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Keep Nice and Carry On: Effect of Niceness on Well-Being

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Abstract

Practicing acts of kindness is beneficial to one's well-being, but is simply being nice to others also beneficial? In a correlational Study 1 ($N = 497$), self-reported behavioral niceness was positively correlated with happiness, self-satisfaction, relationships satisfaction, life meaning, and negatively correlated with depression. In two experimental studies, a one-day online intervention involving acting nicely (Study 2; $N = 482$) and recollecting one's nice behavior (Study 3; $N = 317$) resulted in higher mood, self-satisfaction, relationships satisfaction, and life meaning. The present findings suggest that acting in a nice manner, that is, in a warm and friendly way, toward others in everyday situations can promote one's well-being. Practicing niceness also promoted subsequent voluntary nice behavior.

Keywords: niceness, well-being, prosocial behavior, COVID-19, social relationships

Keep Nice and Carry On: Effect of Niceness on Well-Being

Niceness is acting in a warm and friendly way toward others in everyday situations. A smile or a friendly tone of voice usually costs little effort but can brighten someone else's day (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). In the present research, we examined whether such minor acts of prosocial behavior could positively affect the well-being of the person who displays them. Despite a vast body of existing research on the positive effects of so-called random acts of kindness on happiness, in prior work the acts of kindness varied widely, ranging from relatively small and spontaneous acts, such as paying a compliment to someone, to more effortful acts, often demanding special time or planning, such as writing a letter of gratitude (Ko et al., 2019). Thus, it is unclear whether simple gestures of niceness that do not require much effort and could be performed in everyday situations, such as smiling at a cashier in a store or having a friendly chat with a neighbor, are sufficient to yield a positive effect on well-being. In the present research, we aimed to fill this gap and investigate whether everyday acts of niceness can bring hedonistic benefits.

Niceness as a Type of Prosocial Behavior

We define niceness as acting in a warm and friendly way toward others in everyday situations. Examples would be using a warm tone of voice, giving sincere thanks, or telling people kind things – casual, common, simple, and low-cost gestures that are not particularly surprising but gives one a *warm glow*. Importantly, this niceness is not performed to obtain something or because it is socially appropriate, but because one genuinely wants another person to feel good and welcome, and to establish cooperative relations with them. Many actions can be performed in a nice or not-nice way, for example, informing a student that they have failed a course can be done with or without compassion.

In this sense, niceness is prosocial behavior, given that prosocial behaviors are defined as actions performed to intentionally enhance the well-being or welfare of another

person (Penner et al., 2005), and, likewise, niceness is aimed at benefiting others. At the same time, although niceness and other prosocial behaviors are probably correlated, niceness is to some extent independent of other types of prosocial behavior, e.g., one can fling a coin to a beggar while expressing contempt and saying: "You'd better look for a job!". Besides niceness being casual, simple and low-cost, some other unique characteristics of niceness as a type of prosocial behavior are: its link with warmth rather than morality, prevalence, social lubricant function, proactivity, and low indebtedness, which we describe in more detail below.

First of all, niceness corresponds to warmth in the "Big Two" model of agency and communion as basic dimensions of human existence (Bakan, 1966), or social cognition (Abele & Wojciszke, 2018), and particularly in the more recent view of communion as comprising two facets – warmth and morality (Abele et al, 2016; Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). Warmth refers to whether people "facilitate affectionate and cooperative relationships" with others (and when they do, others tend to perceive them as being warm and friendly), whereas morality refers to whether people "adhere to ethics and important social values" (and when they do, they are perceived as moral, fair and reliable; Abele et al, 2016, p. 3). We argue that niceness in most cases can be considered a manifestation of warmth rather than morality.

Behavioral niceness is also characterized by it being relatively prevalent. People have ample opportunities to perform niceness multiple times throughout the day, in basically every social interaction (see Chancellor et al., 2018).

Regarding its function, by addressing others with a warm and friendly attitude, we communicate our good intentions. Niceness can signal that "we came as friends, not enemies", as well as build a sense of belongingness and security in social interactions. Thus,

niceness can serve the role of social lubricant and glue both for familiar and unfamiliar others (i.e., weak ties, Granovetter, 1973).

Niceness can be reactive (a response to someone's distress), but it is often proactive (in the absence of another person's negative state) (Dunfield, 2014). Moreover, niceness may also be easier to accept than good deeds from the recipient's perspective (Fisher et al., 1982), as it does not cause a sense of indebtedness and may also be more readily reciprocated and further spread (Nook et al., 2016).

In brief, niceness is a specific type of prosocial behavior, and given its prevalence and accessibility, it can have a significant impact on the quality of social life and the quality of individuals' life. Although some prior work has investigated behaviors that could be qualified as niceness (e.g., research on civility in the workplace, Chancellor et al., 2018), they have always been mixed with other types of prosocial behavior, rather than studied independently. Also, as behavioral niceness is an everyday experience, applicable in many situations, easy to perform, and accessible to anyone, it has excellent potential for psychological micro-interventions. This research aimed to examine the effects of practicing niceness on an individual's well-being.

Prosocial Behavior and Well-Being

It has been demonstrated in numerous studies that prosocial behavior does not only benefit the recipient, but also the benefactor. Prosocially motivated people enjoy better health, live longer, have more satisfying social and romantic relationships, cope better with stress, and have a greater sense of meaning in life than those who are oriented on personal goals and interests (Crocker et al., 2017). However, prosocial behavior usually refers to good deeds such as donating money to a charitable cause, volunteering, or giving help, i.e., behaviors that often involve a significant cost (money, time, sacrifice) or are not undertaken on a daily basis but are somehow extraordinary (McGuire, 1994). In this article, we focus on

a very simple type of prosocial behavior – niceness, which is a low-cost, everyday, casual prosocial behavior, and has not received much attention in research on prosociality and well-being.

Intentionally practicing so-called random acts of kindness increases positive mood and sense of happiness of individuals who undertook them (for a review, see Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This effect is small to moderate in strength and independent of gender and age as confirmed by a meta-analysis (Curry et al., 2018). But does simply being nice to others qualify as a random act of kindness and is it enough to make one feel better? The range of behaviors undertaken by participants in the research on random acts of kindness was quite broad, from small, nice gestures, such as complimenting somebody, to blood donation or charity. Often they were also quite extraordinary or unexpected gestures, such as giving away a cup of hot chocolate in a park (Kumar & Epley, 2022). Additionally, in research on the effect of so-called everyday prosociality in the workplace on well-being participants were encouraged to practice acts that “included sacrifices of time, resources, and money” (Chancellor et al., 2018, p. 510). Practicing these behaviors has been shown to have individual benefits, but it is unclear whether the benefits could be achieved by just being nice.

Social relationships are one of the key predictors of happiness, partly because they satisfy a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which was found to be as important for happiness as satisfying basic needs (food, money, safety) and health (Diner et al., 2018). A sense of belonging can be achieved not only by forming or maintaining close relationships, but also through prosocial behavior. For example, people who engage in prosocial volunteering are relatively happier due to social integration (Piliavin, 2010). Prosocial behavior also promotes well-being through satisfaction from fulfilling social norms and sense of mattering, i.e. a person feels like a good member of society (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Niceness, like other types of prosocial behavior, also has the potential to strengthen social

integration and satisfy a need for affiliation, as well as to bring personal satisfaction from realizing the social value of benevolence (Schwartz, 2012). As a result, niceness, like other types of prosocial behavior, should promote well-being. However, as practicing niceness has so far not been studied separately, but always in combination with more costly or extraordinary prosocial acts, its effect on well-being needs to be empirically tested.

There is indirect support for the hypothesis that simply being nice to others is enough to improve well-being comes in research on minimal social interactions (i.e., weak ties). This research found that even minimal social encounters in a real-life context (such as having genuine small talk with a stranger) positively affect well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Talking to strangers, which was the focus of research on minimal social interactions, seems to overlap with being nice, as people often display friendliness when initiating a chat with a stranger. At the same time, on a theoretical level, connecting with strangers is not the same as being nice, and niceness is also not limited to strangers but also includes how one behaves toward neighbors, colleagues, or loved ones. We assume that acts of niceness, not only toward strangers, should make one feel better.

