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Abstract

Prosocial spending refers to expending money on others through gift-giving or charitable donations, rather than on oneself. It not only benefits recipients but also positively influences the giver's well-being. The impact of prosocial spending on well-being is primarily manifested in two dimensions: the target of prosocial behavior and the nature of its effects, with boundary conditions encompassing both external and internal factors. The underlying mechanisms through which prosocial spending affects subjective well-being can be further elucidated through Self-Determination Theory, Social Norms Theory, Evolutionary Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. Future research should examine the boundary conditions of the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being, investigate the long-term positive effects of prosocial spending, and enhance the ecological validity of research in this domain.

Full Text

The Effects of Prosocial Spending on Subjective Well-Being and Its Mechanisms

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Abstract: Prosocial spending refers to spending money on others through gifts or charitable donations rather than on oneself. It not only benefits recipients but also positively influences the giver's subjective well-being. This effect manifests primarily in two dimensions: the target of prosocial spending and the nature of its impact, with boundary conditions encompassing both external and internal factors. Self-determination theory, social norm theory, evolutionary theory, and

social exchange theory provide frameworks for explaining the underlying mechanisms through which prosocial spending affects subjective well-being. Future research should examine the boundary conditions of the prosocial spending-well-being relationship, investigate the long-term positive effects of prosocial spending, and enhance the ecological validity of research in this domain.

Keywords: prosocial spending, subjective well-being, self-determination theory, social norm theory, evolutionary theory

Prosocial spending is a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary society, and directing financial resources toward others holds significant importance for communities and society at large. It not only fosters trust bonds among neighbors but also helps sustain education, health, environmental protection, and disaster relief services, thereby building a stronger and more harmonious society (Van Der Slik, 2007). For instance, since the outbreak of COVID-19, voluntary fundraising campaigns have emerged nationwide. As of May 5, 2020, the Hubei Provincial Red Cross had received designated donations totaling 1,921.2804 million yuan. Although donation amounts varied, online surveys revealed that many netizens contributed not only money but also spontaneously purchased protective suits, masks, and goggles for targeted donations to specific hospitals. With support from across the country, the epidemic was effectively controlled and patients gradually recovered. Clearly, prosocial behavior first and foremost directly benefits recipients. However, as positive psychology has deepened its investigation into how to enhance well-being, many researchers have proposed that prosocial behavior also brings happiness to the helpers themselves (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Kuykendall et al., 2015).

The concept of prosocial spending was introduced as a specific form of prosocial behavior, defined as spending money on others through gifts or charitable donations rather than on oneself (Dunn et al., 2008). As a category of prosocial behavior, prosocial spending possesses unique characteristics. First, with the development of online platforms, fundraising and crowdfunding activities have become increasingly common, making “everyone’s philanthropy, instant philanthropy, and fingertip philanthropy” a contemporary trend in prosocial behavior. Second, compared to other types of prosocial behavior such as rescuing, helping, caring, or rule-following that require substantial time investment, prosocial spending demands virtually no time resources. Research indicates that prosocial behaviors requiring personal time, such as caregiving, are often accompanied by greater stress and lower psychological and physical health levels (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2007), whereas individuals who value time over money typically report higher well-being (Lee-Yoon & Whillans, 2019). Consequently, because prosocial spending consumes minimal time resources, people are more willing to engage in prosocial activities through this approach. Additionally, prosocial spending belongs to both prosocial behavior and consumer behavior (Ross, 2011). While consumerism generally emphasizes self-interest, prosocial spending represents a unique consumption form

that benefits others, warranting in-depth investigation. Studying the variable of “prosocial spending” not only enriches literature in the prosocial behavior domain and provides new perspectives for future research but also helps people understand the positive effects of prosocial spending on individuals, challenges the fixed impression that spending equals loss, and thereby encourages active participation in prosocial activities, contributing significantly to both individual happiness and the construction of a harmonious society.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly emphasized the significance of prosocial spending for helpers (Dunn et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2016). Numerous studies have found that prosocial spending indeed brings consumers higher personal value, self-esteem, sense of meaning, and greater happiness (Klein, 2017; Martela & Ryan, 2016; Nelson et al., 2016; Wiwad & Aknin, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). Moreover, the happiness-enhancing effect of prosocial spending has a neurophysiological basis. For example, individuals who engage in prosocial spending exhibit lower cortisol levels, which are closely associated with negative emotions (Dunn et al., 2010). After performing altruistic acts, individuals show significantly reduced pain responses to electric shocks in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and bilateral insula, suggesting that prosocial behavior can alleviate physical pain (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, considering various evidence, prosocial spending may represent an important pathway for individuals to achieve well-being.

