

American Generosity: Who Gives and Why?

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American Generosity answers the *what, how much, who, where, and why* questions of generous activities. This book takes an interdisciplinary approach that defines generosity as expressed through multiple forms of giving. The focus is on three primary forms of giving: donating money, volunteering time, and taking political action. Also explored are participation in giving blood, bodily organs, material possessions, relational attention, and participating in environmental sustainability. All findings are based on data from the Science of Generosity Initiative, combining a nationally representative survey of adult Americans with in-depth interviews and ethnographies of a subsample of survey respondents. From the interviews case studies were selected to narratively illustrate core themes. The analyses examine multiple dimensions of resources, social status characteristics, regional cultural norms, different approaches to giving processes, social psychological orientations, and relational contexts of generosity. The conclusion presents a theoretical model of resource-, norm-, and identity-supported “circles of generosity,” which ripple outward in their reach to different targets of giving. Practical implications include tips for readers who are interested in increasing their giving, parents modeling giving to children, spouses desiring giving alignment, and friends and community members wanting to support other people’s giving. Also offered are fundraising ideas for nonprofit, foundation, and religious leaders, as well as scholars of generosity.

Keywords: donations, volunteering, civic engagement, relational support, social psychological, survey, ethnographies

Introduction –Who Gives and Why?

American Generosity in Perspective

The introduction answers the *what* question of American generosity and provides a brief background on generosity-related fields. Generosity is defined as giving good things to others freely and abundantly. Generous behaviors are intended to enhance the well-being of others and can be actualized through various forms of giving. As such this study is theoretically situated between theories of altruism and rational choice theories. The introduction highlights the unique, multi-outcome approach to studying the dual behaviors of giving at all and giving greater amounts of money or time. An overview of the Science of Generosity Initiative is provided, with a summary of the mixed-methods employed. Quantitative survey data, qualitative interviews, and ethnographic case study analyses are summarized, and a chapter overview is provided.

Keywords: giving, well-being, behaviors, mixed-methods, altruism, rational choice theory

Case Study Introductions:

An In-depth Look at 12 Americans and Their Giving

To put generosity within the context of real social lives, twelve case studies are presented that illustrate the broader quantitative themes presented throughout the book. These qualitative cases help explain real-life processes involved in giving behaviors and guide understanding of the broader quantitative patterns presented in the book. Understanding these interviewees—in all their beauty, idiosyncrasies, and enjoyable life-messiness—breathes life and meaning into the numbers and trends presented throughout the book. As with people encountered in life, some of the cases are more likable than others, but all help to explain how complex life stories shape people into the givers (or not) that they are. The sharing of their lives illustrates the generosity that rings in the human heart with all of its inspiration, sad realities, and funny inconsistencies.

Keywords: case studies, narratives, qualitative, meaning, real-life examples

Chapter 1 –A Picture of Generosity:

Participation in Giving Behaviors

Chapter 1 answers the *how much* question of American generosity and describes participation rates in nine different forms of generous behaviors. Drawing on a wealth of social science literature ranging from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam, this chapter finds somewhat low levels of voluntary participation in the United States today. Snapshots of American generosity are taken across different forms of giving behaviors and reveal a fairly dim picture when examining any one form at a time. The first set of explanations for giving trends is introduced by examining how access to resources colors the generosity picture. While the chapter confirms that resources do matter, it also shows that they do not fully explain giving behaviors.

Keywords: social capital, financial giving, volunteering, civic engagement, socioeconomic resources, Putnam, Tocqueville

Chapter 2 –The Landscape of Generosity:

Social Status and Regional Patterns

In chapter 2, the *who* and *where* questions of American generosity are studied in a Blau-inspired social differentiation analysis. Rates of participation in the “Big 3” generosity forms—financial giving, volunteering, and political action—are investigated with the social status characteristics: age, gender, racial/ethnic identification, marital status, households with youth, religious service attendance, political affiliation, educational attainment, employment status, household income, impact of the recession, homeownership status, residential tenure, and location within metropolitan areas. Also studied are participation rates as related to ability and discretionary time, with particular focus on poverty, disability, elderly status, unemployment, full-time and part-time employment, and student statuses. Geographic maps plot giving patterns by region of the country. Results indicate that some regional giving patterns are related to demographic composition of the areas, while others are differences in regional cultures. This chapter shows that focusing on only one form of generosity biases by social status and region.

