

Leave Them Smiling:
How Small Acts Create More Happiness than Large Acts

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Abstract

In four experiments, participants assigned the goal to make someone smile reported a greater boost in happiness than did those whose goal was to make someone happy. This effect was driven by the size of the gap between expectations and reality. The efforts of those assigned to make someone happy fell short of expectations—leading to less personal happiness—whereas the efforts of those assigned to make someone smile more accurately matched expectations—increasing their happiness. In addition, participants erroneously believed that efforts to make others happy (versus smile) would have a greater impact on their own happiness. However, activating the belief that small acts can have big impacts corrected this misperception, leading participants to recognize the benefits of making others smile.

Keywords: happiness, prosocial, goals, affective forecasting, intuitive theories

Leave Them Smiling: How Small Acts Create More Happiness than Large Acts

“Remember there's no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.”—Scott Adams

For many people, the pursuit and attainment of happiness is one of the most essential quests in life. Indeed, the majority of Americans who are surveyed rate their personal happiness as being very important (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Leung, & Hui, 1990) and report that they think about their happiness at least once each day (Freedman, 1978). But although the desire for personal happiness may be clear, the path to achieving this objective is indefinite.

One reason for this relatively hazy route to happiness is that although people often think they know what leads to happiness, their predictions about what will make them happy are often inaccurate (Gilbert, 2006). Another obstacle is that even though extant research has identified numerous predictors of people's happiness and well-being, most of these factors represent relatively stable aspects of an individual's life, such as the cultural environment in which one is raised or resides (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) and demographics such as age, education, social class, marital status, and religion (Argyle, 1999; Diener et al., 1999; Mastekaasa, 1994; Myers, 2000). Because changing these circumstantial factors can be monetarily and temporally costly—if not impossible—the results of these studies provide limited assistance to individuals who wish to achieve greater happiness in their daily lives. Furthermore, because people are quick to hedonically adapt to stable life circumstances (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Kahneman, 1999; Tversky & Griffin, 1991), these types of factors may have fairly limited effects on long-term happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Instead, the key to more lasting happiness may lie in hedonically rewarding intentional activities (i.e.,

effortful actions or practices in which people actively choose to engage), as they are more resilient to the effects of hedonic adaptation (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

One type of intentional activity that has received much attention from happiness-related research is prosocial behavior. Indeed, the growing body of research on prosociality has shed some light on the question of how people can attain greater happiness, demonstrating that engaging in prosocial behaviors increases one's well-being and happiness (Andreoni, 1989, 1990; Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Sheldon, 2004; Post, 2005). But are some prosocial pursuits better able to increase personal happiness than are others? We address this underexplored question in four experiments, examining one critical moderating factor in the causal link between prosocial behavior and happiness: The magnitude of the goal of the act. In particular, we suggest that acts with small, concrete goals designed to improve the well-being of others are more likely to lead to happiness for the giver than are acts with large, abstract goals—despite people's intuitions to the contrary.

Prosociality Makes People Happier

By their nature, prosocial acts are designed to directly benefit the well-being of the recipient. However, research has shown that prosocial acts can be hedonically beneficial for the giver as well (Andreoni, 1989, 1990; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010). In the prosocial domain of volunteering, both membership in service-oriented organizations and volunteer work have been associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, greater happiness, and fewer symptoms of depression (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Van Willigen, 1998), and those who invest more hours of volunteering report greater psychological well-being (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). Furthermore, acts of kindness and generosity increase the well-being of the instigator of the act. For instance, individuals who performed five random acts

of kindness a week for six weeks were happier than those in a no-act control group (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), and individuals who more frequently engaged in altruistic acts rate themselves higher on measures of well-being (Krueger, Hicks, & McGue, 2001). Research on prosocial spending has uncovered similar hedonic effects. For example, individuals who use more financial resources to help others report increased feelings of happiness (Dunn et al., 2008). In sum, it appears that prosociality's ability to impact personal happiness is present across a wide range of contexts and behaviors.

Not only do prosocial acts increase personal happiness, but there is growing evidence that they may do so just as, if not more, effectively than similar acts directly targeted at the self. For instance, neurological support for this theory has been provided by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Specifically, prosocial acts (in the form of charitable donations) are associated with neural activation in brain regions that are implicated in the experience of pleasure and reward, and this pattern of activation is similar to that which comes from receiving money for oneself (Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007). In addition, spending money on others leads to higher levels of happiness than spending money on oneself (Dunn et al., 2008). However, given that prosocial (versus personally-targeted) acts appear to provide a superior path to happiness, a natural question arises: What kind of other-focused acts have the biggest impact on one's own happiness?

Shrinking the Perceived Goal of the Prosocial Act

The primary purpose of a prosocial act is to do something good for another person. But as the above research has shown, the perception that one has positively impacted another with a prosocial act can in turn boost one's own personal happiness, creating a "helper's high" (Luks, 1988) or "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1989; 1990) for the giver. We suggest that the hedonic benefit

that givers receive from their prosocial acts depends, at least to some degree, on the extent to which the givers perceive that their actions have had the desired prosocial effect—in other words, the extent to which their actions actually met their expectations for achieving the prosocial goal. One possible means of affecting one’s ability to meet these expectations is to “shrink” the perceived magnitude of the prosocial goal. Rather than aiming to make someone happy—a broadly framed goal that is difficult to achieve—we suggest that a smaller, more concretely framed goal—for example, merely making the recipient smile—might prove more effective at meeting the giver’s hopes.

