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## A Life Worth Living: Evidence on the Relationship between Prosocial Values and Happiness

**Donald P. Moynihan**

La Follette School of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison

[dmoynihan@lafollette.wisc.edu](mailto:dmoynihan@lafollette.wisc.edu)

**Thomas Deleire**

La Follette School of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Kohei Enami**

University of Wisconsin-Madison

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**Robert M. La Follette  
School of Public Affairs**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

1225 Observatory Drive, Madison, Wisconsin 53706

608-262-3581 / [www.lafollette.wisc.edu](http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu)

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**Abstract**

Employees with a desire to help others provide benefits to their organization, clients and fellow workers, but what do they get in return? We argue that the prosocial desire to help others is a basic human goal that matters to an individual's happiness. We employ both longitudinal and cross-sectional data to demonstrate that work-related prosocial motivation is associated with higher subjective well-being, both in terms of current happiness and life-satisfaction later in life. Cross-sectional data also suggests that perceived social impact (the belief that one's job is making a difference) is even more important for happiness than the prosocial desire to help. The results show that the relationship between prosocial motivation and happiness is not limited to government employees, suggesting that in this aspect of altruistic behavior, public and private employees are not so different.

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*“Only a life lived in the service of others is worth living” – Albert Einstein*

## **Introduction**

Individuals with a desire to help others in their work provide benefits to their organization, clients and fellow employees. Apart from a paycheck, what do these employees get in return? This article examines if desire to help others in a work environment contributes to happiness. While research on prosocial motivation has argued that altruistic behavior positively relates to a variety of workplace behaviors, we know little about whether these altruists enjoy greater life satisfaction. Public service is sometimes characterized as a special calling, but we again do not know if those with a desire to help others are happier if they work in a public setting. The first section of the article makes the case for incorporating the study of subjective well-being (SWB) into research on prosocial values. SWB is an umbrella term that incorporates both concurrent happiness and long-term life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1999; Ryan and Deci 2011; Ryff 2008). SWB has long been of interest among psychologists and recently has drawn greater interest from economists, organizational theorists, and policy scholars. However, such research has not extensively relied on longitudinal data that can provide a compelling connection with cumulative life-satisfaction, or modeled the question of how career choice might contribute to SWB. To understand how prosocial motivation might relate to long-term SWB, a panel approach with multiple measures of the key variables across significant periods of time would be ideal, allowing individual level fixed effects and stronger inferences about causality. In the absence of such data, we use the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), which has followed a

large cohort of men and women who graduated from high school in 1957. The survey is extraordinary in terms of its length (it is an ongoing survey) and continuously high participation rate. While the dataset lacks multiple cross-time measures, it has a longitudinal component in that we can examine if early-in-life measures of desire to help others through work, employment in particular job sectors, and late-life life satisfaction are correlated. We supplement this analysis with data from the General Social Survey (GSS), which includes a measure of current happiness.

In the remaining sections, we present and discuss our results. The results provide evidence that desire to help others is a robust predictor both of current happiness and cumulative life-satisfaction. The GSS data also shows that the belief that one's work is making a difference (perceived social impact) increases happiness even when prosocial motivation is controlled for. While public employees express a stronger desire to help others in our WLS data, we do not find that public employees with a stronger desire to serve others are happier than others, suggesting that there is not an interactive effect of sector choice, desire to serve, and SWB. This result is consistent with arguments that public and private sector differences in terms of prosocial motivation may be exaggerated in some respects (Steen 2008). We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings.

### **Relating Prosocial Values to Subjective Well-being**

The desire to help others has been conceptualized in a variety of ways – as altruism, prosocial motivation, and public service motivation. In this article we generally use the term prosocial motivation, reflecting the fact that our key measure – a desire to help others – closely reflects the definition of prosocial motivation: “the desire to expend effort to benefit other people” (Grant 2008, 49), and that our sample draws across different job sectors, while the public

service motivation concept has been traditionally tied to the study of public and, to a lesser extent, nonprofit organizations (Steen 2008). However, we do not have strong ex-ante reasons to believe that the causal mechanisms between prosocial motivation and happiness will be dramatically different for other conceptualizations of other-oriented motivation. As Perry, Hondeghem and Wise (2010, 683) note, these concepts are closely related in practice, each holding in common the assumption that an orientation towards others is a powerful motivator. Indeed, an updated definition of public service motivation offered by Perry and Hondeghem– “an individual’s orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society” (2008, vii) – reflects these commonalities with the prosocial motivation concept.

Both prosocial motivation and public service motivation draw from the basic concept of altruism. An early framing of altruism as a human need can be found in Titmuss (1970), who argued that individuals have a basic desire to help others, which can be found in primitive cultures and still performs an integrating function in modern societies. While this insight was originally limited to voluntary behavior (Titmuss compared voluntary versus market-based approaches to blood donation) it has increasingly taken hold in our understanding of public work (through public service motivation research) and private work (through studies on prosocial motivation).