Keywords: social statuses, income, education, religion, gender, regional maps, culture, Blau

Chapter 3 –Types of American Givers:

Variations in Approaches to Giving

The *how* question of American generosity is investigated in chapter 3. An innovative analytical method, called fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, is used to construct Weberian-inspired ideal types along with an atypical group that does not fit into one of these types. The types show how processes of giving group together into discernible combinations regarding the degree to which giving is routine or spontaneous, consciously decided or “just happens,” predetermined or situationally-dependent. Four types of givers are found: Planned, Habitual, Selective, and Impulsive, plus non-discernable-pattern givers labeled as Atypical. The approach represents a combination of Bourdieu-inspired habitus, Freud-inspired consciousness, cognitive theory–inspired behavioral regulation, and through focus on actualization of giving behaviors rather than only intentions to be generous. Particular attention is given to the importance of income, education, and religion in differing approaches to generosity behaviors.

Keywords: ideal types, cognitive theory, qualitative comparative analysis, religion, Weber, Bourdieu

Chapter 4 – Personal and Social Orientations to Giving:

A Social Psychological Approach

In chapter 4 social psychological approaches to investigating the *why* question of American generosity are explored. Theoretical background consists of Mead-inspired symbolic interactionism, Cooley-inspired “looking glass self,” theories of action, Durkheim-inspired social solidarity, Marx-inspired collective consciousness, and Weber-inspired social responsibility and materialism. The chapter begins with an identification of key social psychological factors and their variation in giving outcomes and concludes with attention to varying levels of generous self-identity. The analyses of chapters 1, 2, and 3 are investigated in tandem with social psychological factors, illuminating the importance of personal and social orientations in explaining why Americans differ in their approaches to generous activities. Case studies provide extensive narrative explanations of the ways orientations to giving shape giving practices.

Keywords: social psychology, social solidarity, collective consciousness, social responsibility, Mead, Cooley, Marx, Durkheim, Weber

Chapter 5 –Giving Webs of Affiliations:

A Sociorelational Approach

Chapter 5 presents a sociorelational approach to explaining generosity behaviors. Situated within broader theories of industrialization, modernity, social differentiation, community, and association, the analysis applies a Simmelian-inspired theory of webs of affiliations. Generous self-identity is explored in relation to alignment with spouse in giving, having been taught or role-modeled to give by parents, being surrounded by close friends who are givers, hearing religious calls to give in worship services, and perceiving the local community or national context to be one of high giving. Analyses illuminate the ways that giving is a relational behavior. People vary in their individual choices to give, ability to give, ways they give, and extent of giving support in their affiliations.

Keywords: community, relational support, web of affiliations, religious practices, parents, Simmel

Conclusion –Generosity, Philanthropy, and

Civil Society in Social Context

The conclusion summarizes the central contributions of the book and offers a Maslow-inspired theory of “circles of generosity” that represent meaningful bundles of giving ability, intended targets, and motivations that ripple outward in their societal impacts. These include self-sufficiency generosity, parental-familial generosity, community-religious generosity, and professional-lifestyle generosity. All of these provide benefits to both givers and intended receivers, but in distinct ways. A number of implications for different kinds of readers are also offered in the conclusion. These include research-based tips for individual givers, parents, giving-supportive friends and community members, practitioners in nonprofits, foundations, and religious organizations, as well as interdisciplinary scholars of generosity, philanthropy, civil society, and social behaviors. The result is a better understanding of people as embedded in sociorelational contexts that provide more or less support for giving behaviors, coupled with varying personal orientations, regional cultures, demographic circumstances, and access to resources, all of which combine in explaining their involvement in generous activities.

Keywords: philanthropy, civil society, social context, giving targets, motivations, practical implications, Maslow