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Does Group Size Matter? The Impact of Reciprocity on Giving in Local Faith Communities

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Cover Page Footnote

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This paper conceptually examines how group size may influence the internal structure & relational dynamics of religious communities, ranging from small religious congregations to megachurches (in American society). Classic anthropological, economic, and evolutionary theory holds that reciprocity, particularly generalized reciprocity in the form of altruistic giving, is most likely to strongly influence small groups, especially kinship-based groups (Hames 2000; Hawkes 1993; Malinowski, 1922; Sahlins, 1972). When gift exchange happens in reciprocal relationships, it is distinct from a simple economic transaction because social ties are formed among participants, varying by the expectations of the participants. Marshall Sahlins (1972) developed the typology for three forms of reciprocity that is still the standard today: generalized, balanced, and negative. The forms of reciprocity are associated with social groups by their size and the social distance among participants (Levi-Strauss 1949; Sahlins, 1972).

In the case of non-kin groups, studies of behavior mimicking kin altruism have suggested that reciprocal exchanges of goods and services, including extreme giving and high-cost behaviors, are most likely to be found in small social groups with tight bonds, particularly those with shared religious beliefs (Allen-Areve, Gurven, and Hill, 2008; Hames, 1987; Hames, 2000; Hawkes, 1993). The more tightly knit the social group, the more likely it is that sharing without individuals “keeping score” of what is given or owed is to occur as a recurring social pattern. Our paper is exploratory and conceptual: we desire to highlight potential linkages between reciprocity and church size that might be useful to religious studies scholars as well as faith community leaders.

In the case of larger groups and individuals who are less tightly bound, a different set of factors may be associated with giving and other forms of group interaction. Redistribution of resources through a mediator, leader, or bureaucracy is often more typical of larger-scale groups with less direct contact and a less intense social bond between giver and receiver (Allen-Areve *et. al*, 2008). In these more socially-distant groups, if individuals do perform exchanges, it is much more likely to emphasize balanced reciprocity, in which the exchange must be perceived as equal and occurring over a much shorter time frame (Sahlins, 1972).

How does this dynamic apply to modern religious groups, from the small-scale congregation to the megachurch? Here, we propose a conceptual framework for analyzing religious communities, ranging from small-scale to larger-scale churches. Based on theoretical concepts drawn from both Anthropology and Sociology, we assert that as the social group size increases, the nature of giving, broadly defined, is altered, becoming less direct and less kin-like, with a more explicit tally of what is given and taken. Because the exchanges must be perceived as balanced and/or lack the long-term interpersonal relationships in less intimate or tightly-knit social groups, they require mediators or mediating mechanisms. Often giving becomes more outwardly focused—directed to "others" instead of being focused within the group. By contrast, smaller groups are more likely to focus on interior, direct, reciprocal giving and kin-like altruism on an ongoing basis. We also discuss new social structures and cultural practices that megachurches have incorporated to address declining patterns of reciprocity due to church size.

Generosity and Personal Well-being

Gift-giving and other forms of generosity are important for well-being because they promote happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008 & 2018; Park *et al*. 2017). Dunn *et al.*

(2018) found that giving makes you happier and is good for mental health at the individual level, especially when that generosity is prosocial; while other studies supported this, finding that giving, especially that focused on helping others in your community is good for individual mental health (Aknin *et al*. 2013; Dunn *et al*. 2008; Dunn *et al*. 2018, Park *et al*. 2017). While psychological research focuses on the positive effects of generosity at the individual level, however, most churches focus on the recipients of donations or charity. Given the impact of personal and public wellbeing, however, we should pay attention to both the givers and the recipients when approaching how to best serve the community as a whole. This is particularly true since recent research (Park *et. al*., 2017) indicates that the method of giving and how direct it is from the perspective of the giver matters for the positive mental health and happiness of the giver. More direct and personal giving promotes more happiness in the giver (Dunn *et al*. 2018, Park *et al*. 2017.) What, then, determines whether a faith community participates in direct giving versus mediated giving?

Reciprocity in Anthropological Theory

Exchange within social groups is necessary if members are to distribute uneven resources. Several forms of exchange are categorized in Anthropological and Sociological theory. The oldest form of exchange seems to be generalized reciprocity, one of the many forms of reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972). In its simplest form, *reciprocity* is giving and taking among individuals. Goods and services of any sort can be exchanged—from food to care, resources, labor, or other commodities (Malinowski, 1922; Sahlins, 1972). Accumulated, the many social networks that are established and maintained by these exchanges form the fabric of society, relating individuals to each other and to their communities. Even seemingly simple exchanges can accumulate a great depth of social meaning. Others' perceptions of what an individual gives and contributes to the group are important to that individual's social status and reputation (Malinowski, 1922). What he or she can contribute or has given in the past, on the other hand, is an important core element of an individual's sense of self-identity and self-worth.

