

**Indebtedness, Gratitude, and Community:
A Study on Recipients' Interpretations of Caregiving**

Abstract

A recent increase in public policy discussion about the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in helping needy people has caused a crucial question to arise: how are churches and other religiously affiliated organizations perceived by those they help? While there is a body of literature that examines how caregivers talk about their motivation for helping people, there has been little research about how the recipients of such care interpret the givers' motives. How do people respond to and perceive these works of love? This study examines how people respond to care they have received from both religious and secular organizations. Specifically, my paper asks whether recipients feel that they have received aid with "strings attached." I find that recipients of care from religious organizations are more likely to say that they feel "indebted" for the care received, and are more likely to want to repay this debt by helping others. While some would see this as a critique of faith-based organizations, my study suggests that people feel better when they can give something back, and that the indebtedness they feel is perceived as a positive aspect of receiving.

Study Outline and Goals

My dissertation research, of which this paper is a small part, endeavors to understand how recipients of caregiving perceive the motives of care providers. How do recipients of care interpret the meanings behind the gifts they have been given? More specifically, my research examines the role of religious community in this process; whether a recipient's participation in a religious community that provides care changes or stays the same after the care is received based on the recipient's interpretation of the meaning of that care. Often, caregivers in both secular humanitarian and religious organizations place importance on giving "unconditionally," but do recipients of caregiving experience that care as unconditional? Is it important to recipients that the care is given unconditionally? This paper is inspired by questions about the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in helping needy people. I wonder how churches and other

faith-based organizations are perceived by those they help and whether, as some suggest, recipients feel that there are strings attached when help is given by a religious organization.

This paper looks at the ways in which people respond to the care they have received. A desire that caregivers commonly express is for their actions to start a chain of events which will result in the recipients giving care to someone else later on in life. In the literature on gifts and giving there is an idea that people might feel the need to “give something back” even if they’ve received a gift or kindness unconditionally (Mauss, 1990). Modern ideas of serial reciprocity, on the other hand, suggest that everyone is connected, that a kindness can be repaid by giving to someone entirely unconnected with the gift originally received. Robert Payton argues that the notion of serial reciprocity is central to the philanthropic tradition, and that it is only by people valuing the idea of “passing it on” that voluntarism will persist in America (Payton Papers, 2000). However, do recipients have this same idea of serial reciprocity, passing it on, or “giving back?” Do recipients feel indebted to an organization that has cared for them? If so, does that indebtedness play out in care for others, or does it result instead in a feeling of resentment toward the organization, as Mary Douglas suggests in her forward to Mauss’ work (1990)? Do recipients talk about their own good deeds in terms of a repayment for the kindness they’ve been shown, or do they see the two as unrelated?

My initial data analysis shows the importance of the ideas of reciprocity and indebtedness; this analysis suggests important differences in the way that people receive from religious organizations compared to the way they receive from secular organizations. However, more salient than the religious/secular difference seems to be

the church/non-church difference. I find that churches seem to inspire reciprocity at a much higher rate than any other type of organization, and that people are more likely to connect their own helping behaviors to the care they've received if that care is from a church. At the base of these distinctions, however, lies a foundational distinction between organizations that function as a community versus those that are mere institutions. I argue that it is a sense of intimacy that really matters to recipients. While this intimacy causes a feeling of indebtedness, it also provides a forum for serial reciprocity and cultivates gratitude rather than resentment.

Background Literature

This work can be situated within two major bodies of literature. First, it is related to the literature on compassion and altruism. This literature focuses on the nature of compassionate acts, and the moral meanings attached to altruistic behavior. Most social scientists conceptualize altruism as an activity that helps others without being of obvious benefit to the giver (Post, Underwood, Schloss, and Hurlbut, 2002). While it is generally acknowledged that purely altruistic acts are difficult to find (voluntary organ donation and hiding Jewish people in Nazi Germany being the only agreed-upon examples) the concept of compassionate acts, while perhaps less remarkable, are often studied in lieu of, or in conjunction with, true altruism (Healy 2000, Monroe 1996). Compassion has been defined by many as a caregiving activity that involves a high degree of empathy with the recipient. However, sociologists such as Robert Wuthnow have focused on the fact that caregiving is subject to cultural construction and is usually given moral meanings according to cultural ideas about what is good, right, and socially desirable. Wuthnow

also uncovers an important connection between involvement in a religious community and an increase in charitable efforts (Wuthnow, 1991). His data show that religious inclinations have no effect on efforts to help the needy unless the individual also has a particular level of involvement in a cohesive religious community. Based on my data analysis, I expect that community will be an important aspect of this study as well, having an important effect on the way in which people respond to care they've received.