Although scholars have reviewed the issue of individual well-being in prosocial interactions, noting that only prosocial behavior meeting individuals’ need for autonomy can effectively enhance well-being (杨莹, 寇斌, 2015), no researchers have systematically addressed the scientific question of how prosocial spending influences well-being. Therefore, this paper will first discuss the impact of prosocial spending on individual well-being and introduce its effects, then explain the internal mechanisms through which prosocial spending influences well-being from different theoretical perspectives, further explore influencing factors, and finally propose future research directions based on current limitations.

2 The Impact of Prosocial Spending on Well-Being

Although substantial research has demonstrated a close relationship between prosocial spending and well-being, do these effects vary depending on the recipient? What are the specific effects? Do they exhibit universality and persistence? These questions currently lack clear answers. The following sections attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being by summarizing two aspects: the target of prosocial spending (individual-directed, such as buying gifts for others, versus society-directed, such as charitable donations and green consumption) and the nature of its effects.

2.1 The Target of Prosocial Spending

2.1.1 Individual Level Generally, when the target of prosocial behavior is an individual, a connection forms between the giver and recipient, thereby enhancing the giver's well-being. For instance, using a recall paradigm, individuals who recalled spending money on others reported higher well-being than those who recalled spending on themselves, and this effect was not influenced by the amount spent (Aknin et al., 2011; Dunn et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2016). Beyond recall paradigms, behavioral studies show that individuals immediately experience happiness when engaging in spending on others (Aknin et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2021). Experimental research further demonstrates a causal relationship between prosocial spending and well-being (Aknin et al., 2013). Additionally, a French study focusing on wealthy individuals found that philanthropy serves as a way for the affluent to convert wealth into happiness, with happiness experiences being a clear driver of charitable behavior (Sellen, 2019). This effect is moderated by relationship closeness—those who spend money on intimate partners, close friends, and family members experience significantly higher well-being than those who spend on colleagues or casual acquaintances (Aknin et al., 2011; Rinner, 2019). Therefore, individual-level prosocial spending can effectively enhance the giver's well-being.

2.1.2 Societal Level Prosocial behavior at the societal level, such as community service, also effectively enhances helpers' well-being (Nelson et al., 2016; Rudd et al., 2014). Green consumption, as a behavior directly oriented toward others' welfare, group interests, or organizational benefits, represents a special form of prosocial spending. Green consumption refers to consumption behaviors that reduce environmental pressure, including purchasing energy-efficient vehicles, choosing public transportation, conserving water, and supporting products with recyclable packaging (Kazdin, 2009). This consumption pattern involves a trade-off between personal costs/benefits and others' costs/benefits, as green products may cost more but benefit the environment (Griskevicius et al., 2010). For example, individuals who purchase green products sacrifice personal interests for common benefits (Xiao & Li, 2011). Previous research has found a positive correlation between green consumption and well-being (Kasser, 2017; Xiao & Li, 2011). A study analyzing data from 14 Chinese cities demonstrated that green consumption can effectively improve consumers' life satisfaction (Xiao & Li, 2011). Multiple studies with American, Canadian, and German participants also found that resource-conserving and environmentally friendly consumption can enhance life satisfaction (Minton et al., 2018; Schmitt et al., 2018). Therefore, green consumption as a form of prosocial spending can effectively promote individual well-being.