But can being nice ever be a bad thing for an actor? Acting nicely can also have negative consequences when it is not genuine and against the actor's will. For example, customer service or public administration employees whose job demand is to speak politely to the clients no matter what, in addition to their work tasks, perform emotional labor, which results in energy drain and job dissatisfaction (Grandey, 2000; Pugliesi, 1999). Also, as being polite is gendered, and people may expect that women are more polite than men, it can suppress the authentic expression of emotions in women and leads to emotional (e.g., frustration) and social costs (e.g., their needs not being addressed) (Cuddy et al., 2007; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Hosie et al., 2005; Sung, 2012). However, the examples given qualify as politeness rather than niceness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, considering the effects of

niceness, it is important to differentiate between niceness (an expression of interpersonal warmth) and politeness (an expression of good manners and social norms, often practiced instrumentally). Our baseline prediction is that when one acts genuinely nice, it positively affects one's well-being.

To sum up, there is robust empirical evidence that prosocial behavior has a positive effect on well-being. We suppose that just acting nicely toward others would also have a positive effect on well-being. We find it important, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective, to separate niceness from the broad category of prosocial behavior and verify whether small everyday gestures of niceness matter. From a practical perspective – if everyday niceness proved to be beneficial for people's well-being, it would be worth designing interventions to enhance it. From a theoretical perspective – niceness has not received much attention in theories of prosocial behavior, and the present research could stimulate interest in niceness as a distinct type of prosocial behavior.

Overview of the Current Studies

We tested the idea that practicing niceness would improve well-being in three studies – one correlational and two experimental studies. In the correlational study, we measured participants' self-reported behavioral niceness at the time of the pandemic, while in the experimental studies we asked participants to perform either niceness or small efficacy tasks (Study 2) or to recall their nice or ordinary behavior (Study 3). In all studies, we measured participants' well-being with several different instruments.

Open Data Statement

Our hypotheses and study designs were pre-registered. The pre-registration protocol, as well as the data and materials, can be retrieved from our OSF page (anonymized link for peer review: https://osf.io/v37k8/?view_only=65e14c0ac83547b19ed31e36fd527d03).

Our thinking about the theory of niceness, as well as about accurate labels for the constructs, evolved over the course of the project, for example, in pre-registration protocols of Studies 1 and 2, and in the instructions for participants in these two studies, we used the term everyday kindness and only later we decided that the term niceness would be more accurate and less confusing than everyday kindness (considering the multiple meanings of the term “kindness” in the literature and tradition of research on random acts of kindness) when referring to warm and friendly behavior toward others. We also reconsidered the label for more costly acts, that are usually the subject of research on prosociality. Initially (e.g., in the pre-registration protocol of Study 1) we labeled them simply as prosociality, but later we found that confusing, given that niceness is prosocial behavior too.

Studies 1 and 2 additionally involved measures of social connectedness and helping attitudes, which, for the sake of clarity and brevity, we eventually do not report in the present article. We report only the measures relevant to the present hypotheses, but the details on how social connectedness and helping attitudes were measured and additional analyses for these variables are reported in the Supplementary Materials on our OSF page.

Study 1

In Study 1 we aimed to investigate the correlation between behavioral niceness and well-being. The study coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and participants reported their behavioral niceness during the pandemic, as well as their well-being during this period. We also used the opportunity to include questions about more costly and extraordinary prosocial behaviors, that is, charitable acts undertaken during the pandemic, so that we could compare them with niceness.

Method

Participants

Participants were Prolific respondents of various nationalities (the vast majority from European countries, e.g., the UK, Portugal, Italy, Poland) taking part in a survey (in English) in exchange for a small payment. Five hundred forty-three participants entered the study in May 2020. We followed the exclusion criteria described in the pre-registration and excluded 46 participants – 40 participants who failed at least one of two attention check questions, and six participants who admitted that their answers were not accurate and should not be used in our research. The final sample comprised 497 participants (237 female, 250 male, 2 other, 3 declined to indicate their gender) ranging in age from 18 to 73 years ($M = 28.18$, $SD = 10.08$), 92% White, 3% Asian, 2% Black, 3% other. This sample allowed us to detect the smallest effect size of interest (SESOI; Lakens, 2014) $r = 0.15$, assuming $\alpha = .01$ and 80% power, one-tailed test (as hypotheses were directional).

Procedure

At the beginning, participants rated their behavioral niceness during the pandemic. They were also asked about their more costly prosocial behavior (charitable acts) during the pandemic. Then participants completed a series of scales measuring their well-being. Next, participants were asked to write down a few examples of their nice and charitable behavior, to be used to verify that participants had understood and followed the instructions correctly. The procedure ended with a control question about the participants' reliability ("Were your answers accurate and can they be used in our research?"), to be used as one of the exclusion criteria), and demographic questions about age, sex, education, and ethnicity.

The study protocol received approval from the university research ethics committee.

Measures

Niceness. To measure participants' niceness during the pandemic, participants first read the definitions and examples of behavioral niceness. Niceness was labeled as "everyday kindness" and defined as "voluntary, small actions intended to express a friendly attitude

toward a specific person” which are “low-cost and do not require much effort or sacrifice, but they can brighten up someone’s day” with examples, e.g., “addressing the cashier in the shop with a smile and friendly tone”, “chatting with a neighbor”, “smiling at a stranger”.

Participants were also presented with the definition and examples of more costly prosocial behaviors. In the instructions for participants we labeled them “prosociality” and defined them as “charitable actions to benefit others” that “are more costly, they involve spending money, time or effort, in order to help somebody or support a good cause” with examples, e.g., “donating money to charity”, “volunteering”, “getting involved in some social initiative or campaign”. The full definitions can be found in Appendix A.

After reading the definitions, participants indicated the intensity of their niceness and charitable actions (in a randomized order) during the pandemic (“In general, how would you describe your everyday kindness toward others/your engagement in helping others during the time of the pandemic?” with answers ranging from 1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high*).

Moreover, to test whether, in line with our basic assumptions about niceness, niceness is more common and less costly than charitable acts, participants were additionally asked to indicate the general frequency of their behavioral niceness/charitable acts (“In your daily life, how often do you do acts of everyday kindness/acts of prosociality?”, 1 = *at least once a day*, 9 = *not at all*) and the subjective cost of acts of niceness/charitable acts (“In general, how costly or not, in terms of money, time, effort or sacrifice, are acts of everyday kindness/acts of prosociality in your opinion?” 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*).

Well-Being. To capture participants’ well-being we applied three measures – quality of life, happiness, and depression. First, participants responded to the following items:

“Thinking about the past two weeks: To what extent do you feel your life to be meaningful?” (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *at extreme amount*); “How satisfied are you with yourself?” (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*); “How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?” (1

= *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*). The items were selected from The World Health Organization Quality of Life Assessment (WHOQOL) (1995).

Next, participants indicated their subjective happiness on the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), again regarding the past two weeks (e.g., “In the past two weeks I consider myself”: 1 = *not a very happy person*, 7 = *a very happy person*; 5 items; $\alpha = .87$).

Finally, we measured depression with The Patient Health Questionnaire PHQ-9 (Kroenke et al., 2001) regarding the past two weeks (e.g., “In the past two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Feeling down, depressed or hopeless”; 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *nearly every day*; 10 items; $\alpha = .87$).

Results

Niceness and Charitable Acts During the Pandemic

First, we present descriptive statistics with regard to self-reported behavioral niceness compared to self-reported charitable acts¹ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables measured in Study 1). On average the participants described their behavioral niceness toward others during the pandemic as somewhere between moderate and high ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .83$, on a 1-5 scale), and their charitable acts as somewhere between low and moderate ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .94$, on scale 1-5), $d = 1.31$. The correlation between self-reported behavioral niceness during the pandemic and self-reported charitable acts during the pandemic was moderate, Pearson’s $r = .26$ (Table 1).

Frequency and Cost of Niceness and Charitable Acts

¹ We did not directly test whether participants' understanding of niceness was in line with our definition of niceness, and it is worth including in future research, but we did review the examples of niceness that participants listed at the end of the survey, and the vast majority of them applied to our definition of niceness and charitable acts.