Second, my study is related to public policy literature on faith-based organizations, which develops ideas about the ways in which various types of organizations give differently. This literature is primarily rooted in a debate about the effectiveness of faith-based organizations, which surrounds President Bush's recent Faith-Based Initiative. While some agree that faith-based organizations are particularly effective in providing social services (Sherman, 2000), others argue that it is inappropriate or unrealistic for faith-based organizations to take a formal, government-sponsored, role in providing social services (Glennon, 1997; Wineburg, 2000). The strongest objection centers around the argument that, while faith-based organizations are effective within their own spheres of influence, many needy people are inaccessible to religious organizations or would be uncomfortable going to an explicitly religious organization for help. The literature acknowledges the need for more empirical research that would compare secular and faith-based social service (Chavez 2001), which is one of the main purposes for my paper. The literature also shows a significant tendency to focus on the caregiving institutions rather than on recipients, which is another gap my paper works toward filling.

Methodology and Research Plan

This study looks at one hundred in-depth interviews with recipients of care from several types of caregiving organizations. These interviews ask respondents a number of questions about their own perceptions of the care they have received from different sources, how they interpret that care, and what their response is to the care they have received. Out of one hundred respondents, 51 were helped by religious organizations, and 39 by secular organizations. The religious organizations include Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish affiliated organizations. The secular organizations include both government agencies and private non-religious agencies. The agencies include large and small programs, from intimate family-style shelters to large government aid programs.

Respondents are all from the Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, or the surrounding area. Respondents were helped in many different ways, from shelter in a time of homelessness, to food stamps, to drug rehabilitation programs. Some were simply offered assistance with day care or food from a food pantry; others were given counseling or direct financial assistance. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted in Spanish in order to accommodate the respondents. These interviews were then transcribed and translated into English.

The in-depth interview method has proven to be particularly effective for gaining information about the ways in which respondents understand the meanings of their behavior and the behavior of others. The interviews are standardized as much as possible in terms of questions asked—a strict format is followed in terms of the interview questions. However, respondents are encouraged to talk as much as they'd like, and

many of the questions are open-ended enough that respondents talk for quite a while before the next question is asked.

Interviews were professionally transcribed, but I analyzed each interview myself with an in-depth, qualitative method. My first step was to read each interview in its entirety, making note of interviews I thought would be of particular interest, and of the general tone of each interview. I also noted which interviews contained more information about particular topics such as reciprocity, community, and faith. Additionally, I made notes about which respondent was helped by which organizations and how this correlated with other responses. My study also draws on an additional twenty-seven interviews with directors of the agencies to find out what the organizations helping my respondents are like from an inside, administrator's perspective.

The next step was to analyze the interviews "horizontally." This means that I looked at responses by question, comparing all responses to a particular question to one another so that I can compare what different people respond to the same question. This analysis must be consistently cross-checked with the full text of each respondent's interview in order to keep track of who the responses are coming from, the individual's specific situation, and the type of agency offering assistance, in order to properly contextualize the responses.

Research Findings: Indebtedness, Gratitude, and Giving Back

My analysis does show a difference in the attitudes of those who have received from a religious organization compared to those who have received from a secular organization. Of respondents who were helped by a religious organization, more than

three fourths say that their own helping behaviors are connected to the help they've received from others, compared to only about one third of those helped by a secular organization. Additionally, only a handful of recipients of aid from secular agencies say that they feel a kind of debt they should try to repay by helping others. This is compared to more than half of the respondents who were helped by religious organizations. It seems also that the more evangelical the organization, the more likely people are to feel indebted in this way. Pentecostal and evangelical churches, as well as the Salvation Army, ranked among the most likely to have aided respondents who said they "felt a debt" and who felt motivated to help others. Additionally, this response was more common among church recipients in general—people who were helped by churches were more likely than those helped by other religious organizations to say that they felt a debt of gratitude and wanted to repay it by helping others.

