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book review

American Generosity: Who Gives and Why

By Patricia Snell Herzog & Heather E. Price

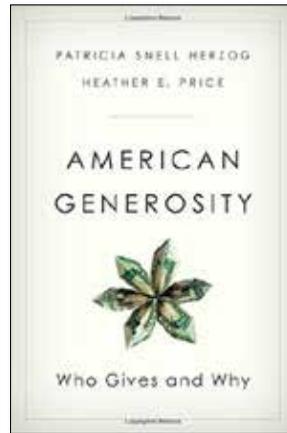
There was considerable buzz in the field of philanthropic research in 2009, when the Science of Generosity (SciGen) Initiative was launched at the University of Notre Dame with a \$5 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation to “mobilize top-quality research across various disciplines on the origins, expressions and effects of generosity.” Now, seven years later, *American Generosity: Who Gives and Why*, by Patricia Herzog & Heather Price, has been published as the “flagship volume of the Science of Generosity Initiative,” according to SciGen Director Christian Smith, and the “most comprehensive and in-depth book about American generosity written to date.”

Theoretically, the authors begin with a critical clarification that they situate their research on generosity between the two rigid theoretical poles of rational choice and pure altruism, of pure self-interest or pure other-oriented giving. Instead, they are exploring the messy and confusing and complex reality of generous behavior that lives between these two pure states — like the person who volunteers at a soup kitchen out of concern for the rising homeless population and then ends up getting a job because they make a contact while volunteering. This commitment to exploring the complexities of generous behavior and how the manifest in real lives across America is evident throughout the book and in particular, the stories of 12 individual givers shared over the

course of the book help ground this evidence rich analysis in lived experiences.

Ultimately, *American Generosity* explores two core behaviors — whether people give and how much they give — and then tries to understand how and why these two core behaviors vary across a wide range of factors. Throughout their research, Herzog & Price look at nine different forms of generosity (p. 6) in an attempt to provide a comprehensive, or at least more inclusive, understanding this impulse to do good in all its forms. They focus on the “big three” as the most prominent forms of generosity:

- Giving money (donating to charitable causes),
- Giving time (volunteering for charitable causes), and
- Giving action (taking political action for charitable causes).



Herzog, P. and Price, H. (2016). *American Generosity: Who Gives and Why*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0190456493

Additionally, they also include some investigation of six other forms: giving blood, giving organs, giving property, lending possessions, giving sustainability (efforts to care for the environment like recycling), and giving attention. I found this inclusion of a wide-ranging set of forms that generosity can take to be both a central strength and weakness of the work. On one hand, this framing brings in a range of experiences and provides the more comprehensive take on “doing good for others” that the SciGen Initiative aims for,

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but at the same time, as a result, it doesn't go as deep into the variations and details of different types of generous behaviors as one might wish. Perhaps future volumes will delve into more depth to build on this initial work.

One of the things that makes *American Generosity* stand out as a new cornerstone book in the field of generosity research is the quality of the data upon which its analysis is built. The core of this work is the analysis of SciGen's nationally representative, cross-sectional survey — one of the largest and most rigorous surveys on the topic of generosity ever conducted. This online survey was conducted in 2010 with a final sample size of 1,997 American adults (aged 23 years and older) with a 65 percent response rate. By geocoding respondent addresses, the research team were also able to explore generosity in relationship to place, pulling in tract-level data from the U.S. Census. To complement the survey findings, the research team also developed a stratified-quota sample of 40 people (plus 22 spouses or partners for a total of 62 interviewees) from among the almost 2,000 survey respondents for in-person interviews along with ethnographic observations and extensive photographing during each interview visit. However, despite the rigor of this data collection, an important caveat to all of the findings Herzog & Price present is that they are relying on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal survey data. While their interviewees share their memories of how things have changed, the lack of independent time series data means that questions about whether these findings are constant or shifting remains an open question for future researchers to test.

