Identifying Triggers of Financial Giving and Volunteerism in Emerging Adulthood

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This analysis seeks to identify what life course milestones serve as effective triggers to incite generosity in emerging adults. Data from Wave 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion are analyzed to identify these triggers. Annual earnings and marital status are examined in their ability to predict financial giving and volunteerism. Findings reveal positive correlations between giving, marital status, and earnings, but negative correlations between volunteering and marital status, as well as between volunteering and earnings. Regression analysis specifies earnings, marital status, affiliation with a religion, and earning a bachelor's degree as significant predictors of emerging adult generosity. Unfortunately, these models account for only a small amount of the variation of emerging adult generosity, and other "stabilizing" trigger variables must be identified to capture the remaining variation in these variables.

Given that countless people and organizations rely on the charitable giving of individuals to survive, it is of utmost usefulness to investigate the root of how habits of giving time and money begin and are sustained. In 2005, Smith and Denton examine the religious lives of American teenagers, identifying religious involvement as a significant predictor of teenagers' financial giving and volunteering. In their interviews with congregants from across the United States, Smith, Emerson, and Snell (2008), reported that the vast majority of their respondents cited religious financial giving as something that they learned from their parents. Respondents also report that while their parents are responsible for this initial teaching, the sustained giving of respondents is motivated by their own morality and theology.

In their investigation of qualitative data from a study of northern Indiana congregations, Mitchell and Snell (In Progress) aimed to find exactly how this parental transmission of generosity occurs in youth. The interviews conducted aimed to query preteens, teens, and their parents on their thoughts and feelings about giving. In these interviews, a vast majority of youth respondents spoke about giving with "other-oriented" language, suggesting that the responsibility of financial giving falls to someone other than themselves. A majority of youth respondents cited their own meager financial situation when explaining their lack of giving, saying that giving is a good thing to do, but only if one is financially capable. The most notable finding in their analysis, however, takes place in the disconnect between how parents conceptualize their children's education on religious financial giving, and their children's report on the subject. The variety of thoughts and feelings that youth communicated about giving appeared wholly unrelated to the teaching techniques enumerated by their parents, and youth seemed rather apathetic towards giving on the whole.

In an effort to explain this phenomenon, Mitchell and Snell note that, in reporting their own narrative of how they themselves learned to give money, parents mentioned that their own habits of sustained giving did not take hold until later in their life, after they had reached adulthood. These responses suggest that parental teaching of giving is the first step in a larger process that culminates later in adulthood. Mitchell and Snell identify the importance of a trigger later in life to incite giving on behalf of the emerging adult. Some adults mentioned engagement with religious teaching as one of these triggers of giving; other discussed the experience of paying their own bills for the first time.

Smith and Snell (2009) shed light on this phenomenon of late onset generosity in their analysis of Wave Three of the National Study of Youth and Religion, a nationally representative telephone survey of emerging adults (ages 18-23) that was coupled with nationwide interviews. In their interviews, emerging adults echo similar sentiments to those found by Mitchell and Snell (In Progress), that giving is for those with more financial resources. The interviews revealed a generally self-interested population, who guarded their money and time as only their own, and were sometimes the recipients of charitable giving themselves. Respondents seemed generally disinterested in giving at this point in their lives, but admitted that this giving of time and money could become a goal at a time later in their life when they had more of both. Concluding, Smith and Snell (2009) mention that it remains to be seen if these plans for future generosity will be triggered into action.

A host of evidence shows that today's young people understand that giving of time and money is a good thing to do, but see giving as irrelevant to their current lives. These teens and emerging adults do suggest, however, that they may choose to give years down the road. This is consistent with accounts of adult givers who describe their experience of learning to give that culminated later in adulthood through one or more “later life triggers.” Because it would seem that these triggers of giving are of vital importance to the future of sustained generosity, this analysis seeks to identify what life course milestones serve as effective triggers to incite generosity. This will be accomplished through the analysis of Wave 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion. While the age range of this survey is only 18 to 23 years of age, this can be seen as the optimal time frame in which to detect the most effective “later life triggers” of generosity in emerging adults. The life course milestones that will be analyzed in this paper include earning a living, and getting married.