With regard to the frequency of acts of niceness, consistent with our basic assumption about the differences between niceness and more costly types of prosocial behavior, acts of niceness were reported to be performed in general (not-pandemic related) by the participants more frequently than charitable acts, $M_{\text{niceness}} = 8.05$, $SD = 1.35$ vs. $M_{\text{charitable_acts}} = 4.86$, $SD = 1.91$, $d = 1.56$ (the 1-9 scale was reversed to range from 1 = *Not at all*, 9 = *At least once a day*, Table 1, Table 2). Correlation between the self-reported frequency of performing niceness and the frequency of performing charitable acts was moderate, Pearson's $r = .29$ (Table 1).

Additionally, the results for the self-reported cost of acts of niceness and charitable acts were in line with our basic assumption that acts of niceness were seen as less costly in terms of money, time, effort, and sacrifice ($M_{\text{niceness}} = 1.68$, $SD = 0.91$, on a 1-5 scale) than charitable acts ($M_{\text{charitable_acts}} = 2.85$, $SD = 0.85$), $d = 1.08$.

[Table 1 near here]

[Table 2 near here]

Niceness During the Pandemic and Well-Being

Performing niceness during the pandemic was weakly positively correlated with life meaning ($r = .22$), self-satisfaction ($r = .18$), and relationships satisfaction ($r = .18$). It was also weakly and positively correlated with subjective happiness ($r = .18$), and weakly and negatively correlated with depression ($r = -.11$). This pattern was in line with our hypothesis.

In series of regression analyses we tested behavioral niceness and charitable acts entered simultaneously into the model as predictors of well-being. The pattern of results for behavioral niceness remained the same – behavioral niceness was weakly related to all the

outcomes. Performing charitable acts was also related to most of the well-being indicators with similar strength to niceness or weaker than niceness (Table 3).

[Table 3 near here]

Discussion

These results offer the first evidence that behavioral niceness is correlated with well-being. It also supports our basic assumptions that behavioral niceness is distinct from more costly prosocial behavior – performing niceness and charitable acts were only moderately correlated. They differed in terms of their reported frequency and cost (although as a limitation of the measure of frequency, please note that the label *everyday* kindness might have suggested to participants the expected frequency). Self-reported niceness was related to well-being (in most cases) over and above charitable actions.

Since these results were correlational, they did not offer evidence for causality. It is possible that this relationship is bidirectional, e.g., a happy person is more willing to act nicely (Otake et al., 2006), but acting nicely may also improve well-being. In the present research, we were interested, however, in the latter case, that is, whether practicing niceness positively affects people's well-being. We addressed this question in Study 2.

Study 2

In Study 2 we designed a one-day online intervention consisting of two parts – the first part aimed to enhance niceness in real behavior and the second part aimed to test the effectiveness of practicing niceness in improving well-being.

In addition, we intended to test whether practicing niceness not only improves well-being but also promotes subsequent nice behavior. Acting nicely toward related and unrelated

others in everyday interactions, being emotionally rewarding, yet low-cost, might encourage people to continue being nice.

Method

Participants

Participants were social media users in Poland invited to take part in the study by four influencers via their social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). The language of the survey was Polish. 1247 participants completed the first part of the study, and 616 completed the second part in June 2020 (resulting in a 51% dropout rate). There was no compensation for participating in the study. Participants were informed that participating in the study could be an interesting experience for them.

We followed the exclusion criteria described in the pre-registration. We also altered one exclusion criterion and applied two exclusion criteria that were not pre-registered. As for the non-pre-registered criteria, we decided to include the participants who performed four or five out of five tasks. Originally, we had planned to include only those who did all five tasks, but this criterion was too strict, and did not take into account that even highly motivated participants might encounter external obstacles in completing all five tasks. Thus, using this criterion would result in losing 30% of the collected sample. Nevertheless, we repeated all analyses for the participants who did all five tasks, and the results were not different from those of the extended sample. Also, we excluded the participants who did not follow the instructions and completed the second part of the study too long after the manipulation (it was a crucial requirement but we forgot to preregister this criterion) and those who were underaged. All the changes and new exclusion criteria were introduced before testing the hypotheses. We describe the details of exclusions in Appendix B.

The final sample consisted of 479 participants (399 female, 64 male, 3 other) ranging from 18 to 58 years old ($M = 26.07$, $SD = 6.61$), 175 in the experimental condition (niceness), and 304 in the comparison condition.

We aimed to collect $N = 300$ responses which would allow us to detect a small effect size, $d = 0.3$ (given the small effect sizes we observed in Study 1), assuming $\alpha = .05$ and 80% power, one-tailed test. The response to the influencers' invitation exceeded our expectations, however, resulting in more participants than planned.

Procedure

The study, administered via Qualtrics, had two parts: in the first part, participants were asked to choose and perform five small tasks within the next 24 hours (experimental manipulation); in the second part, after performing the tasks, the dependent variables were measured. At the beginning of Part 2, participants were asked to indicate how many tasks out of five they had actually performed, and describe the details of these tasks (manipulation check). They also answered a control question about how costly it was for them to perform these tasks in terms of money, time, or effort (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*). Next, participants completed a series of questionnaires measuring their well-being. They also completed several scales that were not relevant to the present hypotheses, one of which was the Compassion Scale (Pommier et al., 2019), and we mention this scale because we exploratorily took advantage of its results to better understand the dropout rate in the current study. Then participants indicated whether their answers were accurate (an exclusion criterion) and responded to demographic questions. They were also given the opportunity to leave a comment about the study in the text box. At the very end, to create the impression that the last part was unrelated to the study, we measured voluntary nice behavior by inviting the respondents to write a thank-you note to the healthcare workers involved in fighting COVID-19.

The study protocol received approval from the university research ethics committee.

Experimental manipulation of niceness

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions – niceness tasks (experimental condition) and everyday errands (comparison condition). At first, to strengthen the upcoming manipulation through enhancing a sense of self-efficacy in the given domain, participants were asked to recall a situation from their life when they acted nicely toward someone and it was rewarding (in the experimental condition) or when they did some errand and it was rewarding (in the comparison condition).

Next, participants chose the tasks that they would perform. They were presented with a list of 15 acts of niceness vs. 15 everyday errands. Participants chose five tasks from the list knowing that they were supposed to perform them on the same day (if it was not too late) or on the next day, all five tasks within one day, and afterward, on the same day, they were supposed to complete the second part of the study.

The niceness tasks involved five social circles: close people (e.g., “When I talk to a close person, I will tell this person something nice, some compliment”²), people from work/school (“When I talk to or write an e-mail to somebody from my work/school, I will praise that person for something they did well”), more distant people in our lives like neighbors or acquaintances (e.g., “When I meet a person I know, such as my neighbor on the staircase or in my neighborhood, I will warmly greet that person or have a nice small talk with them”), strangers (e.g., “When I pass someone on the street or on my walk, I will warmly smile to that person”), or people met on the internet (e.g., “When I am online, I will write a nice comment in some discussion or to some article”).

² All instructions and materials from Study 2 quoted in this paper are translations from Polish, not the actual materials shown to participants.

In the everyday errands condition the tasks also related to a few different contexts: home (e.g., “When I get up, I will make the bed”), work/school (e.g., “When I have a break during working/studying, I will stretch my back”), on the internet (e.g., “When I am online, I will read or watch something that I wanted to for a long time”), and outside (e.g., “When I go out, I will do some errands”).

At the time of the study (June 2020), pandemic restrictions were loosened in Poland due to the relatively low number of infections. Restaurants, shopping centers, and movie theaters were open, although some social distancing rules were still in place. Wearing a mask was only obligatory indoors. The tasks in the experiment were chosen in such a way that they could be performed in compliance with the recommended restrictions. Participants were not instructed to perform a specific task; they chose the tasks they wanted to perform for themselves. For more information on what acts of niceness the participants undertook and for whom they undertook them, see Appendices C and D.

