Research Article – Extended

The Motivation to Protect Future Generations as a Source of Meaning and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract: Helping others confers mental-wellness benefits for helpers themselves. But some people extend their prosocial motivation beyond the present to distant future generations. Do people who show this individual difference experience the benefits of more common prosociality, or is the motivation to protect future generations a psychological burden? Across three studies (N = 1,940), we find that future-oriented prosocial motivation correlates with greater meaning, life satisfaction, and flourishing, even after accounting for self-focused future-oriented constructs. These associations are primarily driven by impact-oriented legacy motivation – the desire to make a meaningful contribution, rather than reputational concerns about being remembered. Individuals displaying impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) – a sustained concern for all future generations – exhibit particularly strong engagement with impact-driven legacy concerns, which in turn predict well-being. However, future-oriented prosocial motivation was not associated with lower anxiety or depression. We discuss potential implications of this finding.

Keywords: legacy motivation, intergenerational concern, meaning in life, life satisfaction, mental well-being

Prosocial behaviors are acts that benefit others, but they also tend to benefit helpers themselves (Curry et al., 2018; Van Tongeren et al., 2015). By elevating positive emotions and fulfillment (Nelson et al., 2016), promoting personal growth, resilience, and social connection (Lekes et al., 2016), and imbuing life with meaning and purpose (Van Tongeren et al., 2015), helping others has been found to impact the mental well-being of helpers across multiple domains linked to cognitive functioning, physical health, and even longevity (Huppert, 2009). What's more is that prosociality enhances well-being not only through small acts of kindness (Dakin et al., 2022) but also through profound sacrifices up to and including organ donation (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014).

However, while most research on the mutual benefits of helping has focused on aiding others in the here and now, some people extend their prosocial motivation far beyond the present to generations they will never meet (Syropoulos et al., 2023, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, Mah, et al., 2025). Emerging research suggests that a subset of individuals feel a heightened sense of responsibility for the long-term consequences of present-day actions, prompting them to engage in future-oriented behaviors like climate action, philanthropy, supporting long-term policies, or pursuing future-focused careers (80,000 Hours: https://80000hours.org/career-guide/; Paek et al., 2024). Yet whether this motivation to protect future generations yields the same psychological benefits as present-day prosociality, or instead imposes a psychological burden, remains an open question.

Why Care for the Distant Future?

Recent discourse in ethical philosophy has emphasized the moral importance of humanity's long-term future. Known as "longtermism," this ethical view holds that because the future may contain vastly more lives than the present, our moral obligations should extend to preserving and improving those distant lives (MacAskill, 2022; Ord, 2020). Longtermism is not a psychological concept, but a normative position within ethics, rooted in utilitarian and consequentialist traditions. It contends that safeguarding future people through responsible policy, sustainable behavior, and existential risk mitigation (e.g., by choosing careers in fields like AI safety or by making monetary contributions to charities that promote pandemic preparedness; 80,000 Hours: https://80000hours.org/career-guide/) is among our most pressing moral duties (Greaves & MacAskill, 2019).

The practical implications of this view are far-reaching. Global challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence, nuclear proliferation, and future pandemics all carry potential consequences for the survival and flourishing of humanity, but – according to expert forecasts – especially for the survival and flourishing of future generations (Moynihan, 2020). Thus, the motivation to protect future generations is central to longtermist ideology is not only philosophically significant; it is increasingly central to global risk management (United Nations, 2024) and policymaking (Bose & Shepardson, 2023). However, longtermism has also drawn critiques. Some argue that emphasizing far-future existential risks may lead people to neglect non-existential risks in the present, like issues related to social justice and mental health (Jecker et al., 2024). Others question the very premise that society today should treat temporally-distant, hypothetical individuals with the same moral weight as present-day people who are suffering – oftentimes quite severely – already (Crary, 2023).

Psychological research has begun to explore these questions from a different angle, investigating how people think and feel about future generations. This emerging work departs from the utilitarian framework of longtermism and instead examines the psychological dispositions that underlie concern for the far future. For instance, researchers have studied legacy motivation, or the desire to leave a positive impact on future generations (Fox et al., 2024; Zaval et al., 2015), as well as impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB), which reflects the belief that all future people deserve equal moral concern, regardless of how far removed they are in time (Syropoulos et al., 2023, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, Mah, et al., 2025). While IIB aligns with longtermist ideals in its impartiality, it does not require commitment to outcome-maximization.

Yet critiques of future-oriented motivation extend beyond philosophical debate and surface in people's everyday moral intuitions. Psychological research shows that individuals who prioritize distant others, especially across time, are often viewed more negatively than those who focus on the present (Everett et al., 2018; Law et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2020; Law, Syropoulos, Young, et al., 2024). They are perceived as less trustworthy, less socially desirable, and even morally suspect. In this way, concern for future generations may carry not only ideological costs but social ones as well. Such findings raise a deeper psychological question: If individuals who extend their motivation to help others far into the future are met with suspicion or disapproval, might this prosocial orientation exact a psychological toll? Most research at the intersection of mental well-being and helping behavior has focused on the reciprocal benefits of aiding others in the here and now (e.g., Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014; Curry et al., 2018; Van Tongeren et al., 2015). But perhaps those who feel a strong moral responsibility to address temporally distant, large-scale global problems do not experience the same rewards and may even bear psychological burdens as a result.

Although we reason this is possible, in the present research, we build a case for the alternative. Drawing on research in prosociality (Curry et al., 2018; Dakin et al., 2022), generativity (Moieni et al., 2020), and meaning making (Van Tongeren et al., 2015), we suggest that concern for future generations may support, rather than undermine, mental well-being. Recent work on legacy motivation (Fox et al., 2024; Syropoulos et al., 2023) and impartial intergenerational beneficence (Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025) offers tools to measure these future-oriented motivational dispositions. We propose that individuals who are deeply committed to contributing to a better future may not suffer psychologically for it, but may experience greater well-being. Specifically, we hypothesize that motivation to safeguard humanity's long-term future will predict higher levels of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2008), life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and self-flourishing (Maslow, 1943) – positive psychological outcomes associated with mental wellness. At the same time, we hypothesize that future-oriented motivation will be linked to *lower* levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which reflect key indicators of psychological distress and mental illness (e.g., Steger et al., 2009). In doing so, we aim to build foundational knowledge about whether feeling motivated to help future generations may be compatible with, rather than in opposition to, helping people live fulfilling lives in the present.

The Psychological Foundations of Future-Oriented Concern: Legacy Motivation and Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence

Two psychological constructs have recently emerged as key to understanding how people extend motivations to benefit others beyond the present and into the distant future: legacy motivation and impartial intergenerational beneficence

(IIB). Though both are concerned with future-oriented prosociality, they stem from different traditions and predict distinct behavioral outcomes.