2.2 The Nature of Prosocial Spending Effects

2.2.1 Universality The positive impact of prosocial spending on well-being appears to exhibit cross-cultural consistency. Researchers have found evidence

of prosocial spending enhancing well-being in North America, India, Uganda, and other countries (Aknin et al., 2011; Aknin et al., 2013). Gallup World Poll data analyzing 136 countries revealed that prosocial spending effectively improved national life satisfaction in 120 countries (Aknin et al., 2013). Recent analyses of data from over one million people worldwide also indicated that prosocial spending in the form of charitable donations is one of six global predictors of life satisfaction (Helliwell et al., 2019). Additionally, empirical research has demonstrated cross-group consistency in the effect of prosocial spending on well-being (Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012; Hanniball et al., 2019). Due to the universal existence of prosocial influences on well-being, scholars have proposed that prosocial behavior may even constitute a fourth basic psychological need alongside autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Martela & Ryan, 2020). Therefore, the capacity of prosocial spending to enhance givers' well-being demonstrates cross-cultural social universality.

2.2.2 Persistence Although research consistently shows that prosocial spending can enhance individual well-being, this happiness may be transient. According to hedonic adaptation theory, humans exhibit hedonic adaptation over time, causing the pleasure derived from any life experience to fade rapidly (Lyubomirsky, 2010). For example, Falk and Graeber (2020) found that while prosocial spending increased well-being, the happiness it brought after one month was far lower than that from receiving money. In other words, prosocial spending has a larger short-term effect but a smaller long-term effect. Conversely, however, evidence suggests that prosocial spending can effectively resist hedonic adaptation. Compared to the happiness from spending on oneself, the happiness from prosocial spending is more durable (O' Brien & Kassirer, 2019). This may be because individuals continuously engage in prosocial behavior to maintain a prosocial image. Unlike many other needs, this social need to build self-image is particularly unstable. Since prosocial self-evaluation and reputation can be easily damaged by negative behaviors (Klein & O' Brien, 2016, 2017; Milinski et al., 2002), individuals must continuously engage in prosocial behavior to maintain their prosocial image, thereby continuously gaining happiness.

Overall, although researchers hold inconsistent views regarding the persistence of prosocial spending's well-being benefits, its capacity to effectively enhance well-being is undeniable. Even if prosocial spending only has temporary effects, people have many opportunities to frequently encounter prosocial spending in daily life, allowing its positive effects to continue. For instance, people regularly spend money on others and can frequently experience joy from this behavior (Dunn et al., 2020). This continuous stream of "small joys" may accumulate to produce greater happiness.

3 Theoretical Perspectives on the Mechanisms of Prosocial Spending

3.1 Self-Determination Theory Perspective

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory posits that humans have three basic psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Throughout life, these three basic needs must be continuously satisfied to experience integrity and happiness. Extensive research shows that satisfying these needs produces numerous positive outcomes, including better job performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007), higher athletic achievement (Adie et al., 2012), better physical health (Ng et al., 2012), and higher well-being (Chen et al., 2014). Prosocial spending serves as an effective way to satisfy these three basic needs (Kindap-Tepe & Aktaş, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2015), thereby enhancing individual well-being.

First, prosocial spending can increase well-being by satisfying individuals' need for relatedness. Yamaguchi et al. (2016) found that prosocial spending positively impacts individuals' social relationships, leading them to experience higher levels of well-being, particularly when they perceive that recipients have indeed been helped (Lok & Dunn, 2020). Individuals who consider relatedness need satisfaction important experience more positive emotions after donating (O' Neill, 2020). This effect is moderated by the target of prosocial spending—the closer the relationship with the recipient, the greater the positive impact (Aknin et al., 2011).

Second, prosocial spending represents a way for individuals to exert meaningful influence on the world, satisfying the human need for competence and thereby enhancing well-being. In fact, when people recognize how their prosocial actions affect others, they are more likely to derive happiness from helping (Aknin et al., 2013). Furthermore, individuals' sense of competence can interact with prosocial spending to produce a synergistic effect that continuously enhances well-being. When individuals have relatively low competence or unmet competence needs, this unmet need becomes a behavioral motivation that drives prosocial behavior to enhance competence, resulting in greater well-being gains. When individuals initially have high or satisfied well-being, prosocial spending can still maintain their well-being by enhancing competence (Hui & Kogan, 2018). This demonstrates that prosocial spending indeed positively influences well-being by satisfying competence needs.