In order to strengthen participants’ motivation and increase the likelihood that they would actually perform the assigned tasks, participants were asked to plan to do these tasks in a more concrete manner using the if-then technique (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), e.g., a task “When I get up, I will make the bed”, could be planned as “When I leave the bathroom after my morning routine, I will go to my bedroom and make the bed”. We also suggested that the participants set some reminders about the tasks they planned to perform, such as a post-it notes or alerts on their mobile phones. Finally, participants were asked to perform the chosen tasks within the next 24 hours and were reminded to complete the online survey afterward (crucially, on the same day).

Measures

In the second part of the study, which participants completed after performing the niceness vs. everyday errands tasks, we measured their well-being. We also measured their voluntary niceness.

Well-Being. We used two measures of well-being. First, we used the same three questions about life meaning, self-satisfaction, and social relationships satisfaction from the WHOQOL (1995) as in Study 1.

Second, we measured participants' mood with four items from the General Mood Scale ("I feel great"; "I'm in the bad mood"; "I feel grey and hopeless"; "I'm in a good mood"; from 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .91$; Wojciszke & Baryla, 2005).

Subsequent Voluntary Nice Behavior. Finally, we invited participants to participate in a social initiative to measure voluntary nice behavior. They were offered an opportunity to write their thanks to the healthcare workers involved in fighting COVID-19. Participants were informed that it was a voluntary activity and that if they decided to engage in it, their letters would be used to prepare a gratitude poster together with thank-you notes written by others and sent to the hospitals. The poster was actually sent out and is included in the Supplementary Material on our OSF page. We coded participants' behavior as 1 when they did write a thank-you note, and as 0 when they declined to do this.

Results

Dropout Analysis

More respondents (64% of the final sample) fully participated in the study in the comparison condition (everyday errands, $n = 304$) than in the niceness condition ($n = 175$). In order to verify whether it was more difficult for participants to adhere to the niceness condition than the comparison condition, we compared the percentages of participants who reported performing all the tasks in both conditions. We found that similar percentage of participants – 78% of participants in the niceness condition and 79% in the comparison

condition, performed all five tasks. Also, performing niceness was rated as less costly (demanded less effort) ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.77$, on a scale 1-5) than doing errands ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.81$), $d = 0.40$.

More importantly, the disproportion in the number of participants between conditions emerged at the very beginning of the study – 62% of participants stayed in the study after they learned that their task would be to perform small errands, compared to 38% of participants who stayed in the study after they learned that their task would be to perform acts of niceness. This finding may raise concerns regarding the potential self-selection bias. Niceness tasks might have attracted those with higher dispositional prosocial orientation in comparison to those in the comparison condition. However, we additionally assessed compassion (Compassion Scale, Pommier et al., 2019; reported in the Supplementary Materials on our OSF page), which can be considered a measure of individual differences in prosociality (e.g., as it is positively related to altruism, Pommier et al., 2019), and we did not find differences between the conditions ($d = 0.05$). Please note, though, that the compassion scale was administered during Part 2, so after the manipulation.

It is worth noting, however, that the niceness condition (in contrast to the comparison condition), required interacting with other people on that very day. Thus, participants who were alone at home that day and did not plan to contact anyone or leave the house (also because of COVID-19 restrictions) did not meet the requirements and had to quit the study. Also, people are generally more willing to develop their agentic than communal skills (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). In summary, the personal efficacy tasks could be seen as more feasible and attractive than niceness tasks, thereby resulting in more participants remaining in the comparison condition.

The Effect of Behavioral Niceness on Well-Being

First, we tested the hypothesis that practicing niceness will have a positive effect on well-being compared to the comparison condition. Indeed, the participants who performed acts of niceness reported higher well-being in terms of life meaning $d = 0.23$, self-satisfaction $d = 0.28$, and social relationships satisfaction $d = 0.17$, as well as better mood $d = 0.20$, than participants who completed errands. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.

[Table 4 near here]

The Effect of Behavioral Niceness on Subsequent Voluntary Nice Behavior

Next, we tested whether practicing niceness enhanced voluntary nice behavior. We found that more participants in the experimental condition (69% of them) wrote a thank-you note in comparison to those in the comparison condition (58% of them). For participants who performed niceness the odds of their writing a note were 1.59 times higher than those of participants who performed everyday errands.

Discussion

To sum up, we found that participants performing acts of niceness reported higher well-being across four indicators – life meaning, satisfaction with oneself, satisfaction with social relationships, and mood than participants in the comparison condition.

Also, those performing acts of niceness more often demonstrated further voluntary nice behavior, that is, they voluntarily spent their time expressing thanks and gratitude to the health care workers than those who did not perform acts of niceness.

The findings suggest that a single-day niceness intervention could be sufficient to improve well-being and be a nudge for further nice behavior. At the same time, the findings are limited by the high dropout of respondents in the niceness condition. We cannot be sure whether conclusions can be generalized to people who, for unknown reasons, withdrew from

the experiment at the very beginning. We can only conclude that among those who decided to practice niceness as an experiment, we observed higher well-being and willingness to carry on being nice afterward, compared to those doing errands in the comparison group.

Moreover, the observed difference may also have been due to the different intensity of social interactions between conditions, rather than the acts of niceness themselves. In Study 3, we aimed to test the hypothesis that acting nicely has a positive effect on well-being while eliminating dropout bias and using a comparison condition that also involved a similar intensity of social interactions.

Study 3

In Study 3, to examine whether niceness improves well-being, participants were asked to recall their recent nice behavior and then their well-being was measured. Although recalling is not the same as actual behavior, this type of manipulation has important advantages. First, it minimizes the risk of dropout – niceness is common (as shown in Study 1) and participants should have no problem recalling such behavior. Second, it is based on the naturally occurring behavior of the participants, while some participants in Study 2 commented that although they perform niceness on a daily basis, doing so intentionally for the experiment felt unnatural. Only a few people left such a comment, but we do not know what the scale of this experience was and what effect it might have had on the results. The manipulation of recalling one's actual nice behavior eliminates this problem.

Furthermore, given the distinction between niceness and politeness mentioned in the introduction, and the concerns of some participants in Study 2 that induced niceness felt unnatural, in Study 3 we additionally measured sincerity and voluntariness of participants' nice behavior to test if it affects well-being. Based on the general principles of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), research on the negative consequences of emotional labor for well-being (Grandey, 2000; Pugliesi, 1999), as well as research on the

positive consequences of autonomous motivation for prosocial behavior for helpers' well-being (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), we expected that the sincerity and voluntariness of nice behavior would be positively related to well-being. At the same time, we did not have precise predictions as to whether insincere and involuntary niceness would only weaken the benefits of niceness for well-being, causes no effect on well-being, or decreases well-being.

Therefore, we adopted an exploratory approach.

In summary, in Study 3 we tested whether recalling oneself behaving nicely improves well-being and whether this effect depends on sincerity and voluntariness of niceness. Also, as in Study 2, we additionally tested the effect of niceness on willingness for further nice behavior.

Method

Participants

We specified a target sample size of 316 participants. The sample size was planned for feasibility. A sensitivity power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that this sample size provided sufficient power (.80) to detect a small-to-medium effect ($d = .28$).

We recruited 317 Prolific respondents (169 male, 142 female, 6 other) ranging in age from 18 to 73 years ($M = 28.02$, $SD = 8.98$), 91% of whom were White, 5% Asian, 2% Black, and 2% other. We randomly assigned participants to conditions: niceness ($n = 158$) or control ($n = 159$). The study was conducted in English.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions – they recalled and described a recent situation in which they acted nicely toward someone (niceness condition) or a recent ordinary social interaction (control condition). Next, there was a manipulation check. Participants indicated (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) whether they acted in a “nice”, “warm”, “friendly” way in the event they recalled (three items, $\alpha = .91$).

After the manipulation, participants responded to items assessing their well-being, willingness to behave nicely toward others, and whether their behavior in the event they recalled was sincere and voluntary. At the very end, they responded to demographic questions.

Experimental manipulation of niceness

Participants were given the instruction: “Think of a recent event from your life in which you were nice to another person – a stranger, a colleague, a relative, any person is ok. Specifically, try to think of a recent event or experience when you acted toward someone in a nice/friendly/warm way. This should be something simple – a no-cost, everyday, nice behavior, such as giving a friendly smile, using a welcoming tone of voice, saying something kind; not big gestures or sacrifices”. Participants were asked to recall such a recent event from their life, and immerse themselves in the experience for about two minutes, thinking of how it made them feel. After two minutes (counted down by a timer) they were asked to write about their nice, friendly, warm behavior. The method was adapted from the Event Reflection Task (Sedikides et al., 2015).

