



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

When Money Buys Happiness with Lara Aknin

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Andy Luttrell:

Hey, everybody. Happy New Year! This is officially the first episode of 2021. Sure, 2020 was weird and awful, but it was the year I started this podcast, so there's that at least! If you're new to the show, check out last week's "Best Of" episode for a quick glimpse into the topics we cover and the approach we take.

To wrap up the year, last month I released a special episode on the psychology of gift-giving. We looked at how givers and receivers think about gifts differently, which means the gifts that givers think they should give aren't always the same gifts receivers wish they'd get.

And in that episode, we heard from Lara Aknin—an assistant professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University. Lara talked about some research she's done on gifts that highlight something about the giver versus something about the recipient. But you also heard a bit about her research on how spending money on other people in general can make you happier than spending the same money on yourself. It's that part that has actually been at the heart of a lot of the work Lara has done...and it's very cool research. When I was done talking with her for the gifts episode, I realized that there was way too much good stuff that we talked about that wouldn't fit into that episode. So I wanted to release our conversation in full...in all its glory...as a standalone.

She talks about her research on spending and happiness and how it extends to lots of different people all over the world. We also talk a little more about what that research means and how it connects to her gift-giving studies.

So, as we ring in the new year, let's jump into the whole conversation and maybe get some insight on how to lead a more fulfilling life in 2021.

Andy Luttrell:

So, I was reading the advances chapter that you all put together.

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. Yeah, that was a labor of love.

Andy Luttrell:

I have so much respect for those advances chapters, just because they're just so integrative, and they require so much I think really careful thought and attention, and I honestly... I didn't know all the work that you had done that is all this developmental and cross-cultural, and all this other stuff, which is super cool. So, I definitely want to talk to you about that. But let me pull up my notes here for a second. Yeah, so you've done some work with gift giving in particular, so we'll talk about that, but you also obviously have this background in something that is a more general psychological phenomenon that plugs into gift giving so easily, right? Which is prosocial spending. So, in the grand scheme, you study effects of spending money on other people, so could you just sort of give an overview of like what that research has looked like, what the kind of themes of those findings are, and just sort of where that's taken you up to this point?

Lara Aknin:

Sure, so yeah, my general interest is in human prosociality and how that relates to well being. For most of my research thus far, I've really focused primarily on to what extent does generosity have a causal impact on well being. And so, as you alluded to, a lot of this research is... It's been very question driven, because I've been... You know, this work started from where I think is a very reasonable starting place, which was looking in and among university college students and what we found there was that people who are randomly assigned to do a small kind deed here, spend as little as \$5 or \$20 on themselves or someone else, were happier at the end of the day when they engaged in this small generous action, spending on others in whatever form they selected than people who spent on themselves.

And so, we were fascinated by that question, but there were many alternative explanations, and college students in Canada might not be the most representative sample, and for various reasons we wanted to look beyond. And so, I became pretty captivated over the next decade or so trying to understand whether this might be what we called a psychological universal, such that happiness is rewarding for most people on the planet. And so, to test this question, I've been conducting studies with partners and collaborators in rich and poor countries around the world, with developmental psychologists to look in some of our youngest givers like children under the age of two. We've also been studying this in small, rural societies, in places like where very little money is ever present, and people give in various and different ways. And also, recently looking at ex-offenders who by and large a lot of their everyday behavior does not reflect what we might think of as a lot of generous or kind behavior, and so trying to understand if in this strong test, as you could consider it, whether giving is also emotionally rewarding there.

And so, across the board... Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cut you off.

Andy Luttrell:

Oh, no. Go ahead.

Lara Aknin:

I was just gonna say and across the board what we find is a pretty consistent pattern, whereby generosity seems to be emotionally rewarding for most people.

