

# If Giving Makes People Happy, Authors Ask, Why Not Give More?

By Avi Wolfman-Arent

For most of his life, Christian Smith didn't donate much to charity. The sociologist at the University of Notre Dame knew he had the means to give and knew that he should.

But there was a psychological hurdle standing in his way, what Mr. Smith calls a "comfortable guilt."

About a decade ago he changed his giving habits, with a goal of donating 10 percent or more of his income to charity. He soon noticed a corresponding change in his disposition.

"Once you conquer the no-I'll-keep-it-to-myself gremlin, it's really great," Mr. Smith says. "You come across a need and say, I'd like to help with that. It's a great feeling."

Inspired by his personal experiment, Mr. Smith wanted to see if others who were generous with their money and time experienced the same benefits. He detailed his findings in [The Paradox of Generosity](#), a new book he co-authored with a colleague at Notre Dame, Hilary Davidson.

The pair discovered that generous people, on the whole, were happier and healthier and had a greater sense of purpose than others, even after controlling for a number of factors, including income.

The primary paradox is simple: The more you give of yourself, the more you receive in return.

As the book notes, this notion dates to antiquity and surfaces in a number of religious texts. Mr. Smith's argument, however, isn't built on a philosophical or spiritual scaffolding. Instead, it leans on a pair of sociological studies he and his research team conducted across the United States. Mr. Smith believes he has proven that sustained, or what he calls "practiced," generous behavior causes better life outcomes.

## Expanding Research

Mr. Smith and Ms. Davidson's research belongs to a growing number of studies that examine generosity through a scientific lens. Mr. Smith is the principal investigator of the [Science of Generosity Initiative](#), a project at Notre Dame started in 2009 with a \$5-million grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The project's grantees include sociologists, economists, psychologists, and political scientists—each examining [some aspect of generosity](#).

Jane Piliavin, professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin, began studying altruism in the [late 1960s](#) and says social science's fascination with giving is on the rise.

Ms. Piliavin contributed to a [forthcoming handbook](#) on altruistic, or "prosocial," behavior published by Oxford University Press, the same publisher that printed Mr. Smith's book. In August, Palgrave Macmillan released an [academic handbook](#) on altruism and morality.

In the past, Ms. Piliavin says, sociologists fixated on whether such a thing as [altruism existed](#) or whether all giving derived in some way from self-interest. That distinction—a largely irrelevant one for those in the nonprofit world—has given way to new modes of inquiry.

"The question is: What makes people do nice things for other people?" Ms. Piliavin says.

The answer could yield important new information for fundraisers and volunteer coordinators. Of course, it depends entirely on what the science reveals.

### **Better Lives**

On that note, *The Paradox of Generosity* offers both hope and caution.

Optimists will appreciate how thoroughly Mr. Smith and Ms. Davidson correlate generous behavior and better lives. Their findings—based on a detailed survey completed by almost 2,000 Americans—found that people who were generous with their money or their time, or generous with their relatives and neighbors on a regular basis, tended to be happier and healthier.

A skeptic might explain this away by arguing that happier, healthier people tend to be more generous.

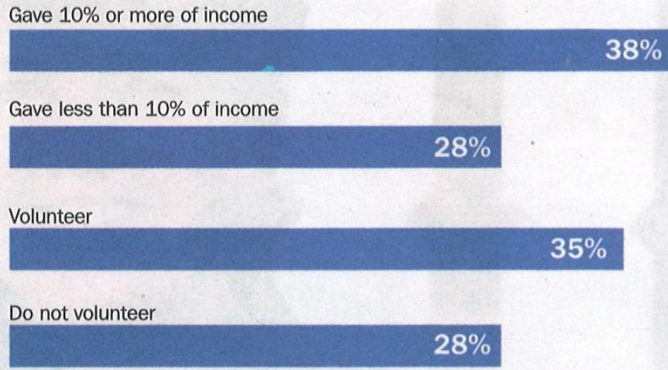
That argument, however, seems insufficient. The researchers found, for instance, that there is no correlation between happiness and generosity when it comes to one-off giving events, like lending possessions or donating blood.

Mr. Smith and Ms. Davidson write, "If giving 10 percent of one's income and volunteering are the results of being happier, healthier, and more purposeful, then why are giving blood and lending possessions not caused by this as well?"

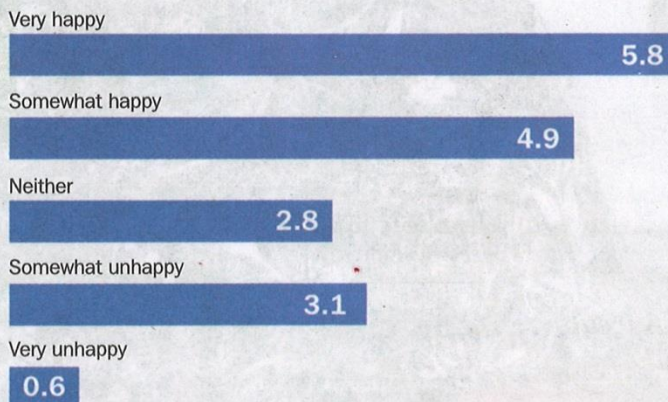
This discrepancy suggests there is something about sustained generosity that causes happiness.

## Generous People Are Happy People

### Share of people who say they are "very happy"



### Happy people give more of their time (average hours volunteered per month)



**SOURCE:** *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, 2014

## Faking Generosity

Mr. Smith and Ms. Davidson's second study, a series of interviews with 40 American families, buttresses this conclusion. The generous families had broader social circles and greater life purpose. They were less self-absorbed, exhibited a greater sense of agency, and seemed more aware of their own abundance.

The ungenerous, by comparison, live narrow, cynical lives dominated by a looming fear of poverty.

Yet, the authors find, Americans aren't all that generous.

"When it comes to generosity with money, time, skills, and relationships, we know that relaxing, letting go, and giving away is not often automatic or easy," they write. "This is especially true in American culture, which from all sides constantly pounds home messages of scarcity, discontent, insecurity, and acquisition."

This is the second paradox, that a

large majority of Americans "fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life."

According to the survey, less than 3 percent give away at least 10 percent of their income.

Worse yet, the authors say, "counterfeit" generous behavior does not beget happiness. If a person gives only to improve his or her own life outcomes, the salutary effects dissipate.

Mr. Smith believes an ungenerous person can "fake it until you make it" and that if more people knew the positive outcomes associated with generosity, they would begin to practice it and eventually fall into patterns of authentic giving.

## Questions Unanswered

That, however, is an untested hypothesis, and it leaves many questions unanswered. What causes generosity? Can we isolate what makes people generous and activate it in such a way that they give more?

Mr. Smith says much of that research is still to come. University of Arkansas sociologist Patricia Snell Herzog is working on a book about the causes of generosity. University of Kansas psychologist Omri Gillath is studying ways to induce generosity by exposing people to words that increase their sense of security.

Perhaps someday fundraisers will rely on a set of rigorously tested psychological shortcuts, each one rigged to produce peak generosity in the target audience.

At the very least, those who encourage generosity for a living can now complement those old maxims on giving and receiving with a stack of scientific evidence.

That alone may be worth something.

"Rightly or wrongly," Mr. Smith says, "science is what's authority in the modern world."