Evolutionary theory and social science has sought to explain the purpose of altruism, and by extension whether it is truly other-oriented. It may confer benefits upon the giver, though accounts vary if these benefits are material or psychological, driven by calculation or an instinctual need. Potential returns include the benefits of a more positive reputation. There may be evolutionary benefit, where altruistic behavior was a valued adaptive trait that became a norm people find it unhealthy to depart from (Post 2005). Altruists may enjoy a “warm-glow” from

helping others (Andreoni 1990), which in turn may generate physiological benefit. Some experiments have demonstrated measurable physical changes associated with altruistic feeling or behavior (Post 2005), and one cross-sectional study showed that helping among churchgoers was associated with positive mental health (Schwartz et al. 2003). Others have argued that prosocial beliefs are at least partly tied to psychological self-reward, where those who enjoy helping others also enjoy higher levels of self-actualization and self-esteem, which in turn raises SWB (Gebauer et al. 2008).

Titmuss (1970, 239) suggested that altruism was self-interested, but only the broadest of terms. By helping another without the expectation of immediate return, the giver signaled a faith in a norm of collective care toward one another: “By expressing confidence in the behavior of future unknown strangers they were thus denying the Hobbesian thesis that men are devoid of any distinctively moral sense.” At the same time, this desire to help even strangers provides a form a self-realization to the giver, reflecting the expression of a “biological need” (Titmuss 1970, 212). Perhaps the most convincing proposition is that altruism improves well-being by displacing more negative emotions. It becomes difficult to dwell on negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger if we focus on helping others.

Some work has argued that that self-interested accounts of altruism fail to recognize a basic human impulse toward empathy (de Waal 2008; Fehr and Fischbacher 2003; Hanson 1990). Regardless of the stance one takes of its origins of altruism, it is increasingly accepted across scientific disciplines that altruism is deeply embedded in human behavior.

We seek to add to the understanding of altruistic motivation by considering whether its prevalence in the workplace generates psychic returns in the form of greater happiness. Scholars and policymakers have come to increasingly accept the importance of SWB as a central societal

value (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2011). The focus on SWB has been largely led by psychologists and economists, but increasingly has drawn interest from organization theorists and policymakers. Judge and Mueller (2011, 31) summarize prior research to suggest that “SWB is relevant as an outcome for organizational research, and that public policy researchers interested in SWB should take note of the considerable body of research from organizational scholars showing that work can be a general source of happiness.” Among valued-life goals, SWB ranks at the top across many countries and different demographic groups (Diener 2000). It has, increasingly, also attained a level of policy importance. Nobel prize winners Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz led a commission that recommended that countries track measures of SWB in addition to GDP (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009, see also Diener 2000), and the government of UK has established a national happiness index.

The growing interest in SWB has been paralleled by a similar increase in attention to prosocial motivation, but there has been little interaction between these two streams of research. Correlations between measures of altruistic behavior and happiness tend to occur largely in the context of volunteering (e.g., Borgonovi 2008), but with less attention to the employee’s work choice. There has been substantial study of how orientation towards others in the workplace results in benefits for the organization, clients, or other employees (see Grant and Wright 2010 and Pandey and Stayzk 2008 for a review of these literatures). But we have not asked if an additional benefit might be increased psychic returns for the individual. The narrow exception is job satisfaction, where there is evidence from multiple countries that public service motivation and prosocial motivation is correlated with job satisfaction among public employees (Brewer and Selden 1998; Kim 2005; Kjeldsen and Andersen 2013; Steijn 2008).<sup>i</sup> Even here, the gap between studies of job satisfaction and life satisfaction is striking – countless studies have focused on the

former, relatively few on the latter, especially in the domains of public administration and organization theory. Why prioritize understanding of satisfaction with work rather than broader satisfaction with life? While attention to work is understandably central to professional fields such as public administration, if we are to understand the psychological mechanisms behind altruistic behavior in the workplace we need a deeper understanding of how work fits into the broader life experience of the individual.

While this study is not designed to sort out the potential competing explanations of why prosocial behavior might link to SWB, it suffices to note that these explanations provide enough motivation to investigate if an empirical link exists. In doing so, this article adds to prior research by examining how prosocial attitudes in relation to work map onto current and late-life life satisfaction. Most explanations of prosocial motivation in the work environment focus on some sort of socialization rather than a psychological benefit. Sociohistorical explanations suggest that basic values are inculcated via early life experiences and important social institutions (Perry 1997). Other work points to the importance of organizational norms (Moynihan and Pandey 2007) or exposure to the beneficiaries of help (Grant 2008; Wright and Grant 2010). In this article we offer what might appear to be a somewhat simpler explanation, which is that the desire to help others in work environments exists and is a powerful motivator because it is linked to SWB. This claim is reflected in the following hypothesis:

*H1: Individuals with a stronger desire to help others through work enjoy higher SWB.*

The relationship between motivation and SWB is likely to be moderated by other factors, providing a logic for two additional hypotheses. First, there may be an interaction between public work and prosocial motivation. Public service is sometimes characterized as a special calling,

one that might not reward financially, but provides an opportunity to help others. For studies of public and nonprofit organizations, the connection between prosocial motivation and SWB has a special importance. There is significant evidence that individuals are drawn to public work out of a desire to serve others (Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise 2010), or satisfaction with the nature of public work (Georgellis, Iossa, and Tabvuma 2011). Private-public comparisons generally show that individuals who score high on measures that reflect a desire to help others prefer public over private work (Rainey 1982; Crewson 1997; Kjeldsen and Andersen 2013; Lewis and Frank 2002). In the WLS sample, desire to help others is also significantly higher for those in government work, suggesting that our sample is similar to others in this respect (see table 1).