Andy Luttrell:

So, to get a little more tangible about some of that, there's sort of... You've looked in many different places as you said for evidence of this kind of thing, so I thought maybe we could start with sort of like the genesis. As I remember it, there's a pretty tangible, easy-to-digest study where you sort of have people do one thing or the other and see what kind of consequence it has. So, could you walk us through what that initial study was about, how it worked, and what you found?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah, so the first study on this topic was part of my master's thesis way back in the day, and it was one of the... probably one of the most exciting and personally rewarding studies I ever got to run, because I was a research assistant in part running this project, and we went out in the morning hours on campus, recruited undergraduate students to participate in the study on everyday spending choices, and if they agreed, they were given an envelope with either \$5 or \$20 inside and some spending instructions pasted on the front. And the spending instructions asked people to spend the money by 5:00 PM that day, and then depending on their condition assignment, they were given one or two different instructions.

Those in the personal spending condition were asked to spend the money on themselves and that could be by way of a bill, expense, or gift for themselves. And those in the prosocial spending condition were asked to spend the money on someone else by 5:00 PM, and that could be on a charitable donation or a gift for someone else. And so, people went on their merry way, spent the money, and a research assistant who was unaware of how much they had been given or how they had been asked to spend it called them in the evening hours for a series of questions, and we always started with their emotional well being and how they felt that day. People reported their happiness and when we analyzed the data later, what we found was those people who were randomly assigned to spend on others were significantly happier. Regardless of whether it was \$5 or \$20.

Andy Luttrell:

Do you have any idea what they were spending the money on?

Lara Aknin:

I do. So, a lot of it was food.

Andy Luttrell:

Okay.

Lara Aknin:

Which had to do I think with the time. You know, we recruited people in the morning and lunch passed in between, but people were doing... Although at a higher level, a lot of it was food and consumption, a lot of it had to do with like there was magic in the details, if you will. People who were in the personal spending condition were buying themselves a latte and heading to class, and people who were in the prosocial spending condition were treating friends for lunch, taking friends to coffee. Some people went out of their way and took special bus routes home to bring home special food for their family because they wanted to give a parent a night off.

And so, food was probably the highest, the most frequent higher order category, but people also bought some interesting gifts for friends and family. One person bought like a small stuffed stuffy for their younger sibling. Several people made donations. I don't remember the details to exactly where. And in the personal spending condition, I remember people reported buying earrings, or makeup, or things like that. So, not extraordinary things, but enough spent in qualitatively different ways enough to shape well being at the end.

Andy Luttrell:

And it didn't seem to matter what they were spending it on, or I don't know, maybe you didn't dig into that.

Lara Aknin:

Well, it was quite a small sample. At the time it was 46 people in the final sample, and so we did not have enough variation. There were not large enough groups to kind of analyze how people were spending their money differently on different items to follow suit. But in subsequent studies, we've tried to really clamp down on that, because one alternative explanation, as you might imagine, is that when people are in the prosocial spending condition, they're getting a lot more opportunity for either experiential gifts, or social connection, and so in subsequent studies we've really controlled what people can buy, and even still, a lot of the key findings still emerge.

Andy Luttrell:

When you were describing at first, when it was like you took your friends out to lunch, or you did... It just seems like there was a lot more effort maybe, where it's like, "I bought a coffee for myself," you go, "Well, that's not really a huge thing." But then when it's a donation, or I just sort of threw some money at someone else, you go, "Well, as long..." If all of those things are doing it, then it does seem to be barreling down into just as long as it's for someone else, regardless of how much additional effort maybe that that takes, it's the other focus part of it that matters. That seems right?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. I think so. I mean, you're right. In that particular study, I don't think we could drill down on that question, but in subsequent studies we've been able to really narrow, to make the purchases across conditions almost identical. It's the exact same content, it's the exact same decision. The main key distinction is who is the ultimate beneficiary of these items. And even still, these emotional benefits pan out in a manner that is consistent with the original study.

Andy Luttrell:

So, when you extended this paradigm beyond Canada, were there challenges in translating this task? Or sort of how... In what ways did this study look the same versus different when you went into the field in other places?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. That's an interesting question, because naively we thought that this initial design could really scale up and scale out, but we started to realize the complications. In some interesting ways that like people across cultures spend their money in helping themselves and in others in very different ways. Like for instance, when we started conducting research in Africa to understand

how people spend their money, there was a ton of anecdotal report and in some of our recollection studies, people were buying airtime. And we had no idea what that was, but this was at its... It's probably still a very popular occurrence, I imagine. I don't know for sure. But people were buying cell phone minutes, and that's like what they could give easily as a gift, and that's something that was really meaningful and important to themselves.

