



Thinkers *and* feelers: Emotion and giving



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ABSTRACT

Voluntary organizations, such as religious congregations, ask their members to contribute money as a part of membership and rely on these contributions for their survival. Yet often only a small cadre of members provides the majority of the contributions. Past research on congregational giving focuses on cognitive rational processes, generally neglecting the role of emotion. Extending Collins' (2004) interaction ritual theory, I predict that individuals who experience positive emotions during religious services will be more likely to give a higher proportion of their income to their congregation than those who do not. Moreover, I argue that this effect will be amplified in congregational contexts characterized by high aggregate levels of positive emotion, strictness, dense congregational networks, and expressive rituals. Using data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and multilevel modeling, I find support for several of these hypotheses. The findings suggest that both cognitive *and* emotional processes underlie congregational giving.

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1. Introduction

Voluntary giving to religious organizations consistently represents the largest share of America's philanthropy ([van Slyke and Brooks, 2005](#)). Like other voluntary associations, religious congregations depend on the monetary contributions of their members to survive and be successful ([Hodgkinson et al., 1988](#); [Stark and Finke, 2000](#); [Finke et al., 2006](#)). Member contributions make up 91 percent of total church income for the average American congregation.¹ Yet, congregational giving is highly skewed with a large number of religious individuals giving no money and a minority contributing the majority of the donations ([Iannaccone, 1997](#); [Smith et al., 2008](#)). Congregations, and voluntary associations generally, "must strive to convert affiliates with tepid commitments into constituents willing to sacrifice resources" ([Scheitle and Finke, 2008](#): 815; see also [McCarthy and Zald, 1977](#); [Stark and Finke, 2000](#)). Central to this goal is identifying why some individuals give more money than others. Yet as [Finke et al. \(2006\)](#) note, until recently congregational giving has received relatively scant attention in the literature, much of which is concerned with identifying correlates of giving, rather than providing a theoretical explanation of it.

Recent theoretical research focuses on economic or rational choice explanations emphasizing individuals as 'thinkers' making instrumental decisions on how much to contribute (e.g., [Finke et al., 2006](#); [Iannaccone, 1994](#); [Scheitle and Finke, 2008, 2000](#); [Whitehead, 2010](#)). As such, this research has mostly neglected the role of emotions² as a motive for congrega-

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¹ Data comes from a nationally representative survey of American congregations—the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (see [Woolever and Bruce, 2002](#)).

² While scholars use emotion to mean many different things, there is general agreement that all emotions "have 'valence'—they are either positive or negative" ([Camerer et al., 2005](#)) and "have an infrastructure that includes neural systems dedicated, at least in part, to emotion processes and that emotions motivate cognition and action and recruit response systems" ([Izard, 2009](#)). Anger, fear, sadness, and disgust are examples of negative emotions and happiness and joy are examples of positive emotions ([Izard, 2009](#)).

tional giving and, in doing so, fails to consider how individuals may be both thinkers *and* feelers.³ Recent psychological and neuroscience research has stressed the interaction and integration of cognition and emotion in the brain (Phelps, 2006; Pessoa, 2008; Izard, 2009) and the importance of emotion for making decisions and facilitating cooperation, altruism, and giving behavior (Bechara et al., 1994, 1999; Damasio, 1994; McCabe et al., 2001; de Waal, 2008; Akin et al., 2012). This line of research questions cognitive-only approaches to congregational giving that fail to consider emotion.

Durkheim ([1912] 1965) identified emotion-inducing rituals as the foundation of religious life. More recent theoretical work suggests that positive social interactions spark emotions that are attributed to the group, thereby facilitating sacrificial behavior on its behalf (Lawler et al., 2000; Lawler, 2001; Collins, 2004). In particular, Collins' (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains highlights how successful rituals result in positive socially derived emotions, which drive individuals to value the group and its survival. Extending Collins' (2004) theory, I argue that experiencing positive emotions during religious services will increase congregational giving as individuals attribute the positive emotion they experience to the group. Congregational contexts in which it is easier to make this attribution (i.e., congregations in which there is a stronger sense of groupness) should facilitate this process and in doing so increase the effect of positive emotions on congregational giving. I argue that high levels of aggregate positive emotion, strictness, dense networks, and expressive rituals are four such congregational contexts.

This study offers an affective model of congregational giving that complements previous theoretical models emphasizing cognitive factors. First, I draw on recent work in the area of emotion and cooperation to propose hypotheses regarding the effect of individual- and congregational-level positive emotion on congregational giving and how the individual-level effect is moderated by certain congregational contexts. Second, I combine individual- and congregational-level data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey to create a multilevel dataset of individuals within congregations that allows me to test the effect of positive emotion generated during religious services on congregational giving and how this effect varies by congregational context. Third, I test these predictions using hierarchical regression models and find support for several of them.

2. Correlates of religious and congregational giving

One of the main areas of research on religious or congregational giving is the identification of correlates (Hoffmann et al., 2010). Some of the most often cited demographic correlates of it include income, age, marriage, and education (Chaves and Miller, 1999; Finke et al., 2006; Hoge, 1994; Iannaccone, 1997; see Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011 for a review of this literature). A great deal of research also focuses on religious behavioral and belief correlates. Studies have consistently found religious service attendance to be a strong predictor of congregational giving (Hoge et al., 1996; Chaves and Miller, 1999; Smith et al., 2008; Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). Conservative religious beliefs also tend to be positively related to giving (Luidens and Nemeth, 1994). Recent work in the area of religious beliefs focuses on the religious meaning ascribed to giving, typically that God asks for it (Peifer, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Miller, 1999; Vaidyanathan and Snell, 2011). However, several studies find that the effect of religious beliefs is not as strong as attendance (Luidens and Nemeth, 1994). On the congregational-level, theologically conservative denominations consistently have higher average levels of congregational giving (Hoge, 1994; Zaleski and Zech, 1994; Hoge et al., 1996; Finke et al., 2006).

While these correlates are important for identifying what types of people and denominations have higher levels of congregational giving, this area of research generally does not provide an overarching theoretical framework for predicting which individual or congregational characteristics should matter and why. The work that has been done in this area typically emphasizes the application of economic or rational choice approaches to religious giving.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Rational choice explanations of congregational giving

There are several economic or rational choice approaches to congregational giving all sharing the assumption that levels of congregational giving are determined by weighing costs and benefits and choosing the level of congregational giving that maximizes utility (Iannaccone, 1992, 1997). An individual's monetary contribution to a congregation therefore depends on the value of the goods and services it provides. However, instrumentally rational individuals will always prefer to consume goods without contributing to their production when possible, that is, to free-ride off the contributions of others (Iannaccone, 1992). Since the value of religious commodities depends not only on one's own contribution to them but also on the contributions of others, free-riders can undermine the quality of the goods congregations produce and in doing so also reduce levels of congregational giving (Iannaccone, 1992, 1997; Stark and Finke, 2000). In this way, the two core dilemmas rational choice approaches attempt to address are (1) how congregations can provide quality goods that outweigh the costs of participation, including monetary contributions, and (2) curb free-riding with the latter contributing to the former.

One factor hypothesized to reduce free-riders and increase the quality of congregational goods is congregational strictness. The strict church model, proposed by Iannaccone (1992, 1994), suggests that behavioral prohibitions act as screening

³ Notable exceptions include recent studies investigating negative emotion, specifically guilt, and religious giving (Smith et al., 2008; Vaidyanathan and Snell, 2011).

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