (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), have shown that individuals experience satisfaction from other-oriented behavior. Next, the mediating mechanism of this relationship was discussed, in particular, from the framework of self-determination theory. Evidence was gathered supporting that engagement in prosocial behavior satisfies individuals' need to feel connected to others (relatedness need), need for autonomy in one's action (autonomy need), and need for social competence (competence need), and that the satisfaction of these three psychological needs mediates the association between prosocial behavior engagement and well-being (Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016). Although most research on the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being had been conducted on Western samples, some cross-cultural studies have replicated these findings using participants with different cultural backgrounds, suggesting that the association between kindness and well-being is a cultural universal (Aknin et al., 2013). In the second part, focusing on the conditions under which engagement in prosocial behavior increases well-being, we reviewed research on the effects of autonomous and controlled motivation to help across cultures. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that engaging in an activity for autonomous reasons (personal will, interest, enjoyment) leads to more satisfaction than engaging in an activity for controlled reasons (external coercion). Research on Western samples shows that autonomously motivated helping is conducive to positive affect, while helping someone in order to meet social expectations is not (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, cross-cultural studies reveal that not all individuals perceive social expectations as controlled reasons for action. For example, people from more collectivistic cultures experience agency and satisfaction by doing what is expected of them (Buchtel et al., 2018; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011). These results suggest that individualists conceive agency and obligation to be incompatible, while collectivists reveal congruence between obligation and a sense of personal choice, as they have internalized social responsibilities to a greater degree (Chirkov, Ryan, & Kim, 2003). To explain the greater congruence between agency and obligation in collectivistic cultures, we referred to the Indian concept of *dharma*, which portrays fulfilling one's duty as natural (Miller, 1997), and to Confucian Role Ethics, which conceptualizes wanting to meet one's obligations as an expression of freedom (Rosemont & Ames, 2016). In the final part, directions for future research were discussed. More research is needed in order to clarify

whether psychological need satisfaction has similar mediating effects on the association between prosocial behavior engagement and well-being in different cultures, how the congruence between obligation and agency can be tapped into by self-determination measures, whether the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary influences the degree of internalization of social obligations for participants from different cultures, and whether the type of morality discourse used in different cultures could account for the observed cultural differences in internalization of social expectations.

Key words: prosocial behavior, well-being, culture, self-determination, motivation