And so, we started to quickly notice that our original paradigm with these very flexible parameters was not gonna be as worthwhile. And so, as we started to kind of build this line of work and be mindful of alternative explanations that came to mind after the paper was published, we started thinking about better, tighter, more rigorous designs that we thought would be more appropriate. And I think one of the paradigms that's really been helpful for us over the past several years is what I call our goodie bag paradigm, and this is basically a design where people complete a simple baseline questionnaire in which they report their baseline happiness. But it also encourages people to take ownership of a financial endowment or a windfall that comes soon after.

And this windfall isn't large. Usually, it's in the ballpark of approximately \$3 Canadian. It's not like a substantial amount of money, but people sign for the money and they take ownership of it, and then we tell them, "With this \$3, you can choose to make a purchase that's available to you at this discounted price." And it's a goodie bag, and you can fill it with either two chocolates, two juice boxes, or a mix of each, and there's an option to opt out and claim the cash value for yourself. People can always exercise this option, but very few do, because we kind of scaffold this choice to suggest that if you are gonna claim the cash, you'd have to pick it up in several months time, and so it's not like you can walk out with this in your pocket now.

So, everybody's got these same options, but people are critically randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In one condition, the goodie bag is for them and themselves at the end of the study, and in the other condition people are randomly assigned to the prosocial condition, where the goodie bag is gonna be donated to a sick child at a local children's hospital, and this is usually a pretty satisfactory and understandable target. Lo and behold, almost overwhelmingly everybody picks they're not gonna come back in a few months to collect this \$2, \$3, and so what they do is they buy a goodie bag, either for themselves or for someone else. They make their selection on a purchase card. They take this purchase card over to a research assistant who is unaware of what condition they're in. The research assistant packages the goodie bag in front of them, so people know that this is real, not a hypothetical item that they're buying. The goodie bag is set aside till the conclusion of the experiment and then the participant returns, they receive a thank you note that just reinforces their condition assignment. Thank you for purchasing the goodie bag. It'll be available for pickup at the end of the study if they're in the personal condition or donated to children's hospital if they're in the prosocial spending condition.

And then they go sit down and complete the post-spending measures. And usually what we find is that again, people randomly assigned to spend money on others are significantly happier than people who spend on themselves. This time, of course, the purchase is standardized, and so alternative explanations about the content of the purchase don't really pan out for understanding alternative courses of why someone might be happy. But also, the study includes many controls to try to remove any opportunity for social connection, or social praise, or potential reciprocity that might occur when we give in normal ways to other people. So, if I give you a gift, you might say

thank you, it might build a friendship, I might expect something from you in return, and here a lot of those sources that are important for everyday giving are short circuited, which allows us to really zero in on the emotional rewards of giving in and of itself.

Andy Luttrell:

And this is a paradigm that is... You can pick it up and put it in different contexts. It seems like that's what the value of it is.

Lara Akin:

Yeah. Yeah. Most places have some vulnerable population group. I mean, we've used this paradigm certainly in Vancouver. We've used it in South Africa and in several other places, and so it's easily adaptable for that purpose, and it's also, like I said, got a lot of these bells and whistles to control for alternative explanations.

Andy Luttrell:

And you did, this was... I was just so impressed that you picked this up. I forget if it was the goodie bag or something else in a very remote part of the world.

Lara Akin:

Yes. That was in Vanuatu.

Andy Luttrell:

So, how did that happen? And how did you pull that off?

Lara Akin:

Well, so I was lucky enough to be hired alongside a friend and colleague of mine, Tanya Broesch, who is a cross-cultural developmental psychologist, and so when we both started here the same year at Simon Fraser University in Canada, we got along really, really well, and I was really impressed with the cross-cultural work she was doing, and she was setting up a field site in Vanuatu. And after examining this question quite a bit already, I was still really interested. We had gone out of our way to try to recruit samples from rich and poor nations around the world, but you know, even still I thought a critic could say that you've been studying underprivileged students, or low income students in certain places around the world, but even by global standards, they're relatively not that well off, but by national standards they are well off if they're able to attend a local university. That's not something most people around the world are able to be able to do.

