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Review

Kindness in short supply: Evidence for inadequate prosocial input

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Abstract

In everyday life, people often have opportunities to improve others' lives, whether offering well-intentioned advice or complimenting someone on a job well done. These are opportunities to provide "prosocial input" (information intended to benefit others), including feedback, advice, compliments, and expressions of gratitude. Despite widespread evidence that giving prosocial input can improve the well-being of both givers and recipients, people sometimes hesitate to offer their input. The current paper documents when and why people fail to give prosocial input, noting that potential givers overestimate the costs of doing so (e.g., making recipients uncomfortable) and underestimate the benefits (e.g., being helpful) for at least four psychological reasons. Unfortunately, the reluctance to give prosocial input results in a short supply of kindness.

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Introduction

"It is better to give than to receive." Though this idiom has been widely repeated across centuries, emerging research suggests that it is not always followed. The current paper specifically examines the extent to which people give *prosocial input* to others: information provided about another person with the intent to benefit that person. We consider four types of prosocial input: feedback ("information provided to recipients about their behavior, performance, or understanding, which can encompass appreciation, coaching, and evaluation"; [1]), advice ("a recommendation regarding a decision or course of conduct"; [2, p. 143]), compliments (a positive statement about another's characteristics or actions; [3]), and expressions of gratitude ("giving thanks to another person for some meaningful benefit received by the expresser" [3, p. 240]). In each of these cases, the giver provides information that is intended to be valuable to the recipient by reacting to something the recipient has done or commenting on the recipient's behavior. The input may be given preemptively, even when not solicited by a recipient. Notably, input that is provided without the intent to improve the recipient's life in some way does not constitute prosocial input. For example, we would not consider the following instances prosocial input: someone providing negative feedback to vent their frustration rather than truly help the recipient, or providing a compliment primarily to manipulate someone for one's own gain.[1]

Several recent research findings converge to suggest that people give inadequate prosocial input, in part because they underestimate how much others will value and appreciate their input. If people gave more prosocial input, we argue, it would not only tend to help the recipient improve their own situation and strengthen the relationship between the giver and recipient, but it could also improve the giver's own mood and reputation. In the following sections, we highlight emerging themes across recent research on various forms of prosocial input. We conclude by proposing avenues for future research.

Evidence for inadequate prosocial input

At least two lines of research suggest that people provide inadequate prosocial input. First, people are often unwilling to provide prosocial input in everyday life. Second, experiments reveal that if people gave more prosocial input than they are naturally inclined to give, both they and their recipients would be better off (e.g., experience greater well-being).

[1] Of course, recipients' perceptions of givers' intentions may not match givers' actual intentions, a point to which we consider in more detail in the discussion.

Reluctance to provide prosocial input

First, there is evidence of a low supply of feedback both in people's work and personal lives. In one survey of 899 employees, 72% reported that their managers do not provide them with enough critical feedback [4]. Outside of the workplace, a recent field study had experimenters administer surveys with marker, chocolate, or lipstick smudged on their faces. Of the 155 respondents who completed the survey and reported noticing the facial blemish, only 4 (fewer than 3%) told the experimenter about the mark on their face [5, Pilot Study]. In an experiment conducted with close relationship pairs, only 48% of assigned feedback-givers wanted to provide constructive feedback to their partner, but 86% of assigned recipients wanted to hear their partner's feedback [5, Experiment 3]. Next, considering the domain of advice, 75% of nearly 300 survey respondents reported believing it is a bad idea to give unsolicited advice to others [6]. Even when people had relative expertise in a particular domain, only 52% said they would give advice to a peer recipient (i.e., someone their same age) [7, Study 1].

People even abstain from giving prosocial input when it is relatively positive and easy to give, such as giving compliments or showing gratitude to others [8]. In a set of surveys, people reported withholding compliments 36% of the time that one comes to mind, and expressing compliments significantly less often than they would like to [3, Supplemental Surveys]. In one experiment in which individuals were required to think of compliments and then had the opportunity to send them to a recipient, only 49.5% chose to send the compliment [3, Experiment 4]. People also wish that strangers would compliment each other more often than they actually do [9, Study 1b]. In the domain of gratitude, people report expressing gratitude less often than they would like to [10, Experiment 3].

More prosocial input would make people better off

Research shows that providing prosocial input can benefit both recipients and givers. For example, feedback and advice can improve recipients' performance outcomes. In a study that required people to provide feedback on public speaking, participants who received more constructive feedback showed greater performance improvement between their practice speeches and final speeches [5, Study 5]. More broadly, advice can help recipients make more accurate decisions [11]. Other forms of prosocial input such as compliments and gratitude can improve recipient well-being by boosting positive emotions [3,8–10]. In a recent Glassdoor Employee Appreciation Survey, 53% of people said that receiving appreciation from their boss would make them stay longer at the company, and 81% said that they feel more motivated when their boss expresses appreciation for their work [12].