There are several forms of reciprocity. The most common are generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity. The often subtle distinctions between these forms of reciprocity are strongly related to the social intimacy of the individuals engaged in exchange (Allen-Arave, 2008; Hames 2000; Hawkes 1993; Malinowski, 1922; Sahlins, 1972). Generalized reciprocity is the most primal form of reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). It is typical of close social bonds and a long-term series of social exchanges and interactions.

For this reason, it is frequently observed among the smallest-scale societies—bands—and small, tightly-knit social groups within larger-scale societies, such as tribes and kin groups (Allen-Areve, 2008; Sahlins, 1972). Generalized reciprocity includes a series or network of recurring exchanges. What is important and distinctive regarding generalized reciprocity is that the value of individual commodities or services exchanged are not calculated. There is no expectation of immediate or even short-term payback (Malinowski, 1922). One gives because one has and the other needs. Think again about the example of parents and their children. Parents feed and care for their children, even though and perhaps because those children are totally dependent and require a massive time and resource commitment. It is simply expected that care will be provided. The tight social bond is built through a million tiny exchanges over a long period of time, and there is no need to ensure that the child provides an equal, or balancing reciprocation. Generalized reciprocity is not a single exchange but rather multiple levels of exchange flowing amongst members and building a social web of interdependence.

Balanced reciprocity is a form of exchange in which the give and take must be perceived as a more equal, or balanced, exchange (Sahlins, 1972). If a commodity is given, something of equal or near-equal value is expected in return within a specified time (Sahlins, 1972). The exchange must have social symmetry, or social bonds will be damaged. An individual who becomes known as a "mooch" instead of a mutualist may gain the reputation for negative reciprocity, or an exchange in which one or more parties takes more than the value that they give (Sahlins, 1972). Negative reciprocity is typically an exchange form people use with strangers or those with few social and kin bonds. It is more common in larger societies and in interactions between members of different groups who do not have strong bonds (Sahlins, 1972). Group size, social bonds, and the term of the exchange period are all important factors in what form of reciprocity might occur in different instances.

Kin Altruism and Reciprocal Altruism

In small-scale societies or tightly-knit kin groups, the sort of giving described as generalized reciprocity is important not only to make sure that all members are successful but also to make sure that resources within the group are distributed as needed (Allen-Arave *et. Al*, 2008; Chagnon, 1981; Flinn, 1988; Hames, 2000; Hawkes 1983 & 1993; Piliavin and Charng 1990). This awareness that the entire group benefits from this unselfish behavior was the origin of the theory of kin altruism. Kin altruism, or kin-selected altruism, was first described by Hamilton (1964), who predicted that altruistic behavior was based upon genetic relatedness. Hamilton believed that relatedness would explain what looked like unselfish behavior as actually being selfish—helping oneself and one's genes to better survive

(Hamilton, 1964; Piliavin & Charng 1990). Hamilton (1964), along with E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* (1975) greatly influenced ethnographers and paired well with theory about reciprocity already accepted within anthropology such as Malinowski's (1922) and research on the Trobriand Islander's Kula Ring (Allen-Arave *et. al.*, 2008). Despite this, genetic relatedness was believed to be the mechanism, not social relatedness (Allen-Arave *et. al.*, 2008). Recent work by Wilson (2011) and Allen-Arave (2008) show that social relatedness, or "nepotism," maybe just as important as genes in tight-knit social groups.

Redistribution Emerges in Larger-Scale Societies

While reciprocity is the most common exchange form in small-scale societies, redistribution emerges in larger groups with more layers of social hierarchy. Redistribution occurs when goods are given and gathered with centralized authority, be it an individual chief or a bureaucratic level. When the group size is too large or exchange the ability to be individually managed across multiple communities, the benefits of reciprocity can be lost. The relationships between individuals involved in distributing the commodities are not as intimate and do not have the long-term history for a balance. The goods go up to a central mediator who knows best how to distribute them. Individuals do not need to engage in direct exchange, and the social bonds are directed up and down the political and economic hierarchy, not among individual members as social ties become more distant or vague. According to Dunn *et al*. (2008) and Park *et al*. (2017), this specific giving is the type most associated with reported individual happiness.