Goals, including the goals of prosocial acts, often differ in their level of abstraction (Emmons, 1996; Emmons & Kaiser, 1996; Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001). They may be framed in broad, abstract, and expansive ways or in small, concrete, and specific ways. However, the framing of a goal can have important implications. For instance, striving for abstract goals has been associated with greater psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, whereas striving for concrete goals has been linked to greater levels of psychological well-being (Carver, La Voie, Kuhl, & Ganellen, 1988; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Emmons, 1992). Building upon these correlational results, we hypothesized that performing a prosocial act of kindness that had a goal framed in smaller, more concrete terms (i.e., making someone else smile) would be more beneficial for personal happiness than would performing a prosocial act that had a larger, more abstractly framed goal (i.e., making someone else happy). In other words, we predicted that shifting the goal of the prosocial act (i.e., making someone else happy) by focusing on a functionally similar, but more concrete, goal (i.e., making someone else smile) would increase the resultant level of personal happiness.

But why might the level of abstraction with which the goal of a prosocial act is framed influence one's personal happiness? One possibility is that acts with smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goals (versus larger, more abstractly framed prosocial goals) lead to outcomes that are perceived as better meeting one's expectations for achieving that goal. The perceived discrepancy between one's expectations that an act of kindness will achieve a prosocial goal and the actual outcome of that act is a type of "expectation-reality gap" (Michalos, 1980, 1985; Vermunt & Steensma, 2001). Of importance to the present research, smaller expectation-reality gaps have been linked to greater satisfaction, happiness, and overall well-being (Christensen, Herskind, & Vaupel, 2006; Davis, 1981; Gregg, 1972; Michalos, 1985; Schwartz, 2003; Thomas, 1981; Vermunt, Spaans, Zorge, 1989).

However, since people tend to be biased in their expectations about future outcomes (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 2002; Weinstein, 1980, 1989; Zauberman & Lynch, 2005), expectation-reality gaps are frequent. This raises the question, when might expectation-reality gaps be minimized? Two related factors play a key role in addressing this issue. One, when one's expectations are more realistic or accurate, there is a greater possibility that these expectations will be met in reality (Kopalle & Lehmann, 2001; Schwartz, 2003). And two, the more that one's perception of the actual outcome can be shifted in the direction of one's biased expectations (e.g., when expectations are positively biased, the better the perceived outcome can be made), the greater the likelihood that the outcome will meet one's expectations (Ojasalo, 2001; Walker & Baker, 2000).

Prosocial acts performed in the service of smaller, more concretely framed goals (versus larger, more abstractly framed goals) may minimize the expectation-reality gap for achieving prosocial goals due to both of these reasons. First, a smaller, more concretely framed goal may

lead to more accurately calibrated initial expectations for achieving the goal. When one is considering goal-related actions, an abstractly framed goal encourages a focus on the why aspect (e.g., the broader meaning or larger purpose) of the action, whereas a concretely framed goal focuses one more strongly on the how aspect (e.g., details or logistics) of the action (Torelli & Kaikati, 2009; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989; Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). Importantly, focusing on how one will attain an outcome (as opposed to why one is attempting to attain the outcome) can enable one to better anticipate potential obstacles as well as opportunities and means for executing the goal-directed behavior (Gollwitzer, 1993, 1996; Pham & Taylor, 1999; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998), all factors that enhance one's ability to accurately calibrate expectations regarding the ability to achieve a prosocial goal.

Second, having a smaller, more concretely framed goal (versus a larger, more abstractly framed goal) may shift the perceived quality of the actual outcome of goal-related actions. Whether a particular outcome is an acceptable instance of goal attainment is often difficult to assess for abstract goals, due to vague standards of success (Emmons, 1992). More concretely framed goals, on the other hand, permit clearer feedback regarding how well the outcome of one's actions achieved the goal (Locke & Latham, 1990). For instance, it is clear whether one has exercised at the gym or read the daily newspaper, but more difficult to assess whether one has lived a healthy lifestyle or increased their knowledge of the world. If an individual feels more certain that a prosocial act has had the desired effect, then this should influence how one perceives the outcome of the act itself (which influences perceptions that the outcome has met one's expectations for achieving the goal).

Therefore, taking into account both strategies for minimizing the expectation-reality gap, we predicted that a prosocial act performed with the smaller, more concretely framed goal of

making someone else smile would enhance one's personal happiness more than a prosocial act performed with the functionally similar, but larger and more abstractly framed goal of making someone else happy. Further, we predicted that the mechanism fueling this effect is a reduction in the expectation-reality gap between givers' expectations of accomplishing the prosocial goal and the actual outcome of their act.

Predicting Personal Happiness from Prosocial Acts

Despite the fact that prior research seems to support the notion that smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goals may be particularly beneficial for personal happiness, the pursuit of bigger, more abstractly framed prosocial goals—such as being healthier, smarter, or happier—is quite commonplace for many individuals. This raises an important question: Do people recognize that acts of kindness in service of smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goals more effectively cultivate personal happiness than acts of kindness in service of larger, more abstractly framed prosocial goals? Research on affective forecasting suggests that people might not. Indeed, people are frequently unable to make accurate predictions about what will make them happy (Gilbert, 2006). For instance, people misjudge how much happiness one's wealth can bring: When people predict how happy they would be at various income levels, they anticipate that the relationship between happiness and money has a steeper slope than is found by actual data (Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). Furthermore, people often overestimate the impact that seemingly big events, such as the dissolution of a relationship, winning the lottery, or whether one receives tenure, will have on their happiness (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Of particular relevance to the present research, people are also poor predictors of the hedonic returns

of prosocial acts. Indeed, Dunn et al. (2008) found that people inaccurately predict that personal spending would make them happier than prosocial spending.