In the control condition, participants were instructed to: “Think of a recent ordinary event from your life that involved another person – a stranger, a colleague, a relative, any person is ok. Specifically, try to think of a recent event or experience that is ordinary, normal, and everyday to you”. Just as in the niceness condition, they thought about it for two minutes, and then described the event.

Measures

Well-Being. Participants responded (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) to well-being items, preceded by the stem “With this event in mind, I feel ...”. We assessed well-being with four indicators – life meaning (“life is meaningful,” “life has a purpose,” “there is a greater purpose to life,” and “life is worth living”, $\alpha = .88$), self-satisfaction

(“satisfied with myself,” “good about myself,” “I like myself better,” and “I value myself more”, $\alpha = .94$), social relationships satisfaction (“satisfied with my personal relationships,” “good about my personal relationships,” “close to people,” and “connected to the people around me”, $\alpha = .93$), and mood (“happy,” “in a good mood,” “unhappy” [reverse-coded] and “sad” [reverse-coded], $\alpha = .90$). Most items were adapted from existing scales (Hepper et al., 2012; WHOQOL, 1995), and a few were generated for this study.

Willingness to Behave Nicely. To measure willingness to act nicely, participants responded (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) to what extent they would like to “be nice to people today so that they feel warmly treated,” “use a warm tone of voice when speaking to people today to make them feel good,” and “behave warmly and sympathetically toward people today to make things pleasant for them” ($\alpha = .91$).

Sincerity and Voluntariness of Niceness. Participants indicated (on a 10-point slider) to what extent their behavior was sincere in the event they recalled, which was explained as: “Was your behavior very sincere and genuine, or was it very insincere and you acted that way just to flatter others or pretend to like them in order to obtain favors? Or maybe something in between?” The question was based on the definition of sincerity proposed in Lee & Ashton (2018).

They also indicated (again on a 10-point slider) to what extent their behavior was voluntary, which was defined as: “Was it entirely voluntary and you behaved this way because you wanted to or was it entirely involuntary and you behaved this way because someone or something made you behave this way? Or maybe something in between?”.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the niceness condition reported a higher level of niceness in their behavior ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 0.70$, on a scale 1-7) than those in the control condition ($M = 5.54$,

$SD = 1.39$), $d = 0.82$. The manipulation was effective. It should be noted though that the level of reported niceness was also high in the control condition.

The Effect of Behavioral Niceness on Well-Being

Participants who recalled their act of niceness reported higher well-being in terms of life meaning, $d = 0.38$, self-satisfaction, $d = 0.50$, and social relationships satisfaction, $d = 0.45$, as well as better mood, $d = 0.75$, than participants who recalled an ordinary social interaction. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.

The Effect of Behavioral Niceness on Willingness for Further Nice Behavior

Participants who recalled their own acts of niceness compared to controls reported a higher willingness to behave nicely, $d = 0.38$ (Table 5).

The Role of Sincerity and Voluntariness

First, we tested whether sincerity and voluntariness differed between conditions. Indeed, participants in the niceness condition reported that their behavior was more sincere ($M = 9.22$, $SD = 1.21$, on a scale 1-10) than those in the control condition ($M = 8.51$, $SD = 1.78$), $d = 0.47$, as well as more voluntary ($M = 9.27$, $SD = 1.42$, on a scale 1-10) than controls ($M = 7.90$, $SD = 2.47$), $d = 0.68$. Please note that in both conditions, the sincerity and voluntariness of the recalled behaviors were high – in the niceness condition, only 1% of the participants indicated sincerity and 3% the voluntariness of their behaviors below the midpoint of the scale (< 5), and in the control condition, 5% of the participants indicated sincerity and 12% the voluntariness of their behaviors below the midpoint of the scale.

Next, we tested whether the effects of niceness on well-being were moderated by sincerity and voluntariness (PROCESS macro, Hayes, 2022; Model 1). We used Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro (Model 1) to test a series of moderation models with the experimental condition (1 = ordinary social interaction, 2 = niceness) as the predictor variable (X) and sincerity (and subsequently – voluntariness) as the moderator (W), on all well-being

measures (life-meaning, self-satisfaction, social relationships satisfaction, mood as Y). We used the mean-centering option for moderator recommended to avoid multi-collinearity between predictor and moderator (Hayes, 2022). In each tested model, niceness, sincerity and voluntariness positively predicted well-being, but we observed neither a niceness \times sincerity interaction nor a niceness \times voluntariness interaction on well-being. We present the results in Table 6.

[Table 6 near here]

Exploratorily, we also tested the same interactions on willingness for subsequent nice behavior, and found no such interactions (Table 6). We also found no niceness \times gender interaction on any tested outcome.

Given the results that sincerity and voluntariness positively predicted well-being for both nice and ordinary social interactions, we subsequently tested the strength of the correlations between sincerity/voluntariness of nice behavior and well-being. Separately for participants in the niceness and control condition, we ran a correlation analyses between the sincerity/voluntariness of participants' behaviors and well-being. The results showed small to medium positive correlations between sincerity of niceness and life meaning, $r = .11$, self-satisfaction, $r = .27$, social relationships satisfaction, $r = .28$, and mood, $r = .31$. The results also showed small to medium positive correlations between voluntariness of niceness and life meaning, $r = .24$, self-satisfaction, $r = .22$, social relationships satisfaction, $r = .24$, mood, $r = .2$. Positive correlations of similar strength were observed for the control condition (Table 7).

[Table 7 near here]

Discussion

To sum up, we found that participants who recalled their recent nice behavior reported higher well-being across four indicators – life meaning, satisfaction with oneself, satisfaction with social relationships, and mood compared to participants who recalled an ordinary social interaction. Moreover, we found that recalling one's own niceness resulted in a greater willingness for further niceness.

We did not find that the sincerity and voluntariness of niceness were critical for niceness' effect on well-being and willingness to continue being nice. Sincerity and voluntariness positively predicted all well-being regardless of whether participants recalled a nice or ordinary social interaction. However, an important limitation to this conclusion is that very few participants recalled their insincere or involuntary behavior, while the majority recalled behaviors that were either entirely, almost entirely or rather sincere and voluntary. At this point, we can only preliminarily conclude that recalling one's own nice behavior was beneficial, regardless of whether that behavior was entirely sincere and voluntary or rather sincere and voluntary.

Since in the control condition participants recalled the ordinary interaction, they were able to choose from a wider range of behaviors than in the niceness condition, which also poses some limitations for the present study. A more specified control condition or using an experimental manipulation to induce insincere and involuntary niceness could yield more conclusive results.

General Discussion

The present research highlights the relevance of niceness across a range of prosocial behaviors and demonstrate the potential benefits of putting niceness into practice. In Study 1, we showed that, during the pandemic, self-reported behavioral niceness was positively correlated with one's well-being. In Study 2, we introduced a single-day online niceness

intervention. We found higher well-being among those who practiced niceness compared to the control condition, in which participants were asked to perform small errands. However, due to the differential attrition, the causal evidence of this study is limited. In Study 3, we found that recalling one's own nice behavior improved well-being. Moreover, in Studies 2 and 3, we observed that behavioral niceness promoted further nice behavior (Study 2) and individuals' willingness to continue to be nice (Study 3), suggesting that niceness may be self-reinforcing.

Theoretical Contributions

The above reported studies advance our understanding of the effects of prosocial behavior on the well-being of an actor. It is well-established that practicing acts of kindness has a positive effect on happiness, positive and negative affect, as well as satisfaction with life and well-being (Curry et al., 2018). Building on this work, we show that everyday niceness, which is simply acting in a warm and friendly way toward others, can also have a positive effect. However, previous research examined acts of niceness and more costly or less common prosocial acts as a single variable, making it difficult to conclude whether the previously observed patterns of results can be applied to niceness. The present results provide evidence that (just) acting nicely in everyday interactions can benefit one's own well-being.