What does this mean for faith communities and church-based giving? The patterns seen in small-scale societies (which use reciprocity) vs. larger-scale societies (which used redistribution and mediated giving) predicts that smaller faith communities will engage in more direct giving. Both kin and reciprocal altruism predict that smaller, more tightly-knit social groups will encourage more giving and more generalized reciprocity. Along that scale, as group size increases and relatedness of members decreases, direct giving may lessen as a more balanced or even negative reciprocity becomes more common. Group size may even increase to the point that reciprocity simply does not work or is not familiar to group members (Sahlins, 1972).

Religiously-Based Financial Giving and Reciprocity

In a metanalysis of the research literature on charitable giving, Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) noted that the weight of altruistic concerns in motivating general charitable giving decreases with group size (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). It is likely that this relationship between group size and financial giving may be even stronger in regard to local church congregations characterized by frequent face-to-face contact. As church size increases, we assert that declines in reciprocity and the reciprocal relationships at the individual levels will result in decreases in individual giving, personal investment in giving, and individual giving interactions—to be replaced by mediated, less personalized giving. Other more intangible forms of exchange, such as supporting ill members, faith-based volunteering, or support for the bereaved, may likewise be altered by increase in group size, because giving is more likely to be mediated by a bureaucracy or specialists.

Several studies have noted that religiously affiliated individuals are more likely to give to religious-based groups as opposed to secular groups (e.g., Smith & Emerson, 2008; Hoge, Zech, McNamara, & Donahue, 1996). Brooks (2006) asserted that religiously affiliated individuals are more likely to give to charitable enterprises than their secular counterparts. The issue of whether the generosity of congregations and their individual members extends beyond the church pew and into the larger community is still an open research question. Clearly, however, church members provide the majority of regular financial support for religious congregations and faith-based organizations. Examining the relationship between participation and giving, Hoge (1995) observed that high attendance levels are representative of strong religious commitment, which typically leads to increased religious giving. In a 2001 survey of the Presbyterian Church (USA), researchers noted that "the frequency with which the respondent attends church is positively related to all types of giving except giving to nonreligious charities" (Lunn, Klay, & Douglas, 2001, p. 771). Chaves & Miller (1999) similarly reported regular involvement in religious organizations, as measured by church attendance, was a strong predictor of financial giving. In explaining the strong influence of religious participation on giving, one possibility is that church attendance "captures unobservable components of underlying religiosity" (Annaccone, 1997, p. 153). Based on this perspective, Chaves & Miller (1999) contended that financial downturns in church-based giving should be framed in the context of declines in the sense of connectedness that members may perceive in regard to their local religious congregations.

Though a positive relationship between church participation and giving is well-documented by research, the mechanisms that facilitate this relationship are less well established. A few scholars have explored these mechanisms. Bekkers and Wiepking (2007) suggested that attendance results in increased exposure to charitable solicitation; high donations among parishioners are closely related to frequent solicitations. Lincoln, Morrissey, and Mundey (2008) succinctly summarized the social impact of church attendance and research questions that need to be explored in future research.

> …because congregations function as schools for learning formative skills and values that are conducive to philanthropic behavior, regular attendance increases religious giving. Attendance in and of itself may therefore be less important than the byproducts of attendance, namely habitual exposure to empathetic and helping value orientations, as well as weekly requests for donations. More work is needed to understand the interplay of these dynamics, especially regarding which charitable teachings elicit the most giving behavior (Lincoln *et al*., 2008. p. 8)

Anthropologists and other social scientists generally agree on the importance of networks, trust, reciprocity, and the emergence of social norms in the cultural patterns of modern societies (Bowie, 2006). Social science research has also detailed the central role of formal networks at the community level, including more formal patterns of social engagement, such as those that occur through civic organizations and local schools (Smelser & Swedberg, 2010). Scholars in religious studies, however, have undervalued the role of the concept of reciprocity in the analysis of religious congregational life. In small and mid-sized religious congregations, shared social norms generated by reciprocity engender trust. Trust plays an important role in modern religious groups by reducing transaction costs with like-minded groups and individuals. Reciprocity also enables those in a community of like-minded believers to more easily communicate via commonly held religious concepts, cooperate in faith-based service activities, and make sense of common experiences. Reciprocity in religious groups also encourages the individuals to balance their own self-interest against the "greater good" of the community (Bowie, 2006). Reciprocity is central to modern religious patterns and represents a useful additional concept to further explain new religious trends, such as secularization, the slowed growth of megachurches, and the increase in the category of "nones" as a U.S. religious preference (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