After explaining their data and methodology, and introducing the reader to the twelve interviewees who help illustrate their findings, you dive into the five core chapters of *American Generosity*. First is a review of the “picture of American generosity” — the high level data summary of American participation in the nine forms of generosity Herzog & Price outline in their

introduction. Looking back at literature from de Tocqueville onwards, they find somewhat lower levels of volunteering today and argue that if you look at any one form of generosity in isolation you get a “fairly dim picture” of American generosity overall. Moving to the next chapter, they present the “landscape of American generosity” and a much brighter picture of American generosity emerges, with over 90 percent of American's reporting at least one recent generous act. They also explore how overall patterns of generosity vary by both traditional demographics and fascinating regional differences that draws on studies of U.S. regional cultures. Both chapters one and two will appeal to nonprofit, academic, and public leaders looking for an understanding of giving, volunteering, and other generous activities among Americans that goes a step deeper than “x percent of people give.”

Chapter three provides a framework of donor types that echoes many fundraising guides about the different types of givers. But rather than building just from personal observation, Herzog & Price derive from survey data four “giver types” — Planned, Habitual, Selective, and Impulsive — and the frequency of each type of giver. While fundraisers might hope to engage planned and habitual givers (those who give in a structured or routine way) they unfortunately only represent 16 percent and 6 percent of all givers, respectively. Indeed, spontaneous givers represent the majority of those who give (impulsive givers at 42 percent and selective givers at 17 percent). The final 19 percent of givers were labeled as Atypical and represented either those who did not answer sufficient questions, whose survey answers were inconsistent (said they didn't give and later in the survey said they did) or whose patterns didn't fit with one of the overarching patterns. One can imagine fundraisers attempting to classify their major donors between these categories to better understand the make up of their donor base or of future researchers focusing in on similarities and differences of donors of one

type to help us all better understand the nuances of generous behavior.

Chapters four and five pivot from explaining the who, what, when, where, and how people are generous to exploring the most challenging question of why people are generous. Of interest both to researchers and fundraisers, this pair of chapters presents refined frameworks for thinking about generosity that have the potential to shape future conversations about motivations for giving, volunteering and more. Using a social psychological approach to analyzing the results of over 100 questions asked of survey respondents, Herzog and Price identified seven core factors that influence people's tendency towards generosity:

1. **Social Solidarity:** "We're all in this together."
2. **Life Purpose:** "I am here for a reason."
3. **Collective Conscious:** "We are here to help each other."
4. **Social Trust:** "People are trustworthy and not out to get me."
5. **Prosperity Outlook:** "The world is abundant, and there is plenty to go around."
6. **Acquisition Seeking:** "Life is for the taking."
7. **Social Responsibility:** "We are all our brother's (or sister's) keeper."

Unfortunately, the battery of questions and complex and often confidential nature of people's self-identification will make bringing these insights on motivation hard to bear in practical application. But as a window into understanding the complexity of what drives us to give and a structure to think about how we can spur greater giving by speaking to people's core motivations, these insights present powerful possibilities.

In their final core chapter, Herzog & Price apply theories of relationship webs to understand influences on giving behavior (the socio-relational context of giving). While few of their findings strike one as revolutionary, their detailed and thorough analysis and rigorous testing of hypothesis and patterns offers the grounding to support many oft-repeated truisms about generosity and help us better frame our understanding of this phenomenon. They ultimately find that people whose spouses are generous, whose parents provided a strong positive example of giving, and those who have regular exposure to religious calls to give end up giving more (p. 272). While these findings are not shocking, the detailed attention to the modeling of six different primary affiliations and careful testing with both traditional regression methods and fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis lends these findings greater confidence than much past research in the field.

Taken altogether, *American Generosity* offers a deep and incisive examination of the patterns and causes of generosity in the United States and a thoughtful development and testing of new and refined frameworks to understand the phenomenon of generosity in general. While geared primarily to scholars exploring these issues, it will also definitely prove of interest for fundraisers and other nonprofit leaders looking to strengthen and deepen their resource development strategies. But for its core academic audience, *American Generosity* capably achieves what it set out to do — to provide a rigorous, data-driven grounding for future research into the science of generosity.



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