The present research contributes not only to a better understanding of the effect of niceness on well-being but also to a better understanding of niceness as a type of prosocial behavior. Above all, niceness is common and easy to perform. It does not require much effort or sacrifice. Smiling at somebody or being nice to a cashier in a shop can happen every day, whereas donating money or visiting the sick are less common acts and may require resources beyond one's own control (e.g., money, time, or good health). Indeed, the results of the present research confirmed that acts of niceness were regarded as more frequent and less costly than charitable acts.

Second, practicing niceness promoted subsequent voluntary nice behaviors. In Study 2, a higher percentage of participants in the niceness condition than in the everyday errands condition decided to write a thank-you note to healthcare workers. Even though participants in the niceness condition had already performed five nice acts that day, they were more likely to perform another nice behavior. It seems that acting nicely toward others during a given day only increased their willingness to act nicely. In Study 3, recalling one's recent nice behavior toward someone resulted in a greater willingness to continue acting nicely. Thus, while morally-based prosocial behavior may result in moral licensing (that is, the tendency for people who initially behave in a moral way to display behaviors that are immoral, unethical, or less socially desirable later, Merritt et al., 2010), behavioral niceness may promote subsequent nice behaviors (cf. Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). While doing a good deed, which is often costly and requires the sacrifice of one's resources, gives oneself a moral boost but also increases the risk of their subsequent immoral behavior, acting nicely, which is less costly, yet gives a warm boost and personal satisfaction, promotes subsequent nice behavior. This finding suggests that niceness may be different from more costly prosocial and moral behaviors. Future research can be conducted to address this point.

Third, we propose that niceness, which has its unique characteristic compared to the broad category of prosocial behavior, is a behavioral expression of interpersonal warmth (with regard to warmth, see Abele et al., 2016). According to the Big Two framework, agency and communion are two dimensions of social perception. Communion includes warmth and morality (Abele et al., 2016). However, theoretical discussions on the role and importance of each dimension in guiding social perception have predominantly focused on morality and agency. The present research conceptualizes niceness as a manifestation of warmth. This differs from other types of prosocial behavior (e.g., signing a petition; blood donation), which can be conceptualized as a manifestation of morality. Considering this may

provide a new perspective on thinking about different types of prosocial behaviors and shed new light on the role of warmth in one's well-being.

For example, in one line of research that has focused on separating costly from costless prosocial behaviors, "costly prosociality" was used to refer to charitable giving (which involves sacrificing money) or volunteering, and costless prosociality was used to refer to behaviors aimed at others when the giver loses nothing, such as posthumous organ donation, signing a petition, or the economic generosity game (Ferguson et al., 2019). However, a simple distinction between costless and costly prosociality seems insufficient, as costless prosociality would include both posthumous organ donation and smiling at one's neighbor, which are clearly not comparable. Introducing a morality-warmth distinction to the prosocial behavior research, which we propose here, would allow low-cost morality-related prosocial behavior (such as donating unwanted clothes, signing a petition) to be differentiated from high-cost morality-related prosocial behavior (blood donation, charity) and low-cost warmth-related prosocial behavior (smiling at a neighbor, i.e., niceness) from high-cost warmth-related prosocial behavior (making an effort to be nice when visiting annoying in-laws, i.e., costly acts of niceness). We hope that the present studies will inspire further theoretical considerations regarding prosocial behaviors as manifestations of warmth or morality.

Limitations

One limitation of the present research is the risk of self-selection bias in Study 2. We observed a higher dropout rate in the niceness condition than in the comparison condition. We did not observe differences in helping attitudes or compassion (measured as additional data) between the conditions, so it is unlikely that niceness tasks attracted those with higher dispositional prosociality in comparison to those in the control condition, but it could have attracted those who were in a better mood. Nevertheless, a pretest assessing dispositional

well-being, as well as prosociality, extraversion, and agreeableness would be needed to control for this bias in follow-up or similar studies. The most likely case is that the uneven dropout resulted from practical constraints – a lack of social interactions on the day of the intervention, which was necessary for the niceness condition. Additionally, some acts of niceness might have been challenging to perform for those who were asked or chose to self-isolate due to the pandemic. Thus, the comparison condition could have been more feasible for participants. Nevertheless, based on Study 2, we can conclude that people who are willing to intentionally practice niceness reported a better mood afterward. However, the question of whether it benefits people who are less willing to participate in such an intervention requires further research.

Additionally, the majority of participants in Study 2, but not Studies 1 and 3, were women. This gender imbalance in the sample does not allow us to conclude whether the proposed online intervention would be similarly effective for men. At the same time, in Study 3, the beneficial effects of recalling one's nice behavior on well-being were independent of gender.

In Study 3, we also aimed to examine the consequences of sincerity and voluntariness of niceness for an actor, but the behaviors that participants reported were in most cases highly sincere and voluntary. In future studies, sincerity and voluntariness of niceness should be manipulated to better understand the consequences of insincere and involuntary niceness.

Moreover, in the present research, we did not manipulate the key features of niceness, such as whether it is low-cost or aimed at benefiting others, we only defined it as such in the instructions to participants. In future studies, it would be worthwhile to systematically examine key niceness characteristics by manipulating or precisely controlling for them, in order to compare niceness with, for example, instrumental politeness or costly niceness.

Further Directions

An agenda for future research should include an examination of the mechanisms of niceness on well-being, both those common to all prosocial behaviors and those specific to niceness. We believe that niceness, like other prosocial behaviors, fulfills affiliation and self-esteem motives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Downs, 1995) – increasing the sense of connectedness with other people, the sense of mattering as well as self-worth from achieving social and personal values. At the same time, more costly and morality-related prosocial behaviors such as volunteering or charity, in addition to a sense of belonging and mattering, can satisfy other psychological needs, for example, providing a sense of agency, competence and power (Caprara & Steca, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In terms of these mechanisms, the potential for niceness may be weaker. On the other hand, niceness also has unique characteristics compared to other types of prosociality – it is low-cost, often proactive and accompanied by mostly positive emotions. In contrast, other types of prosociality are often costly, reactive, and co-occur with the helper or recipient experiencing negative as well as positive emotions. These unique qualities of niceness can benefit well-being, but also explain the unique effects of niceness, such as a greater likelihood of subsequent nice behavior.

Certainly, there are other types of low-cost prosocial behavior than niceness, for example, signing a petition or dropping a coin into a donation box. As mentioned earlier, acting nicely seems more related to warmth, while other low-cost prosocial behaviors might be more related to morality. Further research could probe the magnitude of the effects of behavioral niceness and other types of prosocial behavior, the conditions fostering them as well as their applicability, taking into account both their cost and their relation to warmth and morality. For example, future studies could examine which prosocial behaviors boost well-being more (high-cost or low-cost, those driven by morality or those driven by warmth) or if the boost in well-being occurs irrespective of the type of prosocial behavior. To date, research on prosocial behavior has mainly focused on morality-related behaviors, such as helping the

victims of accidents (e.g., within the decision model of helping framework, Latané & Darley, 1970), donating to charity, and volunteering (Omoto & Snyder, 2009) or cooperating in social dilemmas (e.g., Van Lange et al., 2013). Comparing the effects of niceness and other prosocial behaviors would help to further advance the theory as well as promote applications.

Yet another relevant direction for future research would be to test the beneficial effects of niceness in the context of studies that have shown that individuals, including introverts, feel better when behaving like extroverts (Jacques-Hamilton et al., 2019).

Niceness and extroversion can, and often do, go hand in hand, but an extroverted person does not necessarily have to be nice to others. To what extent behavioral niceness versus behavioral extroversion accounts for a boost in well-being requires further research.

Future research would do well to explore the importance of niceness for the quality of social life, not just one's individual life. The hypothesis that life is better in societies where people are nice to each other seems fairly obvious but requires empirical testing. Testing how people's nice and not nice behavior influences social beliefs (e.g., social trust, cynicism) and social behaviors (e.g., civic engagement) seems particularly important in the face of social challenges, such as hate speech and social polarization, that are currently affecting many societies. We have shown that practicing niceness can increase individuals' willingness to continue to be nice. It is worth testing whether it can encourage people to become more prosocially oriented in general and nudge them towards more costly prosocial behavior.