We expected that people would incorrectly predict that pursuing a seemingly bigger, more abstractly framed prosocial goal (i.e., making someone else happy) would lead to greater personal happiness than would pursuing a seemingly smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goal (i.e., making someone else smile). In other words, we anticipated that when making predictions about the personal benefits one would receive from an act of kindness, people would tend to focus on and weigh too heavily the perceived meaningfulness or largeness of the goal of the prosocial actions and overlook their considerations for how well they think the outcome of the act will meet their expectations and the perceived manageability of the goal of the prosocial actions. But if people are indeed unable to accurately predict which act of kindness is best for personal happiness, can this forecasting error be corrected? In the present research, we explored one possible strategy for diminishing this error.

Contrary to the popular notions that “bigger is better” and that one should “go big or go home,” prior research has shown that small acts can actually have a big impact (e.g., Collins & Ford, 2010; Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, & Wilson, 2004; Mochon, Norton, & Ariely, 2008; Storch, 2005). Therefore, the theories that people hold about the potential power of small acts may tend to be inaccurate, leading people to mistakenly predict that acts of kindness made in pursuit of seemingly bigger prosocial goals will have a more positive influence on their own happiness. In other words, an expectation-reality gap—in this case between one’s expectations about the size of the consequences of seemingly small prosocial acts and the reality that small prosocial acts can have big impacts—might be preventing people from correctly choosing to pursue smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goals over larger, more abstractly framed ones.

We predicted that one way to shrink this gap and counteract this affective forecasting error would be to increase the accuracy of people's beliefs about the potential impact of small acts (e.g., by increasing people's perceptions of the size of the implications, consequences, and meaningfulness of small acts). Indeed, LeBoeuf and Norton (in press) show that people often believe that small consequences are linked to small events, and that big consequences are linked to big events. These "cause-consequence" matching beliefs arise because people are motivated to see the world as predictable, and such beliefs helps to fulfill this motivation. But importantly, it is possible to activate an alternative causal schema to shift these beliefs. Thus, in a similar vein, we predicted that by activating the belief that small acts could have a big impact, the accuracy of people's affective forecasts could be improved. Under such conditions, individuals should have an increased preference for undertaking the prosocial of making someone else smile (over making someone else happy) when asked to pursue the goal that would bring them the greatest personal happiness.

Overview

Stated formally, the hypotheses tested in the present research are:

H1: Performing an act designed to accomplish a smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goal (i.e., make someone else smile) will lead to greater personal happiness than performing an act designed to accomplish larger, more abstractly framed, goal (i.e., make someone else happy).

H2: Performing an act designed to accomplish a smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goal (i.e., make someone else smile) will lead to greater personal happiness than performing an act designed to accomplish larger, more abstractly framed, goal (i.e., make someone else happy) by reducing the gap between one's expectations of accomplishing the prosocial goal and the actual outcome of the act.

H3: People will make inaccurate predictions about which type of prosocial goal will lead to the greatest personal happiness, incorrectly predicting that performing an act designed to make someone else happy would be better for personal happiness than performing an act designed to make someone else smile.

H4: Altering lay beliefs about the impact factor of small acts, such that small acts are perceived as having big impacts, will correct the affective forecasting error about which prosocial goal (making someone smile versus happy) leads to the greatest personal happiness.

Experiment 1

The goal of Experiment 1 was to perform an initial test of whether performing an act intended to make someone else smile (versus happy) would lead to greater personal happiness (H1). To examine this prediction, participants were randomly assigned to perform either a prosocial act designed to accomplish the goal of making someone else smile or a prosocial act designed to accomplish the goal of making someone else happy.

Method

Participants and design. Fifty people from a national survey pool (31 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 38.32$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 12.60$) participated in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift certificate. The experiment used a 2 cell (Goal of Prosocial Act: Smile vs. Happy) between-subjects design.¹

Procedure. All participants took part in a two-part survey. In the first survey, participants were informed that they would be required to perform an act of kindness. To manipulate the goal of the prosocial act, participants were randomly assigned to either the smile act condition or the happy act condition. Participants in the happy [smile] condition were told, “In this study we ask you to accomplish a task: do something to make someone else happy [smile].” All participants

were instructed that they would have 24 hours to accomplish their task, at which point they would take part in a follow-up survey.

The follow-up survey, administered one day later, contained filler items about the assigned task, embedded in which was the key measure of personal happiness. Participants responded to, in regards to the act they had performed, the following item: “To what degree do you feel you created happiness in your own life?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Last, participants reported the extent to which the act they performed was designed to elicit a smile (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) and the extent to which the act they performed was designed to elicit happiness (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on participants’ ratings regarding the goal of the act that they performed confirmed that those in the smile goal ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 0.78$) versus happy goal condition ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.61$) performed acts that were designed, to a greater extent, to elicit a smile, $F(1, 48) = 5.90$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Participants in the happy goal ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 0.75$) versus smile goal condition ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.50$) performed acts that were designed, to a greater extent, to elicit happiness, $F(1, 48) = 6.44$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$.