Givers also stand to benefit from giving prosocial input. In one study in which advice was given to those who were new to a social environment, recipients reported that they enjoyed the advice and felt a sense of connection with the advice-giver [6]. People also reported being in a more positive mood after (versus before) expressing gratitude [10, studies 2–3], as well as giving compliments [3, Study 2]. In a study of 103 couples, those randomly assigned to express more gratitude to one another for one month experienced more positive mood compared to couples in a control condition [13]. Giving a compliment can also make people happier by deepening social connection with recipients [14].

In concert, these two lines of research suggest that people may be reluctant to provide unsolicited prosocial input—but that providing more would be jointly beneficial for both givers and receivers. So why do people hesitate to provide prosocial input? Whereas various possible reasons exist, here we focus on people's misconceptions of the consequences of being prosocial.

Underestimating benefits and overestimating costs of providing prosocial input

We propose that a central reason for people's reluctance to provide prosocial input comes from their tendency to both underestimate the benefits and overestimate the costs of giving prosocial input. First demonstrating the underestimation of benefits, in one series of experiments in which people were assigned to provide constructive feedback to others, feedback-givers underestimated the extent to which recipients would find their feedback helpful and consequently be grateful for their feedback [5]. Givers also underestimate the positivity of recipients' reactions to the provision of compliments [3,9], gratitude [10], and advice [6,7].

Demonstrating the overestimation of costs, feedback givers overestimate how uncomfortable and hurt recipients will feel upon receiving constructive and critical feedback, and how much giving it will damage their relationship with recipients [5,15]. Additionally, people overestimate how awkward and uncomfortable others will feel upon receiving a compliment [3,9] or an expression of gratitude [10]. We summarize these mispredictions in Table 1.

Reasons for mispredictions

We believe there exist at least four broad reasons why people tend to mispredict recipients' reactions to their input.

Egocentric projection

First, people tend to project their own thoughts and experiences onto their predictions of others' experiences (a

Table 1

Evidence that givers underestimate benefits and overestimate costs of providing prosocial input.

Type of prosocial input	Relevant recent citations suggesting inadequate prosocial input	Underestimated benefits	Overestimated costs
Advice	Vani et al., 2022	- Recipients' appreciation - Recipients' feeling of relationship closeness	- Givers' awkwardness upon providing advice
	Zhang & North, 2020	- Recipients' perceptions of advice effectiveness and helpfulness - Recipients' interest in receiving the advice - Recipients' reports of their likelihood to use the advice	
Feedback	Abi-Esber et al., 2022	- Recipients' appreciation - Recipients' gratitude - Helpfulness of feedback (for recipient) - Givers' warm glow	- Givers' discomfort upon providing feedback - Recipients' discomfort upon receiving feedback - Harm to giver/recipient relationship
	Levine & Cohen, 2018	- Givers' own enjoyment, sense of social connection, and sense of meaning - Recipients' enjoyment, sense of social connection, and sense of meaning	- Harm to giver/recipient relationship - Recipients' negative reactions
Compliments	Boothby & Bohns, 2021	- Recipients' positive sentiments (feel good, happy, pleased, and flattered)	- Recipients' negative sentiments (annoyed, bothered, uncomfortable)
	Zhao & Epley, 2021	- Recipients' positive mood	- Recipients' felt awkwardness
Gratitude	Kumar & Epley, 2018	- Recipients' positive mood and pleasantness - Recipients' sense of surprise	- Recipients' felt awkwardness

form of egocentric bias) [16,17]. More specifically, people may underestimate the value of their prosocial input because they assume that the content of their input is already obvious to recipients since it is obvious to themselves (i.e., the "curse of knowledge"; [18,19]). For example, in a study of expert guitarists asked to provide advice to novice guitarists, experts who first played with their non-dominant hand, and thus had an opportunity to overcome the curse of knowledge, provided more helpful advice compared to those who did not [20]. Additionally, people may overestimate recipients' negative experiences from receiving prosocial input because they project their own feelings of discomfort and anxiety onto recipients. When predicting how recipients would react to their compliments, people's own level of anxiety in giving the compliments predicted their forecasts of how negatively recipients would react [9, Study 4]. Givers' anticipated discomfort in giving constructive feedback predicted their beliefs about recipients' desire for feedback [5, Studies 1, 3, & 5].

Focusing error

Second, givers fail to recognize which elements of an interaction will inform recipients' appreciation and assessments of givers. Givers' predictions about how others will perceive their prosocial input tend to stem from how effectively and competently they believe they can deliver the input, whereas recipients' experiences are shaped more strongly by givers' good intentions and warmth [3,8–10,21–23]. For example, givers' concerns about their ability to express their gratitude "just right" led them to misunderstand how the recipient of their gratitude would actually feel [10]. Givers randomly assigned to focus on their warmth versus their competence more accurately predicted recipients' reactions to their compliments [3, Exp 3] and were more likely to be interested in providing compliments in the first place [3, Exp 4].