Increasing Church Membership Size: Megachurches and Declining Reciprocity

Sociologists of religion have detailed the rise of consumer religion in American society in recent decades, as traditional religious practices and consumer culture have become increasingly intertwined (Howard, 2011; Watson & Scalen, 2008). The growing influence of the church growth movement (CGM), church marketing, and megachurches reflect the expanding influence of consumerist ideology within modern evangelical churches. We suggest that, as church size increases reciprocity declines and is replaced by formal bureaucratic structures and guidelines that supplant reciprocity. Megachurches represent a powerful influence within American religion. Megachurches, commonly defined as large, primarily Protestant churches with an average attendance of at least 2,000 attendees per week, have reshaped religious culture locally, regionally, and nationally, and have radically transformed denominational and congregational practices (Thumma & Travis, 2007). Megachurches have incorporated multiple religious innovations, including major changes in worship center architectural design, alteration of traditional ritual practices, new hierarchical church structures, and the use of secular marketing techniques. The number of megachurches has risen from fewer than 50 in 1970 to over 1,300 in 2009 (Thumma & Bird, 2009). By 1990, there was one megachurch per four million Americans; a recent study noted that there are now more than four megachurches for every one million Americans, and approximately 80% of the U.S. population resides within one hour's drive of a megachurch (Thumma & Bird, 2009). More detailed analysis of the history of megachurches is available elsewhere (e.g., Ellingson, 2007). The growing dominance of larger congregations in U.S. religious life was influenced by multiple social forces that also reshaped other social institutions, including education, entertainment, sports, and the economy. In turn, changes in both traditional and emerging social institutions have reshaped U.S. religious patterns reflected in local religious congregations. Consumer culture has influenced religion in ways that have not been fully explored by religious studies scholars. We suggest that declines in reciprocity in large churches have caused a number of significant social and cultural shifts in larger churches, especially megachurches.

A main concern of U.S. megachurch leaders is not merely the total number of individuals attending worship services, but instead what is commonly referred to as the "revolving door" principle (Ellingson, 2007; Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). That is, megachurches must address both the delivery of high-quality large group worship experiences while also responding to the significant number of attendees that exit the service and often never return (Thumma & Bird, 2009). As a result, a critical organizational focus of modern megachurches is the issue of retention. There is a type of a dual emphasis: (1) securing new attendees and (2) converting the largest possible number of current attendees into active members. The effectiveness of this strategy often determines the level of financial support in megachurches (Thumma & Bird, 2009). Megachurches have redefined religious culture in a myriad of ways. In particular, the emphasis on consumer culture is perhaps the most directly observable feature in the geographic space of megachurches. Many megachurches have diversified operations such as bookstores, coffee shops, cafes, and child-care centers (Watson and Scalen 2008). Once an attendee enters a megachurch, regardless of his/her original motivation for participation, the overall experience is built upon the consumption of additional products and services, often resulting in additional monetary revenue for megachurches (Thumma & Bird, 2009). The potential hazard of this "consumer religion" emphasis is that it reduces lived religious experience to a series of consumer choices to meet "felt needs." This emphasis also leads to a sociological paradox: conservative evangelical megachurches embracing a new form of secularization through a consumerism focus, while publicly eschewing "things of the world" as an improper focus for the devout (Watson & Scalen, 2008).

The church growth movement, with its purpose-driven or seeker-sensitive paradigm, has also played a major role in the growth and dominance of megachurches in U.S. religious life. The key element of the purpose-driven or seeker-sensitive paradigm for church life involves a view of congregations as targets of marketing, i.e., implementing a detailed business model for "doing church." In this paradigm, key questions often asked by church leaders are: What do people want? What do they like? What keeps them coming back? An additional key marketing strategy is to appeal to the constantly changing youth culture. Just as McDonald's installed playgrounds in front of their restaurants to attract children who will persuade their parents to take them there, churches of this ilk offer a dazzling array of amenities in an appeal to all levels of the youth culture (pre-K through 12). Adult prospects are target—marketed as well - they often find facilities and programs similar to their workplace, shopping malls, and sports activities (Watson & Scalen, 2008). The church buildings, architecture, and interior decorating reflect the surrounding culture as well. Audio and video technology is typically "state of the art," musical performances are typically first-rate, and pastoral messages (sermons) are humorous, practical, and short in duration to accommodate short attention spans and busy schedules of parishioners.