Additionally, prosocial spending can enhance well-being by satisfying individuals' need for autonomy. Multiple studies show that prosocial behavior driven by autonomous motivation increases need satisfaction and enhances well-being (Kindap-Tepe & Aktaş, 2019; Lok & Dunn, 2020). In contrast, forced participation in prosocial activities may backfire and produce negative effects (Van Schie et al., 2015). However, behaviors initially driven by external motivation can gradually become internalized and integrated into personal self-concept, transforming into intrinsically motivated autonomous behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Therefore, even prosocial spending initially motivated by external factors

may later convert to intrinsic motivation, bringing happiness to individuals. In summary, prosocial spending enhances well-being by satisfying the three basic psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

3.2 Social Norm Theory Perspective

Humans have a strong desire to follow social norms and imitate others' behaviors (Bernheim, 1994). In groups, conforming to social norms is a way to gain recognition from others and society, allowing individuals to maintain a positive self-concept and experience high levels of subjective well-being (Batson & Powell, 2003; Morris et al., 2015). Conversely, individuals whose behaviors deviate from social norms experience higher negative emotions and lower well-being levels (Stavrova et al., 2012; Stutzer & Lalive, 2004).

In environments where prosocial behavior constitutes a social norm, individuals will conform to, assimilate, and internalize this norm, making prosocial behavior their own behavioral and cognitive standard (Higgins, 1987) and evaluating themselves based on whether their actions align with social norms to reduce uncertainty. Social norms are generally divided into descriptive norms (perceptions of what people actually do in specific situations) and injunctive norms (perceptions of what others approve or disapprove of) (陈维扬, 谢天, 2018). Individuals can engage in prosocial spending under both types of norms, with those under descriptive norms donating significantly more than those under injunctive norms (Agerström et al., 2016), because following descriptive norms allows individuals to act consistently with the group, satisfying their need for belonging and reducing negative emotions. Additionally, the universality of social norms' influence on prosocial spending has been verified: a cross-cultural study of 23 countries found that individuals living in countries where prosocial behavior represents a strong social norm experience higher life satisfaction when engaging in prosocial behavior (Oarga et al., 2015). This indicates that in countries where prosocial behavior represents a strong social norm, the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being is stronger. Therefore, under prosocial norms, prosocial spending helps individuals form a prosocial image, gain social recognition, and thereby experience happiness.

3.3 Evolutionary Theory Perspective

From an evolutionary perspective, human psychological mechanisms can be understood as a set of adaptive decision rules (Kenrick et al., 2003). Prosocial spending entails costs, and individuals need certain rewards to participate in such activities. Emotional rewards represent a potential mechanism that encourages people to engage in costly prosocial spending (Dunn et al., 2020). According to the self-reinforcing effect of altruism in evolutionary processes, altruistic behavior can benefit helpers by adjusting their psychological resources and positively influencing psychological processes. Helpers receive immediate returns from prosocial behavior, with benefits occurring in the present rather than being delayed (谢晓非 et al., 2017). Therefore, people may be willing to engage in

prosocial spending because it costs material resources but brings psychological happiness. Due to the special nature of prosocial behavior, evolutionary theory offers different explanations for different situations (Penner et al., 2005).

One perspective suggests that the evolution of prosocial behavior results from kin selection. Since inclusive fitness is more important than individual fitness in evolutionary processes, those who frequently help relatives have evolutionary advantages in terms of overall adaptability. Multiple studies show that humans are more inclined to help kin than non-kin (Barrett et al., 2002). This greater willingness to spend money on relatives aligns with inclusive fitness theory in evolutionary theory, which is more conducive to group survival. Consequently, spending on close others yields higher happiness (Rinner, 2019). Another perspective views prosocial behavior toward non-kin as a model of reciprocal altruism. Humans live cooperatively in social groups where members care for each other. Therefore, people generally believe that although prosocial spending involves obvious material costs, giving to others is rewarding; while selfishness has direct material benefits, its costs may be high (Crocker et al., 2017). According to Trivers (1971), if helping strangers yields returns, humans gain evolutionary advantages from such help, which produces positive effects and increases the evolutionary success of prosocial behavior. For example, people are more willing to engage in prosocial behavior toward those who have helped them (Boster et al., 2001), and prosocial behavior can create good impressions, enhancing one's status and reputation among community members (Van Vugt et al., 2007; Wedekind & Braithwaite, 2002). This status and reputation brings mating advantages and helps avoid negative emotions (Bodner & Prelec, 2003; Grant & Dutton, 2012; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017). Therefore, prosocial spending evolves through mutual help, and individuals can enhance their well-being even when spending money on strangers.