Data

Data analyzed are from Wave 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). This data was collected from 2007-2008 under the direction of Christian Smith at the University of Notre Dame. The Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill collected the Wave 3 survey data. The survey used a random digit dialing telephone sampling method, and callers attempted to contact respondents over varying days and times. Regardless of their participation in the second wave, callers attempted to contact and survey every respondent from the original NSYR sample.

Every caller obtained the consent of the respondent before the phone survey was conducted. No parental consent was required for this wave because all of the respondents were over the age of 18. For identity verification purposes only, respondents provided their name, date of birth, and the name of the city and state where they completed the first wave survey. This data is not reported in any way.

The Wave 3 dataset contains 2,532 cases and 484 variables that query a variety of dimensions of the lives of emerging adults aged 18-23. Some of these dimensions include religious beliefs, religious practices, extracurricular activities, family, friendships, risk taking behavior, education, dating, physical relationships, morality, and work history. Wave 3 features 77% of the original Wave 1 respondents.

This particular analysis focuses on the variables that assess generosity among emerging adults (volunteering, financial giving, general helping) and those variables that may affect generosity over the life course (annual earnings, marital status, age, gender, parental financial assistance received, education, affiliation with a religion). Specifically, this analysis investigates the role of earning a living and getting married as life course "triggers" that lead emerging adults to generous behavior. The effect of earnings and marital status on giving and volunteering are analyzed, and variables assessing education, religious affiliation and attendance, gender, age, and parental financial assistance received are also built into these models. These control variables were chosen because preliminary analysis revealed that these variables may explain some of the same variance as earnings and marital status, or that they may have unique effects on giving and volunteering themselves. Other control variables were included to demonstrate that they did not have an effect on giving, volunteering, annual earnings, or marital status.

Methods

This analysis begins with descriptive statistics on what percentage of respondents volunteered through an organization or gave more than $50 in the last year. Descriptive statistics are also provided for how much respondents reported helping other people in need, not through an organization. Next, correlation matrices are used to examine the relationships between annual earnings, marital status, financial giving, volunteering through an organization, and helping of people in need (not through an organization). Lastly, multiple regression is employed to assess the individual effects of earnings, marital status, gender, affiliation with a religion, frequency of religious service attendance, age, education, and parental financial help on both financial giving and giving of time. This approach expands upon the present analysis of this topic by determining the effectiveness of each variable's ability to "trigger" increased generosity in emerging adults. This detailed breakdown of each potential trigger variable allows this analysis to pinpoint what variables affect giving within a narrow age range (18-23).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Three Metrics Used to Measure Generosity

	Frequency	Percent
Give >$50 in the last year?		
Yes	835	33.1
No	1,691	66.9
Total	2,526	100.0
Volunteered in the last year?		
Yes	1,177	46.6
No	1,350	53.4
Total	2,526	100.0
Amount helped people in need		
A lot	291	11.5
Some	743	29.4
A little	823	32.6
None	668	26.5
Total	2,525	100.0

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Earnings and Generosity Metrics

	Earnings	Giving	Volunteering	Helping
Earnings	1.00			
Giving	0.14*	1.00		
Volunteering	-0.11*	0.26*	1.00	
Helping	0.12*	0.17*	0.07*	1.00

* Pr < .05

Table 3

Correlation Matrix of Marital Status and Generosity Metrics

	Marital Status	Giving	Volunteering	Helping
Marital Status	1.00			
Giving	0.09*	1.00		
Volunteering	-0.06*	0.26*	1.00	
Helping	0.03	0.17*	0.07*	1.00

* Pr < .05

Table 4

Regression of Financial Giving as a Function of Earnings, Marital Status, and Control Variables

