

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND POSITIVE AFFECT:
A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

Summary

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Abstract

Self-determination theory posits that autonomously motivated prosocial behavior is conducive to the experience of positive affect through satisfaction of basic psychological needs (e.g. Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, people do not engage in prosocial behavior for autonomous reasons all the time. Different situational factors, such as others' requests and expectations, could create an obligation to engage in prosocial behavior, which may inhibit individuals' autonomous motives and affect the degree of satisfaction derived from behaving prosocially.

This research focuses on the role of social expectations to act prosocially, making the claim that social expectations hinder benefactors' autonomous prosocial behavior and, thus, experienced positive affect, but that culture (independent vs interdependent) moderates the strength of this association. In line with previous research (e.g. Buchtel et al., 2018), it was hypothesized that social expectations inhibit autonomous motivation to engage in prosocial behavior, satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and positive affect only in independent cultures (the U.S., Romania), but not in interdependent cultures in which individuals tend to internalize the expectations of others to a higher degree (e.g. Japan).

In 3 studies, employing correlational (Study 1, 2) and experimental designs (Study 3), and sampling both university students (Study 2a) and adults (Study 1, 2b, 3) from Japan and the U.S. (Study 1, 2, 3), as well as Romania (Study 1, 2a), the mediating and moderating factors of the association between prosocial behavior engagement and positive affect were investigated.

Study 1 tested the main hypothesis that engagement in prosocial behavior promotes the experience of positive affect through satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Study 2 focused on the role of social expectations to engage in prosocial behavior, and revealed their contrasting effects on need satisfaction and affect depending on culture. Japanese showed a stronger positive relationship between perceived social expectations to help a distant target and positive affect than Romanians (Study 2a) and

Americans (Study 2b). Furthermore, perceiving the existence of social expectations when helping reduced satisfaction of the need for autonomy, and thus, positive affect in the U.S., but it led to more satisfaction of the need for competence, and more positive affect, in Japan (Study 2b). In Study 3, social expectations to help were manipulated and engagement in actual prosocial behavior toward a distant target was investigated. Results showed that the negative effect of recalling an instance of requested (expected) helping on positive affect was significantly stronger for Americans than for Japanese (Study 3a). Furthermore, when help was explicitly expected, Americans made less prosocial effort, while Japanese tended to make more (Study 3b).

This study provides a more elaborated image of the relationship between prosocial behavior and the well-being of the benefactor, suggesting the importance of situational factors (e.g. the existence of social expectations), and the moderating role of culture.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In this chapter, research investigating the positive outcomes of engaging in prosocial behavior on benefactors' positive affect is reviewed. The focus is on mediating (basic psychological need satisfaction) and moderating factors (culture, motivation), 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. Evidence was gathered supporting that engagement in prosocial behavior satisfies individuals' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and that the satisfaction of these three psychological needs mediates the association between prosocial behavior engagement and well-being (Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016). However, only few studies have replicated this mediating mechanism beyond the Western world (but see Jiang, Zeng, Zhang, & Wang, 2016).

In the second part, focusing on the conditions under which engagement in prosocial behavior increases positive affect, research on the effects of autonomous motivation to help across cultures was reviewed. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that engaging in an activity for autonomous reasons (e.g. personal will, interest, enjoyment) leads to more satisfaction than engaging in an activity for controlled reasons (e.g. external coercion). For example, research on Western samples shows that helping someone in order to meet social expectations is not conducive to positive affect (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, cross-cultural studies reveal that not all individuals perceive social expectations to be coercive. For example, people from more interdependent cultures experience agency and satisfaction by doing what is expected of them (Buchtel et al., 2018; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011). These results suggest that independent individuals conceive agency and obligation to be incompatible, while interdependent individuals reveal congruence between obligation and a sense of agency, as they have

internalized social responsibilities to a greater degree (Chirkov, Ryan, & Kim, 2003).

In the third part, the purpose of the present research is presented. The aim of this research is to offer a more complex image of the relationship between prosocial behavior engagement and well-being by investigating the role of need satisfaction, social expectations, relationship with beneficiary, and culture. This study focuses on three cultures that have been rarely included together in cross-cultural comparisons: Japan, the United States, and Romania. In addition to the representatives of independent (U.S.) and interdependent (Japan) cultures, this study adds a sample from Romania, a culture that mixes independent and interdependent aspects (Gavreliuc & Ciobotă, 2013), and makes the claim that, due to the importance placed by Romanian people on autonomy and freedom from external constraints, Romanians will prove to be more similar to Americans than to Japanese.

Chapter 2

Prosocial Behavior Engagement and Well-Being

In Chapter 2, the main hypothesis that autonomous prosocial behavior promotes well-being through satisfaction of basic psychological needs was investigated.

First, as the existing scales measuring engagement in prosocial behavior (e.g. Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981) were not culturally appropriate to be used in the three cultures under investigation (Japan, Romania, and the U.S), in Study 1a, a short questionnaire measuring frequency of performing acts of kindness was constructed, and its validity was probed. Results showed that frequency of engagement in prosocial behavior is associated with well-being in all three cultures.

In Study 1b, the mediating role of satisfaction of the needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence was investigated. All three needs had significant mediating effects in Japan, but only

satisfaction of the need for relatedness was a significant mediator in the U.S. This study fills a gap in self-determination theory literature by showing that the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are significant mediators of the relationship between frequency of engagement in prosocial behavior and well-being outside the Western world, too.