Prosocial tendencies are transmitted genetically across generations, with physiological or neural processes forming the basis for promoting prosocial behavior (Penner et al., 2005). Research shows that prosocial tendencies are associated with rapid growth in the prefrontal cortex, whose size matches the capacity and willingness to engage in prosocial behavior (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). The neocortex responsible for advanced cognition, including the prefrontal cortex, requires more energy than the brain regions responsible for instinct (Kahneman, 2011). Although prosocial activities consume more energy than instinctive responses and may even endanger survival during difficult times, prosocial behavior benefits both others and oneself. For example, prosocial spending indeed brings positive emotions and higher life satisfaction, and these additional psychological rewards help maintain individual energy costs, facilitate social survival (Kim, 2020), and can further promote individuals' prosocial behavior (Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2012). Therefore, in human evolutionary history, prosocial spending may incur short-term costs but yields long-term benefits.

3.4 Social Exchange Theory Perspective

Social exchange refers to the exchange that occurs when two or more people engage in activities involving tangible or intangible, more or less rewarding or costly expenditures (Homans, 1961). Social exchange theory posits that human behavior is governed by exchange activities that bring rewards and compensation, that all human social activities can be reduced to a form of exchange, and that relationships formed through social exchange are also exchange relationships (Cao et al., 2015).

People engage in six main types of social exchange: money, status, love, information, goods, and services (Schilke et al., 2015). Social exchange is first stimulated by social capital, which not only promotes the development of social relationships but also constrains their development and outcomes, such as power and equitable distribution in social processes (Coleman, 1994; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). The form of prosocial spending reflects the valuable resources controlled by the giver and the resource allocation with recipients (Coleman, 1994). Most importantly, regardless of the resource type, exchange must follow the reciprocity principle: in social interactions, when helpers provide assistance or support to recipients, the latter have obligations and responsibilities to reciprocate, enabling resources to be exchanged at equivalent value between both parties, satisfying their respective interests and achieving relative fairness (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the process of prosocial spending, individuals also follow social exchange theory. When individuals' contributions and returns are balanced, they perceive exchange fairness and experience high satisfaction; when invested resources and obtained returns are imbalanced, individuals may perceive exchange inequality, reducing their satisfaction and adversely affecting prosocial behavior (Dainton, 2003). However, cost-benefit analysis in social exchange theory is a subjective process (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961) based on individuals' own value systems (Hamon & Bull, 2016). In other words, when engaging in prosocial spending, whether individuals feel that contributions and returns are equivalent varies from person to person. Yet everyone desires and pursues happiness. Even if recipients do not provide material returns to givers, givers immediately obtain happiness after prosocial spending (Curry et al., 2018; Martela & Ryan, 2016), and happiness itself is an intangible return on prosocial spending. Therefore, prosocial spending acquires happiness at the cost of material resources, exchanging tangible resources for intangible resources to achieve the reciprocity principle.

3.5 Summary

The four theories above explain why prosocial spending can bring happiness from different perspectives. Self-determination theory explains from the perspective of basic individual needs, showing that prosocial spending can satisfy competence, relatedness, and autonomy needs, indicating that prosocial spending makes individuals happy because it fulfills fundamental human needs. Social norm theory operates at the cultural level, demonstrating the importance

of prosocial norms in groups. Individuals may engage in prosocial spending to meet external social expectations, which helps them maintain their image and gain social recognition, thereby harvesting happiness. This theory emphasizes individuals' prosocial cognition. Evolutionary theory explains from the perspectives of kin selection and reciprocal altruism that prosocial behavior may be an evolutionary instinct beneficial to human survival, thus generating feelings of security and happiness when individuals act prosocially. Social exchange theory explains the exchange of monetary resources with other resources in prosocial spending, encompassing interactions between people. Self-determination theory, evolutionary theory, and social exchange theory all explain the influence of individuals' internal prosocial motivations on well-being from the individual level, while social norm theory effectively explains the influence of external motivations for prosocial spending on well-being from the social level. In addition, numerous factors affect the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being, which will be further analyzed below.