*H2: Public employees with a strong desire to help others through work enjoy higher SWB than private employees.*

The third hypothesis proposes that experiencing a sense that one's work makes a difference should further SWB. The experience of making a difference, conceptualized as perceived prosocial impact, has been related to improved performance (Grant 2008; Wright and Grant 2010), but there is also evidence that it matters to SWB. The experience of a task as significant has been associated with a positive affective state, increasing enthusiasm and reducing fatigue (Saavedra and Kwun, 2000). Helping others at work improves mood by raising gratification and reducing negative moods (Glomb et al. 2011). Subjects induced to help others in experiments reported improved moods and self-evaluations (Williamson and Clark 1989). Perceived social impact has been found to act as a buffer against emotional exhaustion (Grant and Sonnetag 2010) and result in positive emotional effects after the workday is over (Sonnetag and Grant 2012). In public administration research the distinction between motivation and impact has been framed in terms the fit between the employees public service or prosocial

motivation and the values of the organization (Bright 2007; Steijn 2008; Taylor 2008) or broader environment (Kjedlsen and Andersen 2013). The implication is that if the organization or environment fails to create opportunities for prosocial employees to make a difference, they may become disenchanting.

*H3: Individuals who perceive higher social impact of their work enjoy higher SWB.*

## **Data**

We use data from the WLS, a longitudinal study of a random one-third sample of Wisconsin high school graduates (10,317 individuals) from 1957. Main survey waves include 1957, 1964, 1975, 1992, and 2004. The survey collects a wide range of information on individuals' life courses, including family background, education, and physical and mental health. For the purposes of our research questions, the data also includes individual work history, an early-career measure (asked when respondents were about 37 years old) of disposition to help others in work, as well as life satisfaction as individuals come to the close of their careers (asked when respondents were about 65 years old). Both the retention and response rate for the survey have been exceptionally high. The retention rate of the original 1957 respondents in 2004 was 75 percent, and 86 percent among the non-deceased sample. The response rate among non-deceased respondents was 92 percent.<sup>ii</sup> The large sample size, long study period, and high retention rate all make WLS uniquely suitable for studying the relationship between early attitudes and life satisfaction at older age.

We supplement our longitudinal analysis using pooled cross-sectional data from the GSS, a national survey of the American public that began in 1972 and has been administered every other year since then. Across two waves (1989 and 1998) the GSS features some combination of

the basic variables we are focused on (desire to help others, prosocial impact, and a general indicator of SWB), as well as a host of relevant control variables.<sup>iii</sup>

We utilize the two sources for a variety of reasons. First, the use of two different samples and two different approaches (cross-sectional and longitudinal) provide an external validity check of the findings of one single source. Second, the two sources provide complementary indicators of SWB, reflecting both current happiness and cumulative life satisfaction (explained in greater detail below). Third, the different sources have relative strengths that compensate for limitations of the other source: the WLS data allows for an interaction between desire to help and work sector. The GSS does not, but contains a wider array of measures of pro-social beliefs and measures of perceived social impact.

## **Measures**

In this section we describe the measurement of the key variables we examine. Since our primary analysis is based on the WLS data, our discussion focuses mainly on items from this dataset unless otherwise noted. The key dependent variable for the WLS data source is life satisfaction in 2004, which is based on the following question: “To what extent do you agree that when you look at the story of your life you are pleased with how things have turned out?” The set of possible responses include six ordered categories, ranging from “disagree strongly” (0) to “agree strongly” (5). The item is notable in that it seeks to solicit a sense of cumulative life satisfaction, inviting the respondent to consider their life course near retirement age. It is more common for indicators of SWB to frame the item in terms of current state. The SWB measure in the GSS is more typical in this regard, asking respondents “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days?” where respondents have the option of answering "very happy,"

"pretty happy," or "not too happy." We code these responses 2, 1, 0, respectively. The GSS measure is more directly a measure of happiness rather than life-satisfaction and the framing of the question ("these days") emphasizes current feelings rather than the long-term framing of the WLS ("when you look back at the story of your life"). It is important to note therefore, that the measures from the WLS and GSS measure different aspects of SWB.

Our measure of prosocial motivation is a question about how important the opportunity to help others is in judging a job.<sup>iv</sup> The set of possible responses include three categories: "not particularly important," "fairly important," and "very important." We create a dummy variable based on these responses, which takes the value of 1 when the response is "very important" and 0 otherwise. This question is asked only in the 1975 wave of the WLS survey. This item also appears in certain rounds of the GSS. As noted above, this measure aligns relatively well with the definition of prosocial motivation offered by Grant ("the desire to expend effort to benefit other people") and has been used to represent this concept (Kjeldsen and Andersen 2013), but this item has also been used as a measure of public service motivation (Rainey 1982; Crewson 1997; Lewis and Frank 2002). Recent work on public service motivation measurement suggest that a single-item measure of desire to help others correlates highly enough with widely used measures of public service motivation that may be judged to capture the same conceptual space (Wright, Christensen, and Pandey forthcoming). For some rounds of the GSS, we also have additional measures of prosocial motivation (the importance of social usefulness in a job) as well as measures of perceived social impact (whether respondents perceive they are helping others in their job, and if their job is useful to society).

