

Do Prosocial Behaviors always Increase Well-being? A Meta-Analysis on the Impact of Prosocial Behavior on Well-being

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Abstract

This paper looks at issues in prosocial behaviors (PB) on well-being (WB). Prosocial behaviors have long played a role in debates around well-being, yet that do prosocial behaviors always increase well-being are not clear-cut. One limitation of previous research is that it typically focuses on the effect about PB on WB, either positively or negatively. This article seeks to untangle this confusion whether PB always increases WB through a review and summary of the relevant literature. The findings indicate that prosocial behaviors to improve well-being are not absolute. These results have important implications for how we study prosocial behaviors on well-being.

Keywords: Prosocial Behavior, Well-Being, Neurotransmitters, Positive Effects, Negative Effects

Introduction

Humans are driven by a tremendous desire to be well-being (Abu-Raiya et al., n.d.; Aknin & Barrington, 2013; Sarah D. et al., 2018). Prosocial behavior can improve wellbeing, according to numerous more recent qualitative and quantitative reviews (Preston & Rew, 2021; Schindler & Friese, 2021; Schneider et al., 2021; Aknin & Barrington, 2013; Post, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2003) : On the one hand, prosocial people themselves have more achievement, positive feelings, and emotions, and they tend to be more energetic (Preston & Rew, 2021); On the other hand, prosocial behavior also enhances friendship quality (Columbus & Molho, 2021) and stabilizes individuals' social relationships (Aknin et al., 2017).

Prosocial behavior has some clear disadvantages, as outlined by recent research. Firstly, it can feel burdensome and can direct resources away from oneself towards others (Jaeger & van Vugt, 2021). In addition, there may be missed opportunities for personal gain (Righetti et al., 2021), and it can impair one's sense of connection and belonging (Ramkissoon, 2022). Furthermore, Frank (1988) and Nowak (2006) suggest that these drawbacks may lead to stress, burnout, ill health, and negative emotions such as resentment and rage in interpersonal interactions. But lots of queries are still open (Sassenrath et al., 2021; Zettler, 2021). What, for instance, underlies the literature's

contradictions? Importantly, do prosocial behaviors always lead to greater wellbeing? What are the mechanisms that tie good deeds to happiness? This review's objective is to explore these concerns in depth, with an emphasis on key study characteristics and ideas that shed light on the two questions.

Purpose of the Study

The conceptualization of the paper is to provide an overview of the impact of PB on WB through shedding light on the following two questions: first is “does prosocial behaviors always lead to greater wellbeing?”; second is “what are the mechanisms that tie good deeds to well-being?”.

By answering these two questions, the purpose of this paper provides valuable insights that can enhance our understanding of the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being to improve them.

Literature review

Prosocial Behavior

The concept of prosocial behavior is a topic of ongoing research, with disagreement among researchers regarding its definition and how it relates to altruistic behavior (Pfattheicher et al., 2022). Three main elements that separate and describe various conceptualizations of prosocial behavior and altruism are intentions and reasons, costs and rewards, and societal environment (Clavien & Chapuisat, 2012; Lauren, 1972; Schroeder & Graziano, 2015). Prosocial and altruistic behaviors both indicate acts of positive social behavior towards others, with the intentional nature of prosocial behavior being stressed in multiple definitions (Batson & Powell, 2003; Clary et al., 1998; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Krebs, 1991). Altruism is viewed as a motivational state that is frequently linked to prosocial behaviors (Lauren G., 1972; Schroeder & Graziano, 2015), with the ultimate purpose being to advance the well-being of others as a means in and of itself (Batson, 1996; Ruse, 2000).

The theory underlying prosocial behavior is based on two main theories: evolutionary psychology theory and the cognitive theory of prosocial behavior (Guo, 2017). Evolutionary psychology theory holds that prosocial behavior is a natural behavior of individuals, with innate characteristics that help the reproduction of the race and the survival of offspring (Jaeger, & Vugt, 2021; West, 2007). The cognitive theory of prosocial behavior is based on the Social Information Processing Model, which involves individuals processing coded cues to judge the context in which they are situated at the level of clue interpretation and representation (Crick, & Dodge, 1994).

