

Revising Policy to Reflect Our Better Nature



Lara B. Aknin

Abstract Governments should help citizens thrive, not merely survive. Doing so means alleviating stress and addressing mental illness, as well as amplifying positive experiences and emotions that allow humans to blossom and grow. But what factors support human flourishing? In this chapter, I challenge early pessimistic views of human nature as purely selfish by summarizing evidence demonstrating that humans are social and prosocial beings. Critically, I discuss how social and prosocial behavior have been repeatedly shown to promote well-being, a finding that aligns with numerous theories espousing that meaningful social connections are the essential feature to human flourishing (Ryff and Singer, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4(1):30–44, 2000). Using these insights, I suggest that institutions should revise their policies to mirror and inspire human proclivities to connect and care.

Keywords Prosociality · Kindness · Prosocial spending · Happiness · Well-being

The ultimate purpose of government is to help citizens thrive, not merely survive. Governments and organizations can enable human flourishing—defined as positive attributes of the human condition (Ryff & Singer, 2003)—by not only alleviating sources of stress and supporting the treatment of mental illness, but by amplifying positive experiences and emotions that allow humans to blossom and grow. But what factors comprise and promote human flourishing? Challenging early and pessimistic views of human nature as solely solitary and self-interested, in this chapter I provide a brief summary of the emerging literature on the ways in which humans demonstrate their ultra-social and prosocial character. Critically, I discuss how social and prosocial behavior lead to greater well-being, a finding that aligns with numerous theories espousing that meaningful social connections are the essential feature to human flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 2000). Then, in light of this evidence, I suggest

L. B. Aknin (✉)
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada
e-mail: lara_aknin@sfu.ca

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that governments and organizations should revisit policies to reflect and encourage the human tendencies to connect and care.

1 Early Sources and Support for Pessimism

Scholars have debated the nature of human behavior for millennia. Many early voices believed that humans are cruel, callous, and self-interested beings. While this case was perhaps most famously championed by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), classical economic theories similarly assume that humans are primarily motivated to maximize personal gains, even at the expense of others (e.g., Noreen, 1988). Various lines of evidence offer converging support for this position. For instance, classic research shows that some people follow the direction of authority figures to harm others (Milgram, 1964), may hesitate to help others in need (Latane & Darley, 1968), and often take credit for moral behavior that is driven by selfish motives (Frimer et al., 2014).

Perhaps in protection, people are hyper-sensitive to negative information and malicious intent. Consistent with the notion that bad information is more memorable and consequential for survival (Baumeister et al., 2001), new research suggests that ambiguous actions are quickly labeled as immoral (Hester et al., 2020) and prosocial actors are penalized for enacting good deeds with even the slightest potential of self-benefit (Barasch et al., 2016; Lin-Healy & Small, 2012; Newman & Cain, 2014). The widespread belief that human beings are motivated by self-interest is so pervasive (at least in North America) that it alters peoples' thoughts and behaviors. For instance, evidence supporting the Norm of Self-Interest suggests that actors sometimes avoid providing help they are willing and wanting to offer if there is no clear evidence for personal gain (Dunning, 1999; Ratner & Miller, 2001).

Beyond layperson beliefs, numerous organizational and governmental policies appear to embody these sentiments and reflect the view that humanity is solitary and selfish. For instance, businesses typically incentivize workers with personal cash-based bonuses or equivalent rewards, assuming that individualistic gains that separate and distinguish one from their peers are the primary inspiration for workplace productivity (e.g., Ariely et al., 2009; Gneezy et al., 2011; Oyer, 1998; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2001). More broadly, national laws ban harmful treatment of citizens and enforce mandatory contribution to public goods, signaling an expectation that people will harm others and forgo the opportunity to assist if given the chance. While explicit encouragement can help encourage civility and cooperation, these records imply that humans are out for themselves, and themselves alone.