In order to measure public work participation, we use the following variables. Government work is measured using a standard question on class of worker code. For the WLS

data, the dummy variable “Ever participated in government work” is coded 1 if the response of “government employee” appears in retrospective questions about first job, and questions about employment in later waves.<sup>v</sup> The survey data allows for tracking of amount of time employed in all sectors after 1992, and based on that we also include a cumulative measure of government employment (“total government years”) as well a general measure of employment (“total job years”).

In addition to these primary measures, we also include standard demographic measures associated with SWB. The descriptive statistics for the WLS are given in Table 1, and the GSS in Table 2.

*Insert tables 1 & 2 here*

## **Method**

For the WLS data, we include the observations with valid data on life satisfaction in 2004, desire to help in 1975, and all of control variables, resulting in 3879 observations for analysis. For the GSS data, the inclusion criteria are valid data on life satisfaction and all of the control variables, and at least one of four measures of prosocial motivation and perceived social impact, leaving 1929 observations in the analytic sample.

We estimate the impact of career choice, prosocial motivation, and the interaction between the two on life satisfaction using linear regression<sup>vi</sup> with robust standard errors. In the longitudinal analysis using the WLS, we control for factors frequently associated with SWB: gender, parental income and education, respondents family income at time of response, marriage status, health status, and number of children. In the cross-sectional models using the GSS data,

we control for gender, age and age squared, education, marriage status, race, health status, and income.

## **Results**

We present the results for each hypothesis in turn below. First, we briefly note the effects of the control variables on life satisfaction and happiness for the WLS and GSS (Tables 3 and 4 respectively). The results consistently show that female status, being married, having higher levels of education, higher levels of income, and better health are all associated with increased life satisfaction. The GSS analyses presented in Table 3 show similar associations, but also show that whites report higher happiness than non-whites, while age has a u-shaped relationship with happiness. These findings are consistent with other work on happiness, and provide assurance that the samples are not unusual in their experience of SWB.

*Insert table 3 & 4 here*

*Do people with a stronger desire to help others through work enjoy higher SWB than others?*

Our results provide support for the claim that the desire to help others is associated with both life-satisfaction and current happiness. The results are presented in Table 3 for the longitudinal model using the WLS. Individuals who report a desire to help others in 1975 have higher levels of life satisfaction in 2004 (model 1 in Table 3). In addition to being statistically significant, the effect is non-trivial: .12 on a 0-5 scale, which is approximately 10 percent of a standard deviation of the life satisfaction score. SWB is a well-studied concept, but one where the proportion of variation explained by standard models is not high. Finding a variable that

increases the proportion of variation explained to this degree is therefore notable. To provide a sense of context, we follow DeLeire and Kalil (2010) in using the size of the effect of being married as a comparison. Marriage is one of the most robust predictors of SWB and the variable with the largest effect size in our sample, with an effect of 38 percent of a standard deviation of the life-satisfaction score.

Table 4 shows the result of a cross-sectional model using GSS data. Model 1 in Table 4 shows that desire to help is correlated with happiness. The effect size of one unit increase of the desire scale, once again, is non-trivial (0.033 on a 5-point scale, or 5.5 percent of a standard deviation of the happiness measure). To provide a sense of context, the effect size of being married for the GSS sample is 38 percent of the standard deviation of the happiness measures (almost identical in effect size to the WLS sample). The alternate measure of prosocial beliefs (the importance of social usefulness as a criteria in assessing a job, model 2 in Table 4) is similar in terms of its effect on SWB to the desire to help measure.

The findings align with the general pattern of prior work on public service motivation, prosocial motivation and altruism, but extend this work by emphasizing the potential of a happiness payoff for this motivation. We can also interpret the results using self-concordance theory, which argues that individuals derive satisfaction as they pursue goals and actions that align with their values and interests (Sheldon and Elliot 1999), especially goals that are autonomously selected rather than externally imposed (e.g., because of financial needs, or the wishes of others) (Sheldon and Elliot 1998). In considering the origins of altruistic behavior, Titmuss (1970, 239) explicitly notes how extrinsic coercion robs the giver of the freedom to make a choice to help others. The autonomous quality of preferences has been largely unconsidered in prosocial motivation or public service motivation research, utilized to argue that

extrinsic rewards might crowd-out other motivations (Georgeollis, Iossa, and Tabvuma 2011; Moynihan 2010; Weibel, Rost, and Osterloh 2010). Self-concordance theory provides a logic for why expressing motivation consistent with one's ingrained beliefs, such as prosocial motivation, is expected to lead to both more sustained effort, and a greater sense of SWB. But self-concordance theory also allows another way of interpreting the data, which is that it is not so much the content of the goal that matters to SWB, but that simply having any goal and taking steps to realize it is what matters (Judge, Erez, and Locke 2005). Future work could address this question by comparing the relative importance of altruistic goals, and goal attainment, with other goals in shaping SWB. The results presented here suggest that incorporating altruism provides a meaningful addition to our understanding of happiness.