Personal Happiness. To test the hypotheses that performing prosocial acts with the goal of making someone else smile is superior for one’s own happiness (when compared to acts with the goal of making someone else happy), an ANOVA was conducted on the measure of personal happiness. The results revealed the predicted effect of act goal, $F(1, 48) = 8.26$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. Participants in smile goal condition ($M = 6.50$, $SD = 0.66$) felt they created more personal happiness with their act than did those in the happy goal condition ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.58$).

Discussion. Experiment 1 demonstrated that performing prosocial acts designed to make someone else smile are better for personal happiness than are performing acts designed to make someone else happy. These results therefore provide initial support for the hypothesis that, even though the acts of making others smile or be happy are functionally similar and both prosocial in nature, performing an act with the smaller, more concrete goal of making someone else smile (as opposed to the larger, more abstract goal of making someone else happy) creates more personal happiness. The question of why certain prosocial goals lead to acts that are more hedonically beneficial for the giver was explored in Experiment 2.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 aimed to replicate the main result in Experiment 1 and investigate the mechanism by which prosocial acts designed to make someone smile (versus happy) boosts personal happiness. We tested the hypothesis that the smaller, more concrete framing of the goal to make someone else smile (versus the larger, more abstract framing of the goal to make someone else happy) would reduce the gap between one's expectations of accomplishing the prosocial goal and the actual outcome of the act (Michalos, 1980, 1985; Vermunt & Steensma, 2001), which would in turn generate greater personal happiness (H2). A further goal was to determine whether in fact the two prosocial goals do indeed differ in terms of perceived concreteness.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and twenty-seven people from a national survey pool (90 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 34.67$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 11.49$) participated in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift certificate. The experiment relied on a 2 cell (Goal of Prosocial Act: Smile vs. Happy) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

Procedure. All participants took part in a two-part survey. First, participants, randomly assigned, were asked to perform an act of kindness keeping one of two possible goals in mind. Participants in the happy [smile] condition were told, “In this study we ask you to accomplish a task: do something to make someone else happy [smile].” As in Experiment 1, all participants were then instructed that they would have 24 hours to accomplish their task, at which point they would take part in a follow-up survey. One day later, participants received the follow-up survey, which contained filler items about the assigned task, embedded in which were three key items. To measure feelings of personal happiness, participants responded to the following item, in regards to the act they had performed: “To what degree do you feel you created happiness in your own life?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The second item assessed the perceived size of the expectation-reality gap, asking how well the actual outcome of participants’ acts met their expectations for accomplishing the assigned goal (i.e., making someone else smile or happy, depending on their randomly assigned condition; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very well*). Last, participants reported their perceptions of how specific the goal that they had in mind was when they performed their act (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Ratings concerning participants’ perceptions of how specific the goal they had in mind when performing their act confirmed that the level of goal abstraction manipulation was successful: Those in the smile condition ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 2.12$) felt they had a more specific goal in mind when performing their act than did those in the happy condition ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.97$), $F(1, 125) = 5.92$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$.

Expectation-reality gap. To test the hypothesis that the goal of making someone else smile (versus happy) would reduce the discrepancy between one’s expectations of accomplishing

the prosocial goal and the actual outcome of the act, we conducted an ANOVA on the measure of the perceived gap between expectations and reality. This analysis revealed the predicted effect of act goal condition, $F(1, 125) = 11.14, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .08$. Participants in the smile condition ($M = 6.51, SD = 0.86$) perceived that the outcome of their act better met their expectations for accomplishing the assigned goal than did those in the happy condition ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.10$). A correlation analysis additionally supported this effect by showing that, across conditions, having a more specific goal in mind when performing the act was associated with the outcome of the act better met one's expectations, $r = .36, p < .01$.

To further test the hypothesized process by which performing an act designed to make someone else smile (versus happy) shrinks the expectation-reality gap, we conducted a mediation analysis with perceived goal specificity as the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The goal of the prosocial act (happy = 0, smile = 1) was a significant predictor of both perceived goal specificity, $b = .88, t = 2.43, p = .02$, and how well the outcome of the act met expectations, $b = .59, t = 3.34, p < .01$. As previously reported, perceived goal specificity was positively correlated with how well the outcome of the act met expectations, $r = .36, p < .01$. In support of (partial) mediation, the level of goal specificity remained a significant predictor, $b = .15, t = 3.69, p < .01$, whereas the act goal condition's predictive ability was significantly reduced, $b = .45, t = 2.64, p = .01$, Sobel $z = 2.03, p = .04$, when both of these variables were simultaneous predictors of the size of the expectation-reality gap.

Personal happiness. The results of an ANOVA revealed the predicted effect of act goal condition, $F(1, 125) = 4.89, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Participants in the smile condition ($M = 5.95, SD = 1.14$) felt they created more personal happiness with their act than did those in the happy condition ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.08$). Further, a correlation analysis supported our account of this

effect by showing that, across conditions, greater perceived goal specificity was associated with greater personal happiness ($r = .32, p < .01$).