2 Reasons for Optimism

2.1 *Ubiquity and Value of Social Connection*

Counter to the cynical accounts of humanity, new evidence reveals that humans are deeply connected to and concerned about other people. Supporting the notion that social relationships are vital to human functioning, people spend a large portion of their time interacting with others and these experiences are often rated as some of the most enjoyable moments of the day (Kahneman et al., 2004; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Indeed, social relationships seem to be a necessary condition for experiencing the highest levels of happiness. A thorough investigation of over 200 college students revealed that every individual in the top decile reported having strong and satisfactory relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Further evidence comes from responses of over one million people surveyed by the Gallup World Poll; having just one individual to count on in times of need is the single best predictor of life satisfaction around the globe (Helliwell et al., 2019a). These findings—along with meta-analyses underscoring the importance of social relationships for health and mortality (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010)—have led researchers to argue that humans have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In addition to the importance of meaningful relationships with close others, humans also derive feelings of connection and pleasure from interactions with acquaintances and strangers. At the most basic level, being overlooked by a stranger can lead people to feel a sense of disconnection from others (Wesselmann et al., 2012) and brief interactions with acquaintances can bring a sense of belonging and joy (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a, 2014b). People experience higher levels of happiness on days when they connect with a greater number of weak social ties (i.e., people they know but not particularly well), and this relationship holds even controlling for the number of interactions with strong social ties that same day (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a). Critically, having a brief and pleasant conversation with an acquaintance, such as the barista at Starbucks, has a causal impact on well-being and leads to greater happiness than having an efficient and impersonal exchange (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014b).

Despite the enjoyment of talking to unfamiliar others, people overlook the benefits of these short but powerful opportunities for connection—and erroneously express a preference to be left alone. In one study, commuters on trains and busses predicted that they would experience lower feelings of well-being and productivity when chatting with a stranger on their commute than when remaining alone, yet controlled experiments show that people were happier and no less productive when they engaged in conversations with other commuters (Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Indeed, emerging work on “the liking gap” demonstrates that interacting with strangers tends to breed more liking and enjoyment than most people expect (Boothby et al., 2018).

Why do people err and prefer to be alone? The mistaken inclination, which mirrors early assumptions of humans as solitary creatures, results from a failure to appreciate that others are interested and willing to converse and connect. Indeed, when a group of commuters were asked to report how willing they and a fellow commuter would be to talk with each other on a commute, responses revealed that people were more interested in conversing than they expected their peers to be (Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Taken together, these findings demonstrate the potential value of human connection, even if these benefits are not always recognized in advance.

2.2 Early Emergence, Prevalence, and Rewards of Prosocial Behavior

Given that social relationships are a critical source of human well-being, how do people build and strengthen these bonds? One means is through kind and caring actions, broadly labeled as prosocial behavior. The human capacity for and sensitivity to prosocial behavior begins early in life. Infants as young as 3–6 months of age attune to the kind or cruel actions of others—and display a preference for prosocial actors (Hamlin et al., 2007, 2010). Not long after, children begin providing help to others through various helping, sharing, and comforting actions in infancy (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010; Dunfield et al., 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). As they grow, toddlers provide assistance to others (even strangers), which is sometimes spontaneous, anonymous, and proactive (Aime et al., 2017; Hepach et al., 2017; Warneken, 2013; Warneken et al., 2007; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). In fact, seeing a target in need of help leads children to experience a sense of physiological arousal, detected in pupil dilation. This distress is alleviated when targets receive assistance, regardless of whether this help comes from the child or a third party (Hepach et al., 2012, 2013, 2017).

Beyond infancy and childhood, people engage in a range of prosocial behaviors. In 2018 alone, Americans volunteered upward of 7 billion hours (equivalent to more than 800,000 years) and donated more than \$420 billion to non-profit organizations (National Service Research, 2018). In addition to these formal and familiar channels of giving, people assist one another in various direct and personal ways. For instance, people share food with the hungry, commit random acts of kindness, and donate blood to those in need (e.g., Aknin & Whillans, 2020; Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014; Koo & Fishbach, 2016; Marsh, 2019; Mogilner & Aaker, 2009; Meier & Stutzer, 2008). These acts can be observed in lab-based experiments and the real world. For instance, in cooperation experiments, people contribute resources to help non-related others and punish transgressors (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Gintis, 2003; Van Vugt & Van Lange, 2006), and outside the lab, some people engage in exceptional altruism by donating life-saving organs to complete strangers (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014).

