

Giving and Volunteering in the Netherlands

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

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Introduction

Philanthropy – private action for the public good – is studied by scholars from a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences. In sociology, philanthropy is studied as an indicator of social capital and cohesion in society. In personality and social psychology, giving is studied as a form of prosocial behavior with a more or less altruistic character. Unfortunately, these shared interests have not led to common endeavors. The aim of the dissertation is to increase our knowledge of philanthropy and to foster the mutual understanding between sociology and personality and social psychology when accounting for philanthropic behavior. To do so, I studied intentions to give in a scenario experiment, actual philanthropy, and various other forms of philanthropy (such as blood and organ donation) and civic engagement (membership of voluntary associations and volunteering). In the present summary, I will focus on traditional philanthropy: monetary gifts to charitable nonprofit organizations.

Sociological and psychological perspectives on giving

First, I outline the sociological and psychological perspectives on philanthropy. Sociologists argue that the social conditions in which people live are the main determinants of giving. People often receive requests for contributions to voluntary associations from friends, family members and others in their social networks. People tell each other that it is a good thing to contribute, putting social pressure on contributing. Sociologists – following economists – generally assume that good intentions are universal, but that some people have a stock of human and social capital that allows them to fulfill these intentions while others lack the resources to do so. Thus, sociologists and economists have studied the effects of financial capital (income and wealth), human capital (level of education and health), and social capital (community and religious involvement) on giving.

Personality and social psychologists, on the other hand, argue that across a variety of social conditions, some people are more likely to engage in philanthropy contribute because they have an ‘altruistic personality’: they are more helpful, empathic, or more able to take the perspective of people in need, while others are more likely to refuse, evade, or forget their duties towards others. This psychological perspective is attractive because it suggests that people base their prosocial behavior on their personal preferences and values, giving them an individual responsibility for their actions. The sociological perspective points to the role of the social environment; an external factor that forces itself upon us. Psychologists are interested in philanthropy as an expression of prosocial dispositions such as extraversion, agreeableness, social value orientations and empathy. In this literature, volunteers are found to be more sociable and extraverted people with a caring disposition; philanthropists are compassionate people who identify more strongly with the needs of others; and blood donors have an exceptional altruistic self-identity.

However, we know very little about the relative effects of personality characteristics and social conditions on prosocial behavior.

Sociologists and psychologists have studied prosocial behavior in relative isolation. Social psychologists have devoted little attention to the way personality dispositions are intertwined with social conditions. As a result, we know very little about how important individual differences in personality are, compared to financial, human and social capital. We know even less about the interactive effects of personality characteristics and social conditions. When do people base their prosocial behavior on their personal preferences and values? To get a better view of the determinants of giving, I adopt a multi-disciplinary perspective, investigating how personality and socio-demographic characteristics interact and jointly determine philanthropic behavior. Thus, the first research question of this dissertation is: *To what extent can philanthropic behavior be explained by prosocial motives and other psychological characteristics of people and the social conditions in which they live?*

Data & Methods

To test the hypotheses, I integrate research methods used in sociology and psychology. Sociologists have mainly studied prosocial behavior with large random sample surveys, showing differences between social groups. Psychologists have mainly studied prosocial behavior in laboratory and field experiments, as a criterion variable for prosocial motives and personality characteristics. While the internal validity of these studies is often high, the external validity of these studies is often limited by the use of student samples and abstract decision making situations such as in the social dilemma research paradigm. In addition, sociological studies rarely include personality characteristics, and psychological studies rarely include social characteristics. In this dissertation, I combine the strength of sociological and psychological research methods. I report five studies investigating effects of social conditions and personality simultaneously on examples of prosocial behavior in the 'real life' among a large sample of the Dutch population. I use data from the Family Survey of the Dutch Population (FSDP) that were collected in the year 2000 among 1,587 individuals. The survey is a multistage stratified probability sample designed to be representative of the Dutch population. The FSDP contains measures of charitable giving, membership of voluntary associations, volunteer work, blood donation and post mortem organ donation, which served as dependent variables. The survey contained a wide range of socio-demographic characteristics that serve as measures of financial, human, and social capital. In addition, the survey contained a unique set of measures of personality characteristics. A brief measure of the 'Big Five' consisting of 30 items was included, which has become the standard approach to personality in psychology today. The 'Big Five' are the five most general traits of human personality. They can be remembered easily with the acronym OCEAN: Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. In addition to the 'Big Five', I measured three specifically prosocial motives for giving and volunteering: Empathic Concern, Perspective Taking, and prosocial value orientations. These measures are often used in social psychology. The reliability coefficients of the personality measures were ranging from .68 to .87.