And so, I was talking with Tanya and we secured this small grant for me to be able to fly to her field site with her while I think she was maybe five or six months pregnant and couldn't take malaria medication, and so it was a pretty risky trip for her, and so anyway, she got sick on the trip. Anyway, she dropped me off on this remote village in Vanuatu where I stayed for three weeks, and so she introduced me to the chief and kind of said, "I gotta get out of here. I can't take medication. I can't stay safe." And so, she left me in the village, in a very nice... They were lovely and I had a wonderful time, but it was a fun exercise. I knew it was gonna be hard work, but I don't think I had fully anticipated the challenges and rewards of cross-cultural work.

But it was there that we adapted this paradigm. For various reasons, we had to loosen a lot of our very stringent controls, in part because there were only two women in the village who spoke English, and so we wanted to run this in the mother tongue language, and so I had to rely very much on these two women for back translations and translations to be able to make it work, but also many adults in the village were illiterate. They could not read. And so, for all the bells and whistles that we had built into this in Vancouver, and Canada, and elsewhere, to reduce these social appraisal concerns, we had to allow the study to run with in-person dialog there, where someone else was gonna know of their choice because there was no way around it.

But lo and behold, there in the village of probably about 100 people, we were able to recruit 26 adults. We rented out one of the villagers' huts and I was kind of off on the side, and people were very skeptical when I was in the room, and so Lija, one of the local women, ran the experiment for me and we had to make some adaptations. We used not chocolate bars and juice boxes, but candies that I was able to buy in Port Vila on my way into this remote village, and we set out. I have some pictures that are really jogging my memory, but we set out a map in the middle of the floor, we put three bowls to represent the three options. People were able to take these choices right then and there. Many people were so excited to eat the foods they had never really seen before, ate them right then and there in the personal condition.

In the prosocial spending condition, there was no local children's hospital that we could donate to, but people were asked to go share these with friends and family and not eat them themselves. And again, rather than rely on like long validated happiness report measures, people simply pointed at a ten-rung ladder and indicated how happy they were feeling in the moment on several positive emotion variables.

Andy Luttrell:

And so, you're finding that in this context when people still are making choices that are gonna give to others and not benefit themselves, that's when people reported the most happiness on the ladder.

Lara Aknin:

Yes. Yeah. Very much so. Yeah, and just of interest was just overwhelmingly these individuals, they were just so happy on this 10-point ladder. You might think that people living in these remote villages with very little access to healthcare, no running water, no electricity, they were on average somewhere in the high eights or nines out of a 10-point scale, and it was just we come in with some of our Western conceptualizations of what we might need to make us happy, and here these individuals were living in a beautiful, natural place, surrounded by friends and family. Their lack of financial resources didn't seem to matter so much because they had these close, tightknit communities.

Andy Luttrell:

I think that paper came out in 2015, is that right?

Lara Aknin:

Yes.

Andy Luttrell:

When did you go? When did it actually happen?

Lara Akin:

Probably 2013.

Andy Luttrell:

Okay. Yeah.

Lara Akin:

Yeah. It was a long time. I mean, it was a long... The trip itself was three weeks, but the preparing for it, I mean, we had weekly meetings for about a year before we went, and when we came back it was... I mean, the analyses were not hard to run, but it ended up... We also included the child data in that paper, too, so I was lucky to be able to try a version of our goodie, our giving paradigm with kids there, too.

Andy Luttrell:

You spend all that time and energy going there. Were there other tasks that you ran while you were there? Or really it was it all hinged on this one thing.

Lara Akin:

Well, it was two experiments, primarily, so it was the one with the adults and the one with the kids, and it... Three weeks there sounds like a lot of time to run 26 individuals. Well, 26 adults and 20 kids, but the whole first week was really translations, back translations, working with the two women who could understand English to make sure that our designs were culturally appropriate and not scary, not... For instance, the experiment we did with kids uses puppets, and I had originally... I brought three, thank goodness, but one was a dog, and I thought, "Most people everywhere like dogs, right?" But dogs had a very nasty connotation there. They were dirty, and not well kept, and people would shoo them out of their homes, and sometimes... It wasn't a desirable animal to interact with, and so when the main focal design was focused on a dog, we had to very much redesign and run with it.