To test the process by which performing an act designed to make someone else smile (versus happy) created greater personal happiness, we conducted a mediation analysis (see Figure 1) with the perceived gap between expectations and reality as the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The goal of the prosocial act (happy = 0, smile = 1) was a significant predictor of both how well the outcome of the act met expectations for accomplishing the assigned goal, $b = .59, t = 3.34, p < .01$, and the amount of personal happiness created, $b = .44, t = 2.21, p = .03$. How well the outcome of the act met expectations for accomplishing the assigned goal was positively correlated with personal happiness, $r = .29, p < .01$. In support of mediation, how well the outcome of the act met expectations remained a significant predictor, $b = .28, t = 2.85, p = .01$, whereas the act goal condition became non-significant, $b = .27, t = 1.36, p = .18$, Sobel $z = 2.16, p = .03$, when both of these variables were simultaneous predictors of personal happiness.²

Insert Figure 1 Here

Discussion. Experiment 2 provided further evidence that performing an act of kindness in service of the goal to make someone else smile cultivates more personal happiness than does performing an act in service of the goal to make someone else happy. Therefore, it appears that shifting away from a broad, abstractly framed prosocial goal (e.g., making someone else happy), and framing the goal in more concrete terms (e.g., making someone else smile) can increase the hedonic benefits experienced by those who engage in prosocial acts. This greater boost to personal happiness was thought to occur because a prosocial goal with a lower level of

abstraction was hypothesized to be better able to reduce the gap between one's expectations and reality. A mediation analysis supported this theory, demonstrating that the augmented effect that the smaller, more concrete prosocial goal of making someone else smile (versus the larger, more abstract goal of making someone else happy) had on personal happiness was driven by the actual outcome of the act better met one's expectations for accomplishing the prosocial goal. Another mediation analysis further showed that the prosocial goal of making someone else smile (versus happy) was indeed perceived as being more specific, which in turn led to the observed reduction in the gap between expectations and the actual outcome of the act. We now address the question of whether people are able to accurately predict which prosocial goal is best for personal happiness.

Experiment 3

Experiments 1 and 2 showed that performing an act of kindness with the goal of making someone else smile, relative to one with the goal of making someone else happy, increases one's personal happiness. But, an important question is whether people recognize that pursuing the smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goal of making someone else smile has a hedonic advantage over pursuing the larger, more abstractly framed prosocial act of making someone else happy. Given that people typically make inaccurate predictions about how much happiness various things in life will bring (e.g., Aknin et al., 2009; Brickman et al., 1978; Buehler & McFarland, 2001), including the hedonic returns one can receive from a prosocial act (Dunn et al., 2008), we predicted that forecasting errors would be made in this domain as well. Thus, in Experiment 3 we test the hypothesis that people will make inaccurate predictions about which type of prosocial act will lead to the greatest personal happiness, incorrectly predicting that

performing an act designed to make someone else happy would be better for personal happiness than would performing an act designed to make someone else smile.

Method

Participants and design. Eighty-four people from a national survey pool (52 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 38.25$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 13.31$) participated in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift certificate. The experiment used a 2 cell (Imagined Goal of Prosocial Act: Smile vs. Happy) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were initially told that they would be required to imagine that they were taking part in a study that would be described to them. They were then told to imagine that they received study instructions asking them to perform an act of kindness. Participants who were randomly assigned to the smile condition imagined that they were asked to perform an act designed to elicit a smile, while those in the happy condition imagined that they were asked to perform an act designed to elicit happiness. Specifically, participants in the happy [smile] condition were told to imagine they received the following instructions: “In this study we ask you to accomplish a task: do something to make someone else happy [smile].” They were then told to imagine that the instructions informed them that they would have 24 hours to accomplish their task, at which point they would participate in a follow-up survey.

Participants were then told to imagine how they would be feeling 24 hours later, after performing their act, when the experimenter contacted them with the follow-up survey. They then received a copy of the follow-up survey and were asked to “predict how you would answer the following questions.” The follow-up survey contained filler items about the assigned task, embedded in which was the key measure of predicted personal happiness. Participants predicted

how they would respond to the following item about the act they performed: “To what degree do you feel you created happiness in your own life?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).”

Last, after providing their predicted responses to the follow-up survey, participants were told that in a previous study the experimenter had run, participants were assigned to one of two conditions. We then described the two experimental conditions used in Experiment 2 to the current participants: “In Condition A, participants were given instructions to do something to make someone else happy within the next 24 hours” and “In Condition B, participants were given instructions to do something to make someone else smile within the next 24 hours.” We then asked the current participants to use a scale from 1-100 and separately rate each condition based on the degree to which they felt it would create happiness in their own lives.

Results and Discussion

An ANOVA on the measure of predicted personal happiness tested whether those who imagined performing an act designed to make someone else smile predicted that they would create more personal happiness than did those who imagined performing an act designed to make someone else happy. This analysis revealed that participants in the smile condition ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.52$) did not predict that they would create more personal happiness than did those in the happy condition ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 82) = 0.21$, $p = .65$.

A repeated measures ANOVA, with the ratings of the two experimental conditions from Experiment 2 as the within-subjects factor, was run to test the hypothesis that participants would not recognize that performing an act designed to make someone else smile generates more personal happiness than does performing an act designed to make someone else happy. This analysis revealed the predicted main effect of condition rating, $F(1, 82) = 8.31$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Participants rated the experimental condition where one performs an act to make someone else

happy ($M = 78.60$, $SD = 19.42$) as being able to create more personal happiness than the experimental condition where one performs an act to make someone else smile ($M = 74.60$, $SD = 21.19$).

