

GiveWell Project Review
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PROJECT AIM:

My objective for this project was to conduct a survey of the historiography of American philanthropy, with a particular focus on how works analyzed the impact of philanthropic programs and initiatives. I hoped to identify which works offered an especially robust engagement with the question of philanthropic impact, and the ways in which they did so, as well as to identify explanations for why other works did not do so helpfully.

FINDINGS:

In general, I found that the vast majority of sources on the history of modern American philanthropy that I consulted did not rigorously engage the question of impact. There were a few notable exceptions, many of which were clustered in the historiography of early twentieth century philanthropy. Many of the sources examining the more recent period, however, dealt with impact in ways that suggested significant gaps in the research, and the need for additional work to be done.

METHODOLOGY:

I decided upon a number of strategies that structured my inquiry. First, I operated under the assumption that determinations of impact and effectiveness are best made with a certain degree of retrospection—they require an appreciation of change over time. Thus, I paid particular attention to work of history, as opposed to contemporaneous journalistic reportage.

I also focused, at least initially, on sources that take the perspective of a particular funder and that are written from a perspective external (if allied with) the philanthropic institution in question. Other categories of sources include those written from the perspective of the funder from within the institution (ie, foundation reports); those written from the perspective of the grantee (a history of a particular nonprofit, for instance), and those that take as their subject a broad movement of reform. I did in fact consult a number of sources from these latter categories, but I placed my initial emphasis firmly on the first category. I did so for several reasons. First, this was the literature I knew best, and therefore already had in mind the contours of a comprehensive survey. Also, though the literature encompasses a vast body of sources, it is bounded by the relatively small number of major philanthropic institutions or benefactors in the US, compared at least to the number of nonprofits; that is, I began at the narrower apex of the funding pyramid. Finally, I felt that these sources would have the highest probability of success in yielding robust accounts of philanthropic impact; accounts that focused on nonprofits (beneficiaries of philanthropic funding) or movements, I assumed, would only engage the question of funding peripherally and so would not fully grapple with how philanthropy

resources were or were not used effectively. As my project progressed, my faith in that assumption was shaken a bit, but it did shape much of my work.

Given the expansiveness of the literature on American philanthropy, I did not expect my search to be exhaustive. I did, however, hope it to be as comprehensive and systematic as possible, in order to reach a point where I could begin to make some broader generalizations regarding the state of the literature. My method was to identify a handful of major works in the field, especially broad surveys, and to mine their notes and bibliographies for a wider array of potentially helpful sources. In taking this approach, I surely overlooked many possible sources. But grounding my own inquiry in the sources relied upon by a few “master-texts,” which were often themselves key sources in philanthropy research, did allow me to compile a bibliography of sources that could claim a certain prominence in the field.

Among the sources I used for this purpose were: the endnotes in Oliver Zunz’s *Philanthropy in America: A History* (2011); the endnotes in Helmut Anheier and David Hammack’s *American Foundations: Roles and Contributions* (2010); the annotated bibliography in *Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities*, ed. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (1999); the endnotes in Joel Fleishman, et. al, *Casebook for the Foundation: A Great American Secret* (2007), as well as the bibliography in Fleishman, *Foundation: A Great American Secret* (2007); the notes in the bibliographic essays in Lawrence Friedman and Mark McGarvie, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* (2003); and the endnotes in Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (2011). I added a few sources that were not mentioned in these sources, but that I knew to offer valuable insights from my own research. I should add that I also canvassed a number of leading scholars in the field of philanthropy research (Stanley Katz and Alan Abramson in particular); they offered a title or two, but all expressed the sense that there was not much out there that really grappled with the question of the impact of a particular program, a conclusion that I now share as well.