And so, it took probably about two weeks to run the kids study and one week to run the adult studies. Time was tight.

Andy Luttrell:

Wow. Man. So, even to push it further, so you're exploring the bounds of all of this and you mentioned kids. I watched the video from... There was the link to the video, and it was like... Yeah, this just enjoyment of like, "Oh, this monkey is eating the thing that I gave it." And this sort of like, "I don't really care if you just gave it something." So, could you, just to kind of round it all out, describe an additional challenge of translating this paradigm to kids and how can we know that kids also gain this kind of satisfaction from giving to others?

Lara Akin:

Sure. So, yeah, I was very interested in thinking about whether it's not just full grown adults, but maybe younger humans that also feel good about giving. And around the time I was very interested

in this question, there was new emerging research kind of suggesting that kids engage in generous acts very early in life, and I was thinking there were various reasons for that, but one possibility could be that kids, like adults, feel good about giving. And so, working with Kiley Hamlin and Liz Dunn, we designed this experimental procedure where kids who were 22 months came into the lab with their parent and they did a little warmup round, where they learned that puppets like eating treats, and once they kind of got the idea that puppets, like humans, like eating yummy treats, we took them into a new lab room and they were introduced to a puppet named Monkey who liked eating treats, and then both the child and the puppet were given a bowl, and the child was given eight edible treats, like things that we often find tasty, like Goldfish crackers, or Teddy Graham crackers, things that young kids enjoy.

And then over the course of several minutes, they were asked to participate in three key phases that came in counterbalanced order. So, in one phase, the kids were asked to watch as the experimenter gave a treat to the puppet and in one phase they were asked to give one of the experimenter's treats to the puppet, and in one phase they were asked to give one of their own treats to the puppet. And every time Monkey ate, every time he received a treat, he ate it in a very loud and excitable fashion, and we used... We thought this was really clever at the time. We used this big bowl, and it had a false bottom corner, and so every time Monkey put his face down in the bowl, he used his nose to push the treat through the hole, and so when he lifted his head, the treats disappeared. And lo and behold, it was pretty convincing to the kids.

And so, we wanted to see not just whether kids would do this, but how it made them feel, and so we had a video camera in the far corner of the room, just kind of capturing this exchange, and when all the data were collected we coded the children's facial expressions on a seven-point happiness scale, just to see if we could track emotion, and we could, and that allowed us to compare how much kids were smiling as they engaged in these various actions. And as you alluded to, we found that kids smiled more when giving treats away to the puppet than when receiving these eight edible treats themselves, and what we were most excited about was that kids seemed to smile the most when giving their own treat to the same puppet who responded in the exact same way than when they were giving an identical treat that didn't belong to them, which we interpreted to suggest, or at least be consistent with the possibility that giving might be especially rewarding when it's costly.

Andy Luttrell:

So, all of this paints a very clear picture that giving to someone else increases well being, makes people happier than using those same resources on yourself, and it's happening all over, at different developmental times in people's lives, and so my question is why? What is it actually about this that is so potent? I think it's undeniable at this point that it is a powerful cue, or a powerful influence on happiness, but why? Why should it be?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. So, that's an interesting question. While we've had a lot of... I wouldn't say lack. Well, we've spent, invested a lot of time, and thinking, and energy, and resources into trying to understand what is the magical ingredient. We've been able to drive a lot more insight about what are the conditions under which this effect is larger and smaller. I can speak to that if you want, but we haven't really nailed down a central mechanism. In fact, one of the key collaborators on a lot

of this work, Mike Norton, seems to think that there might not be some internal mechanism in our heads that kind of is the magic ingredient. We think that it has a lot to do with humans are very social creatures, we rely on other people, and this is like a very clear and key way that we facilitate and kind of build these social connections with others, is to engage in giving and sometimes even costly giving to reflect that.