Results

Willingness to give to charities. In a scenario study, I asked the respondents to imagine that they were in a variety of situations where they faced a request for a contribution to a nonprofit organization. The experiment varied the amount of time or money requested, the relationship of the respondent with the person asking for a contribution, the efficacy of the contribution in realizing the organization's goals, and the psychological distance to the beneficiaries of the contribution. In total, 140 different scenarios were rated by the respondents. Because each respondent rated 8 scenarios, I created variance within as well as between subjects. The results of a series of random effects logistic regression analyses show that the social distance to the intermediary person is the key factor determining the willingness to give time and money: people are more likely to honor requests by persons at a smaller social distance. This result indicates that social incentives have powerful effects on contributions to collective goods. A striking finding was that a request by a spouse or a family member was almost never refused, regardless of the amount requested or the type of cause receiving the donation. Other findings were that a higher distance to the beneficiary decreased the willingness to give, and that requests for less effective contributions were more likely to be refused.

Among the characteristics of the respondents, the level of education is the strongest predictor of giving and volunteering intentions, while personality characteristics typically had smaller effects. Higher educated persons more often reported a willingness to contribute money. Other socio-demographic characteristics that increased the willingness to contribute money were a higher household income and a higher frequency of church attendance. The only personality characteristic that promoted intentions to give money was empathic concern.

Philanthropy. In a second study, I investigate traditional philanthropy – monetary donations to charitable nonprofit organizations – and health related philanthropy. I find that personality has little to do with traditional philanthropy. Empathic concern promotes the likelihood that people engage in philanthropy as well as the amount donated. Extraversion only promotes the likelihood that people engage in philanthropy, but not the amount donated. Socio-demographic characteristics are much more strongly related to philanthropy than personality characteristics. The likelihood that people make charitable donations increases with the level of education, income, working hours, and decreases with the level of urbanization (effects ordered according to their relative influence). The amount donated increases with the level of education, church attendance, income, working hours, and level of urbanization. To illustrate the magnitude of the effects of social conditions compare the difference in annual donations between the lowest and the highest percentile on the empathy concern-scale (€85) with the difference between those who never attend religious services and those who attend church more than once a month (€220) or the difference between respondents with primary education only and those who completed tertiary education (€120, net of all other variables, including household income).

Civic engagement. In three studies of civic engagement in voluntary associations, I arrive at similar conclusions: participation in voluntary associations is mainly a matter of being in the right social conditions (again: higher education and stronger religious involvement, but also living in a smaller community) rather than being a specific 'type' of person. In one of the studies of civic engagement, I show that the nature of participation in voluntary associations has changed profoundly since World War II. Due to secularisation, participation in religious organizations declined. At the same time, secular associations such as human rights watch organizations, environmental organizations and sports clubs have emerged due to the rise of postmaterialist value orientations and the average level of education. I find no support for the

argument that participation in secular voluntary associations is more strongly based on personality characteristics than participation in pillarized associations. Instead, some secular organizations have grown because they offer more selective incentives to members, while others have grown because of the increase in postmaterialistic values among the Dutch population.

Conclusions and implications

This dissertation has implications for scholars as well as practitioners. For academic scholars, the dissertation shows that giving and volunteering are primarily social behavior, determined by social conditions. On average, about 30% of all the variance in the examples of prosocial behavior that was explained by the most extensive regression models was due to personality characteristics and social value orientations. The most distinctive characteristic of people who give time, money, blood and organs is their higher than average level of education. In addition, people who are more religious, live in smaller communities, work more hours for pay and earn higher incomes also tend to contribute more (often). I found evidence that the relations of giving and volunteering with social conditions such as education or church attendance are partly due to personality characteristics; and that purely sociological studies of participation can lead to biased estimates of the effects of social conditions such as age and education. The major implication for scholars is that studies from either sociology or psychology are incomplete because they disregard the role of the determinants that are part of the other discipline.

For practitioners, the dissertation sheds light on the effectiveness of recruitment strategies donors to charitable causes. The scenario study shows that recruitment of donors and volunteers through personal ties is most effective. Moreover, the effectiveness of personal solicitation hardly varies between persons with different personality characteristics. This means that organizations should try to recruit donors and volunteers with a large and dense network of friends and relatives, without paying much attention their personality. The study on changes in civic engagement shows that younger people are recruited more easily by offering selective incentives.