Legacy motivation refers to a person's desire to leave behind a lasting, positive influence that endures after death (Zaval et al., 2015). This motivation is typically divided into reputation legacy motives (RLM), *which focus on being remembered positively,* and impact legacy motives (ILM), *which emphasize making a meaningful contribution to others, especially future generations* (Syropoulos et al., 2023). ILM, in particular, has been linked to a wide range of future-oriented behaviors. Individuals high in ILM are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption, donate to future-focused charities, and allocate resources in experimental games that benefit future others (Fox et al., 2024; Zaval et al., 2015; Syropoulos et al., 2024).

Impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) is a related but conceptually distinct construct. Rooted in moral psychology (Kahane et al., 2018) and ethical philosophy (MacAskill, 2022; Ord, 2020), IIB captures the belief that all future people deserve equal moral concern, regardless of when in time they live (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2025). It is not a prescriptive ethical stance like longtermism, but a measurable psychological disposition, an individual difference in how far and how fairly people extend their moral concern over time.

Emerging research shows that impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) predicts a broad array of prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Individuals who exhibit this disposition (marked by a consistently high level of intergenerational concern (IGC) that does not diminish as future beneficiaries become more temporally distant) are not only more concerned about the welfare of future generations (by definition) but also demonstrate expanded moral concern toward marginalized or unfamiliar groups in the present (Syropoulos et al., 2024). In this way, IIB reflects a broader, impartial moral orientation that cuts across both temporal and social boundaries. They are more likely to support ambitious climate policies (Law et al., 2023), donate to altruistic causes (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2025), and endorse moral principles that emphasize impartiality and fairness across social and temporal boundaries (Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025). Notably, both ILM and IIB have been linked to prosocial personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility, and are negatively associated with dark traits like Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Syropoulos et al., 2024).

Although still a nascent area of study, these findings suggest that concern for future generations is not merely an abstract moral ideal, but a stable psychological orientation that shapes real-world decisions. People who are motivated to help the distant future are not only more likely to act on behalf of future others but often demonstrate broader commitments to justice, equity, and social responsibility in the present.

Why Might Motivation to Protect the Future Promote Well-Being?

As discussed earlier, concern for future generations could plausibly come at a psychological cost. Because this orientation involves confronting complex, long-term global challenges (Crary, 2023) and because individuals who prioritize distant others are often socially penalized (Law et al., 2024), we considered the possibility that future-oriented moral commitment might be burdensome rather than beneficial. Yet in the present research, we advance a competing hypothesis: that caring for future generations might be psychologically nourishing, rather than detrimental.

This prediction begins with the premise that at its core, the motivation to protect future generations is a form of prosocial motivation (Paek et al., 2024; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025; Wade-Benzoni & Tost, 2009). Like other expressions of prosociality (such as kindness, generosity, and moral concern), efforts to safeguard the well-being of others, even across vast temporal distances, may contribute to psychological enrichment. Extensive research shows that prosocial behavior benefits not only recipients but also helpers themselves. Whether through writing gratitude notes, donating to charity, or performing everyday acts of care, helping others reliably promotes life satisfaction and psychological wellness (Dakin et al., 2022; Martela & Ryan, 2016). Even high-cost altruism directed toward socially distant others, acts that are often met with suspicion or social disapproval (Everett et al., 2018; Law et al., 2021; Law, Syropoulos, Young, et al., 2024; McManus et al., 2020), has been linked to enhanced well-being and improved relationship quality (Amormino et al., 2024; Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014). Helping across time, like helping across social distance, involves caring for psychologically distant others and tends to be judged negatively by observers (Law, Syropoulos, Young, et al., 2024; Wade-Benzoni & Tost, 2009). This parallel supports the prediction that future-oriented prosocial motivation, despite potential social costs, may yield similar psychological benefits. By anchoring individuals in a broader moral narrative and engaging them with large-scale challenges in constructive ways, this type of motivation may transform existential anxiety into a sense of direction, coherence, and purpose.

One explanation for *why* prosocial behavior benefits well-being is that it helps individuals connect to something larger than themselves, supporting self-transcendent experiences that foster eudaimonic well-being (i.e., meaning, fulfillment, and the realization of personal potential; Huppert, 2009; Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Research on generativity, the desire to invest in the next generation, supports this idea, showing consistent links to greater life satisfaction, psychological resilience, and, importantly, a sense of meaning (Huta & Zuroff, 2007; McAdams & Logan, 2004). These effects hold across the lifespan and are not limited to biological parents or those with traditional pathways to legacy-building (Lawford et al., 2023). However, generativity typically focuses on concern for one's immediate descendants or the near future. In contrast, the present research examines future-oriented motivations that extend far beyond the next generation and are not bound by familial ties. Still, findings from generativity suggest that future-oriented concern, even when directed toward temporally or relationally distant others, may protect and promote well-being when grounded in meaningful, value-consistent action (Moieni et al., 2020).

Legacy motivation and impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) extend these insights by capturing broader and more impartial forms of future-oriented moral concern. Legacy motivation, particularly in its impact-oriented form, predicts sustainable behavior, forward-looking generosity, and adaptive responses to existential threats such as climate change (Fox et al., 2024; Mah et al., 2024). IIB reflects a principled commitment to treating all future people with equal moral regard and is associated with prosocial personality traits, including higher empathy, greater honesty–humility, and lower levels of traits such as Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Syropoulos et al., 2024). These traits and behaviors are psychologically relevant not only because they support healthy prosocial functioning but also because they contribute to a stable, meaningful moral identity (Ashton et al., 2024). Motivations like legacy and IIB may promote well-being by embedding individuals within a coherent future-oriented narrative, one that fosters agency, meaning, and connection through intrinsically motivated concern for others. This is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that well-being is supported when individuals pursue goals that satisfy core psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Accordingly, prosocial future-oriented motivation may not only align with deeply held values but also fulfill essential psychological needs that promote flourishing in the present.

Distinguishing Prosocial From Egoistic Future-Oriented Motivations

Importantly, concern for the future is not always other-focused. Some future-oriented constructs reflect a fundamentally self-directed orientation. For instance, future self-continuity (FSC) captures the degree to which individuals perceive a strong psychological connection between their present and future selves (feeling that who they will become in the future is part of who they are now; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009). Similarly, consideration of future consequences (CFC) refers to the extent to which individuals factor the long-term outcomes of their present-day actions into their decisions (Strathman et al., 1994). Both FSC and CFC have been associated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater meaning in life, higher life satisfaction, and engagement in healthy behaviors (Azizli et al., 2015; Ji et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2024).