Well-being

Well-being is a term used to describe a person's evaluation of their life based on their own standards and how they behave and feel at their best (Deci & Ryan, 2006; Diener, 2012). There are three prevalent types of well-being: subjective, psychological, and social (Son & Wilson, 2012). Subjective well-being includes positive and negative emotions and life satisfaction, which refers to feeling contentment and peace. Psychological well-being includes autonomy, self-acceptance, personal growth, life objectives, environmental control, and pleasant interpersonal interactions (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Social well-being includes social acceptability, social fulfillment, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration (Keyes, 1998; Deci & Ryan, 2006).

There are two main theories of well-being: hedonism, which measures subjective well-being, and eudaimonism, which focuses on realizing human potential. Theories underlying well-being include self-construction theory, which suggests that interpersonal harmony, social norms, other people's well-being, and future orientation contribute to well-being (Menaces, 2020), and expectancy theory, which proposes that individuals evaluate their well-being in relation to their desired goals and that behaviors with intrinsic and autonomous expectations are more conducive to well-being (Sadeghi, 2021; Mudryk, 2018; Hardy, 2013).

Methodology

A single statistically significant result can be reached by methodically combining and synthesizing data from numerous research papers, known as meta-analysis (Balta et al., 2017; Salkind, 2010). For this meta-analysis, the author performed a narrative evaluation of the literature. Often descriptive, a narrative review synthesises non-numerical data in a systematic way to let researchers choose the data they want to meta-analyze (Jerzembek & Murphy, 2013; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

In this study, an online database of Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and other web-based service providers such as ScienceDirect, Springer Link, IEEE Xplore Digital Library and Google Scholar were used to search pertinent published articles. The keywords used in the search process of relevant studies include prosocial behavior/ prosociality/ altruism and well-being/ happiness/ subjective well-being/ mental health/ psychological health/ psychological well-being. In the beginning stage, there was no restriction on searching relevant studies such as research papers, conference papers, seminar papers, concept papers, thesis works and technical reports. Therefore, the search found about 627 papers which stated about prosocial behavior (PB) and well-being (WB). In the second stage, the number of related prior studies found was reduced to a total of 28 which fulfilled these criteria: (1) The studies focused on PB as described by Rossi (2003) and WB as described by Diener(2012); (2) The studies published between 2014 to date with IF factor higher than 2 score; (3) The studies focused on positive and negative effect of prosocial behavior on well-being; (4) The studies focused on the mediating, moderating mechanisms and physiological mechanisms of PB on WB . Some articles retrieved during the process of searching were not included in this study as the impacts of PB on WB were not explicitly stated in the titles, keywords, or abstracts.

Results

Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the research studies related to the impact and mechanism of prosocial behavior (PB) on well-being (WB).

Table 1:

The Impact of Prosocial Behavior (Pb) on Well-Being (Wb)

NO.	Author	Sources	Title	Findings
1	(Rhoads et al., 2021)	Psychol Sci	Global Variation in Subjective Well-Being Predicts Seven Forms of Altruism	Altruism increases when resources and cultural values provide objective and subjective means for pursuing personally meaningful goals and that altruistic behaviors

				may be enhanced by societal changes that promote well-being
2	(Rutledge et al., 2016)	Nat Commun	The social contingency of momentary subjective well-being	A powerful social influence upon subjective emotional state, where emotional reactivity to inequality is strongly predictive of altruism in an independent task domain.
3	(Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014)	Psychol Sci	Geographical differences in subjective well-being predict extraordinary altruism	Well-being mediated the relationship between increases in objective well-being metrics, such as income, and prosocial behavior. These results suggest that extraordinary prosociality may be promoted by societal factors that increase well-being.
4	(Ouyang et al., 2022)	Int J Environ Res Public Health	Does Subjective Well-Being Promote Pro-Environmental Behaviors? Evidence from Rural Residents in China	Enhancing rural residents' well-being is the starting point of cultivating prosocial behavior.
5	(Crocker et al., 2017)	Annual Review of Psychology	Social Motivation: Costs and Benefits of Selfishness and Otherishness	The biggest cost of prosocial behavior comes in the form of missed opportunities for personal gain. People are unlikely to exploit others or take advantage of them.
6	(Geng et al., 2022)	Front Psychol	Volunteering, Charitable Donation, and Psychological Well-Being of College Students in China	Prosocial behavior can improve the psychological well-being that indicates individuals' positive psychological functioning and well-being.
7	(Jebb et al., 2020)	Psychol Sci	Subjective Well-Being Around the World: Trends and Predictors Across the Life Span	Prosociality had practically significant associations only with positive affect, and life meaning had strong, consistent associations with well-being measures across regions and ages.