Prosociality is not limited to wealthy nations, but can be observed across rich and poor countries around the globe (Aknin et al., 2019; Helliwell et al., 2019a, 2019b; Henrich et al., 2005). In fact, some evidence suggests that prosociality may be an automatic or intuitive response (Rand, 2017; Rand et al., 2012; Zaki & Mitchell, 2013). If so, this could help to explain some seemingly puzzling findings, such as why people are willing to pay more to reduce harm for a stranger than for themselves (Crockett et al., 2014), why assistance rises in the wake of natural disasters (Rodriguez et al., 2006), and why people stay in unsatisfactory romantic relationships if they feel that relationship dissolution will have a strong negative impact on their partner (Joel et al., 2018).

Humans not only engage in prosocial action with relative frequency, but they derive pleasure from it too. Indeed, humans may have evolved to find costly help provision rewarding because prosocial behavior facilitates cooperative social relationships that are essential for survival (Aknin et al., 2013a). Supporting this possibility, a growing body of research indicates that engaging in various forms of kind or generous action, such as donating one's time or money, leads to emotional rewards for the helper (Aknin et al., 2019; Curry et al., 2018). For instance, a consistent trend emerging from the volunteering research is that people who engage in more volunteering tend to report higher level happiness. Supporting this notion, data from over 28,000 Americans in 29 states indicates that volunteers express higher happiness than non-volunteers, even when accounting for alternative factors, such as demographic and socio-economic variables (Borgonovi, 2008). Beyond the United States, data from more than 30,000 people from 12 countries who participated in the 2007 Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, analyses demonstrated that volunteers reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than non-volunteers (see also Musick & Wilson, 2003). The most far-reaching evidence for this association comes from the Gallup World Poll where responses from more than one million people between 2009 and 2017 link formal volunteering with higher life satisfaction in most countries around the globe (Aknin et al., 2019; Helliwell et al., 2019a; see also Kushlev et al., 2020). Despite this robust association, little causal evidence shows that formal volunteering leads to greater happiness (Schreier et al., 2013; Whillans et al., 2016). This may result from the nature of formal volunteering, which can be required and offer little information about the impact of one's actions. Other work, however, indicates that more direct and volitional interpersonal assistance can lead to happiness gains (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2016).

In addition to giving time, people can also use their money to benefit others. This form of generous behavior—sometimes called *prosocial spending*—is both associated with and leads to emotional rewards (e.g., Aknin & Whillans, 2020; Dunn et al., 2014). People who spend more money in a typical month on others—by way of gift giving or charitable donations—report higher levels of happiness than those who spend less (Dunn et al., 2008). Importantly, this relationship is causal. In one early experiment, participants randomly assigned to spend a small monetary windfall of \$5 or \$20 on someone else were significantly happier at the end of the day than

participants randomly assigned to spend the same amount on themselves (Dunn et al., 2008; see Aknin et al., 2020 for large-scale replication).

Data from various sources suggest that the emotional rewards of prosociality may be a human universal, detectable in most humans around the globe. For instance, survey responses to the Gallup World Poll indicate that people who donated charity to in the last month reported higher levels of life satisfaction in most countries around the globe (Aknin et al., 2013a, 2013b; Helliwell et al., 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, a number of experiments conducted in rich and poor nations, such as Canada, India, South Africa, and Vanuatu, suggest that the emotional benefits stemming from generous spending may be shared by most humans around the globe (Aknin et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2015). Even young children under the age of two smile more when giving treats away to others than when receiving treats themselves (Aknin et al., 2012). Finally, new evidence suggests that gang-involved youth and felony level ex-offenders also experience greater joy from giving than buying for themselves (Hanniball et al., 2019).