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	.265***	.247***	.145***	-.243	-.025	-.082
	(.013)	(.017)	(.023)	(.139)	(.1648)	(-.082)
Earnings	.010***	.011***	.011***	.009***	.009***	.013***
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Marital Status	.114**	.108**	.092*	.074*	.116**	.128*
	(.038)	(.108)	(.038)	(.038)	(.042)	(.059)
Gender	-	.029	.019	.016	.016	.022
		(.019)	(.019)	(.019)	(.021)	(.024)
Religiously affiliated	-	-	.138***	.139***	.151***	.1634***
			(.022)	(.022)	(.024)	(.028)
Freq. of religious service attendance	-	-	.001* (.000)	.001* (.001)	.001* (.001)	.001* (.000)
Age	-	-	-	.020**	.009	.006
				(.007)	(.008)	(.010)
Earned Bachelor's Degree	-	-	-	-	.175*** (.053)	.126* (.057)
Amount of Financial Help from Parents	-	-	-	-	-	.036*** (.009)
R^2	.022	.024	.043	.046	0.0529	.062

* < .05   ** < .01   *** < .001

Table 5

Regression of Volunteering as a Function of Earnings, Marital Status, and Control Variables

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	.524*** (.014)	.505*** (.018)	.365*** (.025)	.530*** (.147)	.687*** (.173)	.572** (.202)
Earnings	-.009*** (.002)	-.008*** (.002)	-.008*** (.002)	-.007*** (.002)	-.009*** (.002)	.006* (.003)
Marital Status	-.080* (.040)	-.080* (.040)	-.099* (.040)	-.091* (.040)	-.049 (.044)	-.096 (.062)
Gender	-	.033 (.020)	.019 (.020)	.020 (.020)	.025 (.022)	.040 (.025)
Religiously affiliated	-	-	.190*** (.023)	.189*** (.023)	.184*** (.025)	.171*** (.030)
Freq. of religious service attendance	-	-	.001* (.000)	.001* (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Age	-	-	-	-.008 (.007)	-.016 (.009)	-.016 (.010)
Earned Bachelor's Degree	-	-	-	-	.194*** (.055)	.108 (.060)
Amount of Financial Help from Parents	-	-	-	-	-	.055*** (.009)
R^2	.013	.014	.043	.044	.049	.065

Results

Table 1 depicts the three metrics used to assess generosity among emerging adults. Displayed are the percentage of respondents who have given $50 or more to any organization or cause in the last year, the percentage of respondents who have done organized volunteer work or community service in the last year, and how much respondents reported helping homeless people, needy neighbors, family friends, or other people in need, not through an organization in the last year.

One third of respondents reported giving at least $50 in the last year, and about half reported volunteer work. On average, respondents reported between "a little" and "some" helping of other people in need. This evidence supports the finding that emerging adults are, on average, fairly disinterested or uninvolved in charitable giving, but there remains a significant minority of respondents who report giving of money and time.

Previous research indicates that youth who are not currently generous cite their lack of financial resources as inhibitory to their potential generosity (Smith and Snell, 2009; Mitchell and Snell, In Progress). Thus, earning an annual wage and the consequent financial security may be an adequate life course milestone to trigger increased giving of money and time. Table 2 examines annual earnings as a potential trigger of generosity by correlating annual earnings with the metrics of generosity outlined in Table 1. Giving has the strongest correlation with earnings in this table; respondents with higher annual earnings were more likely to have given at least $50 in the last year. Helping homeless people, needy neighbors, family friends, or other people in need (not through an organization) correlated positively with annual earnings, but volunteering through an organized activity was negatively correlated with earnings. One explanation of this finding posits that giving replaces volunteering as earnings increase, with those who earn more having more financial resources to contribute. It is possible that those with high earnings may devote the vast majority of their time to their job, leaving little time and energy to give to organized charitable causes. Table 4 and Table 5 confirm that annual earnings remains a robust parameter for explaining the variance in giving and volunteering even when controlling for age, marital status, gender, religious affiliation and participation, education, and financial help received from parents.