Even legacy motivation, though typically discussed as a prosocial orientation, contains both self-focused and other-focused components (Syropoulos et al., 2023). Individuals may be driven by a desire to be remembered (reputation legacy motivation) or to make a lasting positive impact (impact legacy motivation). While both forms can co-exist, only the latter reflects a truly prosocial motivation aimed at benefiting others beyond the self. In contrast to FSC and CFC, which are primarily self-directed, impact-oriented legacy motivation (ILM) and impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) reflect a moral investment in the well-being of future *others*. In this investigation, we examine whether these prosocial future-oriented motivations (i.e., ILM and IIB) predict well-being even after accounting for self-focused future constructs like RLM, FSC, and CFC. This allows us to test whether people who care deeply about the long-term future for others' sake, not just their own, experience uniquely positive psychological outcomes. We aim to determine whether the motivation to protect future others may be psychologically enriching in ways that go beyond the benefits of simply planning for or identifying with one's future self.

The Current Studies

In the current investigation, we sought to shed light on the association between legacy motivation and impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) with mental well-being. Study 1 did so by examining correlations between impact (ILM) and reputation (RLM) legacy motives with outcomes such as meaning in life, life satisfaction, self-flourishing, and mental illness/wellness. Study 2 expanded on these findings by comparing respondents who manifest the ethical disposition of IIB to respondents who do not to determine whether they would report greater mental wellness by way of increased prosocial legacy motivation (i.e., ILM).[1] Finally, to better capture associations between

[1] We tested this model because prior research has shown that IIB predicts ILM, such that feeling exceptional and impartial concern for future generations predicts seeking to leave behind a legacy marked by contributions to improving their lives (Law, Syropoulos, Young, et al., 2024; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025).

future-oriented motivation and mental wellness above and beyond egoistic future-orientations, Study 3 replicated the results of Study 2 and considered/controlled for greater connectedness with one's future self (FSC) and greater consideration of future consequences (CFC). All relevant materials for each study are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/j39pb.

Study 1

In our first study, we examined associations between impact (ILM) and reputation (RLM) legacy motives with scores on a comprehensive battery of measures capturing mental wellness/illness. We hypothesized positive correlations between legacy motives and mental wellness (or eudemonic well-being), and negative correlations between legacy motives and mental illness (or psychopathology symptoms), with these associations being more prominent for impact (ILM) than reputation (RLM) legacy motives. All aspects of the study were pre-registered https://aspredicted.org/dt44-w8qj.pdf.

Methods

Participants

We recruited 400 participants online via Prolific. An a priori power analysis determined that a sample of $N = 346$ subjects would allow for the detection of small effects ($r = .15$) with 80% power (assuming a two-tailed test and alpha of .05). We rounded this number up to 400 to account for potential exclusions. Two participants were excluded because they failed the attention check (i.e., "In order for psychological research to produce meaningful results, it's necessary to ensure that participants are paying attention when they respond to questions. To show us you are paying attention, please select the "Somewhat agree" option from the choices below). As such, we retained 398 participants. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that our final sample was powered at 80% to detect effects as small as $r = .14$. Table 1 displays demographic information for all studies.

Materials and Procedure

After participants provided informed consent, the following measures were presented in random order. Scores were estimated by calculating the average value of each construct. Although all scales used in the study have been validated in prior published research, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) on each scale (or subscale, where applicable), which confirmed their intended factor structure. Code for these analyses is provided on the OSF.

Legacy Motives

We measured legacy motives with the dual-legacy motives scale (Syropoulos et al., 2023), which includes a subscale for impact legacy motives (ILM; 2 items, $\alpha = .80$; e.g., "I want my life to impact others in a positive way") and reputation legacy motives (RLM; 2 items, $\alpha = .92$; e.g., "I don't want my life to be forgotten"). Both subscales utilized 1 = *strongly disagree* – 7 = *strongly agree* Likert-type scales, and scores were averaged together to yield composites for each subscale. Both subscales used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). Item responses were averaged to create composite scores for each subscale.

Meaning in Life

We utilized the meaning in life scale (10 items; Steger et al., 2006), which comprises "presence of meaning" (5 items; $\alpha = .95$, e.g., "My life has a clear sense of purpose…") and search for meaning (5 items; $\alpha = .95$, e.g., "I am searching for meaning in my life…") subscales. Both subscales used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= a*bsolutely untrue*) to 7 (= *absolutely true*). After reverse coding the appropriate items, item responses were averaged to create composite scores for each subscale.

Life Satisfaction

We measured life satisfaction with the satisfaction with life scale (5 items; $\alpha = .92$, e.g., "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal…") developed by Diener et al. (1985). Items were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*) and were averaged to create a composite score.

Self-Flourishing

A measure of self-flourishing was also included (8 items; $\alpha = .94$, e.g., "I am engaged and interested in my daily activities…"; Diener et al., 2010). Items were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*) and were averaged to create a composite score.

Depressive Symptoms

Depression was captured by the Center of Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CESD-10; Andresen et al., 1994; 10 items; $\alpha = .90$, e.g., "I could not "get going"…). Participants indicated how often they felt each symptom during the past week on on 4-point scale (i.e., 1 = *Less than 1 day*; 2 = *1–2 days*; 3 = *3–4 days*; 4 = *5–7 days*). After reverse coding the appropriate items (e.g., "I was happy."), scores for each symptom were averaged to create a composite score. Although the CESD-10 is often scored using summed totals in clinical contexts, we computed mean scores to retain the original response scale and ensure consistency

Table 1. Demographic information for each study

Study	Pre-registered	Sample	N_{total}	N_{male}	N_{female}	N_{white}	M_{age}	SD_{age}
Study 1	Yes	Prolific	398	194	194	262	40	13.74
Study 2	Yes	Prolific	760	362	378	482	38	14.97
Study 3	Yes	Prolific	782	380	377	467	34	13.07

Table 2. Bivariate correlations between all measures

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. ILM	–						
2. RLM	0.73***	–					
3. Meaning searching	0.20***	0.21***	–				
4. Meaning presence	0.31***	0.25***	−0.32***	–			
5. SWL	0.27***	0.23***	−0.19***	0.70***	–		
6. Flourishing	0.40***	0.34***	−0.13**	0.77***	0.76***	–	
7. Depression	−0.19***	−0.20***	0.25***	−0.60***	−0.65***	−0.73***	–
8. Anxiety	−0.17***	−0.23***	0.22***	−0.47***	−0.51***	−0.59***	0.82***