8	(Weiss et al., 2021)	PLOS One	Personality, subjective well-being, and the serotonin 1a receptor gene in common marmosets (<i>Callithrix jacchus</i>)	Prosociality and Boldness represented a higher-level of personality organization.
9	(Sabato & Kogut, 2019)	J Exp Child Psychol	Feel good, do good? Subjective well-being and sharing behavior among children	Higher levels of well-being were linked to sharing only in the Perceived-Low Obligation condition.
10	Miles et al., (2019)	PLOS One	Using prosocial behavior to safeguard mental health and foster emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: A registered report of a randomized trial	Prosocial behaviors may provide small, lasting benefits to emotional well-being and mental health to enhance well-being.
11	(Lu et al., 2021)	J Adolesc	Do gifts of roses have a lingering fragrance? Evidence from altruistic interventions into adolescents' subjective well-being	Altruistic intervention was identified as an effective way to improve adolescents' well-being.
12	(Shan et al., 2020)	Psychology and Aging	Differences between caregivers and noncaregivers in psychological health and physical health: A meta-analysis.	Prosocial behavior can have negative effects on psychological, physical, and relationship well-being. Caregiving, or providing care for a close other who has a chronic debilitating illness or condition, is associated with poor psychological health and well-being.
13	(Pan et al., 2022)	Emotion	Psychological well-being is associated with prosociality during the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparison of Swedish and Chinese samples	Well-being holds relevance for prosocial behaviors during a global crisis, with primarily invariance between individualistic and collectivistic cultures
14	(Stern, 2019)	J Am Psychiatr Nurses Assoc	Altruism: Giving for Mental Well-Being	Prosociality is foundational to the connections psychiatric-mental health nurses employ in our care of patients and weaken nurses' well-being.

15	(Serrat-Graboleda et al., 2021)	Int J Environ Res Public Health	Factors Favoring and Hindering Volunteering by Older Adults and Their Relationship with Subjective Well-Being: A Mixed-Method Approach	Well-being with life as a whole contributes positively to volunteer behavior and satisfaction with the groups one belongs to contributes negatively.
16	Rinner, Haller, Meyer, & Gloster. (2022)	Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	Is giving receiving? The influence of autonomy on the association between prosocial behavior and well-being	Prosocial behavior was positively related to well-being when individuals experienced a sense of autonomy when deciding to act (Rhoads et al., 2021)prosocially.

Table 2:

The Impact Mechanism of Prosocial Behavior (Pb) on Well-Being (Wb)

NO.	Author	Sources	Title	Findings
1	(Chao & Gu, 2021)	Front Psychol	Effects of Labor Values on Subjective Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Altruistic Tendencies	The mediating role of altruistic tendency in the association between labor values and subjective well-being (SWB).
2	(Schneider et al., 2021b)	J Health Psychol	Factors mediating the psychological well-being of healthcare workers responding to global pandemics: A systematic review	Self-efficacy, coping ability, altruism and organizational support were protective factors.
3	(OH, 2022)	J Sports Med Phys Fitness	Relationship between passion and psychological well-being of Taekwondo athletes: testing the mediating effects of social behavior	Harmonious passion had a significant indirect effect through prosocial behavior on the feelings of self-realization, confidence, and flow and through antisocial behavior on the feeling of flow. Obsessive passion had a significant indirect effect through prosocial behavior on the feelings of self-realization, confidence, and flow and