*Do public employees with a strong desire to help others through work experience higher subjective well-being than private employees?*

Data limitations prevent us from examining if those with a desire to help in the public sector enjoy higher life satisfaction in the GSS data – the variables “desire to help” and “government work” are not included in the same GSS data waves, meaning we cannot create an interaction term between desire to help and government employment. Such an interaction term is possible with the WLS data however. The results of this interaction test are provided in model 2 (which interacts any government work and desire to help) and model 3 (which interacts total years of government work and desire to help) of Table 3. These results provide no evidence in support of the idea that the SWB benefits of prosocial motivation accrues only for public sector workers. The interaction between government work (either any government work or our measure

of total government work) and desire to help is not significantly related to life satisfaction among WLS respondents.

It may be that the reason no findings occur between public work and a desire to help others is because our measure of public work is too crude to reflect the attainment of a desire to help others – tasks and work environments vary so much within the public and private sectors that assuming that the public sector is inherently more rewarding is too simplistic (Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012). Our next hypothesis examines the effect of believing that one's job makes a difference, regardless of sector.

*Do individuals who perceive higher social impact of their work enjoy higher SWB?*

We can examine the relationship between perceived social impact and SWB only in the GSS data.<sup>vii</sup> The results reported in Table 4 suggest that the belief that one's job is actually making a difference (models 3 and 4 in Table 4) is positively correlated with SWB. Both individual perceptions of actually helping others in their job (model 3) or working in a job useful to society (model 4) have substantial associations with happiness (6.5 percent and 8.4 percent of a standard deviation, respectively). Indeed, of all the prosocial items in the GSS data, the item reflecting the belief that one's job makes a difference to society has the largest effect on SWB.

Models that include both prosocial beliefs and impacts (models 5 and 6 in Table 4), provide some additional but mixed evidence on the relative importance of prosocial motivation and perceived social impact. Model 5, which includes the items on desire to help others and belief that one's job is allowing the respondent to help others, shows neither variable as significant. This in part may be due to collinearity, as the two items are correlated at .365. Model 6 includes the items on belief of social usefulness of a job as important and belief that one's job

makes a difference to society. These items are also significantly correlated (at .305) but the variable reflecting perceptions of perceived social impact is significantly associated with happiness. This finding is similar to a cross-national analysis of the relationship between prosocial motivation and job satisfaction, where Kjeldsen and Andersen (2013) show that when measures of prosocial beliefs and perceived social impact were included in the same model, perceived social impact was positively and significantly associated with job satisfaction, while prosocial beliefs lost significance or became negatively related to job satisfaction. The results in our analysis provide some complementary evidence that while prosocial beliefs matter, the ability of individuals to find a job that allows them to make an impact matters more to happiness.

A further test of hypothesis three, consistent with the research on person-organization fit, would be to examine if those with higher prosocial motivations benefit more than others when they experience perceived social impact, i.e. there should be an interaction effects between the key independent variables in models 1 and 3, and models 2 and 4, on SWB. Other work (Steijn 2008; Taylor 2008) has found that prosocial impact moderates the effect of public service motivation on job satisfaction, and Kjeldsen and Andersen (2013) find that such interactions with the variables we employ are positively and significantly associated with job satisfaction. But tests on the GSS sample (not shown) did not find that these interactions were significantly associated with SWB. Prior work focused on job satisfaction rather than SWB, but the null finding raises question about the relationship between measures of altruistic motivation, impact and positive affective states. While research in public administration scholarship generally focuses on altruistic motivation rather than impact, the results presented in Table 4, especially model 6, suggests that greater attention might is justified to understanding how perceived social impact of work matters.

### *Limitations*

It is worth noting some limitations of the work presented here. For the longitudinal analysis, the reliance on a cohort from one particular state might also raise concern that the data are not representative of the general population. On the other hand, a more homogeneous sample reduces the potential for error due to unobserved factors, and should increase confidence in the internal validity of the model. A longitudinal approach offers a number of very real advantages over cross-sectional data, but one shortcoming is that the conditions under which data was collected change over time, raising concerns about the temporal validity of the findings. The consistency of the main findings with more recent GSS cross-sectional data reduces this concern, however.

Because the GSS is a cross-sectional data set there is the potential for common-source bias. The WLS data largely avoids this problem, given the temporal gap between when the key responses were taken. But because the key measure of prosocial motivation appears only at one time-point in the data, we cannot employ individual levels fixed effects, which would offer stronger causal evidence. One possibility is reverse causality, i.e. that those who are inherently happier by nature are also more likely to help individuals. While we can observe whether prosocial motivation tested early in life is associated with life satisfaction three decades later, it is possible that the SWB of respondents is relatively stable over time, and predicts prosocial motivation decades earlier. We cannot discount this possibility, but note that measures of life-satisfaction show only modest stability over much shorter time-periods, which reduces the concern that this is a fixed trait that explains earlier attitudes (Fujita and Diener 2005).

