“Family comes first”:
Fundraisers’ perspectives on charitable bequests

by

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Abstract

This exploratory paper examines how fundraisers for charitable organisations in Australia understand influences of charitable giving in the transmission of individual, deceased estates. It utilizes a sub-set of semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a wider study into the place of charitable giving in the intergenerational transfer of wealth. My analysis draws on Mauss’s classic concept of the “‘total’ social phenomena” that underpins the process of gift giving, and on contemporary theory of social capital and trust. The insights of fundraisers suggest that attitudes towards asset transmission and charitable giving are overwhelmingly influenced by expectations of honouring family ties and they are influenced to a far lesser degree by the nature and strength of the relationships individuals have with charitable organisations.

Key words: charitable bequests, fundraisers, trust, family, social capital
Introduction

In 1925 Marcel Mauss produced his seminal exploration of the phenomena of gift giving *Essai sur le don* [The Gift]. From an analytical approach founded on Durkheim’s (1964) concept of “organic solidarity”, Mauss observes that in theory gifts and their exchange are voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and self-interested (1990: 1). Mauss details the ways in which gifts are “‘total’ social phenomena” that are governed by the complex interaction of societal norms and obligations (1990: 76). In pre-industrial and in more diverse and complex industrial societies, giving is not an isolated and independent act but is part of the interconnected interpersonal and institutional phenomena of the social context in which it takes place. The foundational nature of Mauss’s work is evident in his distinguishing three separate and interrelated obligations that come into play under certain circumstances: giving (essential to the creation and maintenance of social relationships); receiving (consummation of the social bond); and reciprocating (demonstration of the receiver’s own honour). An important concept for Mauss is that the gift and the giver are never completely separated and because “to give something is to give a part of oneself” (: 10), that indivisibility is fundamental to the creation of reciprocal obligation. As Mark Orsteen (2002) observes in his edited collection of cross-disciplinary essays on the gift, many have failed to grasp the significance of Mauss’ insight and have sought to explain away giving as simply self-serving or to romanticise giving as some form of pure altruistic behaviour.

Giving can take many forms, and in this paper I focus specifically on giving by individuals to charitable organisations from their estates. I examine how fundraisers working in charitable organisations in Australia understand the role of charitable giving in the transmission of
individual, deceased estates. I use the conceptual framework developed by Mauss of the interconnected and independent nature of “‘total’ social phenomena” that underpins the nature of gift giving. I use this in conjunction with more contemporary sociological concepts of social capital and trust to suggest that attitudes towards asset transmission and to giving are influenced by prevailing social expectations and dominated by the familial.

**Social Context, Social Capital and Trust**

The insights Mauss articulated in the 1920s are derived from his analyses of practices and behaviours in a range of pre-industrial societies. Mauss’s use of inverted commas around the adjective ‘total’, in “‘total’ social phenomena”, serves to highlight the interconnected and interdependent nature of complex social phenomena that he described as simultaneously legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, and morphological (1990: 76). A more contemporary manifestation of aspects of this theoretical framework is that of social capital. The use of the term social capital of recent times was brought to prominence by Pierre Bourdieu (1977); given a clear theoretical framework by James Coleman (1988; 1990); and became the focus of more popular interest in the 1990s by scholars including Robert Putnam (1993; 1995) and Francis Fukuyama (1992; 1995).

Coleman (1988) argues that unlike other forms of capital (such as economic capital and human capital), social capital adheres to the structure of relations both between and among social actors. He identifies obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures as key aspects of social capital, depending on both the trustworthiness of the social environment (the expectation that obligations will be repaid) and the scale of those obligations held. The bonds of interpersonal relations, especially within families, combined with reciprocal obligations
and trust that those obligations will be fulfilled or met with sanctions underpins Coleman’s articulation of social capital. Fukuyama advanced the social capital debate with a particular focus on trust. Fukuyama establishes “the desire for recognition” as a key concept in the western philosophical tradition and a key influence over human behaviour (1992: 162/163). He notes that “every human being seeks to have his or her dignity recognized … [and that] this kind of recognition cannot be achieved by individuals; it can come only in a social context” (1995: 6-7), and argues that recognition is a necessary precursor to trust. For Fukuyama recognition is an important component of the human condition and as recognition by its very nature involves the expressed perceptions of others it is determined by social context, or, in Mauss’s terms, is a product of total social phenomena.

Fukuyama argues that social capital is not something that an individual can acquire in isolation, but a “capability” that arises from sociability and associated trust in a society or parts of that society. He contends that shared moral values form the basis of normative behaviour that becomes habituated and he posits that in general “the higher are the qualifications for entry into the community, the greater is the degree of solidarity and mutual trust among those on the inside” (1995: 154). Strong, narrowly defined communities provide an enhanced basis for clarity of expectations and intensity of trust.