Note. All tests presented are two-tailed. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 3. Linear regression models with legacy motives as simultaneous predictors

	Impact legacy			Reputational legacy			
	b	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*Adj. R^2*
Mental wellness outcomes							
Meaning – searching	0.14	0.09	.129	0.14	0.08	.078	0.04
Meaning – presence	0.36	0.09	< .001	0.05	0.08	.525	0.09
Life satisfaction	0.28	0.09	.002	0.08	0.08	.291	0.07
Self-flourishing	0.31	0.07	< .001	0.09	0.05	.105	0.16
Mental illness outcomes							
Depressive symptoms	−0.05	0.04	.206	−0.06	0.03	.072	0.04
Anxious symptoms	−0.002	0.04	.958	−0.12	0.04	.002	0.05

Note. Coefficients (*b*) are in raw scale units (i.e., unstandardized). All tests presented are two-tailed. Adj. = Adjusted.

across all multi-item measures in the study. This scoring choice does not affect results, as summed and averaged scores are linearly equivalent.

General Anxiety Symptoms

General anxiety was captured by the general anxiety disorder scale (GAD-7; 7 items; α = .93, e.g., "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge…"; Spitzer et al., 2006). Participants indicated how often they felt each symptom during the past 2 weeks on 4-point scales (i.e., 1 = *not at all*; 2 = *several days*; 3 = *more than half the days*; 4 = *nearly every day*). Scores for each symptom were averaged to create a composite score. Although the GAD-7 is often scored using summed totals in clinical contexts, we computed mean scores to retain the original response scale and ensure consistency across all multi-item measures in the study. This scoring choice does not affect results, as summed and averaged scores are linearly equivalent.

Results

First, we examined correlations between legacy motives with measures of mental wellness and mental illness. Both categories of legacy motives had positive correlations with mental wellness measures and negative correlations with mental illness measures (see Table 2).

Secondly, we estimated regressions between impact and reputation motives as simultaneous predictors for each outcome. ILM had positive significant correlations with meaning presence, life satisfaction, and self-flourishing, but not with any mental illness indicator. Instead, RLM had a significant association with anxiety, such that caring more

Table 4. Differences in focal outcomes between respondents who showed impartial intergenerational concern and those who did not

	General population (N = 589)		Participants with IIB (N = 172)			
Outcomes	M	SD	M	SD	t-tests	Cohen's d
Impact legacy motivation	5.38	1.11	6.06	0.88	$t(344.48) = 8.33$***	0.64
Mattering	4.21	1.51	4.81	1.62	$t(264.70) = 4.29$***	0.39
Purpose	5.2	1.28	5.66	1.19	$t(295.93) = 4.40$***	0.37
Self-flourishing	5.22	1.16	5.62	1.06	$t(310.69) = 4.22$***	0.35
Reputation legacy motivation	4.56	1.44	5.03	1.4	$t(284.09) = 3.82$***	0.33
Meaning presence	4.55	1.58	4.95	1.6	$t(275.75) = 2.90$**	0.25
Comprehension	4.71	1.4	5.05	1.47	$t(268.33) = 2.71$**	0.24
Searching for meaning	4.41	1.48	4.67	1.63	$t(258.92) = 1.88$	0.17
Life satisfaction	4.1	1.62	4.24	1.73	$t(265.40) = -0.98$	0.09
Anxiety	1.81	0.77	1.75	0.83	$t(264.80) = 0.90$	−0.08
Depression	1.93	0.7	1.82	0.74	$t(266.19) = 1.71$	−0.15

Note. All tests presented are two-tailed. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

about how one is remembered by others was related to decreased anxiety (see Table 3).

Discussion

Our first study demonstrated that expressing concerns about one's legacy, particularly impact-oriented rather than reputation-based motives, may benefit mental health. Moreover, the findings suggest that these effects are primarily driven by increases in eudemonic well-being rather than reductions in psychopathology symptoms. Nonetheless, reputation-based motives did predict lower scores on a measure of generalized anxiety. In summary, the findings thus far suggest that, rather than being a burden on well-being in the present, prosocial concern for the future of humanity instead appears to relate positively to signatures of mental wellness.

Study 2

Study 2 focused specifically on individuals with exceptionally high levels of intergenerational concern (IGC) across all possible future generations – what has been previously termed impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025) – to provide a stringent test of whether a deep and temporally invariant commitment to future generations aligns with, rather than detracts from, well-being in the present. In alignment with prior research, we define individuals who consistently exhibit high IGC for all future people as embodying the ethical disposition of IIB. Moreover, prior research suggests that these individuals also report heightened concerns about their legacy. As such, we also sought to explore whether impact-related legacy motivation may show potential as a mediating mechanism in this relationship (Syropoulos et al., 2023).

We hypothesized that individuals with IIB would score significantly higher on impact legacy motives (ILM) but not reputation legacy motives (RLM) (H1a–H1b). Furthermore, we expected IIB to be associated with greater eudemonic well-being (H2) and fewer psychopathology symptoms (H3). Controlling for each other, we predicted that ILM – but not RLM – would relate to greater eudemonic well-being (H4) and fewer psychopathology symptoms (H5). Finally, we hypothesized significant indirect effects of IIB on well-being and psychopathology symptoms via increased ILM (H6–H7). All aspects of the study were pre-registered: https://aspredicted.org/xt2x-hfds.pdf.

Methods

Participants

We pre-registered that we would recruit a sample size of 800 participants from Prolific. Drawing upon past estimates of IIB prevalence, with zero exclusions, we would have roughly 180 participants with IIB and 620 general population members, allowing us to detect effect sizes as small as d = 0.24 with a power of 0.80 for comparisons between participants with and without IIB. With 700 participants (100 excluded), we would have roughly 160 participants with IIB and 640 general population members, allowing us to detect effect sizes as small as d = 0.25 with a power of 0.80. Ultimately, four additional participants completed the survey but did not submit their responses for remuneration and were retained. Thus, we recruited 804 participants. Forty-three participants were excluded because they failed the attention check. A total of 760 participants were used for all analyses reported below.

Materials and Procedure

The following measures were identical to the ones used in Study 1: ILM (2-items; α = .77), RLM (2-items; α = .81), Meaning Presence (5-items; α = .94), Meaning Search (5-items; α = .94), Life-Satisfaction (5-items; α = .93), Self-Flourishing (8-items; α = .93), Depressive Symptoms (10-items; α = .90), Anxiety Symptoms (7-items; α = .93). Additional measures used in this study included the Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence Inventory (which captures IGC/IIB; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025) and expanded measures for existential meaning. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. Although all scales used in the study have been validated in prior published research, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) on each scale (or subscale, where applicable), which confirmed their intended factor structure. Code for these analyses is provided on the OSF.