It is also possible that some underlying trait explain both prosocial motivation and SWB. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess what such a trait may be. Wright and Grant (2010) point to personality as a possible omitted variable between the effect of altruism and other variables. For the WLS models, we did run versions of the model that controlled for personality factors (using standard indices for the big 5 items: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness). The inclusion of these items reduces the effect size of the desire to help variable by about half, though it remains a positive and significant predictor of SWB. One limitation of such controls is that it is open to debate whether personality indicators truly predict prosocial motivation, but instead it may be that both the desire to help others and certain personality characteristics tap the same underlying construct. Correlations show that extraversion and agreeableness are substantively and positively correlated with prosocial motivation in the WLS sample, consistent with Carlo et al. (2005).<sup>viii</sup> This suggests the potential for additional work to further explore how altruism relates to personality.

## **Conclusion**

This article contributes to both the study of SWB – by showing the relevance of prosocial values in a work context – and the study of altruism, by suggesting that there is psychic payoff in helping others. Much of the growing research on altruism in an organizational context, whether framed as prosocial motivation or public service motivation, emphasizes positive gains for clients, employers and fellow employees, but has provided little evidence on the gains for the individual. This article shifts the emphasis back to the individual. Being motivated to help and believing your work makes a difference is associated with greater happiness in our analysis. Other work has also emphasized the socialization processes that predict why some individuals

are more or less motivated to service (Perry 1997; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Wright and Grant 2010). The findings here are slightly different, in that they link prosocial values not to some form of specific socialization but to the basic human need for happiness. In doing so, the results provide further evidence that such values are not quixotic or unusual, or tied to a particular sector of employees, but are deeply embedded across many people regardless of

The findings reframe our understanding of why people want to help others in a simple and profound way. For human beings, this motivation may be tied to our happiness and life satisfaction. This is not intended to demean prosocial motivation – helping others has an inherent value, and may often involve some material loss. Instead, we suggest that prosocial motivation is not a form of martyrdom, but for many operates as part of a healthy psychological reward system where the desire to help others creates positive psychic returns.

The article offers three relatively specific contributions. First, prosocial motivation in the context of work is associated with greater subjective well-being. Second, this finding is not unique to public work. Third, the perceived social impact of work matters to SWB even with prosocial motivation is accounted for. We deal with each in turn.

Longitudinal data is often used to understand how early life factors or events contribute to later life outcomes. Here, we find relatively strong evidence that a motivation to help others through work early in life is associated with later life satisfaction. We set up a demanding test for the connection between desire to help and life satisfaction, tracking its impact across three decades. This guards against the danger of spurious findings because of a reliance on cross-sectional data, even as the cross-sectional GSS data provides supplementary evidence of this relationship. The GSS and WLS offer two distinct measures of SWB. The former elicits a measure of current happiness, while the latter seeks to understand cumulative life satisfaction.

Given these real differences, it would be reasonable to expect a good deal of variation in the general findings. However, the results show a notable level of consistency. For both sets of analysis we can conclude that there is clear evidence that prosocial motivation is associated with greater SWB.

The second major implication of the research is that the benefits of prosocial motivation to happiness are not limited to public sector work. The findings contribute to our understanding of how altruism plays out in different sectors. The original formulation of public service motivation linked altruism to public sector work. This formulation has been relaxed somewhat, with a greater acknowledgment of the parallels with altruistic behavior in non-public settings (Perry, Hondeghem and Wise 2010). The way in which altruism matters in public environment is important to explore, and in our WLS sample we find a stronger desire to help others than among private employees. But such differences should not be extended to an assumption that the altruistic impulse is unique to the public sector (Steen 2008; Grant 2008; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012). In some cases, it may operate in similar ways across sectors. This article provides evidence that in regard to how prosocial motivation is associated with happiness, public and private employees are not so different.

Finally, the article offers some evidence that perceived social impact of work matters to SWB. Here the evidence is not as strong as on the other questions largely because of data limitations. But the results do suggest that when both prosocial motivation and prosocial impact are included together, measures of prosocial motivation lose significance and prosocial impact (in at least one test) remains significant. Even if two individuals start with the same level of prosocial desire to improve society, the results suggests that it is the individual who believes more strongly that their job is useful will be happier. One implication for both practice and

theory is that the strong emphasis on altruistic motivation should be balanced with greater attention to providing feedback on the impact of work. While changing motivation is difficult, it is possible to design jobs in a way that allows employees to gain an understanding of how their work makes a real difference. Our findings suggest that increasing that experience of prosocial impact will help to increase employee happiness.

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VARIABLES	Year	Obs	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
<b>Dependent variables</b>						
Life satisfaction	2004	3879	4.831	1.099	1	6
<b>Independent variables</b>						
Importance of helping others in a job	1975	3879	0.649		0	1
<i>male</i>		2070	0.586 <sup>^a</sup>		0	1
<i>female</i>		1809	0.721 <sup>^a</sup>		0	1
<i>any government job at any time</i>		1478	0.708 <sup>^b</sup>		0	1
<i>no government job at any time</i>		2401	0.612 <sup>^b</sup>		0	1
Government job at any time		3879	0.381		0	1
Total years of government work		3879	6.179	11.19	0	46
<b>Control variables</b>						
Female		3879	0.466		0	1
Number of children	1992	3879	2.871	1.650	0	14
Father graduated from high school		3879	0.435		0	1
Mother graduated from high school		3879	0.502		0	1
Average parental income 1957-60 (in \$100)		3879	63.86	59.77	1	998
Total years of work		3879	29.85	8.93	0	60.33
Total household income in 2004 (in \$1000)	2004	3879	69.91	83.41	0	710
High school (reference)		3879	0.535		0	1
Some college		3879	0.156		0	1
College		3879	0.153		0	1
Graduate school		3879	0.156		0	1
Never Married (reference)	2004	3879	0.042		0	1
Married	2004	3879	0.801		0	1
Separate/Divorced/Widowed	2004	3879	0.157		0	1
Self-rated health	2004	3879	3.038	0.676	0	4