One possible interpretation of this data is simply that people are made to feel indebted to religious organizations, while they can receive more freely from secular organizations. However, after a close look at the data I venture to suggest an alternative interpretation. It seems to me that, while respondents in the religious aid group are more likely to eventually answer "yes" to the question of whether or not they feel they owe a debt of gratitude that should be repaid by serial reciprocity, they are still hesitant about the wording of the question. Many of them say things like, "A debt? I never thought of it that way." Several try to re-word the question to include the word "respond" or "reciprocate" instead of "debt." Mr. Gonzalez, in response to the debt question, responds typically, "No, not a debt in that way. I just felt like I know how it felt and I didn't want other people to feel like that if I could help it." Mrs. Smith takes it a step further, as many

respondents do, connecting her giving to her emotions, rather than her sense of fairness, “I just did it out of the kindness of my heart, because they opened their heart to me. So I tried to help my friend, too. I felt like someone cared about me other than my family and my kids and my husband. And that if you need help, like talking about a personal thing you can't talk to your husband or your friends about or your family, then you can talk to one of the counselors there. Because they're understanding and they're caring. And I felt that I could help out my friend because they helped me out. Because I wanted to do something good like they did for me.”

Like Mrs. Smith, many respondents feel that they give in response to what they've received. However, this is less out of a sense of debt than a sense of inspiration—they are inspired to help others because they were helped. While a number of respondents helped by religious organizations end up answering “yes” to the question of whether they felt they had a debt that should be repaid, they seemed hesitant to use the word “debt.” Many of them were quick to say that they would have felt motivated to help someone else anyway, even if they hadn't felt a sense of debt. “That's just the way I was raised” or “that's just the kind of person I am” are phrases that come up frequently in response to questions about their own helping behavior or whether they help others out of gratitude for being helped.

Several respondents also talk about their own giving as a response to the help received, not because of a debt or even out of gratitude—instead, they highlight the fact that they were emotionally or financially unable to help others until after their own needs were taken care of. After being helped back on their feet, they were able to make a contribution to others in the same position. Ms. Martinez says, “I never really thought I was much of anything, not going anywhere, I wasn't good enough, I was worthless, and

through talking to people there, they kind of showed me that it's not true. That I am somebody. I may not have a million dollars in my pocket, but that don't mean anything. There are things that I can do. Everybody's greedy to a sense, but you go to those supermarkets and they've got the quarters that you have to put in the carts. Instead of getting my quarter back, I'll just hand it off to somebody else and I'll say, 'All you have to do is give it to the next person.' It's just a matter of being nice. I wasn't a very nice person then, now I am. I'm a much nicer person. With all the help that I've received, it just kind of brings it all together because this is where I'm actually starting to get my life together." While Ms. Martinez acknowledges the idea of serial reciprocity ("all you have to do is give it to the next person"), she locates her own motivation for helping others within her feelings about herself; feelings of worth as a person that allow her to contribute to others.

Respondents also vary in terms of the gratitude they express. Respondents helped by government services such as Welfare are much less likely to express gratitude in the interview, and are often puzzled by the question, "Tell me about the sense of gratitude that you feel." Mr. Isaacson says, "No matter what, a percentage of my pay from past earnings came out of that anyway, and I don't use it a lot. That was a once and done deal for me, so I figured it was actually owed to me anyway." Ms. Zatiro says, "I don't know what to say. I just went in and applied and they accepted me. And that was it." Most respondents, including many who do express a strong sense of gratitude, seem puzzled by the link that the question suggests between their own gratitude and their helping others. They often have ideas of repayment that are more tied to maintaining their own functioning role in society than of helping others, and are more likely to think of "debt" as explicitly financial. One respondent says, "Well, I guess if I could afford to pay them

back, I would certainly try to.” My hypothesis about this pattern is that, while government aid goes a long way toward helping people to get back on their feet, people also need a measure of emotional support that is less available from large government agencies. Many of the welfare recipients who want to talk about their own gratitude switch midstream from talking about their welfare aid to talking about a friend or neighbor who has “been there” during the rough times. The picture I see emerging is not one of welfare recipients who are ungrateful or who want to take all they can get, but of welfare recipients whose basic needs are met but who are left with something still missing.