Practical Implications

The present results might also contribute to practice, e.g., in social campaigns or education. They preliminarily suggest that a few nice acts a day can benefit people's well-being as well as be a simple and affordable first step to further nice behavior. This can be an avenue for applied research.

The manipulation used in Study 2 was designed as a potential niceness intervention that could be applied online. The participants were asked to perform five acts of niceness in five social circles (close friends/family, people from your work/school, more distant others, strangers, and people on the internet; see Appendices C and D for how participants practiced niceness in our experiment). The effectiveness of similar interventions based on intentional activities was demonstrated in previous studies, for example, it was shown that writing gratitude journals improves the sense of happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005). The present intervention could also be effective in improving well-being, mood, and voluntary niceness.

Many psychological interventions require considerable effort or time, whereas practicing niceness requires neither extra time nor preparation. Therefore, the advantage of the niceness intervention is that it is a micro-intervention that can easily be incorporated into one's everyday behavior. Moreover, given that acts of niceness are also easy to perform online, the intervention seems to be effective even during such extraordinary times as a pandemic, when our social life is substantially limited and maintaining well-being and prosocial orientation is of particular importance (Wolf et al., 2020).

At the same time, the present research points to potential pitfalls in applying a niceness intervention. Study 3 showed a positive correlation between sincerity as well as voluntariness of niceness and well-being. Additionally, previous research has suggested that practicing niceness against one's will or toward a rude person can cause fatigue (English & John, 2013). Therefore, niceness is better when it is voluntary and genuine, not forced or instrumental. This does not mean that interventions that encourage people act nicely are pointless, but that they do need to be designed in such a way that people feel they are performing these acts voluntarily and that they have a choice (e.g., they can choose acts that suit them from a list). Analogously, as observed in research on happiness interventions, a lack

of authenticity suppresses the positive effect of the intervention (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Still, we believe that despite some exceptions, niceness can be applied relatively comfortably and naturally to a wide range of everyday situations, as most everyday interactions are benign (Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). Therefore, when one has the choice to smile at a cashier in a store or not, intentional niceness should be a positive and beneficial experience.

Conclusions

Lay theories on niceness are mixed, with some people criticizing niceness as insincere and superficial, and often confusing niceness with politeness. In the present research, we documented that practicing niceness can enhance people's well-being as well as further niceness. We hope this paper will encourage researchers to study niceness, as it has received little attention, but is important from both a theoretical and practical perspective. This small effort to be nice and friendly to others can help to maintain individual and social harmony in our daily lives.

Data availability statement

All the data and materials can be retrieved from our OSF page (anonymized link for peer review: https://osf.io/v37k8/?view_only=65e14c0ac83547b19ed31e36fd527d03).

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials for this article can be found online on the project's OSF page.

Ethics approval statement

The studies reported in this article received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

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Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Appendix A

Definitions of niceness and charitable acts presented to participants in Study 1

Niceness

By everyday kindness* we mean voluntary, small actions intended to express a friendly attitude towards a specific person. These types of actions are low-cost and do not require much effort or sacrifice, but they can brighten up someone's day. Here are some examples: addressing a cashier in a shop with a smile and friendly tone, chatting with a neighbor, smiling at a stranger, writing a nice comment on someone's Facebook post, being nice to your household members, giving someone a compliment, etc.

Prosociality

By prosociality we mean charitable actions to benefit others. These types of actions are more costly, they involve spending money, time, or effort, in order to help somebody or support a good cause. Here are some examples: donating money to charity, donating blood, devoting your time to help another person, volunteering, getting involved in some social initiative or campaign, showing your support to some good cause initiative on social media even though it may negatively affect your image for some people, etc.

* Please note that in the instructions, we used the term everyday kindness instead of niceness. For more on this topic, see the Open Data Statement at the end of the Introduction.

Appendix B

Exclusions in Study 2

We excluded the responses of 15 participants who failed the attention check question, nine participants who admitted that their answers were not accurate and should not be used in our research, three participants whose answers to the open-ended questions indicated they had not taken the survey seriously, e.g., writing nonsense words, writing something just to fill the boxes but not giving an answer to the questions, 16 participants who indicated that they were in some extraordinary situation or state that could affect their answers, e.g., depression, breakup, job loss, etc. All these exclusion criteria were preregistered.

One exclusion criterion differed from the one we pre-registered – we excluded 47 participants who did fewer than four of five tasks (which were the experimental manipulation), while we pre-registered excluding participants who would do fewer than five tasks. Using the original criterion would result in losing 30% of the collected sample. We underestimated how many participants would be not able to do all five tasks because of some external obstacles (e.g., *I wanted to have a small talk with my neighbor but I did not meet my neighbor that day*). Therefore, we decided to change this too strict exclusion criterion and include the participants who performed 4 out of 5 tasks in the analyses. Nevertheless, we repeated all analyses for the participants who did all five tasks, and the results were not different than those of the extended sample.

We also applied two exclusion criteria that were not pre-registered. First, we excluded 61 participants who did not fulfill the explicit requirement to complete the second part of the study on the same day or the next day after the first part (the manipulation), and they did it later. Second, we invited only adults to participate, but despite direct instruction, five participants declared being underage. We excluded their responses from the analysis. For some participants, the exclusion criteria overlapped.

