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Review of American Generosity: Who Gives and Why by Patricia Snell Herzog and Heather E. Price

Young-Il Kim

George Fox University, ykim@georgefox.edu

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American Generosity: Who Gives and Why,
by PATRICIA SNELL HERZOG and
HEATHER E. PRICE. New York:
Oxford University Press, 2016, 376 pp.;
\$34.95 (cloth).

In *American Generosity*, sociologists Patricia Herzog and Heather Price provide comprehensive, detailed, and realistic portraits of generosity among American adults. The research in this book was conducted as part of the University of Notre Dame's Science of Generosity Initiative. In an earlier book, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson described the paradox of generosity in which few Americans generously give despite the many benefits that generosity brings back to the giver. *American Generosity* sheds some light on why this paradox exists, asking: Who gives, who does not give, and why do some people give more than others?

In order to answer these questions, the authors rely on a wide range of data sources, including a nationally representative Internet survey, geocoded data, in-person interviews, ethnographic observation, and photographs. This breadth extends to the scope of subject matter as well. The book investigates nine forms of generous behaviors, including charitable giving, volunteering, political action, blood and organ donation, estate giving, possession lending, sustainability giving, and relational giving. Furthermore, it applies an interdisciplinary approach to explaining these behaviors,

drawing from the social psychological and sociological literatures.

The book is comprehensive in its methods, coverage of the subject, and approach in explaining and conceptualizing generosity. For Herzog and Price, generosity comes from both altruism and self-oriented motivations. That is, as long as behavior is intended to benefit someone else, having egoistic motivation is not an issue. Rather than attempting to reconcile the egoistic and altruistic motives, Herzog and Price examine how generosity is conceived of and executed in the daily lives of ordinary Americans.

Conceptualizing generosity broadly, the authors treat one's immediate relatives as the recipient of generosity. In their view, one can even show generosity to others by not relying on others' resources. Based on this "self-sufficiency generosity," one can build up generosity toward one's own families ("relational-parental generosity"); one's own church and community ("community-religious generosity"); and ultimately, abstract others ("professional-lifestyle generosity"). This is what they call "circles of generosity." Understanding generosity this way not only lessens the moral burden that "giving" carries, but also offers realistic prospects of achieving generosity, regardless of one's human and economic resources. For example, readers will meet characters such as Rosa Perez, an expecting mother living in a Brooklyn housing project, who babysits for her relatives and friends. Taking generosity out of middle-class contexts, Herzog and Price provide an often-overlooked picture of how generosity is performed relationally in resource-deprived neighborhoods.

As a quantitative researcher, I found it particularly useful when the authors analyzed certain variables that survey researchers often overlook. Residual poverty is one such variable. Using in-depth interviews, the authors demonstrate that poverty experienced in childhood is a key barrier to financial giving. One of their respondents is reluctant to give money despite his economic resources because "his financial fears of the past cast a long shadow over his life" (112–13). This notion of residual poverty

explains more about why people give or do not give than measures of family income alone. Future survey research on the topic may benefit from incorporating measures of residual poverty in the survey's design.

While important insights clearly emerged from the in-depth interviews, the selection of case studies at times neglected the bigger picture. For example, the three community-religious generosity cases are very similar, all representing instances of religious giving, although the authors recognize that one does not have to be religious to fit the "community-religious generosity" type. Ryan Dewey, Jackie Sawyer, and George Nettleson (the examples used) all attend church regularly, tithe, and take religion seriously when it comes to giving. I suspect that there are some nonreligious interviewees who are equally active in giving to their ideal communities, but those stories are not told.

Another weakness is that although it is intuitive to view generosity in terms of concentric circles, the inner two circles of generosity can blur conceptual distinctions among generosity, self-reliance, and familism. The book also excludes many personal and social orientations and social relational factors that affect giving behaviors. Perhaps, this is the price that must be paid for a broader audience. Scholars who expect a structural equation model to see how these factors are causally linked to one another may find the book less than satisfying. Lastly, the book could have added vitality to the narrative by presenting some photographs taken in the interviewees' houses and neighborhoods.

Despite these limitations, *American Generosity* is an academically sound and highly accessible book. Practitioners, general readers, as well as scholars will find it rewarding.

Young-Il Kim
Baylor University

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