Smith and Snell (2009) note that youth ages 18-23 identify financial giving and volunteering as something designated for adults, but is something that they themselves may participate in once they transition into adulthood achieve a more stable life. Based on this finding, marriage can be examined as another potential life course milestone that could serve as a trigger to incite generosity. Table 3 examines marriage as a potential trigger of generosity by correlating marital status with reports of giving, volunteering, and helping. In this table, being married is significantly correlated with giving, and Table 4 confirms that marital status remains a significant predictor of giving when controlling for age, marital status, gender, religious affiliation and participation, education, and financial help received from parents. It is possible that the effect of marriage on financial giving is in part due to the increased financial stability of dual incomes. Just as giving increases with the annual earnings of an individual, it is reasonable to expect that stable dual-income households may be more likely to give than less stable arrangements. Table 3 indicates that being married is negatively correlated with volunteering. Like the reasoning behind the negative correlation between earnings and volunteering, the explanation for the negative relationship between marriage and volunteering is likely related to time. With the extra time constraints of marriage and family, it is possible that volunteering falls by the wayside.

A regression of financial giving as a function of earnings and marital status allows for an analysis of potentially interacting variables. In Table 4, Model 1 shows that annual earnings is a more significant predictor of financial giving than marital status, but additional analyses reveal that these effects are independent of one another. Model 2 controls for the gender of the respondent, and shows that this has no effect on the dependent variable or other independent variables. The introduction of religious affiliation and frequency of attendance to the model demonstrates that being affiliated with any religion is a robust predictor of financial giving, as is frequency of attendance at religious services. It is interesting to note that the addition of religious affiliation and religious service attendance to the model decreases the effect of marital status on financial giving. It is not overly apparent why affiliation with a religion would account for some of the effect of marital status on financial giving. It is possible that religious affiliation and attendance would increase religious financial giving to congregations, a phenomenon that could have been previously captured, at least in part, by marriage within a particular congregation.

Previous research reveals that young people generally regard financial giving as something that could occur for them later in life (Smith and Snell, 2009; Mitchell and Snell, In Progress). This analysis looks at this phenomenon in terms of "triggers" that could spur emerging adults to generous behavior. To observe the effects of these triggers independent of the effect of raw age, this variable must be controlled for. Model 4 adds the age variable, which contributes a statistically significant effect, and does not appreciably affect the significance of earnings, marital status, affiliation with a religion, and religious service attendance. Model 5 adds the earning of a bachelor's degree, which is a significant predictor of financial giving. Introducing this binomial variable completely removes the significant effect of age. The fact that the majority of the effect of age on financial giving is captured by the attainment of a bachelor's degree is logical, given the age range of the sample, the time it takes to earn a bachelor's degree, and the knowledge that those with bachelor degrees tend to give more. In an analysis with more variation in the age range of the sample, it would be reasonable to expect an effect of age on financial giving that is independent of earning a bachelor's degree, but because this analysis only includes emerging adults aged 18-23, it is not surprising that the effect of age on financial giving is captured by the earning of a bachelor's degree.

Controlling for the presence of a bachelor's degree actually increases the effect of marital status on financial giving. This is due to the fact that in this sample, married people tend to give more, but also tend not to have a college degree. Therefore, once education is controlled for, the effect of marriage on financial giving increases.

Amount of financial help received from parents decreases the effect of having a bachelor's degree on financial giving. This can be explained by the fact that those who earn bachelor's degrees are more likely to receive financial help from their parents. Thus, earning a bachelor's degree and receiving parental financial help explain much of the same variance and do not necessarily represent two different phenomena or triggers that affect financial giving.