Existential Meaning

To better nuance eudemonic well-being and to conceptually replicate previous results with another measure of meaning, we utilized the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (15 items, George & Park, 2016). This measure had three facets: Mattering (e.g., "I am certain that my life is of importance"; 5-items, α = .90), Purpose (e.g., "I have aims in my life that are worth striving for", 5-items, α = .93), and Comprehension (e.g., "My life makes sense", 5-items, α = .94). All three subscales used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). After reverse coding the appropriate items (e.g., "There is nothing special about my existence"), item responses were averaged to create composite scores for each subscale.

Intergenerational Concern (IGC)

Furthermore, we captured intergenerational concern for all possible future generations (7 items that repeat across 4 timeframe contexts for 28 items total; α = .98 for the average of all 28 items) with the Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence Inventory (IIBI) developed by Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, and Young (2025; e.g., "We should act wisely because what we do today will influence an untold number of people in the future."). Importantly, each of the 7 items was completed simultaneously at four different timeframes (1,000, 10,000, 100,000, and 1,000,000 years in the future; assuming humanity still exists). Scores were captured on slider scales ranging from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 100 = *strongly agree*. Participants were classified as displaying impartial intergenerational beneficence if they scored at or above 75 for the closest temporal timeframe and had the same (or higher) score for all other distant timeframes. Thus, IIB reflects high endorsement of intergenerational concern (i.e., beneficence) that remains consistently high regardless of when in the future targets exist (impartiality).

Results

As shown in Table 4, significant differences were noted for legacy motivation, most aspects of meaning (except searching for meaning), and self-flourishing. These results suggest that those who show high levels of impartial intergenerational concern lead a more fulfilling life, but do not necessarily feel happier or less depressed/anxious as far as direct effects/associations are concerned.

Indirect Associations

We tested whether significant indirect effects via increased legacy motivation were observed for participants with IIB (see Table 5). We estimated a path model with the *lavaan* package in R, using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. In this model, impartial intergenerational beneficence was the exogenous variable, the two legacy motives were parallel mediators, and all indicators of mental well-being and mental illness were parallel outcomes. Since we included the direct effects of IIB on all outcomes, as well as all direct effects of both types of legacy motivation, and all possible indirect effects, no model fit indicators are provided (instead, this model should be treated as multiple mediation tests). When accounting for the effects of impact and reputation legacy, the direct effects of IIB on all outcomes were rendered not statistically significant. Both impact and reputation legacy motives had significant direct associations with all variables relevant to meaning, flourishing in life, and life satisfaction, acting as mediators for the effect of IIB on these outcomes, with all indirect effects emerging as statistically significant. Neither IIB nor any legacy motive had a significant association with anxiety or depression.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 and extended them by examining whether individuals who endorse impartial intergenerational beneficence also report higher levels of psychological fulfillment. Consistent with our predictions, results revealed both direct and indirect effects of impartial intergenerational concern on perceived meaning and purpose in life. Notably, these effects were mediated by both impact-oriented and reputational legacy motivations. This suggests that motivations to protect future generations, whether grounded in a desire to make a positive impact or to be remembered, are each positively associated with well-being, even when accounting for the influence of the other.

Study 3

In our final study, we replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2 and examined whether the association between

Table 5. Indirect associations of impartial intergenerational beneficence with each mental well-being and mental illness outcome via increased legacy motivation

Outcome	IIB direct effect β [95% CI]	Impact legacy effect β [95% CI]	Reputation legacy effect β [95% CI]	Indirect effect via impact β [95% CI]	Indirect effect via reputation β [95% CI]	R^2
Impact legacy	**0.67*** [0.51, 0.83]**					0.07
Reputation legacy	**0.47*** [0.23, 0.71]**					0.02
Meaning presence	0.09 [−0.18, 0.35]	**0.37*** [0.24, 0.49]**	**0.13** [0.03, 0.23]**	**0.25*** [0.15, 0.35]**	**0.06* [0.01, 0.12]**	0.12
Meaning searching	0.07 [−0.19, 0.33]	**0.15** [0.05, 0.25]**	**0.19*** [0.11, 0.26]**	**0.10** [0.03, 0.17]**	**0.09** [0.04, 0.15]**	0.07
Purpose	0.14 [−0.06, 0.33]	**0.40*** [0.30, 0.52]**	**0.10* [0.02, 0.19]**	**0.27*** [0.18, 0.38]**	**0.05* [0.01, 0.10]**	0.20
Mattering	0.21 [−0.03, 0.45]	**0.31*** [0.18, 0.43]**	**0.38*** [0.28, 0.47]**	**0.21*** [0.12, 0.31]**	**0.18*** [0.08, 0.28]**	0.28
Comprehension	0.09 [−0.15, 0.33]	**0.30*** [0.20, 0.41]**	**0.10* [0.02, 0.19]**	**0.21*** [0.12, 0.30]**	**0.05* [0.01, 0.10]**	0.10
Anxiety	−0.04 [−0.17, 0.11]	−0.03 [−0.09, 0.03]	−0.01 [−0.06, 0.03]	−0.02, [−0.06, 0.02]	−0.01, [−0.03, 0.01]	0.01
Depression	−0.07 [−0.20, 0.06]	−0.02 [−0.07, 0.03]	−0.05 [−0.09, 0.01]	−0.01, [−0.05, 0.02]	−0.02, [−0.05, 0.01]	0.02
Flourishing	0.10 [−0.08, 0.06]	**0.34*** [0.26, 0.43]**	**0.14*** [0.07, 0.20]**	**0.23*** [0.16, 0.32]**	**0.06** [0.02, 0.11]**	0.22
Life satisfaction	−0.04 [−0.34, 0.25]	**0.15** [0.05, 0.25]**	**0.19*** [0.11, 0.26]**	**0.10** [0.04, 0.17]**	**0.09** [0.04, 0.15]**	0.06

Note. Bolded values highlight statistically significant results. All tests presented are two-tailed. Coefficients (β) are standardized. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 6. Differences in focal outcomes between those who showed impartial intergenerational concern and those who did not

