Philanthropy affects culture as it is part of our communal ethos. The question that fundraisers should ask when developing strategies should be: How might one’s culture affect their philanthropy?

Across diverse religions, racial and ethnic cultural groups, and nationalities, philanthropy is understood and demonstrated in many different ways. However, human generosity seems to bridge all of our differences and manifestations of giving. Prosocial behaviors, or the voluntary actions to support others, are part of the human spirit.

Religions throughout the world request their followers participate in their respective communities through giving of themselves and their wealth. Religion’s influence on American philanthropy is beyond the church and spreading of religion predates the founding of the country. In fact, it was clergy who served as the first fundraisers for education, healthcare, and underprivileged communities (Curti & Nash, 1965).

There is a strong religious connection to philanthropy within the Abrahamic religions. Within Judaism, tzedakah, the Hebrew word for philanthropy, emerges from the root tzedek, meaning righteousness, fairness, or justice. Therefore, the Jewish concept of tzedakah is often viewed as an act of social justice. There is a strong history of progressive philanthropy and support of social justice by Jewish communities (Block, 1997; Tobin, 2001).

Christianity, like other faiths, has a deep use of and understanding of charity. The word charity is first used in the New Testament as a word for love. Jones (2009) argues that “a Christian understanding of charity is far more radical and demanding than simply giving from what we have ‘left over.’ … it is a vibrant expression of love” (n.p.).

Similar to the Judeo-Christian concept of tithing, or giving 10% of one’s annual income to others in need, philanthropy within Islamic tradition is one of the five pillars, or personal obligations, of the faith. Zakat, or almsgiving, is generally seen as a function of tithing where Muslims donate 2.5% of their annual wealth. Zakat is often viewed as compulsory, while sadaqah, a close Arabic word to Hebrew’s tzedakah, is voluntary giving and based on social welfare and to support community.

Research over the past twenty years has pushed to expand our understanding of who can be called philanthropic and how prosocial and philanthropic behaviors within communities of color often differ — but still exist — from that of Whites that have traditionally been regarded as philanthropists.

There are traditions of giving back, self-help, mutual assistance, and philanthropy in all racial and ethnic communities and cultures. Each community and culture brings their own perspectives on giving; however much of the philanthropic world, including those fundraising and doing research on philanthropy, have overlooked the different methods and motivations for giving found within non-White wealthy communities.

The majority of African American giving is centered on the ideas of racial uplift and the need to continue to overcome both historic and continued oppression (Carson, 1989; 1993; Fairfax, 1995; Gasman, 2006; Gasman, Drezner, Epstein, Freeman, & Avery, 2011; Gasman & Sedgwick, 2005; Hall-Russell & Kasberg, 1997; Sweet, 1996). Hall-Russell and Kasberg (1997) described Black philanthropy as “proactive rather than reactive...a form of resistance to the exclusion African-Americans perceive from the majority community” (p. 13). According to Carson (1989) and Gasman (2002), from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, African American philanthropy focused on giving among friends — gifts to churches, mutual aid societies, and fraternal organizations that provided funds within their own communities. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black giving changed; African Americans began to give to “strangers” outside of their immediate communities, but still toward Black causes and means of racial uplift (Carson, 1993).

Latinos, similarly to African Americans, have historically been seen as non-donors (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988; 1990; 1992; 1994; 1996). There is a large tradition of fictive kin networks, extended families often without formal blood or legal relations, sending money to family members abroad within Latino communities. These forms of giving are traditionally not counted as philanthropy as they are not given through a nonprofit organization. In a University of San Francisco study, when philanthropy was defined broadly to include informal donations and to communities outside the U.S., there is no statistical
significance in the difference of philanthropic nature among Latinos with respect to any other racial/ethnic group (Smith et al., 1999).

Similar to Latino philanthropy, Asian American giving generally focuses on supporting informal family networks that are not recognized as nonprofit organizations. Chao (1999) notes the trends among Asian Americans toward informal giving, through care of extended family and community, as well as giving to mutual aid societies, religious organization, and Saturday schools. Chao found that Asian Americans are motivated to give through a strong ethic of duty and obligation. It is important to note that the respondents in Chao’s study viewed this obligation as positive, rather than as a negative obligation.

As with other communities of color, and perhaps to a greater extent, American Indians are not considered to be philanthropic (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988; 1990; 1992; 1994; 1996). Little is written about American Indian philanthropy. Berry (1999), in her chapter on Native American philanthropy, notes that while many American Indian communities are still part of the poorest segments of American society, some Nations have risen to new economic levels. Berry demonstrates that giving has always been a part of aboriginal community life. Philanthropy in Native American nations rests upon a system of mutual exchange, with each community member giving and receiving time, goods, knowledge, and blessings, in addition to money. Berry contends, “For most Native communities, it is not new to share and exchange; it is new to institutionalize and standardize these activities” (p. 2).

Cultural traditions and even government practice in other nations affect philanthropic participation and understanding. The United States is the most generous nation of individual donors—giving 2.2% of our GDP, with the United Kingdom the second most giving nation at 0.71% of their GDP (Charities Aid Foundation, 2009; GivingUSA, 2009). However, this should be viewed within the context of national culture. Whereas the US government does not provide many social services, in other countries what Americans see as the work of non-governmental agencies is provided for by the state. Many immigrants come from nations where governments and churches, rather than private and nonprofit organizations, provide healthcare, education, and other essential services. As such, Ramos (1999) points out that those who recently immigrated to the United States or even subsequent generations might not have a culture of support for many American forms of philanthropy, as they are viewed in their cultures as true public goods and fully funded by their government or churches.

Given the different manifestations of philanthropy and prosocial behaviors, the full impact of philanthropy and human generosity will likely never be measured. However, its impact is felt on a regular basis by recipients, donors, and those tangential to the process. The impact of culture on philanthropy should challenge fundraising practitioners to think about creating culturally sensitive and culturally responsive fundraising practices that engage their potential donors in a way that speaks to the donor’s sense of philanthropy.

References