Putnam in his work on social capital consistently emphasises the interdependent and self-reinforcing nature of association and trust arguing that the “theory of social capital presumes that, generally speaking, the more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa” (1995: 665). In Bowling Alone Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networking and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that
arise from them” (2000: 19). For Putnam social interactions generate and reinforce the systems of mutual obligation and trust that are critical to the effective functioning of society. Putnam uses personal statements to illustrate that association can give rise to specific reciprocity “I’ll do this for you if you do that for me” and to generalised reciprocity: “I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road” (2000: 20/21).

Putnam argues that altruism, volunteering and trust, which he broadly defines as “readiness to help others” (2000: 116), is a central measure of social capital. He draws on contemporary US data to suggest that those who belong to formal and informal social networks are more likely to give time and money to good causes than those of us who are isolated socially. Putman argues that more than other variables including wealth, education, community size, age, family status, and employment “by far the most consistent predictor of giving time and money is involvement in community life” (2000: 119). While “joiners” may be generous by nature, involvement in social networks both encourages and provides increased opportunities for giving behaviours. He points to two maxims well known to fund-raisers: “simply being asked to give is a powerful stimulus” and “Fund-raising typically means friend-raising” (2000: 121). The establishment of interpersonal relationships functions to build trust and to strengthen reciprocal obligation.

This Study

In this paper I examine the perspectives of contemporary Australian fundraisers against the theoretical framework that giving is significantly influenced by total social context. I explore the fundraiser’s perspectives on: i) the extent to which giving (in particular from estates) is a
result of familial, personal and organisational networks and associated perceptions of trust, trustworthiness and reciprocity; and ii) the extent to which the giving behaviour of individuals is influenced by prevailing social norms and expectations. I analyse interviews of 14 separate fundraising practitioners employed directly by their respective charitable organisations. Between them the 14 interviews had in excess of 160 years fundraising experience. Each of the interviewees had extensive experience and knowledge of charitable bequests in particular and each held responsibility for charitable bequests for their employer, via managerial oversight or dealing directly with bequest donors and their estates. As there is no standard, consistently used framework for categorising charitable organisations in Australia, for the purposes of this study I adopted the seven cause related groupings used by the bi-annual Australian Charities Financial Analysis (Thompson 2005). At least one interview was sourced from each of the seven categories detailed in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted in Sydney and Melbourne in 2007 as part of a wider study into the place of charitable giving in the intergenerational transfer of wealth. Given the significance of financial transfers (monetary giving) to this study, and that in 2005 approximately 75% Australian charities received total donations of under $35,000 p.a. (CPNS 2006: 5), the interviewees were mostly but not exclusively drawn from larger charitable organisations.

Before discussing the practitioners’ perspectives, it is appropriate to acknowledge that this particular cohort of interviewees has a vested interest in “growing the program”; in seeking to increase both the participation rate and the scale of post mortem charitable giving, to their
organisation in particular. As such their views and representations will be informed by their professional role. Specifically, the practitioners each presented their perspectives from a stand-point of a moral and ethical individual, working for and with a moral and ethical organisation. It is not my intention to imply that such a perspective is contrived; it is to note that should there be a prevalent social norm or expectation of how individuals “should” behave in relation to charitable bequests, then it is probable that this position will be well understood by those involved professionally in the field. As professionals, they will have a stronger understanding of what Fukuyama (1995) described as the shared moral values that underpin habituated normative behaviour.

**Discussion**

From a quantitative perspective there were two pieces of consistent advice from the interviewed fundraisers working within charitable organisations. The first is that very few people leave charitable bequests. The second is that in the main there is a very low correlation between regular donors to a given charity and individuals who leave charitable bequests. The low rate of *post mortem* charitable giving is seen by those involved in seeking to secure such funds as both a concern and an opportunity.

**Family first**

The most common theme running through the discourses of these interviewees was that when it comes to distributing one’s estate, the obligation to family comes first. This came up in the interviews repeatedly and from a range of different entry points. It was in discussing the practical process of field visits that one interviewee most succinctly captured the sentiment often expressed by the prospective bequestors: “Certainly when you are out there approaching people and bringing up the question of bequests, people often say ‘Oh, family
comes first”. Another interviewee observed: “A lot of people say ‘I wouldn’t leave a bequest to a charity. Bequests are for the family’”.

From the perspective of the charity itself, the same principle was repeatedly espoused: “as we always say, consider us after you’ve looked after your family. Look after your family first.” From another interviewee: “we say to them ‘look after all of your loved ones, make sure your family is well looked after, but then consider leaving us percentage if there is anything left over’. As can be seen by this example, even when moving into the language of persuasion, the shared understanding of familial primacy is always articulated as a given. The dual considerations of looking after the family AND making a charitable bequest enable the fundraiser to work with the given, the unquestioned expectation that the family comes first in estate distributions, while making a clear argument that primary obligation does not equate to sole option. Indeed, in only one interview was there was even a hint that there might be circumstances in which estate distributions might go to charity as an alternative to the family, and this only under extreme circumstances:

I consider it appropriate that they have precedence if they are a family member AND (original emphasis) they haven’t been endowed with great wealth. But where that has happened, where there has been a great endowment of wealth and it is not necessary to bolster a family member … (it) presents wonderful opportunity for the non profit sector to tap into people’s estates and resources. (Community Services IV)

The qualifying sentiment of family first is repeatedly woven into the expression of this single concept. This exception to the norm is only considered where family members have “great wealth”, not just sufficient wealth not to require the full estate.
In characterising people who do leave charitable bequests, interviewees consistently and repeatedly emphasise the centrality of family. The interviewees’ shared perspective is that individuals who die without direct family are most likely to make a distribution from their estate to charity. Individuals in circumstances where they are unencumbered by obligations to family are those most likely to give at least a portion of their estate to a charitable organisation: “People who are usually the last of their line are the ones who tend to go for charitable distributions. When there are family members available they tend to clearly rate a priority. Where there are children, they get it, or at least most of it.” Another expressed it a little more mischievously: “The dream of the fundraiser is the single, little old lady with no family”. The expectations that accompany the bonds of blood are clearly manifest in the understanding of who gives part of their estate to charity and why.

**Trustworthiness and relationships**

For the relatively few bequests that they do receive, the interviewees identify two issues of critical importance: trustworthiness and relationship nurturing. The first stems in part from an insight expressed succinctly by one interviewee as “bequests come from capital, whereas giving comes from income”. Interviewees from organisations with a significant bequest income all report that in the majority of cases they are unaware of the relationship between the bequest donor and the charity. The direct correlation between donors on a charity’s database and those who leave a charitable bequest is consistently low. Interviewees speculate it is probable that bequest donors have had some form of association with their organisation or its work at some point in their life and / or they have trust in the organisation and its utilization of donated funds. Given this lack of empirical knowledge about the association of
many bequestors with their organisations, practitioners work with their learned experience and the shared wisdom of the sector.

In line with Mauss’s three obligations or giving, receiving and reciprocating, the strongest perceived bond is where the individual has been the direct recipient of a benefit from the organisation, or has a family member who received such a benefit. It is also the derived wisdom of some that where there has been no direct relationship, a belief in the “good works” of the organisation may be the link in circumstances where “Sadly … they don’t have anyone else to give it to. So what do they do with their money? They leave it to a charity they trust”. As a representative of a charity which sources 60% of its significant annual income via bequests explained: “With us, we’ve got the brand, we’re out there, people know what we do and we’re seen as a trustworthy organisation”.

For those individuals with whom the charity does have a relationship and are potential or committed bequestors, nurturing that relationship is seen by the interviewees as imperative: a bequest program as “all about relationships”. The interviewees consistently acknowledge the importance of inviting those individuals who have commitment to a bequest into the life of the organisation: “The purpose of our bequest society is to engage committed bequestors in the work of [this place] so they feel as though they are included. So they feel they are part of the family”. Offering opportunities to engage and participate are seen as central to strengthening ties and reducing the likelihood that an individual will change their mind and their loyalty to different charity. “We have a special relationship with our bequestors. … We do not want them to think ‘Now they’ve got the money they’ve forgotten all about me’”. At the heart of this commitment to relationship nurturing is an intention on the part of the
charity firstly to improve the likelihood of a bequest prospect becoming a committed
bequestor when asked; and secondly to build and maintain a sense of reciprocal obligation
with committed bequestors such that their behaviour reflects a sentiment of “If you don’t
forget me, I won’t forget you”. The fundraisers work to a two part process. The first is to
establish a profile and a reputation for trustworthiness in order to maximise the potential for
“unknown” bequestors. The second is to build social capital and trust with those who are
known in order to maximise the potential for bequests to be made, and not rescinded.

Conclusions
In this paper I have drawn on concepts of gift giving obligations and of social capital and the
importance of networks and trust to identify areas in which practitioner perceptions are
strongly consistent. From interviews of fundraisers with expertise in charitable bequests, I
have identified that interviewees hold a shared understanding of the expectation that familial
obligations will be honoured by way of transferring estate assets to the family. Even amongst
this group of professionals who work directly to secure charitable bequests from the
community, the expectation of “family first” in relation to estate transmission goes entirely
unquestioned. The social context in which post mortem giving takes place in Australia is
hegemonic. Beyond the given of family, building and sustaining relationships and trust are
perceived to be fundamental to securing charitable bequests from individuals who have a
direct association with a charity. In the absence of direct relationships with individual
bequest prospects, charities focus on building an awareness of trustworthiness. The
perspectives of professional fundraisers indicate that charitable giving from estates is
significantly influenced by societal expectations in relation to honouring family ties. To far
lesser extent practitioners operate on the belief that it is influenced by the nature and strength
of the relationships individuals have with charitable organisations, the establishment of trust and maintenance of a sense of reciprocity.

References


Table I: Interviewees employed by a charity

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<tr>
<th>Cause Related Grouping</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanitarian (includes the Arts)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospitals (includes medical research)</td>
<td>3</td>
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