Discussion. Experiment 3 provided evidence that people make inaccurate predictions about which prosocial goal, making someone else smile or happy, will lead to acts of kindness that create the greatest amount of personal happiness. Participants who imagined performing an act designed to make someone else smile and those who imagined performing an act designed to make someone else happy predicted they would create an equal amount of happiness in their own lives—inaccurate predictions based on our prior results. Furthermore, when they were subsequently told about both prosocial goals, participants incorrectly predicted that performing an act designed to make someone else happy would generate more personal happiness than would performing an act designed to make someone else smile. Based on these results, it appears that instead of relying on the perceived manageability of achieving the prosocial goal, people overweight the perceived magnitude of the prosocial goal when making their predictions. Thus, it seems that people do not recognize that acts of kindness in service of smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goals can more effectively cultivate personal happiness than can acts in service of prosocial goals framed in larger, more abstract terms.

Experiment 4

Experiment 3 demonstrated that people do not accurately predict the amount of personal happiness created by prosocial goals that are functionally similar but differ in level of abstraction (i.e., making someone else smile versus happy). But, if people are unable to correctly predict which of these prosocial goals lead to acts of kindness that generate the greatest hedonic rewards, this may increase the likelihood that people will choose to pursue prosocial goals that are less

than optimal for one's personal happiness. Can this affective forecasting error be corrected? In Experiment 4, we explored one possible strategy for reducing this prediction bias.

One source of error in the forecasting of emotions (such as personal happiness) is one's intuitive theories about the affective impact of various things or events (Andrade & Van Boven, 2010; Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Gilbert et al., 1998; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999; Van Boven, Loewenstein, Welch, & Dunning, 2012), as some of these theories are inevitably wrong. For instance, research has demonstrated that seemingly small acts can have big (if not bigger) impacts (Collins & Ford, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2004; Mochon et al., 2008; Storch, 2005). However, many philosophies popular in modern American society, such as the notions that “bigger is better” and “go big or go home,” are contrary to these results and may bias personal happiness predictions in favor of acts with larger, more abstract prosocial goals—as goals with a higher level of abstraction accentuate the magnitude or size of goal-relevant actions (Emmons, 1996; Emmons & Kaiser 1996; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989; Zhang et al., 2008). Therefore, in Experiment 4, we tested whether shrinking the gap between expectations about the size of the impact made by small acts and the actual impact size—by improving the accuracy of people's lay expectations about the potential impact of small acts (i.e., increasing the perceived size of the consequences of a small act)—would counteract this affective forecasting error and increase perceptions that performing an act in pursuit of the smaller, more concretely framed prosocial goal of making someone else smile (versus the larger, more abstractly framed goal of making someone else happy) would lead to greater personal happiness.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and one students and university employees (53 women; $M_{Age} = 22.15$, $SD_{Age} = 3.29$) participated in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift certificate. The experiment used a 3 cell (Small Act Beliefs: Control vs. Small Impact vs. Big Impact) between-subjects design.

Procedure. As a cover story, participants were informed that they would be participating in several ostensibly unrelated studies. In the first study, participants were told that we were interested in their attitudes and opinions about the quality of a newspaper. They were then presented with the front page from the newspaper and asked to read the article on the page. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three articles about a recent storm that covered a beach in trash and the resulting cleanup effort. These articles were identical for the first few paragraphs (and the closing paragraph), providing information about the damage done by the storm and safety precautions that should be taken, but they differed in the middle three paragraphs so as to manipulate participants' beliefs about the potential power of small acts (e.g., LeBoeuf & Norton, in press).

The article read by those in the big impact condition was designed to prime beliefs that small acts could have large and meaningful consequences (e.g., a butterfly effect), mentioning the big impacts made by the small actions of the cleanup volunteers. On the other hand, the article read by those in the small impact condition was designed to prime beliefs that small acts have only small and insignificant consequences (e.g., their effects are just a drop in the bucket), mentioning that the small actions of the cleanup volunteers did not lead to big impacts. Finally, the article read by those in the control condition did not prime any beliefs about the potential impact factor of small acts, instead mentioning some of the logistics of the cleanup effort. After reading the article, all participants responded to filler questions about the newspaper.

In the second study, participants were asked to choose one of two prosocial tasks to accomplish sometime in the following 24 hours: (1) Do something to make someone else smile or (2) Do something to make someone else happy. Participants were instructed that even though the target of the act of kindness would be someone else, they should choose the task based on how happy they thought it would make *themselves* feel. They then choose between the two prosocial goals.

Results and Discussion

Prosocial goal choice. An a chi-squared analysis tested the hypothesis that altering beliefs about the power of small acts would influence one's preference to perform an act of kindness designed to accomplish the prosocial goal of making someone else smile versus making someone else happy. The results revealed the predicted effect of small act beliefs, $\chi^2 = 6.74$, $p = .03$, Cramer's $V = .26$. Participants in the small impact condition were more likely to choose the goal of making someone else happy (70%) over the goal of making someone else smile (30%) as being better for personal happiness. The same pattern was found for participants in the control condition: These participants were also more likely to choose the goal of making someone else happy (66%) over the goal of making someone else smile (34%). In contrast, participants in the big impact condition showed the opposite pattern: They were more likely to choose the goal of making someone else smile (59%) over the goal of making someone else happy (41%) as being better for personal happiness.

Discussion. The results of Experiment 4 provided evidence that altering lay expectations about the potential impact factor of seemingly small acts is one possible strategy for correcting the affective forecasting error identified in Experiment 3 (i.e., the incorrect prediction that the larger, more abstract goal of making someone else happy would lead to greater personal

happiness than would the smaller, more concrete goal of making someone else smile).