<sup>^a</sup>, <sup>^b</sup>: The difference is statistically significant ( $\rho=0.0000$ ).

**Table 2: GSS Descriptive Statistics**

VARIABLES	Obs	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
<b>Dependent variable</b>					
General happiness	1929	1.21	0.61	0	2
<b>Importance/sense of helping</b>					
Importance of helping others in a job	1898	3.05	0.82	0	4
Importance of social usefulness in a job	1894	3.06	0.81	0	4
In my job I can help other people	1294	3.00	0.90	0	4
My job is useful to society	1285	2.88	0.94	0	4
<b>Control variables</b>					
Female	1929	0.57		0	1
Age	1929	44.8	17.0	18	89
Less than high school	1929	0.16		0	1
High school	1929	0.61		0	1
College	1929	0.16		0	1
Graduate school	1929	0.07		0	1
Never married	1929	0.21		0	1
Married	1929	0.53		0	1
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	1929	0.26		0	1
Race - White	1929	0.83		0	1
Race - Black	1929	0.13		0	1
Race - Other	1929	0.05		0	1
Total family income (in 1986 dollars; in 10000)	1929	3.16	2.58	0.03	11.58
Number of children	1929	1.85	1.70	0	8
Health - Poor	1929	0.03		0	1
Health - Fair	1929	0.17		0	1
Health - Good	1929	0.47		0	1
Health - Excellent	1929	0.32		0	1

The sample combines data from 1989 and 1998 waves of GSS.

**Table 3: Effects of Desire to Help on Cumulative Life Satisfaction (WLS)**

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)
<b>VARIABLES</b>			
Desire to help others	0.1216*** (0.0356)	0.1377*** (0.0448)	0.1209*** (0.0405)
Any government work		0.0742 (0.0623)	
Any government work * desire to help others		-0.0532 (0.0739)	
Total government years			0.0047* (0.0026)
Total government years * desire to help others			-0.0009 (0.0031)
Total job years	0.0024 (0.0020)	0.0026 (0.0020)	0.0019 (0.0020)
Female	0.0833** (0.0377)	0.0774** (0.0382)	0.0736* (0.0378)
Father graduated from high school	-0.0499 (0.0379)	-0.0506 (0.0379)	-0.0510 (0.0379)
Mother graduated from high school	0.0258 (0.0373)	0.0255 (0.0373)	0.0277 (0.0373)
Average parental income 1957-1960	0.0001 (0.0002)	0.0002 (0.0002)	0.0002 (0.0002)
Some college	0.0175 (0.0499)	0.0127 (0.0501)	0.0093 (0.0501)
College	0.0643 (0.0504)	0.0560 (0.0510)	0.0465 (0.0510)
Graduate school	0.2217*** (0.0494)	0.2044*** (0.0523)	0.1757*** (0.0527)
Married in 2004	0.4291*** (0.1007)	0.4275*** (0.1009)	0.4284*** (0.1010)
Divorced/Separated/Widowed in 2004	-0.0223 (0.1100)	-0.0242 (0.1101)	-0.0227 (0.1103)
Number of children	-0.0101 (0.0116)	-0.0100 (0.0116)	-0.0094 (0.0116)
Household income in 2004	0.0008*** (0.0002)	0.0008*** (0.0002)	0.0008*** (0.0002)
Self-rated health status	0.3551*** (0.0285)	0.3550*** (0.0286)	0.3555*** (0.0286)
Constant	3.1478*** (0.1478)	3.1269*** (0.1488)	3.1493*** (0.1480)
Observations	3879	3879	3879
R-squared	0.101	0.101	0.103

Robust standard errors in parentheses, \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1%, two-tailed