It seems to me that what is lacking is a sense of community—there is no sense that what these people received *came from* anywhere in particular. Even secular agency respondents who answer that they do feel they have a debt often fail to articulate how that debt might be repaid. This is in contrast to the respondents helped by churches, who frame their own helping in terms of “giving back” even when they answer no to the debt question—90% of respondents helped by churches make a connection between their own helping and the help they have received. This contrasts with only 33% of respondents helped by secular organizations. After a closer look, it seems that it is not so much the religiosity of the organization that matters; the more intimate the agency, the more likely people are to say that they should give something back because of the help they received. Almost all of the respondents from secular organizations who felt they should help others are respondents who were helped by smaller organizations—a personal, one-on-one rehabilitation program, or a small, family-style shelter.

It seems, then, that people feel indebted not because they feel that the gift wasn't truly free, but because they feel more gratitude for the gift, and they feel that this help has a tangible source. Almost every respondent who articulates a desire to "give back" assumes that this gift will be within the community where the gift was given. People want to give back to the same organization that helped them. If someone built them a house, they want to work on building a house. If someone helped them to get additional education, they want to help others in the same endeavor. It seems to me that this is mostly about community—people want to give back to the community that helped them, and it is easier to feel part of a community in smaller, more personal organizations.

In addition to a sense of community, respondents who were involved with a church or religious organization are more likely to have experience with a serial reciprocity framework. People who were helped by churches, in particular, talk about owing a debt to God, or "doing unto others." Mrs. Garcia, who was helped by a local church, says, "I came out of addiction with nothing where at one time I had everything and I lost everything. I didn't get what I have today on my own. I believe God looked out for me. He put people in my life to help me. In return, I help people or anyone who may ask me for help if it's in my power to help. That gives me gratitude. It just lets me know that I can do for others what others have done for me." Those who have been helped by a church may have already been provided a framework for thinking about serial reciprocity in a biblical context. Mrs. Hernandez, when asked whether anyone at the church has ever suggested that she has a debt to the church, responds, "They talk in church about it but they don't specifically talk to anybody. I mean like when they are preaching they talk about it, God wants us to help each other, but no one has ever spoken

to me directly about 'you owe the church,' so you have to repay, no, not really.” Mrs. Hernandez has clearly picked up an idea of “helping because you were helped” from her time at the church, and so she has come to see her own experience that way. While the idea of serial reciprocity is also present in the interviews with those helped by secular organizations, it is not as prevalent or as strongly stated. Many of the respondents are surprised to find that they do think about their own giving as a kind of reciprocity, although they might not have thought of it that way at first.

To summarize, it seems that community has an important effect on the ways in which people think about their own response to the help they received. People seem to feel better about the help they've received if they received it as part of a community, and the better they feel about the assistance, the more likely they are to frame it as “indebted.” However, many who don't explicitly feel a debt do feel that their own caregiving is somehow attached to the care they've received. Those who received care from churches are most likely to articulate a moral code of serial reciprocity, though this is present in the non-religious interviews as well. In short, “giving back” is more likely to occur when people feel that there is someone in particular to whom they can give. If there is a structured community such as a church or a family-style shelter, they experience the caregiving as more caring and feel more capable of giving something back to that community.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Study

Conclusions about recipients' feelings of indebtedness, gratitude, and reciprocity are important to both the broader scope of our ideas of compassion and altruism as well

as the implications for policy regarding faith-based aid to needy people. More interview data should be examined before any assertions are considered final, but there are some preliminary conclusions that can be drawn, and from these conclusions hypotheses can be made about some of the other questions posed in this paper.

From this initial data analysis I see three main findings. First, I find that recipients of care do respond differently to care from religious versus secular organizations. More recipients of faith-based organizations feel a sense of “debt;” they are also more likely to connect their own helping behaviors with the help they received. This difference is even more evident when recipients of churches, in particular, are compared to those of secular organizations. Second, the data shows that almost all respondents are unwilling to frame their feelings of gratitude with the term “debt.” They think of their response as coming from inspiration rather than obligation. Finally, people are more likely to feel gratitude and to help others in response if they feel that they are part of a community, and if they feel that community contributing to their new start.

From these responses, I expect that further analysis of the data will show that recipients do value a gift freely given or a sense of unconditional caring. However, the question seems to get more complicated from there—it seems as though people might construct the care they receive differently based on whether the organization fosters a sense of community. Further data analysis should be undertaken to determine whether this is true, and to what extent respondents express this importance in other parts of the interview. I am particularly interested in looking at the questions that ask respondents how their life has changed as a result of receiving help. I expect that this idea of

community will be important to the rest of the study, particularly in how respondents interpret the meaning of the care they have received.

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