In summary of Table 4, annual earnings and marital status remain significant predictors of financial giving even when controlling for gender, age, religious affiliation and attendance, education, and parental financial help received. Other significant parameters in these models include being affiliated with a religion, and earning a bachelor's degree.

A regression of volunteering as a function of earnings and marital status allows for an analysis of potentially interacting variables. Table 5 shows that annual earnings is a robust predictor of volunteering, and is a more significant predictor of volunteering than marital status. Additional analysis reveals that the effect of earnings and the effect of marital status are independent of each other. It is important to note that the effects both earnings and marital status on volunteering is negative. Model 2 controls for the gender of the respondent, and shows that this has no effect on volunteering, or on the individual effects of earnings and marital status. The introduction of religious affiliation and frequency of religious service attendance to the model demonstrates that being affiliated with any religion is a strong predictor of increased volunteering. This increase in volunteering is likely accomplished through participating in organized activities with religious congregations. Frequency of attendance at religious services is not as strong of a predictor as being affiliated with a religion because these two variables explain much of the same variance. Model 4 introduces age, which does not appreciably alter the effects of any other variables in the model. As with financial giving, earning a bachelor's degree contributes a significant effect on volunteering. The addition of the bachelor's degree variable also decreases the effect of marital status on volunteering. This is logical given the understanding that married people volunteer less, but also tend not to have a bachelor's degree. Thus, when controlling for the bachelor's degree, the negative effect of marital status on volunteering is reduced.

Amount of financial help received from parents decreases the effect of having a bachelor's degree on volunteering. As with Table 4, people who earn bachelor's degrees are more likely to receive financial help from their parents, these variables explain much of the same variance of volunteering, and do not represent unique phenomena.

In summary of Table 5, annual earnings remain a strong predictor of decreased volunteering, but the negative effect of marital status is diminished when controlling for people who earned a bachelor's degree. Affiliation with a religion and earning a bachelor's degree are strong parameters in the final model.

Discussion

This paper examines the ability of earning a living and marriage to trigger increased financial giving and volunteerism in emerging adults. Analysis reveals that annual earnings and marital status are significant predictors of increased financial giving. Although earning a living and marriage both decrease volunteerism, only annual earnings remains a significant predictor of decreased volunteerism when controlling for a host of interacting variables. Other significant independent variables that postitively affect giving include being affiliated with a religion and earning a bachelor's degree. Future research could break down the effects of these variables in greater depth.

When examining the apparent "triggers" of financial giving and generosity in emerging adults (earnings, marriage, affiliation with a religion, a bachelor's degree), it appears that these explanatory variables all add an element of stability to the emerging adult's life. This common denominator of stability across trigger variables is consistent with the interview findings from Smith and Snell (2009), where respondents frame generous giving and something that they would be more open to doing once their lives become more settled and uniform. Future analyses of triggers of generous giving should therefore examine other life events and circumstances that add stability to a person's life, including children, living situation, length of employment, etc.

Although generous giving is increased by variables that add stability to an individual's life, volunteering is decreased by the variables that tend to decrease the amount of free time available to the emerging adult. This is evident in the negative effect of earning a living and marriage on volunteerism. Thus, future analyses of trigger variables on volunteerism should investigate life events and circumstances that increase the amount of free time of the individual.

It is interesting to note that while emerging adults regard organized volunteering as something that they will have time to do later in their lives, volunteering is negatively correlated with annual earnings, marriage, and age. The future of organized volunteering is jeopardized when emerging adults chose to delay this practice until a point in their lives where they no longer have the opportunity to do so.

One major shortcoming of this research is that fact that although earnings, marriage, affiliation with a religion, and earning a bachelor degree all appear to be significant triggers of giving, these models account for less than seven percent of the total variation in emerging adult generosity. These variables alone cannot be considered to determine the generous outcomes of emerging adults. It is possible that a wide variety of other stabilizing variables could capture a greater percentage of the remaining variation in generosity. Alternatively, a wider age range could be used to better determine the effects of the independent variables.

Works Cited

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