Participants who were primed to believe that small acts do not lead to big consequences and those whose beliefs about small acts were not manipulated showed the same pattern of preferring the act of making someone else happy (over making someone else smile) when asked to choose the prosocial goal most conducive to personal happiness, indicating that people's default beliefs about the power of small acts may indeed be in line with the intuitive theory that small acts do not lead to big consequences—that “bigger is better.”

However, Experiment 4 revealed that activating the belief that small acts can have a big impact increased the likelihood that participants would make the correct choice: Unlike those who were primed to believe that small acts do not lead to big consequences or those whose lay beliefs were not altered, these participants were more likely to choose the act of making someone else smile (versus happy) as being better able to generate personal happiness. Therefore, better calibrating people's expectations about the power of small acts, such that the perceived size of the consequences and meaningfulness of small acts are increased, appears to enhance the accuracy of predictions about which prosocial goal (making someone else smile or making someone else happy) will create the greatest amount of personal happiness.

General Discussion

Previous research suggests that one underappreciated means of increasing one's own happiness is to focus on increasing the happiness of others – through prosocial acts. But what kinds of prosocial acts lead to the greatest returns for the giver? Although people's intuition is that acts designed to achieve broad prosocial goals—for example, trying to make someone else happy—create the most happiness for the giver, four experiments suggest that more concrete, manageable prosocial goals are more effective. Individuals who performed acts of kindness in

pursuit of the goal to make others smile (versus make others happy) reported increased personal happiness (Experiments 1 and 2), an effect that was driven by a smaller gap between one's expectations of achieving the assigned prosocial goal and the actual outcome of the act (Experiment 2). Further, participants erroneously believed that efforts to make others happy would have a larger positive impact on personal happiness than would efforts to make others smile (Experiment 3). Last, we showed that priming participants to believe that small acts have the power to have a big impact corrected their perception, leading them to recognize that making others smile is more effective at generating personal happiness than is making others happy (Experiment 4).

These results provide an additional lens into one of the most widely-known and cited effects examining the triggers of prosocial behavior: The identifiable victim effect, in which people are more likely to contribute to a single individual in need than a large group of individuals in need (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Importantly, this relative unwillingness to help large groups has been linked to givers' feeling that the problem is too large for their actions to have any impact, compared to the perceived impact of acting to benefit an individual. Our results suggest that, in addition to decreasing the desire to act, attempting to act to solve large, abstract goals may also lead to decreased happiness. In the context of individuals or organizations attempting to raise money for large problems, people's reluctance to give may be rational in that giving to large causes would lead to less happiness than giving to individuals—a smaller, more concrete action.

In addition, our results inform the growing literature on “helper burnout.” Consistent with our account and results, a discrepancy between aspirations and reality have been shown to be critical factors in causing helping to become a source of unhappiness (Glass & McKnight, 1996;

Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, & Reed, 2003). When givers expect to change the lives of others through volunteering and other prosocial acts, the resulting failure to accomplish such large goals can lead to frustration and disappointment—making helping a negative rather than a positive influence on the giver’s happiness. Our results suggest that encouraging givers to have smaller, more concrete goals—helping those under their care to smile rather than trying to solve all of their problems—might lead to less helper burnout, and thus more a sustainable pattern of prosocial behavior.

Limitations and Future Research

The current research focused on the impact of prosocial acts on an individuals’ self-reported personal happiness, yet is silent on whether making someone else smile (versus happy) really has an equal or greater benefit on *others’* happiness. Future work is needed to address such empirical questions, as well to reconcile the current results with prior work (Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011) showing that merely being exposed to acts of uncommon goodness (versus common benevolence) induces more positive emotions and greater altruism. We demonstrate seemingly opposite results: When people are the ones actually doing the act (not observing/reading about someone else doing it), positive consequences ensue. Although “bigger” prosocial acts may be better for happiness when experienced from an outsiders’ perspective (a potential boundary condition of our effects), we show evidence that smaller acts can be better for happiness when the source of the act comes from within an individual (i.e., for the person actually committing the act). Also, in our studies, we focus on reframing functionally similar goals. Thus, we are not arguing that small is always better than big—just that one is likely experience greater happiness if they framed their prosocial goal in small, concrete terms rather than big, abstract terms.

Our results show that people are unable to correctly predict that a small goal to make someone smile (versus the bigger goal to make someone happy) would lead to greater personal happiness, and that people underestimate the ability of small acts to create big changes in their happiness. But would these results hold across different cultures? Some evidence suggests this inaccurate prediction may not be as prevalent in other cultures. First, there is a distinction between the independent, analytical nature of Western cognition and the interdependent, holistic nature of East Asian cognition (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Because interrelationships among the consequences of events are more salient to East Asians, they perceive events as causing a more complex chain of subsequent events than Westerners; most relevant to our account, East Asians are more aware of the “ripple effects” of events—more cognizant of the downstream effects of actions and events (Maddux & Yuki, 2006). As a result, we might expect East Asians to be better calibrated in their understanding that small acts can in fact have large consequences further downstream—suggesting that they may be less likely to presume that big acts are required to increase their happiness.