**Table 4: Effects of Prosocial Motivation and Perceived Social Impact on Happiness (GSS)**

VARIABLES	Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Importance of helping others in a job		0.0334* (0.0179)				0.0250 (0.0230)	
Importance of social usefulness			0.0325* (0.0168)				0.0109 (0.0217)
In my job I can help other people				0.0398** (0.0191)		0.0326 (0.0201)	
My job is useful to society					0.0516*** (0.0174)		0.0496*** (0.0185)
Female		0.0488* (0.0278)	0.0547** (0.0279)	0.0633* (0.0323)	0.0651** (0.0321)	0.0643** (0.0327)	0.0696** (0.0326)
Age		-0.0142*** (0.0052)	-0.0137*** (0.0052)	-0.0194** (0.0085)	-0.0172** (0.0085)	-0.0176** (0.0085)	-0.0168* (0.0086)
Age squared		0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)
High school (Ref: less than h.s.)		0.0814* (0.0436)	0.0797* (0.0437)	0.1279** (0.0616)	0.1355** (0.0613)	0.1302** (0.0621)	0.1392** (0.0617)
College		0.0368 (0.0540)	0.0313 (0.0542)	0.0792 (0.0718)	0.0832 (0.0712)	0.0875 (0.0725)	0.0895 (0.0718)
Graduate School		0.0072 (0.0679)	0.0011 (0.0681)	0.0736 (0.0842)	0.0669 (0.0848)	0.0706 (0.0852)	0.0625 (0.0858)
Married (Ref: never married)		0.2391*** (0.0409)	0.2352*** (0.0410)	0.2007*** (0.0472)	0.1919*** (0.0472)	0.1939*** (0.0474)	0.1855*** (0.0476)
Divorced/Separated/Widowed		-0.0034 (0.0475)	-0.0061 (0.0476)	0.0235 (0.0566)	0.0108 (0.0564)	0.0153 (0.0569)	0.0023 (0.0568)
Black (Ref: White)		-0.0943** (0.0441)	-0.0939** (0.0442)	-0.1388** (0.0538)	-0.1299** (0.0541)	-0.1244** (0.0548)	-0.1276** (0.0551)
Other race		0.0800 (0.0661)	0.0817 (0.0663)	0.0314 (0.0769)	0.0412 (0.0766)	0.0211 (0.0777)	0.0305 (0.0778)
Number of children		-0.0003 (0.0095)	-0.0001 (0.0095)	-0.0041 (0.0129)	-0.0038 (0.0128)	-0.0038 (0.0130)	-0.0027 (0.0129)
Health: Fair (Ref: poor)		0.2654*** (0.0875)	0.2676*** (0.0877)	0.3679*** (0.1297)	0.3495*** (0.1272)	0.3855*** (0.1398)	0.3705*** (0.1356)
Health: Good		0.3711*** (0.0844)	0.3682*** (0.0845)	0.4590*** (0.1246)	0.4463*** (0.1220)	0.4742*** (0.1351)	0.4590*** (0.1307)
Health: Excellent		0.5389*** (0.0864)	0.5366*** (0.0865)	0.5999*** (0.1264)	0.5871*** (0.1239)	0.6196*** (0.1368)	0.6033*** (0.1325)
Real income (in 1986 \$10000)		0.0271*** (0.0058)	0.0273*** (0.0059)	0.0209*** (0.0068)	0.0201*** (0.0069)	0.0224*** (0.0069)	0.0217*** (0.0070)
Constant		0.6691***	0.6661***	0.7036***	0.6459***	0.5915***	0.5867***
Observations		1898	1894	1294	1285	1267	1258
R-squared		0.130	0.129	0.105	0.106	0.108	0.110

Results combine 1989 and 1998 data, with year dummy (not shown). Robust standard errors, \* significant at 10%; \*\* 5%; \*\*\* 1% two-tailed

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Other studies have found that job satisfaction and life satisfaction are positively and reciprocally related (Judge and Watanabe 1993), which offers some empirical evidence to suggest that PSM would also be correlated with life satisfaction. However, the relationship between job and life satisfaction is strongest using cross-sectional data, and weakens when longitudinal measures are used (Judge and Watanabe 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> More detail on the survey can be found here: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch/>. The data is available to any interested researchers. Full details on response and retention rates for different waves of the survey can be found here: [http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch/documentation/retention/cor1004\\_retention.pdf](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch/documentation/retention/cor1004_retention.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Details of the GSS can be found here <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/>

<sup>iv</sup> The exact question is: “I’d like to find out how important a number of things are to you in judging jobs in general--not just your job but any job. For instance, how much difference does the pay make in how you rate a job--is pay very important, fairly important, or not particularly important?” Then importance of other aspects of job, including “the chance to help people,” is asked in turn.

<sup>v</sup> The work-related variables come from 1975, 1992, and 2004 waves of WLS. The 1975 interview asked about the respondent’s “the first job”, “the job in March, 1970”, “the longest job last year”, and “current or last job”. In the 1992 wave, information on up to four employment spells since 1975 was collected. In 2004 wave, information on up to eight employment spells since the last interview (in most cases the 1992 wave). For each job recorded in these data, a class of worker code is assigned, which classifies jobs into five categories of private, governmental, own business incorporated, own business unincorporated, and working without pay in a family business or farm.

<sup>vi</sup> Because the dependent variables are categorical, we also estimated all models using ordered probits and obtained equivalent results.

<sup>vii</sup> While measures of perceived social impact exist in the WLS data, they only occur in the 1975 wave. While we assume that prosocial motivation is a relatively stable trait, perceived social impact is job-specific, and therefore it is not reasonable to assume it has lasting effects 30 years later.

<sup>viii</sup> All measures of personality, with the exception of neuroticism, were positively and significantly correlated with our dummy measure of desire to help, but the size of the effects varied a good deal. The actual correlations were .122 for extraversion, .138 for agreeableness, 0.69 for conscientiousness, 0.76 for openness and .018 for neuroticism.