	General population (N = 559)		Participants with IIB (N = 223)			
Outcomes	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test	Cohen's *d*
CFC	4.51	0.67	4.82	0.61	*t*(447.43) = 6.27***	0.48
ILM	5.57	0.93	6.02	0.85	*t*(469.37) = 6.32***	0.47
RLM	4.88	1.41	5.15	1.3	*t*(439.91) = 3.47***	0.27
FSC	4.16	1.65	4.62	1.77	*t*(384.94) = 3.31***	0.27
Mattering	4.2	1.46	4.52	1.56	*t*(385.91) = 2.65**	0.22
Self-flourishing	5.18	1.13	5.43	1.06	*t*(434.02) = 2.86**	0.22
Purpose	5.28	1.17	5.49	1.17	*t*(410.30) = 2.32*	0.18
Self-esteem	4.64	1.34	4.81	1.37	*t*(400.14) = 1.50	0.12
Searching for meaning	4.52	1.47	4.62	1.55	*t*(389.61) = 0.83	0.07
Meaning presence	4.32	0.97	4.39	0.94	*t*(417.44) = 0.87	0.07
Comprehension	4.71	1.31	4.76	1.37	*t*(394.08) = 0.44	0.04
Life satisfaction	4.03	1.5	4.09	1.55	*t*(397.12) = 0.47	0.04

Note. All tests presented are two-tailed. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) and eudemonic well-being (particularly meaning and purpose in life) could be explained by alternative, self-oriented future-focused motivations. Specifically, we tested whether future self-continuity (FSC) and consideration of future consequences (CFC), which have been linked to both physical (Rutchick et al., 2018) and mental health outcomes (Macrae et al., 2017), might account for the relationship. These constructs share theoretical and empirical overlap with prosocial, other-oriented motivations such as IIB and impact legacy motivation (ILM; see Law et al., 2025), making them important to evaluate as potential confounding mechanisms alongside RLM.

We hypothesized that individuals who exhibit impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) would score significantly higher on FSC, CFC, as well as both ILM and RLM. We further predicted that these individuals would report greater eudemonic well-being, assessed through measures of meaning presence, meaning search, comprehension, purpose, mattering, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and self-flourishing.

Building on our prior results, we expected both ILM and RLM to be positively associated with eudemonic well-being, though we predicted that ILM would emerge as the more consistent and robust predictor, even when controlling for FSC and CFC. Ultimately, we hypothesized that individuals

Table 7. Significant indirect effects of impartial intergenerational beneficence (binary predictor), on each mental well-being and mental illness outcome via increased legacy motivation type (mediator).

	IIB effect	Impact legacy effect	Reputation legacy effect	FSC effect	CFC effect	Indirect effect via Impact	Indirect effect via reputation	Indirect effect via FSC	Indirect effect via CFC	
Outcome	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	β [95% CI]	R^2
Impact legacy	**0.44*** [0.30, 0.57]**									0.04
Reputation legacy	**0.37** [0.15, 0.57]**									0.02
Future self continuity (FSC)	**0.46** [0.19, 0.73]**									0.02
Consideration of future consequences (CFC)	**0.31*** [0.21, 0.41]**									0.04
Meaning presence	−0.11 [−0.26, 0.04]	**0.27*** [0.18, 0.36]**	−0.01 [−0.07, 0.05]	**0.14*** [0.10, 0.18]**	−0.03 [−0.14, 0.09]	**0.12*** [0.07, 0.18]**	−0.01 [−0.03, 0.02]	**0.06** [0.03, 0.11]**	−0.01 [−0.05, 0.03]	0.14
Meaning searching	−0.05 [−0.29, 0.19]	**0.26** [0.11, 0.42]**	**0.12* [0.03, 0.22]**	‘−0.02, [−0.09, 0.04]	−0.05 [−0.19, 0.18]	**0.12** [0.05, 0.20]**	0.04 [0.00, 0.10]	−0.01 [−0.05, 0.02]	<.001 [−0.06, 0.06]	0.06
Purpose	−0.13 [−0.30, 0.04]	**0.43*** [0.32, 0.55]**	0.01 [−0.06, 0.07]	**0.11*** [0.06, 0.15]**	**0.31*** [0.18, 0.45]**	**0.19*** [0.12, 0.27]**	0.002 [−0.02, 0.03]	**0.05* [0.02, 0.09]**	**0.10*** [0.05, 0.15]**	0.22
Mattering	0.05 [−0.18, 0.28]	**0.34*** [0.20, 0.48]**	**0.20*** [0.11, 0.30]**	**0.12*** [0.05, 0.18]**	−0.02 [0.20, 0.15]	**0.15*** [0.08, 0.23]**	**0.07* [0.02, 0.14]**	**0.05* [0.02, 0.10]**	−0.01 [−0.06, 0.05]	0.16
Comprehension	−0.20 [−0.41, 0.00]	**0.29*** [0.15, 0.42]**	−0.01 [−0.09, 0.08]	**0.22*** [0.16, 0.28]**	0.08 [−0.08, 0.25]	**0.13** [0.06, 0.21]**	−0.002 [−0.03, 0.03]	**0.10** [0.04, 0.17]**	0.03 [−0.03, 0.08]	0.13
Flourishing	−0.02 [−0,18, 014]	**0.32*** [0.21, 0.43]**	0.01 [−0.06, 0.08]	**0.15*** [0.10, 0.19]**	**0.15* [0.02, 0.29]**	**0.14*** [0.08, 0.22]**	0.01 [−0.02, 0.03]	**0.07** [0.03, 0.12]**	**0.05* [0.01, 0.09]**	0.17
Life satisfaction	−0.15 [−0.39, 0.09]	**0.28*** [0.14, 0.42]**	0.02 [−0.08, 0.11]	**0.22*** [0.15, 0.28]**	−0.06, [−0.24, 0.12]	**0.12** [0.05, 0.20]**	0.01 [−0.03, 0.04]	**0.10** [0.04, 0.17]**	−0.02 [−0.08, 0.04	0.10
Self-esteem	−0.07 [−0.27, 0.15]	**0.18** [0.04, 0.30]**	0.02 [−0.06, 0.10]	**0.18*** [0.12, 0.24]**	**0.20* [0.04, 0.37]**	**0.08* [0.02, 0.14]**	0.01 [−0.03, 0.04]	**0.08** [0.03, 0.14]**	**0.06* [0.01, 0.12]**	0.09

Note. All tests presented are two-tailed. Coefficients (β) are standardized. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

who demonstrate IIB would report higher eudemonic well-being, potentially mediated by elevated FSC, CFC, ILM, and RLM. Notably, no prior research has jointly examined these variables, leaving open the question of which future-oriented dispositions most strongly contribute to psychological flourishing. In line with our pre-registered predictions, we anticipated that ILM, even when accounting for FSC and CFC, would remain a significant positive predictor of meaning presence, comprehension, purpose, mattering, self-esteem, and self-flourishing, while RLM would specifically predict meaning search.

All aspects of the study were pre-registered, https://aspredicted.org/wm8y-37nt.pdf.