Although the hedonic benefits of generous behavior may be far-reaching, generous acts are more likely to yield happiness in certain conditions. Specifically, people are more likely to experience happiness from enacting kind behavior when their actions (1) are freely chosen, facilitating a sense of autonomy, (2) have a clear positive impact, demonstrating a sense of competence, and (3) build or promote social relationships. I briefly consider the evidence for each of these factors below.

Autonomy People are most likely to experience emotional rewards from helping when their generous actions emerge from or reflect their personal volition. For instance, in one lab experiment, student participants donated part of a financial endowment to another person before reporting their well-being. Half of the students were allowed to decide how much, if any, they wanted to give away (high autonomy). Meanwhile, the other half of students were told that, due to the study design features, their donation amount was pre-determined (low autonomy). Results showed that people who gave larger donations experienced great well-being, but only when they had freedom to choose how much to give. Indeed, larger donations predicted *lower* levels of well-being in the low autonomy condition (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

More recent work has replicated this finding using a well-powered, pre-registered experimental design (Lok & Dunn, 2020). One hundred people recruited online were asked to describe two previous spending events: one in which they decided to help (high autonomy) and one in which they had little choice to help (low autonomy). After describing each event, participants reported their emotions at the time of spending. Consistent with the idea that the emotional rewards of helping others are greater when generous behavior is autonomous, people reported greater happiness after describing a time in which they chose to spend money on others than when they had little choice to do so. Other studies reveal that simply leading donors to feel that they have freedom about how much and how they would like to give can be beneficial (Nelson et al., 2015).

Competence People are more likely to experience emotional rewards from helping when appreciate how their generous actions have had a positive impact on others. As noted elsewhere (e.g., Aknin & Whillans, 2020), not all acts of generosity provide clear evidence that one’s efforts have made a difference. For instance, payroll deductions and online donations can contribute to important causes but offer fewer cues of direct helping than in-person visits to the food bank or directly delivering a birthday gift to your niece.

Several studies demonstrate the importance of competence for experiencing the mood benefits of prosociality. In one study, for example, more than one hundred students were provided with a \$10 endowment that they could donate to charity (in part or in full) if they liked (Aknin et al., 2013b). Critically, half of the students were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were told that their donation would go to UNICEF, an umbrella organization that helps children in many ways around the globe. Because this condition provided little specificity about if and how the aid would be provided, it was considered the “low impact” condition. Meanwhile, the other half of students were assigned to a condition in which they were told that their donation would go to Spread the Net, a charity that buys bed nets to stop the spread of malaria through Africa. This condition provided participants with clear information about exactly how their actions would benefit others, and was thus considered the “high impact” condition. All students were allowed to make a donation decision and then report their current well-being. While the average donation did not differ across conditions, the emotional impact of generosity did. Specifically, larger donations predicted higher levels of post-giving happiness, but only when people gave to Spread the Net, suggesting that providing donors with clear information about how their contributions will help others is important for experiencing the hedonic benefits of giving. Meanwhile, giving more money to UNICEF did not predict greater happiness.

The importance of believing that one has made a positive impact on others was demonstrated in a recent well-powered and pre-registered experiment (Lok & Dunn, 2020). One hundred participants recruited online were asked to describe two instances in which they spent money on others—one instance included a time they were able to see how their actions made a difference for others (high impact), and the other instance included a time they were unsure of how their actions made a difference for others (low impact). After describing each instance, participants were asked to report their current positive emotions. As predicted, people reported feeling significantly happier when they were aware of how their generous spending had helped someone else (vs. after recalling a time they were unsure of how their generous spending impacted another person).