Finally, although we demonstrate that the benefits of trying to make others smile is driven in part by the extent to which such goals are manageable and therefore meet expectations, successfully making someone smile may also have stronger contagion effects. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that people can “catch” emotions from others, including catching positive emotions from people’s facial expressions (Chartrand & Van Baaren, 2009; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). In short, it is possible that in making others smile, people accidentally “catch” that smile themselves—providing an additional means by which making others smile boosts one’s own happiness. While it is unlikely that contagion accounts for our overall results—after all, many people in the “make someone happy” conditions may have

smiled as well—it is possible that the smaller goal of making someone smile may have led to more smiles than the large goal of making them happy. As a result, emotional contagion provides another possible mechanism contributing to our effects, offering an interesting area for future research—those acts that are most likely to induce facial expressions of happiness in others are also those most likely to lead the giver to “catch” that happiness.

Conclusion

People seek to be happy, and one clear path towards happiness is through prosocial behavior. The current research suggests that such prosocial pursuits are differentially effective at augmenting personal happiness. Prosocial behaviors have a greater impact on one’s own happiness to the extent that the goals of these acts are concrete, allowing givers to keep their expectations for the outcome of their act of kindness in check. In other words, when performing an act of kindness, framing the prosocial goal in more concrete terms—like the goal of making someone smile instead of happy—is likely to leave not only the recipients of such acts with smiles on their faces, but put smiles on the faces of the givers as well. Therefore, through concrete, manageable prosocial goals, a path to greater personal happiness can be cultivated.

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Footnotes

¹ We conducted two additional conditions in which participants were assigned to perform a personal act designed to make themselves smile or a personal act designed to make themselves happy; we do not report these conditions here as they do not pertain to the current investigation into the impact of prosocial behaviors on happiness.

² As an additional test of the hypothesis that it is the differing levels of goal specificity perceived by those who perform an act designed to make someone else smile (versus happy) that are driving the observed effects, we re-ran this mediation analysis, substituting perceived goal specificity as the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The goal of the prosocial act (happy = 0, smile = 1) was a significant predictor of both perceived goal specificity, $b = .88, t = 2.43, p = .02$, and the amount of personal happiness created, $b = .44, t = 2.21, p = .03$. As previously reported, perceived goal specificity was positively correlated with personal happiness, $r = .32, p < .01$. In support of mediation, perceived goal specificity remained a significant predictor, $b = .16, t = 3.43, p < .01$, whereas the act goal condition became non-significant, $b = .30, t = 1.52, p = .13$, Sobel $z = 1.98, p = .05$, when both of these variables were simultaneous predictors of personal happiness.

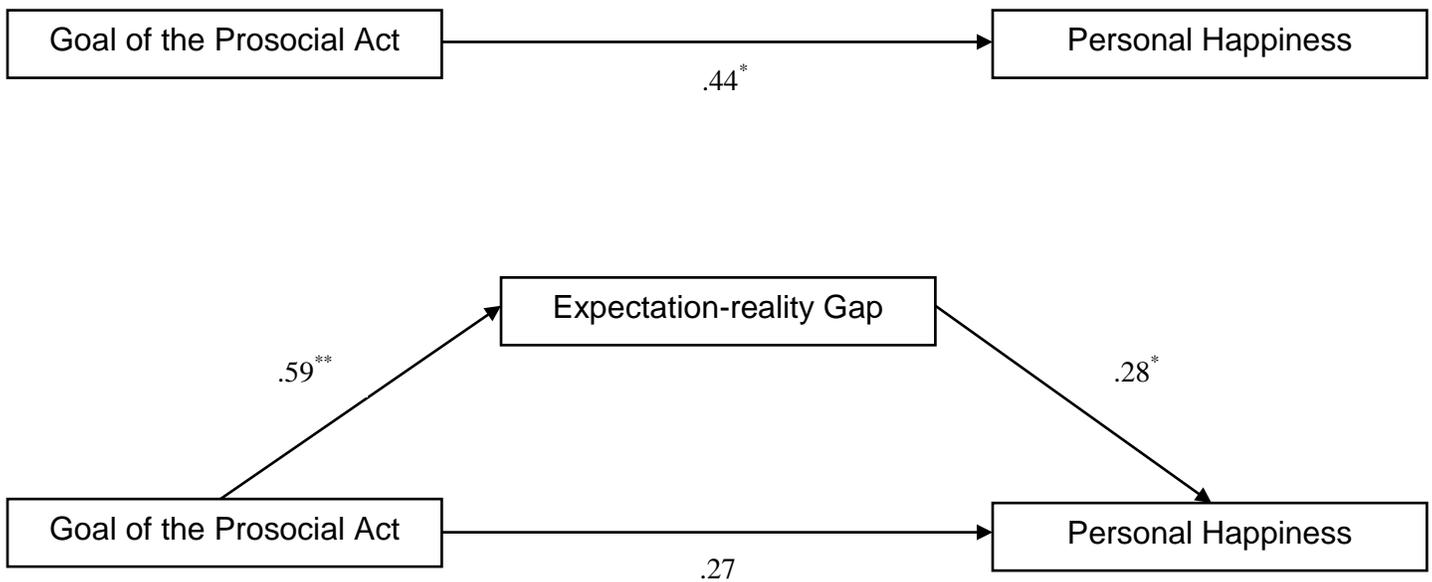


Figure 1. The mediation model from Experiment 2 that explains the relations among the goal of the prosocial act, the size of the expectation-reality gap, and personal happiness. Goal of the Prosocial Act = level of goal abstraction with which the prosocial goal is framed (0 = Happy/High; 1 = Smile/Low); Expectation-reality Gap = how well the outcome of the act met participants' expectations for accomplishing the assigned goal; Personal Happiness = degree to which participants felt they created happiness in their own lives. All coefficients are unstandardized estimates. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.