Chapter 3

Perceived Social Expectations to Engage in Prosocial Behavior and Positive Affect

Study 1 revealed that prosocial behavior was significantly associated to well-being. However, because only frequency of prosocial behavior and general well-being was measured, questions remain about the conditions under which actually engaging in prosocial behavior enhances state positive affect. To address this issue, two studies investigated a possible moderator of the association between prosocial behavior and positive affect: social expectations. Study 2 aimed to clarify whether perceiving social expectations to help hinders the experience of positive affect after engagement in prosocial behavior, as suggested by research conducted on Western samples (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

First, Study 2a employs scenarios and asks university students from Japan, Romania, and the U.S. to imagine engaging in different prosocial behaviors and evaluate targets' expectations, as well as predict how they themselves would feel if they engaged in the depicted behaviors. Results support the idea that Japanese internalize the expectations of distant targets more than Romanians, showing a stronger positive association between perceived target expectation and desire to engage in prosocial behavior, as well as between perceived target expectation and positive affect.

However, as in Study 2a scenarios were used and no significant differences between Japanese and Americans were observed, questions remained about the generalizability of findings. To overcome

these limitations, in Study 2b, Japanese and American adults' actual engagement in past prosocial behavior was investigated. Participants were asked to recall a situation in which they helped an acquaintance, evaluate target's expectations, and report on their current need satisfaction and affect. Results replicate and extend Study 2a, revealing that social expectations have contrasting effects on need satisfaction and affect in the two cultures. For Americans, the more they recalled a situation in which targets expected their help, the less they currently felt satisfaction of the need for autonomy and positive affect. For Japanese, the more they recalled a situation of expected helping, the more they felt satisfaction of the need for competence and positive affect. Overall, the results of Study 2 reveal that in cultures in which social expectations are internalized, perceiving that others expect one to help does not hinder satisfaction of basic psychological needs and positive affect.

Chapter 4

The Effect of Social Expectations to Help on Positive Affect and Prosocial Effort

Study 2 revealed that perceived social expectations to help have different effects on positive affect, depending on culture. However, as correlational design was employed, Study 2 could not speak of causation. Therefore, in Study 3, social expectations to help were manipulated. The hypothesis was that culture moderates the effect of social expectations to help on positive affect, Americans experiencing significantly lower positive affect and need satisfaction after engaging in prosocial behavior when social expectations are high, but Japanese experiencing as much need satisfaction and positive affect regardless of the existence of social expectations.

In Study 3a, adult participants from Japan and the U.S. were randomly assigned to one of two groups: non-requested helping or requested helping. Participants in the non-requested helping group

recalled a situation in which they did something kind for another person without being requested to do so. Participants in the requested helping group recalled a situation in which they helped someone (although they didn't initially want to), because that person requested their help. After recalling the situation, both groups evaluated how they felt when helping. Results showed that, overall, participants who recalled requested helping experienced lower satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and relatedness and lower positive affect. Furthermore, culture moderated the strength of the association, the difference in experienced positive affect between non-requested and requested helping conditions being smaller for Japanese than for Americans. However, as recalled prosocial behavior was used, the results might have been affected by memory biases. To overcome this limitation, in Study 3b, an actual helping task was included.

In Study 3b, adult participants from Japan and the U.S. were randomly assigned to two groups: low obligation condition and high obligation condition, and were asked to help a graduate student by offering advice to improve a cover letter. Obligation was manipulated through the instructions for the prosocial task. Participants in the low obligation condition were told it is their choice how much advice they offer, while participants in the high obligation condition were told that the target expects their help so they should offer as much advice as possible. After writing down their advice, participants evaluated their present need satisfaction and affect. Although obligation to help did not influence positive affect and need satisfaction, a significant interaction between culture and obligation on prosocial effort (amount of advice offered) was observed: Americans tended to write less advice when obligated, while Japanese tended to write more. The results showed that although social expectations reduced prosocial effort in the U.S., but not in Japan, they did not influence need satisfaction or positive affect in either culture. Consequently, more research is needed in order to clarify the mechanism through which social expectations influence affect derived from engagement in prosocial behavior.

Chapter 5

Implications and Future Directions

The aim of this research was to investigate the mediating and moderating factors of the relationship between engagement in prosocial behavior and benefactors' positive affect. Employing the theoretical framework of self-determination theory, this research contributes to the literature by showing that (1) the positive effect of autonomously motivated prosocial behavior on the well-being of the benefactor replicates beyond the Western world and (2) the significance of social expectations to help and their effect on positive affect differs with culture, Japanese participants internalizing the expectations of significant others more and being more accepting of meeting these expectations than Romanians and Americans.

However, this study has several limitations. First, although it showed that the association between expected prosocial behavior (imagined or recalled) and positive affect changes depending on culture, this research failed to replicate this result when employing actual prosocial behavior as an experimental task. A more controlled experimental environment is necessary in order to reveal how engagement in prosocial behavior influences state positive affect. Second, although it brought some evidence that Romanians are more similar to Americans than Japanese as to the degree of internalization of social expectations to behave prosocially, questions still remain pertaining to the relative position of Romania on different cultural dimensions, including independence/interdependence. Third, this research could not provide a strong explanation for the cultural moderation effect observed, so why exactly Japanese internalize the expectations of others to a higher degree than Americans and Romanians requires further inquiry.

Finally, for the practical implications of the results, this research offers some hints to the most effective way of motivating people from different cultures to engage in prosocial behavior. First, by showing that being kind to others has not only positive effects on the beneficiary, but also on the benefactor,

it suggests that engagement in prosocial behavior can be an effective “positive intervention” for non-Western participants, too. In addition, by evidencing the cultural differences in the role of social expectations to help, it reveals that, in order to motivate Americans and Romanians to engage in prosocial behavior, references to the expectations of others should be avoided. However, the same references might be used to motivate Japanese people to engage in prosocial behavior and, thus, experience satisfaction from doing so. Consequently, the results of this research offer useful suggestions for the implementation of moral education programs and community health interventions.