				through antisocial behavior on feeling of flow, hedonic enjoyment.
4	(Serrat et al., 2018)	Res Gerontol Nurs	Prosociality as a Form of Productive Aging: Predictors and Their Relationship with Subjective Well-Being	to understanding prosocial behavior among older adults by examining the relationship between prosocial behavior and subjective well-being and contribution to productive aging.
5	Xie, Yilu Wang, Gu, & Li. (2017)	Advances in Psychological Science	Is altruism just altruism? -- A two-path model from an evolutionary perspective	A two-path model in which altruistic behavior increases the adaptation of altruistic behavior implementers, including external path and internal path.
6	McGowan & Schmidt. (2021)	J Exp Child Psychol	Helping as prosocial practice: Longitudinal relations among children's shyness, helping behavior, and empathic response	Shyness concurrently impedes early helping behaviors, and that this withdrawal may contribute to reductions in shy children's prosocial learning opportunities that inform later empathic responses.
7	Hui. (2022)	Curr Opin Psychol	Prosocial behavior and well-being: Shifting from the 'chicken and egg' to positive feedback loop.	To present a reciprocal model where prosocial behavior begets well-being and well-being begets prosocial behavior.
8	Zhang, Fu, Liu, Turel, & He. (2022)	Children and Youth Services Review	Psychological capital mediates the influence of meaning in life on prosocial behavior of university	Meaning in life in university students can influence subsequent prosocial behaviors, directly, as well as through psychological capital.
9	Kleef & Lelieveld. (2022)	Curr Opin Psychol	Moving the self and others to do good: The emotional underpinnings of prosocial behavior.	Although some emotions promote prosocial behavior in the self and others, most emotions promote prosocial behavior either in the self (via their intrapersonal effects) or in others (via their interpersonal effects)
10	Sasse, Li, & Baumert. (2022)	Curr Opin Psychol	How prosocial is moral courage?	Prosociality in moral courage is, however,

				complex. While its prosociality is often evident at a higher societal level, it can be contested in some aspects of morally courageous acts.
11	Yang Ying, Kou Yu. (2017)	Psychological Development and Education	The Influence of prosocial autonomous motivation on Adolescent happiness and prosocial behavior: the mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction	The occurrence of prosocial behavior was not only limited to the doer and receiver of behavior in interpersonal communication, but also involved the bystanders of behavior.
12	(Marsh et al., 2020)	The Neuroscientist	Oxytocin and the Neurobiology of Prosocial Behavior	Oxytocin/vasopressin and 5-hydroxytryptamine, are associated with prosocial behavior, with genetic variation in these systems affecting individual behavior.

Discussion

Discussion on the effect of prosocial behavior on well-being

Positive effects of prosocial behavior on well-being

Table 1 summarizes the positive effects of prosocial behavior on well-being based on studies of emotion, personality, intervention, and crisis. Empirical research has demonstrated that prosocial behavior enhances well-being by enabling individuals to pursue personally meaningful goals, such as resources and cultural values (Jebb et al., 2020). Additionally, prosociality has been shown to be associated with positive affect and life meaning, which are consistently linked with all measures of well-being across regions and ages (Jebb et al., 2020). Emotional reactivity to inequality has been identified as a strong predictor of prosocial behavior, suggesting that social factors can strongly influence an individual's subjective emotional state (Rutledge et al., 2016). Subjective well-being has been identified as a mediator of the relationship between objective well-being metrics and prosocial behavior, indicating that improvements in objective well-being can translate into improved prosocial behavior (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014).

Higher levels of prosociality and boldness have been identified as personality traits that can improve well-being. Sharing, particularly in the Perceived-Low Obligation condition, has been linked to higher levels of well-being (Weiss et al., 2021; Sabato & Kogut, 2019; Rinner et al., 2022). Autonomy is a key factor that contributes to the positive relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being (Weiss et al., 2021; Sabato & Kogut, 2019; Rinner et al., 2022).

During global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, prosocial behaviors can have lasting benefits for well-being and mental health, with primary invariance observed between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Pan et al., 2022; Miles et al., 2019). Prosocial

interventions have been identified as effective means of improving adolescents' subjective well-being, particularly among rural residents (Ouyang et al., 2022; Geng et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021). Enhancing well-being has been suggested as a starting point for cultivating prosocial behavior, as it can meet an individual's psychological well-being needs and contribute to their overall well-being (Ouyang et al., 2022; Geng et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021).

