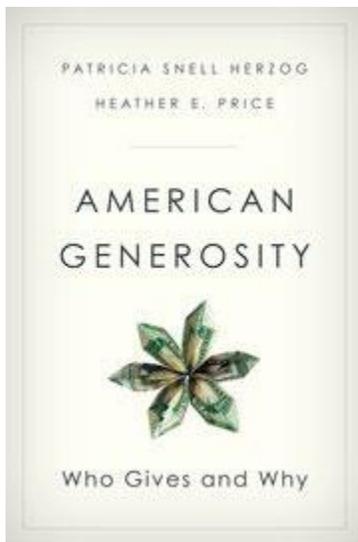


## American Generosity: Who Gives and Why [Review]

May 17, 2016

Imagine a snapshot of American giving. What would it look like? Would it portray an abundantly generous America, or show a dismal lack of involvement in charitable causes and civic society? In [\*American Generosity: Who Gives and Why\*](#), sociologists Patricia Snell Herzog and Heather E. Price address this question using a variety of methods with the goal of both broadening and deepening our understanding of how generosity is expressed, what fuels it, and what can be done to encourage more of it.



To write their book, Herzog and Price drew on the results of Notre Dame's [Science of Generosity Initiative](#), a [Templeton Foundation](#)-supported effort to promote interdisciplinary approaches to the study of generosity in all its forms. The initiative's findings and Herzog and Price's presentation of those findings, offer valuable insights for the individual giver as well as scholars, religious leaders, and nonprofit practitioners and fundraisers.

The book, which draws much of its data from a nationally representative survey of more than a thousand people, is organized into a "who, what, where, why, and how much" structure. Herzog and Price begin by defining generosity as "giving good things freely to enhance the well-being of others." Although they identify nine such forms of giving, the "Big 3" are: donations of cash, time spent volunteering, and political or civic activity. (The other six encompass a wide range of actions, including the donation of one's blood or organs, estate giving, environmentally sustainable consumption, the lending of one's possessions, and "relational" giving to friends and family.)

Having defined generosity and identified its constituent forms, Herzog and Price then look at how generous Americans are, and how social and demographic factors — age, race, gender, education, income level — and regional characteristics influence generosity — "zoom[ing] out," as they put it, "from the frame-by-frame snapshots [in the earlier chapter] and survey[ing] the overall landscape of American generosity with a wide-angle lens." It's a view, they add, that lends itself to a "glass half-full perspective," in that it allows us to "see that Americans are generally quite active in working to help others."

One of the ways Herzog and Price add nuance to their portrayal and "breathe life into" the "static quantitative snapshots" is by including in-depth interviews from twelve survey participants. And one of the most interesting aspects of their analysis is the finding that while resources such as time, money, and connections do influence whether and how much someone gives, they are hardly the only factors that shape individual generosity — and don't explain why individuals with few resources often give more generously than those who have more to give. Why that might be the case is the subject of the second half of the book.

Herzog and Price find that givers generally fall into four categories ("giver types"): Planned, Habitual, Selective, and Impulsive (and some, whose survey answers are inconsistent or don't jibe with the patterns predicted by their framework, who are grouped as "Atypical"). The four types differ widely in how they choose to donate. Planned givers (about 16 percent) "have a regular, established routine for giving, and they spend time consciously deciding on their donations, allowing their giving amounts or the targets of their giving to adjust and change"; Habitual givers (6 percent) "put some thought into developing their...system, and then...tend to let it run on autopilot" (the religious tithe exemplifies this kind of giving); Selective givers (17 percent) "make conscious decisions about where and how much to give, but they do so with a spontaneous, non-routine approach"; and Impulsive givers (40 percent) "have no sustained, regular, or conscious involvement with giving," but respond when "presented with an immediate situation" such as an emergency relief appeal that involves texting a \$10 donation by smartphone.

Herzog and Price next explore how the social and demographic factors discussed in an earlier chapter apply to their giver types and then look in some detail at how various personal and social orientations — the extent to which people aspire to own material things, the extent to which people believe there are no hard-and-fast rights/wrongs in life, the extent to which people feel grateful for what they have — influence giving. After identifying seven principal factors representing a range of social psychological characteristics (social solidarity, life purpose, social trust, prosperity outlook, etc.), they then address "the billion-dollar question": To what extent do these orientations explain philanthropic behavior? The answer? "On the one hand, the reasons [for giving] cannot be reduced to a simplistic formula shared by all American givers. On the other hand, the story is not so complicated that we cannot make sense of it. People act in patterned ways, and adequate, non-reductionist explanations of giving outcomes entail combinations of personal orientations and approaches to giving."

The authors then adjust their lens to include an individual's socio-relational context using Georg Simmel's Webs of Affiliation theory, which posits that the modern individual, instead of belonging to "concentric" social circles (as was customary in the past), is embedded in a spoke-like web of group affiliations that sometimes reinforce and sometimes conflict with each other. These include personal affiliations — spouses, parents, friends, and religious calls to action — as well as local and national giving contexts. Herzog and Price consider each of these affiliations in relation to levels of "generous self-identity," and conclude that people with generous self-identities are more likely to be givers, and to give more, if their social circles are also generous. Conversely, people who find themselves in social circles that aren't very generous will tend to give less.

In accordance with this finding, Herzog and Price offer one of many useful tips in the book for increasing giving by Americans: feel free to talk about your own giving (without bragging, of course). If Americans spent as much time talking about their volunteer activities or the fact they donate blood as they do about pop culture or their own hobbies, they write, people around them would be inspired to give more. Elsewhere in the book, they share a number of techniques designed to help fundraisers and development professionals appeal to the various giver types. For example, planned givers, as part of their systematic approach, value feedback about "what their donations accomplished" from the organizations to which they donate.

Perhaps more significantly, the authors warn against "focusing on only one of expression of generosity" (e.g., donating money) and broaden their definition of giving to more fully encompass the generosity of, for example, lower-income Americans and people who often are just trying to get by. "To limit our understanding of generosity to giving away resources" without taking into account relational giving or a low-income individual's

efforts to become self-sufficient, they write, "necessarily makes giving something that can be done only from [a position of advantage]." Insights like that — which is hinted at early in the book but is only fully articulated toward the end — makes one wish that Herzog and Price had spent more time discussing the ways in which we all could work together to highlight the value and impact of charitable giving, regardless of the form it takes.

That said, *American Generosity* is only a starting point; indeed, Herzog and Price close with a call for additional multidisciplinary research into this broad and important topic. And while a cynic might point to the relatively low charitable involvement of many Americans and argue that nothing anyone does will change the basic fundamental equation of generosity in America, the authors end their book on a more hopeful note, saying there's a great deal of potential in the American giving landscape waiting to be tapped.

*Mirielle Clifford is an online resources program associate at the [New York Foundation for the Arts](#). For more great reviews, visit our [Off the Shelf](#) section.*