4 Influencing Factors

4.1 External Factors

Culture plays a significant role in the relationship between individual prosocial spending and well-being. First, across different cultures, individuals have different understandings of subjective well-being. In recent years, psychologists have distinguished between subjective well-being in Eastern and Western cultures. In Western culture, individuals tend toward independent self-construal, viewing themselves as autonomous entities who defend their rights, so the ultimate goal in Western culture is personal happiness (Uchida et al., 2004). In Eastern culture, subjective well-being emphasizes connectedness, harmony, and collective happiness (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2015; Uchida et al., 2004). In other words, people's ultimate goal is not only personal happiness but also the happiness of the entire group through good and effective interpersonal relationships. Prosocial spending is a form of social participation that closely connects with others, so individuals in Eastern cultures experience stronger happiness when engaging in prosocial behavior. For example, research found that compared to American participants, individuals in Japanese culture experienced higher happiness when acting prosocially (Gherghel et al., 2020). Second, across different cultures, individuals have different understandings of prosocial behavior. In Western individualistic cultures, defining prosocial behavior as beneficial to oneself may increase individual well-being more, whereas in Eastern collectivistic cultures, defining it as beneficial to others may increase well-being more. For example, studies conducted in the United States showed that compared to a control group, participants who read that prosocial behavior benefits themselves had higher life satisfaction and positive emotions and lower negative emotions (Shin et al., 2019).

Additionally, the positive effect of prosocial spending on well-being is related to other factors in the implementation process, such as scale and goal specificity.

Compared to larger charitable organizations, individuals experience greater happiness when donating to smaller charitable groups (Aknin et al., 2013), possibly because donating to smaller groups makes it easier for individuals to track their money and understand the actual impact of their prosocial spending. Compared to vague goals, when prosocial goals are specific and concrete, individuals more easily experience the positive effects of prosocial spending. For example, Rudd and Norton (2014) found that compared to participants whose prosocial goal was “to make someone happy,” those whose goal was “to make someone smile” experienced higher well-being. Because specific goals facilitate better behavioral outcomes, they produce stronger happiness.

4.2 Internal Factors

Whether individual prosocial spending brings greater well-being is also closely related to personal motivation. When prosocial spending is driven by internal motivation, it is more likely to promote subjective well-being. Human social life is interdependent, and human flourishing depends primarily on creating, maintaining, and strengthening social connections. Egoistic motivation undermines mutually supportive relationships with others, whereas altruistic motivation builds them (Crocker et al., 2017). For example, Wang and Tong (2015) found that people are happier after donating privately than publicly because public donations are more likely motivated by external concerns about self-image. If helping others is motivated intrinsically rather than by expectations of reciprocity, individuals experience higher well-being (Oarga et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers found that compared to recalling self-focused prosocial behavior, participants who recalled other-focused prosocial behavior subsequently experienced higher well-being (Wiwad & Aknin, 2017). This indicates that motivation indeed causes differences in happiness from prosocial behavior. Conversely, engaging in self-focused prosocial behavior, while helping others, often correlates with poor psychological health, physical health, and interpersonal relationships (Crocker et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2016) and tends to accompany lower life satisfaction and higher jealousy (Krekels & Pandelaere, 2015). Moreover, research shows that benefiting from prosocial behavior reflects lower moral character. Compared to people who engage in neutral behavior for self-centered reasons (e.g., volunteering at a café where a romantic interest works to gain their affection), those who engage in charitable behavior for self-centered reasons (e.g., volunteering at a shelter where a romantic interest works to gain their affection) are perceived as having lower moral standards (Newman & Cain, 2014). Therefore, when individuals’ actions are altruistic rather than egoistic, the positive effects of their prosocial spending are stronger.