In summary, prosocial behavior has positive effects on well-being such as increased life satisfaction, happy relationships, higher self-esteem, loving interactions with other people, and improved psychological and physical health. Donating in the form of volunteering offers numerous psychological benefits, especially for the elderly, including greater happiness, good effect, reduced loneliness, and reduced likelihood of depression. Prosocial behavior is also associated with lower systolic, diastolic, and arterial pressure and a decreased risk of recurrent cardiovascular disease occurrences in people with cardiovascular disease. Giving support to others predicts lower relationship dissatisfaction and discomfort, and six weeks of prosocial activity towards others or the world has been shown to improve emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

Negative effects of prosocial behavior on well-being

The benefits of prosocial behavior are well-established, but there are also costs and risks associated with it. One such risk is the potential harm to oneself and exploitation by others, and the missed opportunities for personal gain that come with prosocial behavior (Crocker et al., 2017). Another risk is empathic distress and long-term health consequences, especially for vulnerable individuals who frequently experience negative situations that produce physiological resonance. Prosocial behavior can also have negative effects on psychological, physical, and relationship well-being, particularly in caregiving situations involving close others with chronic debilitating illnesses or conditions (Shan et al., 2020).

In addition, the perceived difficulty of giving can result in unfavorable repercussions, such as poor mental health. Givers who consistently give more than they receive in return may neglect their own emotional and physical needs, leading to suffering. For example, prosociality is foundational to the connections psychiatric-mental health nurses employ in caring for patients, but this can also weaken nurses' well-being (Stern, 2019).

Overall, these studies demonstrate that while prosocial behavior can have many positive benefits, it is also important to consider the potential costs and risks associated with it.

Effects of prosocial behavior on well-being among samples

The studies reviewed provide consistent evidence of effect between prosocial behavior and well-being across different samples. For instance, Geng et al. (2022) found a positive relationship between volunteering, charitable donation, and well-being among college students in China. Similarly, Jebb et al. (2020) observed a positive association between well-being, prosociality, and life meaning across ages. Weiss et al. (2021) demonstrated that prosociality and boldness are higher-level personality traits associated with improving well-being, while Sabato and Kogut (2019) reported a positive link between well-being and sharing behavior among children.

Furthermore, the studies by Miles et al. (2019) and Pan et al. (2022) suggest that prosocial behaviors may provide small but lasting benefits to well-being and mental health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lu et al. (2021) found that prosocial interventions are effective ways to improve adolescents' subjective well-being, while Shan et al. (2020) reported negative effects of caregiving on psychological, physical, and relationship well-being.

Moreover, Stern (2019) showed that connections in psychiatric-mental health care mediated the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being, highlighting the importance of social support in promoting well-being. Additionally, Serrat-Graboleda et al. (2021) identified factors favoring and hindering volunteering by older adults and their positive relationship with well-being. Finally, Rinner et al. (2022) found that the association between prosocial behavior and well-being is moderated by autonomy, with more autonomous prosocial behavior leading to more well-being.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the importance of prosocial behavior in promoting well-being across different populations, as well as the potential of interventions aimed at cultivating prosociality to enhance subjective well-being.

Discussion on mechanism on the effect of prosocial behavior on well-being

Table 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the different mechanisms through which prosocial behavior (PB) impacts well-being (WB). The prosocial tendency, self-efficacy, coping ability, passion, organizational support, psychological capital, basic psychological needs satisfaction, and emotions are among the mechanisms through which PB can impact WB. Additionally, several neurotransmitters such as oxytocin/vasopressin and 5-hydroxytryptamine are associated with PB, and genetic variation in these systems can affect individual behavior. Chao and Gu (2021) found that prosocial tendency mediates the association between labor values and well-being. Schneider et al. (2021b) reported that self-efficacy, coping ability, prosociality, and organizational support are protective factors that mediate the psychological well-being of healthcare workers responding to global pandemics. OH (2022) observed that PB has a significant indirect effect on feelings of self-realization, confidence, and flow through harmonious and obsessive passion, as well as on the feeling of flow and hedonic enjoyment through antisocial behavior affecting well-being.