Motivated cognition

A third reason could be that input-givers' own preferences and goals prevent them from forming accurate assessments of others' mental states [24]. To avoid anticipated discomfort or effort, people may rationalize that others don't want their prosocial input. In support of this possibility, in one experiment, participants who imagined someone else providing feedback to a recipient, instead of providing the feedback themselves, were more accurate in recognizing the recipient's (high) desire for feedback [5, Exp. 4]. In addition to wanting to avoid discomfort or effort for themselves, people may prefer to engage in actions that prioritize avoiding harm to others over other actions that might be socially valuable, such as honesty [15,25–27].

Legitimacy

Finally, people may doubt their legitimacy to give prosocial input, thinking it is socially inappropriate for

them to give it [28,29]. If recipients find the provision of prosocial input to be more appropriate than input-givers expect, it may lead givers to underestimate recipients' appreciation for their input. Supporting this possibility, one series of experiments found that advice givers underestimated how appropriate it would be for them to provide unsolicited advice, which statistically mediated their underestimation of the benefits of providing advice [6]. In a different study, givers underestimated their effectiveness in giving advice and how much recipients would follow it; this misperception was particularly evident when givers advised recipients who were relatively older versus younger than them, in part because givers believed that relatively older individuals would not be receptive to their advice and would find it to be socially inappropriate [7, Study 5].

Future directions and outstanding questions

We see at least four considerations for future research. First, the short supply of prosocial input may be an example of a short supply of social engagement more broadly. Indeed, a series of recent findings (summarized in Ref. [21]) suggests that people may be less social than what is optimal for their own and their interaction partners' benefit. For instance, people report being reluctant to talk with strangers (only 14% would do so, according to one survey [30]) yet report being surprisingly happy when doing so [30–32]. People additionally report being happier when they have longer conversations than they would naturally have [33]. Also, people who reach out to others [34], ask questions of others [35], commit random acts of kindness [36], and engage in conversations more broadly [37] are appreciated and liked by their interaction partners more than they expect. Moreover, even having more intimate interactions (talking about "deeper" topics [38], asking more sensitive questions [39], asking for help [40], and providing social support to people in times of need [41]) results in more interpersonal connection and more positive reactions from interaction partners than people anticipate. Thus, the lack of prosocial input that we identify may well be contextualized as a broader lack of social engagement.

Second, when might prosocial input be poorly received? To our knowledge, no research has clearly demonstrated when, if ever, givers *overestimate* the value or desirability of their prosocial input. But possible cases could exist when recipients perceive givers' prosocial input to be dishonest or given with selfish intent. People form worse impressions of others who appear to be motivated by self-interest [42–44]; thus, recipients may dislike prosocial input if they perceive givers to have such motives, even when givers' intentions are actually good. Indeed, people occasionally overestimate the extent to which their behavioral strategies to make others like or respect them will actually make others view them more positively [45–47]. Thus, future research can examine how input-givers can ensure that their prosocial intent is recognized by recipients.

Third, to what extent are elements like the input's instrumental value and honesty important for recipients to benefit? Consider prosocial input that is provided with the best of intentions but turns out to be inaccurate or wrong (e.g., "I think you should go on a date with John" when dating John will not lead to the best outcome for the recipient). Might recipients appreciate the input in the short-run but later have a negative impression of the input-giver, upon learning that input was wrong? Further, what about prosocial input that is dishonest, like telling someone that they look good when they do not? Lies that are enacted with prosocial intent increase perceptions of a giver's benevolence, but simultaneously harm perceptions of a giver's integrity, suggesting that dishonest prosocial input might result in mixed outcomes [26,27]. Overall, it is important to understand the consequences of prosocial input in the short-term versus long-term, as well as the consequences of prosocial input that is honest versus dishonest.

Finally, it is worth considering whether there might be functional benefits of erring on the side of underestimating rather than overestimating recipients' appreciation for prosocial input (when accuracy is unlikely) [48]. Even if relatively rare, occasions when recipients do not want prosocial input but receive it anyway may lead to very negative consequences for givers and receivers (e.g., Ref. [49]), creating a risk/reward structure that people must navigate. To avoid any interpersonal risk at all, people may refrain from offering input.

Conclusions

Whether giving feedback, offering advice, or expressing thanks, providing prosocial input creates psychological and practical benefits for both receivers and givers. Yet to potential givers, these benefits appear to be not as apparent, or do not outweigh their corresponding costs. Thus, prosocial input is given not just sparingly, we argue, but inadequately. With kindness in short supply, people would do well to realize that providing prosocial input will likely lead to greater positive impact than they expect.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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