But the fact that we see this quite early on in life and with some pretty knee jerk reactions seems to suggest that... I don't know if there's like a key psychological mechanism that mediates this relationship, but we have had better insight into deciphering when the relationship is larger versus smaller.

Andy Luttrell:

And if we know some of the times where it goes away, where people no longer get that boost, then it may give us some clues. So, what are some of the things that render this prosocial giving kind of irrelevant to people's well being?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. That's a great question. So, the way we've described it so far is it aligns very nicely with self determination theory needs. So, the first is the sense of autonomy. This feeling of volition. So, if people give in ways that are very forced or required, that seems to really rob the emotional benefits. So, if I give you \$5 and say, "Go drop that off in that donation bucket there," you're not gonna feel particularly good about that. And lo and behold, Netta Weinstein and Rich Ryan have a really nice JPSP paper showing this effect pretty much. When volition goes away, so to do the emotional rewards of giving.

Another is competence. And we've often thought about that as having a positive impact on others. And so, usually you can really dial up the emotional rewards of giving by emphasizing the degree to which your gift has had a positive impact on others, and similarly you could decrease or detract the emotional rewards by really making it bland, obtuse, or really pallid. So, you know, some charities, I think some charities do a better job of this and some have a better stance to do so, where they can make very clear declarations about how your dollars are gonna be helping other people, and some charities that don't have that luxury. We ran one experiment in which we asked students to give money to either UNICEF, which is this broad organization from the United Nations that helps children in need, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, and Spread the Net, which is almost a subsidiary that stops the spread of malaria through Africa and has a very clear declarative. Every \$10 donated buys a bed net to stop the spread of malaria. Donation rates were no different across conditions, but what did differ was the emotional rewards of giving.

When people were giving to this very clear, obvious, high impact charity, the more they gave they happier they reported feeling. Meanwhile, that relationship did not exist in the UNICEF condition. So, impact seems to also be key.

And third and probably most critically I think is the social relational aspect. And so, when people give in socially connected ways, you can really amp up the emotional rewards. And when people give in very disconnected ways, you can pull that way.

Andy Luttrell:

I want to be mindful of your time and we'll talk about gifts in a second. I have one more question about the prosocial thing, though.

Lara Aknin:

Sure.

Andy Luttrell:

If that's fine with you.

Lara Aknin:

Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

So, the question is to what extent is this specifically about giving or spending? You all sort of very clearly demarcate this as prosocial spending in some ways that you talk about it. But I wonder if I help someone across the street, I mean, prosociality can take lots of different forms. Is this something specific about spending and giving, or is this really one manifestation of being prosocial and helpful makes you feel better about yourself?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. Thank you for asking that question, because I'm interested in prosociality more broadly and I think I kind of... With Liz, we stumbled upon this question of the financial generosity early on. She was interested in the financial side and I was really interested in the prosocial side, and it made a lot of sense, and looking back it was a very lucky stumbling, because it's a lot easier to give people money to give away. I can't... It's much more challenging to give people time to give away. I can't force people to give blood. You know, all these other costly personal resources that we might think of that are manifestations or instantiations of generosity are a little harder to track and harder to manipulate in experimental designs.

But I certainly do think that financial generosity is one form and fashion of the ways, and often the costly ways, in which we help other people. The one... I mean, most of my work is focused on prosocial spending, but the kids work that we talked about a few minutes ago looks at food sharing, which I actually think is probably one of the earliest forms of generosity that may have emerged among humans. But I think the evidence paints a pretty consistent picture across many versions and many facets of generosity.

Ashley Whillans and I just wrote a paper along these lines. I mean, I think the evidence for donating one's time and donating one's money is... They're certainly the largest literatures these days. But I think donating food, donating advice, donating blood, organs, et cetera, also... The evidence aligns. It's not nearly as large or consistent, but by and large I think the general notion is that generosity is positively associated with a causally implicated in increasing well being.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. To the point about the moderators, these... The commonality seems to be that I'm incurring a cost to help you. The part where you said giving advice is the one that seems maybe least

amenable to that, but I kind of wonder. If I'm being helpful totally be accident, and yes, I am causally responsible for your gain in safety, or pleasure, or whatever, but I may not have even known that I did it, or I... Really, I'm no worse off as a result. Does that operate in the same way or is it really like I'm losing to give something to you and that's the thing that I like?