Relatedness Finally, people are more likely to experience emotional rewards from helping when it provides opportunities for connection. For example, in one small study, students were given \$10 and told that they could give as little or as much of this sum to a randomly selected classmate who did not receive a payment. Half of the students were told that whatever amount they chose to give they would have to deliver to the recipient in person themselves (high social connection). Meanwhile,

the other half of students were told that whatever amount they chose to give would be delivered by an intermediary (low social connection), thereby blocking an opportunity for connection. After the donation, all students reported their happiness. Consistent with the idea that social connection is key for experiencing the happiness benefits of generosity, larger donations led to greater happiness when donations were transferred directly from the donor to recipient. However, when the donation was transferred by an intermediary, larger donations led to slightly *lower* levels of happiness (Aknin et al., 2013a, 2013b).

The importance of social connection for reaping the enjoyment of generosity was also detected in a well-powered, pre-registered experiment (Lok & Dunn, 2020). One hundred people were asked to describe a time they spent money on someone else or a cause that led them to feel personally connected to the person or cause they helped (high connection) and did not lead them to feel connected to the person or cause they helped in random order. After describing each experience, participants reported their positive emotions at the time of spending. Consistent with predictions and the findings reported above, participants reported greater happiness after describing a time they spent money in a way that made them feel connected to others or a meaningful cause than a time they spent money that lacked those connections. Taken together, these results support that notion that social connection unlocks the emotional rewards of giving.

2.3 Revising Policies to Reflect and Reward Social and Prosocial Tendencies

The evidence presented above challenges the view that humans are solitary and self-interested creatures. Instead, humans have a proclivity to connect and care (Helliwell & Aknin, 2018). Given that businesses and governments have the ability to shape many of the conditions that allow people to enact these behaviors and derive pleasure from doing so, decision makers should revisit policies in light of these insights. Doing so could further develop *positive institutions*—a critical but often overlooked means for supporting human flourishing (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman, 2002).

For instance, organizations currently incentivize helpful workplace behavior (also called organizational citizenship in the management literature) with monetary rewards, positive assessments, and leadership opportunities. While enticement is an effective strategy for encouraging people to participate in a behavior they initially resist (Tang & Hall, 1995), most people are willing to help others. As such, offering employees external materialistic rewards to help coworkers may *undermine* helping behavior, consistent with classic research on the over-justification effect (Lepper et al., 1973). Instead, companies may be better off providing employees with the opportunity to help fellow employees or customers in a more direct fashion, such as through regular team support networks or face-to-face exchanges (e.g., Grant, 2007,

Table 1 Suggestions for revising policy and practice

<i>Rather than...</i>	<i>Try...</i>	<i>Why?</i>
Emphasizing that certain behaviors are forbidden by law or policy	Allowing and enticing desirable behavior through opportunities for social connection (between fellow citizens, employees, with customers, etc.), direct impact, and social norms	Discouraging and forbidding negative behaviors assumes that these actions may be normative
Incentivizing behavior with money or status rewards	Offering prosocial rewards, such as the funds or time to help a personally meaningful cause	Capitalizes on the human motivation to connect and care

2012). Doing so not only creates and fosters social bonds, but it also provides direct evidence of how the helper’s effort positively impacted the recipient—both critical factors that make prosociality rewarding (see Aknin & Whillans, 2020).

Recognizing that humans have “a need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) could help governments to facilitate creative ways for fostering new connections among citizens. Using both physical and online spaces, such as communal parks, libraries, and virtual communities or training sessions, people can meet their neighbors or like-minded others, share experiences, and support one another. For instance, investing in public spaces where people can interact and give to their communities (e.g., clean park spaces or tend to community gardens) could build relationships and commitment to their neighborhood. While the specific practice, space, or policy would need to fit within the existing community, the literature reviewed above suggests that most humans are seeking—and derive pleasure—from connecting with others.

Revising policy and practice in light of these findings not only presents a more complete picture of humanity, but it should also encourage greater prosociality. Classic research on the self-fulfilling prophecy demonstrates the power of prior expectations. When people are expected to act aggressively or fail in the face of challenge, they tend to fulfill those expectations (e.g., Farrell & Swigert, 1978; Spencer et al., 1999). Conversely, when we expect people to blossom and thrive, they do so as well (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966). Armed with this insight, organizations and governments may want to revisit policies to reflect and reinforce our better nature (Table 1).

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