Megachurches often follow growth patterns in which a threshold level of membership size is achieved, fueling further increases in membership and physical plant expansion (Ellingson, 2007). According to Thumma, Travis, & Bird (2008), between 2005 and 2008, U.S. megachurch average attendance grew by 573, while average worship center seating size increased by an average of 124 seats. The establishment of “sister churches” or the creation of a network of “likeminded” independent congregations with the megachurch as a hub, has become a favored solution (Thumma & Bird, 2009). Recently, the predominant megachurch physical plant model involves the creation of “satellite campuses” whereby segments of a single congregation meet at multiple sites, with local pastors and worship leaders (Bishop, 2011). This rationale is based on the notion of extending socially constructed church space and maintaining a sense of being a part of a single unit.

In some cases, the sermon is delivered by a senior pastor through a DVD, video streaming, or live satellite feed projected on to screens on the satellite campuses. This type of strategy creates a “buffer” in economic recessions by reducing construction costs and zoning issues connected to constructing new sanctuaries (worship centers). In addition, new developments in modern technology and bandwidth make this model especially appealing; web resources such as Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, GodTube, and YouTube, can serve as a natural extension of the megachurch. A further extension to the use of the Internet to communicate with members and potential members is the “virtual” megachurch, which exists on the Internet, disconnected from a physical congregation (Hamilton, 2009). Many megachurches strike a middle ground - connecting physical locations by creating a strong online presence with social networking capabilities in an attempt to better reach a younger age segment, supported by their youth and college ministries (Ellingson, 2009). Megachurches often prefer this model for expansion; the satellite campus system is viewed as reflecting a post-modern approach, consistent with a flattened and networked global reality (Thumma & Bird, 2009).

Conclusions and Implications

Those managing charitable programs in churches should manage size and style of giving to best fulfill member's needs as both givers and receivers. By combining an economic approach to understanding giving strategies based on group size with psychological findings on what is most likely to increase individuals' happiness, those who organize charitable giving and generosity can develop more effective programs. We can ask, "How does church size and congregation size or administrative structure affect the beneficial side effects of giving?" Generosity, especially prosocial forms - those which benefit others (Dunn *et al*. 2018) - creates a feedback loop of happiness (Aknin *et al*. 2011). This has applications for how to maximize the benefits to members of faith communities and their social networks.

There are a number of implications for future research. As we have discussed, megachurches have developed a variety of bureaucratic structures and have effectively utilized communications technology to target market their product to interested religious consumers (Watson & Scalen, 2008). This consumerist focus means that religion must compete with other elements of consumer culture for the attention of congregants. Further research is needed to more succinctly identify these structures and their impact on congregation members. How are they different from congregational bonds generated by both generalized and balanced reciprocity in small churches and other faith communities? The very nature of megachurch bureaucratic structure lends itself to redistribution and mediated exchanges that foster bonds to the church as an institution, not the multi-faceted and intimate network of bonds amongst members themselves that is typical of smaller groups. Many large churches have attempted to deliberately construct small cell groups within the nested hierarchy of large churches as an intentional strategy to recreate the intimacy of smaller groups. There as yet are no studies demonstrating the effectiveness of this strategy.

Every small exchange that individuals partake in enriches the social fabric and their bonds to other individuals within the community. This could be a useful re-envisioning of the goals of giving within the church and understanding of its impact upon members. Some megachurches have implemented a "cell group" concept, emphasizing the development of small group relationships, often meeting in the homes of congregational members. Research is needed to assess the effectiveness of such strategies in building reciprocal bonds despite the limits of large group size. It may be that more social kinship building will increase the overall level of altruistic behavior as well as additional relational benefits to participation for members of congregations –something that small religious congregations are more likely to reflect.

Or, as stated by Patricia Ezell Webster when reflecting on the way giving happens in small churches versus large churches,

> It's the bureaucracy in the bigger churches that gets in the way . . . when it is no longer a few friends working together to help a neighbor/friend/church member. People start judging and worrying about appearances and is it fair . . . blah blah instead of – well you know Mr. Jones is out of work again, I think I'll just take Mrs. Jones a casserole or a pie. It could be said, at that point, they then over-think it as opposed to a gut reaction of just helping a friend in distress or need. (Webster, 2013)

Finally, it is important to study different faith traditions and how they organize giving based on their faith community/group size: patterns of giving or generosity of any specific group may be more predictive than the specific faith tradition of the group. Given that faith communities have the dual goals of serving the personal wellbeing of their congregation members as well as their congregations as a whole - and the local community - we argue that they should identify and develop strategies that maximize reciprocal exchange over more bureaucratic redistributive economies. Local faith communities can intentionally strive to create "lived" reciprocity by a focus on small group structures.

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