Lara Akin:

Yeah. Well, I think it's interesting, because in some of the experiments that we kind of pull upon for the advice giving, which I think are probably the loosest connections, so I appreciate you interrogating this assumption. You know, it may be more of a stretch. People who do give advice are better off in many ways, not always emotional well being. Part of the reason might be that not everybody knows whether their advice has been effective, which circles back to the impact point, but it might also matter... You know, there isn't an inherent cost in giving advice other than perhaps your time. If people think that the world is zero sum and me giving you advice, if I give you feedback on your paper and it's more likely to be published and mine isn't, then maybe I do feel like it's costly advice, but I don't... I'd like to think most people don't see the world that way.

And so, that might also be one of the reasons that that link is perhaps the weakest. Mind you, to the best of my knowledge, I don't know if anybody has really offered a very precise, specific test of that question yet, and so I think it remains yet to... I don't think the evidence is missing because it's been tested and not shown. I think it's more that nobody has most clearly identified that as a form of prosocial currency that could be then given away.

Andy Luttrell:

Okay. Let's talk about gifts.

Lara Akin:

Okay.

Andy Luttrell:

So, one clear connection then is prosocial spending is what gifts are, and gifts are just kind of this prescribed version of prosocial spending that we all kind of just have to do. And one implication would be that giving gifts would make us happier, but what's interesting is the work you've done specifically on gift giving doesn't look at well being, I don't think, as the outcome, but like relationship kinds of outcomes.

Lara Akin:

Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

So, I'm wondering in particular kind of that first one about giver focused versus recipient focused. Could you give an overview of... I mean, one, where that idea came from. Was there some sort of seed to that that is compelling? And then also, what do you find that people are wrong about their preferences in ways that affect their relationships?

Lara Akin:

Yeah, so this project with Lauren Human, I actually don't remember where it grew from. I think I included one question in a large survey where I was just kind of intrigued about what people's intuitions about the best form of gifts. I wish I had a better backstory for this, but I don't, but I was maybe... It could have been out of a discussion with someone where I kind of just thought this was of interest and included a dichotomous question about what kind of gifts do you think are best to give other people, those that reflect you and your interests or those that reflect the receiver and their interests? And lo and behold, we found in this very initial data set that there just seemed to be an overwhelming preference, like overwhelming I don't think captures it. It was just a whopping lean towards the majority of the sample thinking that of course when you give gifts, you give gifts that reflect the recipient. This is what you do.

And so, I contacted Lauren and I just... I knew she had been really interested in kind of self-disclosures, and what a good listener, what a good... someone who's very good at self-disclosure. I thought this was really interesting and well aligned with her interests, and so this project just took off, and we wanted to understand what are the relational consequences of giving these very different types of gifts? Gifts that reflect you as the giver or gifts that reflect the recipient? And whether that aligns with people's intuitions. And across a series of studies, in every study we found the exact same pattern, whereby people kept telling us over and over again, "Obviously, you give gifts that reflect the recipient. That is the proper, nice thing to do."

And people would tell us, like that's what I did when I gave the last gift, and when I got a gift, that's the kind of last gift I got. It was reflective of me as the recipient. In every way we could ask the question, people hands down said, "No, gifts should be given that reflect the recipient." But then we started to kind of toy with which types of gifts had the best relational outcomes, and across several different domains, we found that lo and behold, the better course of action, or at least the more preferential outcomes where people would feel closer to the other person on the other side were in instances in which they gave gifts that reflected the giver.

So, for instance, I remember this study quite clearly. We recruited people at the mall around Mother's Day, and we told them that we were gonna buy their card in the local Hallmark, or card shop, or whatever it was, and we said, "You go in." You could go in and pick whichever one it is, but we randomly assigned them to either buy a card that reflected them as the giver, or the recipient, their mother or mother figure. And we let them write the card and tell us how they thought it would go, and we followed up with them after Mother's Day, and what we found was consistent. What was inconsistent with people's self-reported perceptions or attitudes and predictions in advance, but that people who were randomly assigned to give a gift or a card that reflected who they were made them feel closer.