Xie et al. (2017) developed a two-path model where altruistic behavior increases the adaptation of prosocial behavior implementers through external and internal paths. Hui (2022) proposed a reciprocal model where prosocial behavior begets well-being and well-being begets prosocial behavior. Kleef and Lelieveld (2022) reported that most emotions promote prosocial behavior either in the self or in others. The prosociality of moral courage is complex and contested in some aspects of morally courageous acts (Sasse et al., 2022).

Several studies have reported on the relationship between PB and well-being in different populations. For instance, Serrat et al. (2018) found that PB contributes to productive aging among older adults. McGowan and Schmidt (2021) reported that shyness impedes early helping behaviors and contributes to reductions in shy children's prosocial learning opportunities that inform later empathic responses. Zhang et al. (2022) observed that meaning in life in university students can influence subsequent prosocial behaviors directly as well as through psychological capital to affect well-being. Finally, Yang Ying and Kou Yu (2017) reported that prosocial autonomous motivation influences adolescent happiness and prosocial behavior, and basic psychological needs satisfaction mediates this association.

Conclusion

Do Prosocial Behaviors always increase Well-being? Consistent with the answer to this question: not simply absolutely “yes” -- not a universal truth, it is dialectical. According to research, those who engage in regular prosocial behavior have a variety of advantages for their relationships, physical health, and psychological well-being. Giving back to others can improve one's mood, promote self-esteem, boost self-efficacy, and lessen depressive symptoms. It forecasts advancements in physical health and even life expectancy. It can improve interpersonal connections, forging stronger social ties and developing a sense that one can positively impact others. Giving, however, is not always beneficial to one's health, happiness, or interpersonal connections. The health, happiness, and relationships of givers may suffer if the requirements and costs of engaging in prosocial conduct are very onerous and interfere with the satisfaction of the givers' needs.

This body of work is both compelling and enticing. It is difficult to dismiss the cross-sectional and longitudinal data demonstrating relationships between prosocial conduct and outcomes relevant to well-being. The literature still has some significant gaps. The topic of whether prosocial behavior accurately predicts well-being cannot be answered by a single study due to the numerous operationalizations of prosocial behavior and the complexity of well-being pathways and consequences. Because well-designed and well-controlled studies are costly and time-consuming, each one should be viewed as an important and vital piece of the overall picture. To get the attention of funders and public authorities, researchers must start looking into how their work may be applied to boost public wellbeing. The importance of such research cannot be overstated as it has the potential to positively impact public well-being.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This research endeavors to broaden the existing landscape surrounding the intricate relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being. By consolidating diverse studies across emotion, personality, crisis, and intervention domains, this work synthesizes a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted effects of prosocial actions on individual well-being. It not only underscores the empirical evidence supporting the positive impacts of prosocial behavior on various dimensions of well-being, including life satisfaction, psychological health, and social connections but also illuminates the nuanced negative repercussions, such as potential exploitation, empathic distress and caregiver strain. Exploring diverse populations, including adolescents, healthcare workers, older adults, and different cultural contexts during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the universality and adaptability of the relationship between prosociality and well-being.

Moreover, this study contributes theoretically by integrating findings on the mediating mechanisms between prosocial behavior and well-being, encompassing elements such as personality traits, emotional reactions, psychological needs satisfaction, and coping abilities. By delineating pathways through which prosocial behavior influences well-being and vice versa, this research paves the way for a more comprehensive understanding of these intertwined constructs. Additionally, it acknowledges the complexities inherent in this relationship, urging a more dialectical perspective, recognizing that while prosocial behavior generally fosters well-being, it

may also carry potential costs and risks, especially when the demands of altruism strain the giver's needs and resources.

In summary, this study's amalgamation of empirical evidence, consideration of diverse contexts, and exploration of mediating mechanisms enriches the theoretical foundations surrounding prosocial behavior and well-being, offering insights crucial for guiding interventions to promote individual and societal well-being.

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