Methods

Participants

Utilizing the same (and pre-registered) power a priori power analysis as Study 2, we recruited 800 participants online via Prolific. Eighteen participants were excluded because they failed our attention check, leaving 782 participants.

Materials and Procedure

Participants provided informed consent at the outset of the study. We used the same measures as previous studies to capture the following constructs in Study 3: ILM (α = .68), RLM (α = .75), intergenerational concern/impartial intergenerational beneficence (α = .95), meaning presence (α = .93), searching for meaning (α = .93), life satisfaction (α = .91), self-flourishing (α = .92), comprehension (α = .92), mattering (α = .88), and purpose (α = .91). Three new measures were included in this study:

Consideration of Future Consequences

A 12-item measure (α = .85; e.g., "I consider how things might be in the future and try to influence those things with my day-to-day behavior", Strathman et al., 1994) was used to measure CFC, a person's ability to consider the future outcomes of their actions. Items were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*) and, after the appropriate items were reverse-coded, averaged to create a composite score.

Future Self-Continuity

A single-item measure of FSC was used (adapted from Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009). This measure presents seven images of two circles that overlap at differing degrees. Participants selected the circle that best represents their connection to themselves, 25 years in the future. Higher scores on this measure correspond to greater future self-continuity (i.e., greater present-future overlap).

Self-Esteem

The 10-item self-esteem scale was used (Rosenberg, 1965; e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", α = .93). Items were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*) and, after the appropriate items were reverse coded, averaged to create a composite score.

Although all scales used in the study have been validated in prior published research, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) on each scale (or subscale, where applicable), which confirmed their intended factor structure. Code for these analyses is provided on the OSF.

Results

Table 6 provides an overview of all comparisons. Participants who displayed impartial intergenerational beneficence also tended to consider the future outcomes of their actions more (CFC), felt more connected to their future selves (FSC), cared more about their legacy (for both ILM and RLM), and reported more self-flourishing, purpose, and a sense of mattering.

Indirect Associations

We defined a similar model to that tested in Study 2. The only difference is that we did not have scores for anxiety and depression. Instead, in this model, we had scores for the additional mental-wellness outcome of self-esteem, as well as for the two additional mediators/covariates (FSC and CFC).[2] Impartial intergenerational beneficence was the exogenous variable; the two legacy motives, along with FSC and CFC, were parallel mediators, and all indicators of mental well-being were parallel outcomes. Since we included the direct effects of IIB on all outcomes, as well as all direct effects of both types of legacy motivation, and all possible indirect effects, no model fit indicators are provided (instead, this model should be treated as multiple mediation tests).

Overall, when accounting for the effects of all mediators, the direct effects of IIB on all outcomes are rendered not statistically significant (consistent with "full mediation;" see Table 7). Notably, in this model, impact and not reputation legacy motives had consistent and significant direct, positive effects on all variables, also acting as a mediator for the effect of IIB, on these outcomes, with all indirect effects emerging as statistically significant (for ILM). Among all other variables, FSC appeared to be another important predictor (and mediator), whereas RLM and CFC, by and large, did not contribute directly or indirectly.

[2] ILM, RLM, CFC, and FSC correlated with most measures of mental well-being, with correlations for ILM and FSC being the most consistent across all outcomes (see Table E2 in the Electronic Supplementary Materials, ESM 1).

Discussion

Our final study replicated the previously observed differences between individuals who endorse impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB) and those who do not, showing that those who endorse IIB report greater meaning in life. It also revealed that these individuals tend to care more about their legacy, feel a stronger connection to their future selves, and are more attuned to the long-term consequences of their actions. In a pre-registered mediation analysis, we examined which of these factors accounted for the relationship between IIB and mental well-being. Both impact-oriented legacy motivation and future self-continuity emerged as significant mediators – and independent predictors – of eudemonic well-being. These findings suggest that even when controlling for how connected individuals feel to their future selves and how much they consider long-term outcomes, prosocial legacy concerns related to impact continue to predict increased well-being. In this way, impact legacy motivation appears to partially explain the psychological benefits associated with feeling motivated to protect all future generations, no matter when in time they might exist (IIB), above and beyond future-oriented constructs that reflect egoistic motivations or orientations (FSC, CFC, RLM) that tend to be theoretically and empirically intertwined with IIB (see Law et al., 2025).

General Discussion

Ethical debates are increasingly at the forefront of scholarly and public discourse regarding whether prioritizing the long-term welfare of humanity comes at the expense of well-being in the present. One perspective argues that future lives hold moral significance and that individuals today have a responsibility to safeguard their welfare through sustainable practices, resource conservation, donations to future-oriented charitable causes (e.g., the Long-Term Future Fund), and by supporting forward-thinking public policies (MacAskill, 2022). Conversely, others contend that prioritizing the future imposes undue costs on present generations, potentially undermining immediate welfare and well-being (Crary, 2023; a viewpoint that also reflects in people's psychological intuitions; Law et al., 2025). In the present research, we challenge the notion that future-oriented and present-oriented concerns are inherently at odds, instead examining whether efforts to benefit future generations might also relate positively to psychological well-being in the present.

Across three highly powered studies, we find robust evidence that legacy concerns, especially when motivated by prosocial intentions, predict increased mental well-being. These associations were not only found across multiple conceptualizations of meaning (e.g., presence and search for meaning, purpose, mattering, and comprehension), but also for outcomes like self-flourishment, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Reputation legacy concerns had similar, albeit weaker, associations with these outcomes. Notably, when controlling for the intercorrelations between the two categories of legacy motivations (namely, the general disposition to leave a legacy), we find that impact-oriented legacy is a more robust predictor than reputation-oriented legacy. Going further, we found that respondents who display Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence (IIB) – those who feel high levels of prosocial concern for all future generations tend to score higher in both domains of legacy concern. While some direct positive impacts of IIB on mental well-being were noted, particularly for meaning-focused outcomes, the most consistent finding was the indirect association of IIB with positive indicators of well-being through increased impact-focused concerns about one's legacy.

These findings align with prior research demonstrating that prosocial behavior is associated with benefits for both helpers and recipients (Curry et al., 2018; Van Tongeren et al., 2015) and extend this perspective to the context of intergenerational beneficence. Notably, our results suggest that prosocial motivations centered on long-term impact, rather than egoistic concerns about reputation, may be particularly relevant to well-being. This pattern of results is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) which highlights the role of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in fostering psychological flourishing and meaning, as well as prior work indicating that prosocial behavior often derives its benefits from fostering connections to something larger than oneself, inspiring a sense of purpose (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Taken together, these findings contribute to the growing literatures on legacy motivations and impartial intergenerational beneficence, showing that these future-focused motivations, when embedded in a prosocial narrative that links individuals across time, may cultivate meaning and a sense of interconnectedness, reinforcing not only prosocial and future-oriented behaviors as considerable prior research has demonstrated (Fox et al., 2024; Law, Syropoulos, Coleman, et al., 2024; Zaval et al., 2015) – but potentially present-day well-being as well.