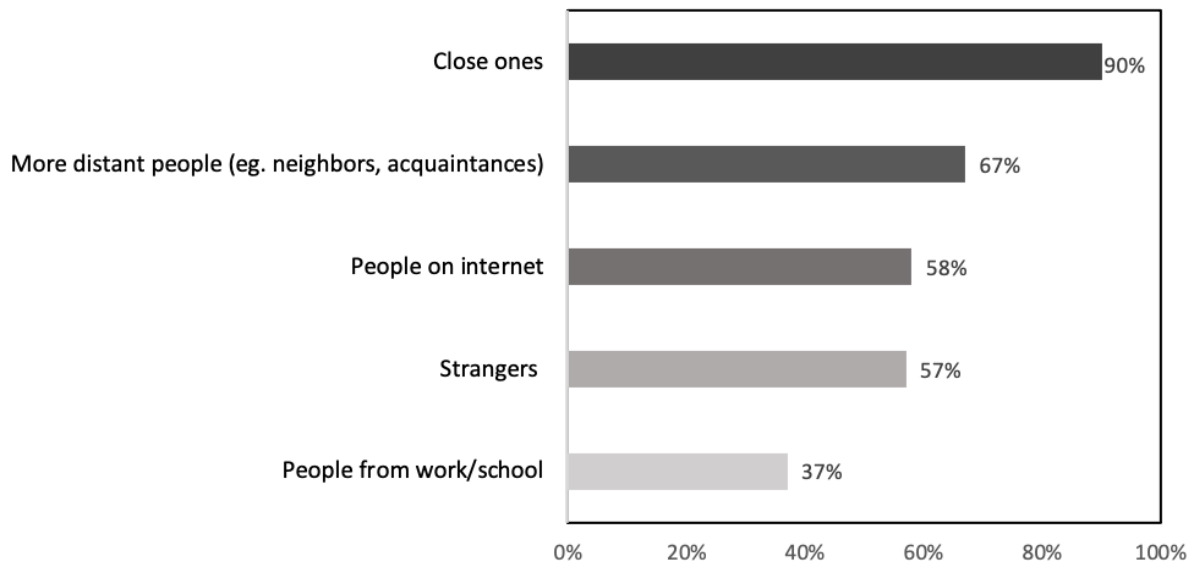
Appendix C

Supplementary Results Study 2

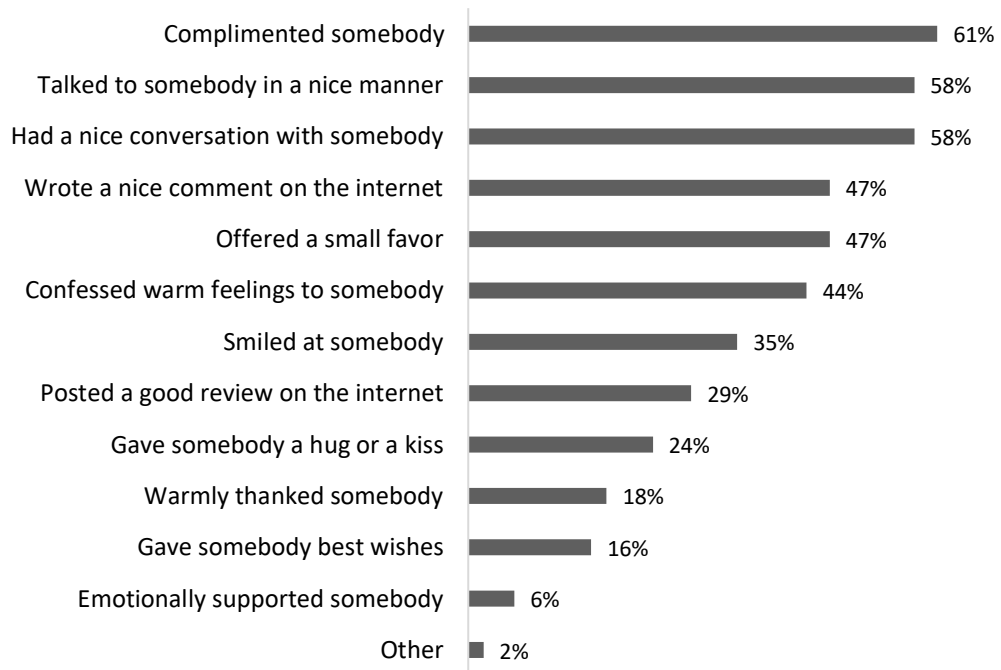
In order to have a closer look at how participants practiced niceness in the context of the pandemic in our experiment, we analyzed and coded all their accounts (see Figure C1 and Figure C2).

Figure C1

Percentage of Participants in the Experimental Condition Practicing Niceness in Each of the Five Social Circles



Note. 17% of participants performed niceness in two social circles, 59% in three social circles, 23% in four circles, 1% in all five circles.

Figure C2*Percentage of Participants Practicing Various Types of Acts of Niceness in Study 2***Exploratory analysis**

The number of social circles in which participants performed acts of niceness was weakly positively correlated with well-being – life meaning ($r = .13$), self-satisfaction ($r = .15$), social relationships satisfaction ($r = .10$), and mood ($r = .18$).

Appendix D**Catalogue of Acts of Niceness in Study 2**

The catalogue features a selection of acts of niceness undertaken by participants in Study 2 and is available on <https://osf.io/nsdjr>.

Tables

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha, and Correlations Among Measures in Study 1

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Behavioral niceness – intensity during the pandemic	3.64	0.83	1-5		—										
2. Behavioral niceness – general frequency	8.05	1.35	1-9		.54	—									
3. Behavioral niceness – general cost	1.68	0.91	1-5		-.10	-.26	—								
4. Charitable acts – intensity during the pandemic	2.48	0.94	1-5		.26	.17	.21	—							
5. Charitable acts – general frequency	4.86	1.91	1-9		.18	.29	.12	.56	—						
6. Charitable acts – general cost	2.85	0.85	1-5		.02	.03	.24	-.04	-.07	—					
7. Life meaning	2.92	1.05	1-5		.22	.13	.07	.25	.11	-.06	—				

8. Self-satisfaction	3.12	1.06	1-5		.18	.06	.04	.14	.06	-.12	.61	—			
9. Relationships satisfaction	3.61	1.06	1-5		.18	.15	-.06	.08	.08	-.12	.39	.50	—		
10. Subjective happiness	4.07	1.34	1-7	.87	.18	.11	.02	.19	.13	-.13	.63	.68	.48	—	
11. Depression	1.98	0.65	1-4	.87	-.11	-.01	.09	-.01	-.01	.14	-.46	-.56	-.34	-.62	—

Note. Cronbach's alpha left blank for a single-item measure

Table 2*Self-reported Frequency of Practicing Niceness and Charitable Acts in Study 1*

Frequency	Acts of niceness (% of <i>N</i>)	Charitable acts (% of <i>N</i>)
At least once a day	50.9%	2.6%
Three to four times a week	27.0%	8.5%
Approximately twice a week	8.9%	7.0%
Approximately once a week	7.0%	16.7%
Once or twice a month	3.8%	23.7%
Once every couple of months	1.2%	17.7%
Once or twice a year	0.6%	13.3%
Once or twice every couple of years	0.4%	5.2%
Not at all	0.2%	5.2%

Table 3*Regression Analyses with the Intensity of Performing Niceness and Charitable Acts as**Predictors of Well-being in Study 1*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>Adj. R</i> ²
Life meaning				
Behavioral niceness	.22	.06	.17	.09
Charitable acts	.23	.05	.21	
Self-satisfaction				
Behavioral niceness	.20	.06	.15	.04
Charitable acts	.11	.05	.10	
Relationships satisfaction				
Behavioral niceness	.22	.06	.17	.03
Charitable acts	.04	.05	.04	
Subjective happiness				
Behavioral niceness	.23	.08	.14	.05
Charitable acts	.23	.07	.16	
Depression				
Behavioral niceness	-.09	.04	-.11	.01
Charitable acts	.01	.03	.02	

Note. N = 497.

Table 4*Descriptive Statistics and Effect Sizes for Variables Tested in Study 2*

Variable	Acts of niceness <i>M (SD) / % of n</i>	Everyday errands <i>M (SD) / % of n</i>	<i>d / Nagelkerke's R²</i>
Well-being			
Life meaning	3.51 (1.03)	3.25 (1.07)	0.24
Self-satisfaction	3.39 (0.90)	3.13 (0.95)	0.29
Relationships satisfaction	3.48 (0.98)	3.30 (1.04)	0.18
Mood	3.58 (1.09)	3.36 (1.03)	0.21
Voluntary nice behavior	69%	58%	0.02

Table 5*Descriptive Statistics and Effects Sizes for Variables Tested in Study 3*

Variable	Niceness <i>M (SD)</i>	Control <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>d</i>
Well-being			
Life meaning	4.75 (0.99)	4.35 (1.12)	0.38
Self-satisfaction	4.91 (0.81)	4.40 (1.21)	0.50
Relationships satisfaction	4.99 (0.85)	4.50 (1.28)	0.45
Mood	5.44 (0.64)	4.75 (1.14)	0.75
Willingness to behave nicely	5.21 (0.79)	4.77 (1.00)	0.49

Table 6

Analyses of the Interactions of Niceness and Sincerity as well as Niceness and Voluntariness on the Dependent Variables in Study 3

Variable	Sincerity as Moderator			Voluntariness as Moderator		
	Niceness <i>b</i>	Sincerity <i>b</i>	Niceness × Sincerity <i>b</i>	Niceness <i>b</i>	Voluntariness <i>b</i>	Niceness × Voluntariness <i>b</i>
Well-being						
Life meaning	0.316	0.200	-0.057	0.212	0.044	0.062
Self-satisfaction	0.390	0.160	0.010	0.305	0.245	-0.061
Relationships satisfaction	0.342	0.260	-0.032	0.240	0.304	-0.079
Mood	0.566	0.219	-0.027	0.513	0.232	-0.067
Willingness to behave nicely	0.340	0.173	-0.024	0.252	0.078	0.039

Note. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient. Results are based on PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022). Sincerity and voluntariness were mean-centered.

Table 7

Correlations between Sincerity as well as Voluntariness of Behavior in Social Interaction and the Dependent Variables in Study 3 (Lower Diagonal for Niceness Condition and Upper Diagonal for Control Condition)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sincerity	—	.48	.23	.25	.32	.30	.27
2. Voluntariness	.47	—	.23	.37	.44	.36	.29
3. Life meaning	.11	.24	—	.69	.61	.59	.46
4. Self-satisfaction	.27	.22	.39	—	.70	.74	.49
5. Relationships satisfaction	.28	.24	.40	.50	—	.71	.65
6. Mood	.31	.22	.42	.48	.49	—	.56
7. Willingness to behave nicely	.19	.28	.40	.48	.48	.36	—