And in a final study, we got to look at this from also the recipient's perspective, and so we recruited pairs of individuals to come into the lab. They were randomly assigned to either the giver or recipient role, and the giver was randomly assigned to either give a giver-centric gift or a recipient-centric gift, and so they went on iTunes and bought a song that either reflected who they were or who the recipient was primarily, and then they sent it via email to the other participant in the other room, and the recipients this time reported that they felt closer when they were given a giver-focused gift than a recipient-focused gift.

In that one study, the givers didn't feel closer. But in every other study where we focused on the givers, they did. And so, it kind of just presented some intriguing insight into when it comes to gift giving, like many other things in life, all of our intuitions don't pan out. This seemed to be one context in which people's intuitions... We probably all know it's good to give gifts to a certain extent, but when it comes to the specificity of what type of gift to give, we might lean towards reflecting the recipient when in fact we'd be better off kind of sharing a little bit of intimacy and detail about who we are in the gifts that we give.

Andy Luttrell:

And just to clarify, when you say giver focused or oriented gifts versus recipient-oriented gifts, what exactly do you mean?

Lara Aknin:

Yeah. So, again, so we asked people to... I'm trying to think about what it... I don't remember the exact words that we gave people, but it was something along the lines of in the giver-centric gift, it was a gift that kind of reflects your personality, your interests, your passions, something about you as the person who is offering the gift. Meanwhile, the recipient-focused gifts were often identified or described as gifts that reflect the recipient's personality, passions, interests, something that reflects the person that you're giving to.

Andy Luttrell:

Just by way of wrapping up and just to kind of distill everything down, if you were to give advice about gift giving or being... where to spend your money. This is sort of the take home moment part of things, right?

Lara Aknin:

Okay.

Andy Luttrell:

Like if you were to give advice to people based on your research, what kind of advice would you give?

Lara Aknin:

I would recommend that people... I think in large part, most people have this general intuitive sense that being kind to others is the right thing to do, and a positive thing to do, but I think when push comes to shove and what we've seen in several of our experiments is that when we show people dollar signs and when we give them the choice in the here and now, they quickly default to these selfish preferences, whereby they think they will be happier, or they choose to invest in themselves. And what I think our research has shown time and time again over the past decade or so is that looking in rich and poor countries, across the age spectrum, and various personal histories, most people are in fact quite a bit happier when they spend on others than on themselves.

Andy Luttrell:

You know, it's interesting, the contrast between that and the gift giving study saying, "Give something that is self focused." There is a little bit of like... People want to be selfish, but you shouldn't be, except when you're being prosocial, then be selfish in how you-

Lara Akin:

Yeah. Well, you know, one way we came to understand that in that... Lauren and I had some long conversations about this, and this is where we landed, but honestly, that project was like a one off, and not something I've given as much thought to as the other line of work. But we thought one of the reasons that giver-centric gifts might lead to greater senses of intimacy than these recipient-centric gifts is that it can be risky when you give a recipient-centric gift because you can miss, right? Like if I tried to give my partner what I think is like his new favorite sports jersey or whatever, and I pick the wrong person, it can very quickly reveal that I wasn't paying attention, right?

Meanwhile, if I give something that is reflective of me, and may of the times... We talk about this a bit in the paper, but on some occasions, when people gave things that were of themselves, they could often be memories of times that like there was a time where I really shared a lot of myself, and so we shared an experience. Like people described some very beautiful things, like I remember one person who drove cross country with a six pack of beer from I think New York to California to share an amazing personal experience. But all this to say that I think when in doubt, sharing a bit of yourself is probably a much safer bet than trying to hit their mark on a recipient-centric gift that could miss. It could, like I said, quite easily reveal that you don't know that person as well as they might hope you do.

Yeah. I think there's good reason to think that people really like sharing things about themselves, so perhaps that's not surprising that the givers really enjoy that and feel good about it, and feel that is a sense of intimacy building, but I think recipients, it's a lot less threatening than if someone gets your preferences wrong.

Andy Luttrell:

Great. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk. This was all very cool.

Lara Akin:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.