An exception to the general trend of positive associations between the motivation to protect future generations and psychological well-being emerges in the findings related to anxiety and depression, where we observed consistently weak or non-significant associations. This suggests that intergenerational beneficence and legacy-related motivations may not directly alleviate related symptomology. Yet, meaning, life satisfaction, and flourishing – signatures of mental health we do find to be consistently related to intergenerational concern – are robustly and negatively correlated with anxiety and depression (Kim et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2009). However, when it comes to direct associations, our findings fall short of painting a conclusive picture. One possible explanation is that meaningful pursuits, such as a deep concern for the future of society, can involve both profound motivation and significant emotional challenges (e.g., Gambin & Sharp, 2018). It is plausible that those who are deeply invested in bettering the world are simultaneously driven by a sense of purpose and burdened by the weight of their concerns. This duality, where meaningful engagement coexists with emotional strain, could explain why intergenerational concern predicts fulfillment but not reduced anxiety or depression.

Aside from the inherent prosocial character of impact-related legacy motivation and impartial intergenerational beneficence, prior insights suggest that individuals who endorse these beliefs also tend to be more concerned about their own futures (Law et al., 2025). Our final study examined – and simultaneously accounted for – how connected one feels to their future-self (future self-continuity or FSC; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009) and how much they consider future outcomes of their actions (consideration of future consequences or CFC; Strathman et al., 1994) as additional mechanisms through which IIB might predict increased mental wellness. Though we found that intergenerational concern is associated with greater mental well-being even after accounting for self-directed constructs like FSC and CFC, these self-directed future-oriented constructs also exhibit their own independent effects on well-being above and beyond prosociality, with FSC emerging as a particularly strong and consistent predictor of mental wellness. This suggests that while the prosocial nature of intergenerational beneficence is likely to play a unique and significant role in promoting well-being, future-oriented thinking more generally and especially feeling connected to one's future self in particular might also contribute meaningfully to these outcomes.

These results highlight the potential for multiple avenues through which intergenerational concern may foster mental well-being. That is, in addition to fostering well-being through the other-oriented or outward pathway of prosociality, intergenerational concern might also show benefits by simultaneously strengthening individuals' connection to their own future selves and their personal future outcomes. This inward focus could enhance motivation, planning, and a sense of continuity, which may further support mental wellness. In this way, concern for the future of humanity may promote present-day well-being through a variety of mechanisms (i.e., some self-focused, some other-focused, and others related to forward-looking tendencies more generally), consistent with recent evidence that a general long-term orientation is associated with engaging in meaningful activities (Hong et al., 2025), which in turn can help individuals cultivate a stronger sense of purpose in life.

However, it is also possible that these pathways are not mutually exclusive and may interact in complex ways. For instance, the prosocial aspects of intergenerational concern might amplify the benefits of future-oriented thinking more broadly (i.e., the ascpects of looking forward that are not inherently prosocial), or vice versa, creating a synergistic effect that bolsters mental well-being. While our findings suggest these possibilities, experimental research is needed to disentangle the specific contributions of prosociality and future-oriented thinking, as well as to explore how they might vary across different individuals or contexts. Nonetheless, what is clear from the present investigation is that it is unlikely efforts to inspire intergenerational concern will come at the expense of psychological well-being in the present.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strengths of the present studies, the research relies exclusively on online samples from the United States, limiting the generalizability of the findings both within the broader U.S. population and across cultural contexts. Prior research suggests that conceptualizations of well-being are culturally constructed and vary significantly across societies (Diener et al., 2003), highlighting the need for cross-cultural examinations to explore whether and to whom the present findings might generalize. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on how different cultures construe and express legacy motivation and impartial intergenerational beneficence, though cultures vary in the extent to which they collectively invest in the future (see research on long-term orientation; e.g., Bearden et al., 2006). As such, future research should explore these dimensions in diverse cultural settings to better understand the universality and variability of these constructs.

Next, because the current research is correlational, it cannot establish causal relationships or directionality between intergenerational concern and well-being. While the observed associations are compelling, it remains unclear whether intergenerational concern fosters well-being or whether those with greater well-being are more inclined toward intergenerational beneficence. It is plausible that individuals who experience greater life satisfaction and meaning are better positioned to consider their long-term impact. Future experimental and longitudinal studies, such as daily diary interventions, could help clarify these relationships by tracking real-time fluctuations in future-oriented behaviors (e.g., sustainable decisions, donation behaviors) and well-being (McCombie et al., 2024).

Finally, future research with an applied focus should explore the role of professional vocations in shaping well-being through prosocial intergenerational commitment. Meaningful work has been consistently linked to greater psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2009), suggesting that professional roles can serve as a conduit for long-term societal impact while also providing psychological benefits to workers. Intriguingly, organizations have emerged to align individuals with careers that maximize their positive impact on society (e.g., 80,000 Hours: https://80000hours.org/career-guide/). Examining how individuals in such professions derive meaning from their work could shed further light on the mechanisms through which intergenerational prosocial motivations contribute to well-being. Such insights could inform career development and workplace interventions that enhance both personal fulfillment and professional engagement while simultaneously fostering a more sustainable and socially responsible future.

Conclusion

Across a series of three studies, we find that the motivation to protect future generations is linked to greater meaning in life, life satisfaction, and flourishing. These associations persisted even after accounting for self-oriented constructs like future self-continuity (FSC) and consideration of future consequences (CFC) and appeared to be largely accountable to impact-related versus reputational motivations to leave behind a positive legacy that serves to benefit future generations, suggesting that the prosocial nature of feeling motivated toward the future may contribute uniquely to well-being. While impartial intergenerational beneficence did not associate significantly with reduced anxiety or depression, its connection to meaning and life satisfaction may indirectly support mental health. These findings suggest that prioritizing the future need not come at the expense of present well-being, offering a more nuanced perspective on the psychological benefits of long-term intergenerational concern. Future research should explore these relationships experimentally and across a greater diversity of subject groups spanning different cultural contexts to further develop our understanding of these phenomena.

Electronic Supplementary Materials

The following electronic supplementary material is available with this article at https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-0001/a000443.

ESM 1. Bivariate correlations between all measures in Study 2 (Table); Bivariate correlations between all measures in Study 3 (Table).

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