Furthermore, individuals’ own understanding of happiness influences the positive effects of prosocial spending. Some believe happiness is built on helping others and contributing to them, while others believe it is built on personal self-development and becoming a better person. These different understandings cause the same behavior to produce different emotional experiences. Research

shows that people who believe happiness is built on self-development hold a hedonic belief of avoiding negative experiences, which is significantly negatively correlated with prosocial spending (Pătra et al., 2019). In other words, individuals who define happiness as avoiding negative emotions tend to reduce prosocial spending. This may be because the belief in avoiding negative emotions leads individuals to focus more on potential negative experiences of behavior, associating prosocial behavior with negative emotions such as deception, overconfidence, and naivety, thus preventing them from deriving happiness from prosocial spending.

5 Summary and Future Directions

Based on the above analysis, regardless of whether the target of prosocial spending is individuals or society, this practice can enhance the well-being of actors, which in turn promotes the spread of prosocial behavior. Scholars have employed different theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being, including self-determination theory, social norm theory, evolutionary theory, and social exchange theory, deepening understanding in this field. However, not all prosocial spending produces the same effects; they may vary due to certain external and internal individual factors. Although scholars have gradually focused on the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being, current research mostly concentrates on whether prosocial behavior can influence well-being. Several issues remain to be addressed, and future research can be expanded in the following key areas:

5.1 Further Examining Boundary Conditions of the Prosocial Spending-Well-Being Relationship

From the current research landscape, the mechanism linking prosocial spending and subjective well-being has received substantial empirical support (Hui & Kogan, 2018; Martela & Ryan, 2016; Nelson et al., 2015). However, research on its boundary conditions remains limited and unsystematic. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore when prosocial spending produces stronger positive effects on well-being to 完善相关的理论框架.

As previously discussed, prosocial spending can enhance individual well-being, and this effect is more likely to promote happiness when driven by internal motivation. However, current explorations of individual factors have focused primarily on different motivations for prosocial spending while neglecting more stable internal factors such as personality traits. For each individual, there are optimal and suboptimal ways to allocate spending—what makes one person happy may not make another feel the same. For example, compared to extroverted individuals, introverted individuals experience lower well-being when spending money on experiential activities (Matz et al., 2016). Therefore, finding suitable spending methods to maintain and improve preferred lifestyles is crucial for well-being. People invest more energy in achieving goals that align with their core values and gain self-concordance from achieving these goals, thereby

obtaining greater happiness (Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Consequently, individual personality traits, as more stable internal factors, may also deeply influence the relationship between prosocial spending and well-being. For instance, people with positive mindsets are more willing to engage in prosocial behavior in daily life and are generally happier (Layous et al., 2017); individuals with pro-environmental self-images exhibit greater happiness during green consumption (Binder & Blankenberg, 2017).

Additionally, the positive effect of prosocial spending on well-being relates to external factors such as the target and goals of prosocial spending. However, the specific method of prosocial spending may also influence this positive effect. Research confirms that social connection is closely related to longevity, physical health, cognitive performance, and psychological health (Peterson, 2006). With the development of the internet era, real-world prosocial spending can occur either face-to-face or online. When individuals donate online or purchase gifts for others without face-to-face interaction, the sense of social connection may weaken. Does prosocial spending still significantly affect well-being in such cases? Moreover, prosocial spending inevitably involves the issue of experiential versus material spending. Experiential consumption often yields greater happiness than material consumption (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; 李斌 et al., 2018). Therefore, could prosocial spending make individuals happy because it provides life experiences rather than because it helps others? Or do both reasons exist? Current research has not clearly defined this issue, warranting deeper investigation in the future.

Overall, the match between person and activity is a key factor determining the well-being-enhancing effect of prosocial behavior. Current research still focuses primarily on the direct effects of prosocial spending on well-being, neglecting the important role of matching individual personality traits with specific activities. Although some studies have preliminarily explored this (Lai et al., 2020; Fritz et al., 2017), research in this area remains scarce. Given the diversity of human personalities and prosocial spending methods, future research could comprehensively consider the match between different personalities and prosocial spending, explore the most suitable prosocial spending methods for different personalities, and provide personalized recommendations on how individuals can find happiness through various forms of social spending.

5.2 Exploring the Long-Term Positive Effects of Prosocial Spending

Prosocial spending has positive effects on well-being, but these effects face the issue of hedonic adaptation. Therefore, how to maintain this happiness remains a key concern. Although some research confirms that prosocial spending may have long-term effects, most studies on this topic have used longitudinal methods over relatively short periods (Nelson et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2016), which cannot provide strong evidence for long-term effects.

Currently, theoretical explanations for the long-term effects of prosocial behavior

mainly include two perspectives. First, some propose that the prosocial spending process involves a “self-reinforcing effect” (谢晓非 et al., 2017), where helpers can obtain certain biological feedback from their actions, continuously enhancing positive feelings through mind-body interaction. In other words, prosocial spending triggers individuals’ well-being, and this emotion has a higher tendency to continue driving prosocial spending, thereby achieving long-term stable happiness. However, is this effect applicable across different contexts? According to social norm theory, prosocial spending conforms to social norms, so individuals can experience happiness from it. However, in countries where helping others is a common behavior, the personal emotional benefits individuals gain from helping others may be limited. If everyone helps and helping becomes commonplace, individuals’ prosocial behavior is no longer distinctive. Will they still engage in self-reinforcement to gain happiness? Will they continue to be prosocial? This is a direction worth exploring in the future. Second, the prosocial spending process involves external rewards. According to the reciprocal altruism model, prosocial behavior can create good impressions, enhancing one’s status and reputation among community members (van Vugt et al., 2007; Wedekind & Braithwaite, 2002), which brings other advantages and enhances individual well-being. However, actual research shows that expectations of reciprocal altruism can undermine the happiness from prosocial spending (Oarga et al., 2015). Is this contradictory? Future research needs to explore this issue more deeply.

Therefore, future studies could attempt to combine explanations from different levels in empirical research. For example, investigating whether prosocial spending can resist hedonic adaptation, how it resists it, and what the resistance mechanisms are, to obtain more convincing results. Additionally, current research on the positive effects of prosocial spending has focused mainly on impacts on positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction, but it may also have different effects on specific emotions (e.g., morality, self-esteem, pride). Whether these effects on specific positive emotions can still exist long-term is also a direction worth exploring. Finally, research could examine intervention measures to enhance the positive effects of prosocial spending and attempt to apply these measures to other positive effects of prosocial spending.

5.3 Improving the Ecological Validity of Prosocial Spending Research

Comprehensive review of current prosocial spending research reveals certain methodological limitations. First, most studies use the recall paradigm, asking participants to recall a past prosocial spending experience or other experience and then measuring their well-being. Although this paradigm has been widely accepted (Aknin et al., 2011; Yamaguchi et al., 2016), using it to measure experienced utility may lead to inaccurate reports. Memory utility is one of the most important components of experienced utility (Dunn & Weidman, 2015). When individuals recall their prosocial experiences and evaluate well-being, they may selectively remember peak or end moments, causing bias in well-being reports (李爱梅 et al., 2013; 刘腾飞 et al., 2010). For example, scholars found that when in-

dividuals' resource allocation fails to meet their personal fairness standards, they incorrectly remember their degree of selfishness, potentially avoiding threats to their moral self-image and thereby avoiding negative emotions (Carlson et al., 2020). Although some studies have attempted to simulate real scenarios (Ko et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2016), their small sample sizes raise questions about rigor. Moreover, this method directly instructs participants to engage in prosocial spending, and although participants can freely choose when, where, and how to act, their autonomous motivation for such behavior may be low, thus failing to accurately reflect real-life situations where people genuinely participate in prosocial spending. Therefore, future research could incorporate real-time emotion measurement in authentic prosocial spending contexts, such as immediately popping up well-being measures after online donations, to assess emotions experienced concurrently with prosocial spending and effectively improve ecological validity.

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