In terms of choosing which books to review more thoroughly from the lists I culled from these master bibliographies, my method was somewhat impressionistic and unsystematic. I attempted to make basic calculations on the helpfulness of sources based on title, topic, and the author(s), grounded in my own familiarity with the literature of the field. I picked out sources that dealt with the major philanthropic programs of the last century, as I understood them, and also had a bias toward scholars whose work I admired, or whose work I knew exerted a significant influence within the field (to cite just one example, the work of Ellen Condliffe Lagemann or Alice O’Connor). But I also sought to make the survey as wide-ranging as possible, so a source on a topic that I had not yet encountered (small, local foundations, for instance), would often make it through my filter as well, even if I did not have a sense that it was promising. Although I initially cast a wide chronological net, eventually, following the directions of the GiveWell staff, I focused more particularly on the more recent (post 1960s) history.

Unless I knew the source from my own research, my appraisals of the books’ helpfulness were the product of relatively brief examinations. My aim was not to fully assimilate a source’s content but to understand how the book or article handled the question of impact and whether it might be worthwhile to study in more depth at a future

point. I hoped to come to a basic conclusion as to a work's helpfulness for the broader project. Of course, the question of how to determine impact is a complicated one. And different sorts of philanthropic programs and initiatives require different types of standards. In the course of this survey, we have adopted three distinct, though often interrelated, understandings of impact. The first is a mechanistic one, hinging on whether a philanthropic program or grant met its proximate aim. There is also a broader consideration of impact, which might be termed a humanitarian calculus, which addresses the ultimate good that the program or grant achieved (taking into account the possible detrimental consequences as well). The former standard asks whether a program or grant worked on its own terms, the latter questions the value of those terms themselves. Then there is another understanding of impact, particularly relevant in philanthropic programs that ultimately seek shape public policy or to transfer responsibility or ownership of programs to governmental institutions. In this case, the key question to ask in order to determine impact is not whether the programs were effective but whether the transfer was successful.

Ideally, a source would address all three understandings of the nature of impact, the mechanistic, the humanitarian, and what might be termed the reproductive. It would explain whether a program "worked" operationally, examine the relevant research to determine what good the program actually accomplished, and map out how it might have influenced or primed the workings of other institutions, both public and private. And it would do all of this with a careful attention to detail and to the context—political, social, economic, cultural—in which the program took root. This would also require attention to the other possible institutions, philanthropic and governmental, that might have had a hand in shaping the program, in order to determine the actual causal potency of the philanthropic institution in question, as well as to the program's precursors and progenitors, in order to address a counterfactual about how other causal forces might have actually been responsible for a particular social outcome attributed to a philanthropic institution. This is a heavy burden, admittedly, for any one source to carry. And so it is not so surprising that, after surveying dozens of the sources that I determined would mostly likely be able to bear it, I have determined that few actually managed to do so. That is, many of the sources provide a fine, detailed analysis of one of those versions of impact, but rarely manage to capture all three. Furthermore, those that delve into the internal, institutional workings of a philanthropy—mapping out the shifts in strategy and personnel that helped to determine a program's success or failure—rarely take a broad societal or international view to follow a program's implementation in the world. Ultimately, of the dozens of sources I consulted, and which I selected as the most likely to be helpful from a list of hundreds of potential sources that I compiled, only a small handful actually did offer a full engagement with the question of philanthropic impact.

RESULTS:

In fact, in the course of this survey, I was struck by how unaggressively many historians of philanthropy engaged with that question. I do not mean that they seemed uninterested in the actual effects of philanthropy, but that they were willing to accept a certain degree of indistinctness or vagueness when addressing the question. They were of course interested in determining whether programs succeeded or failed, but they often did

not define those terms rigorously in respect to societal outcomes, and did not insist on robust causal explanations that strenuously linked philanthropic initiatives to those outcomes. Counterfactual suppositions, for instance, on whether or not some outcome attributed to a particular philanthropy might have been achieved by other causal factors were rarely entertained.

There are a number of reasons why this was the case, I think. Many of the best historical works on philanthropy take a broad chronological approach in order to chart out trend lines. In a sense, institutional histories have a bias toward this sort of approach; they offer a fixed point around which change over time can be discerned. And while the broad scope is helpful in many respects, it requires granting less attention to any one particular program or initiative. Most of these works only devote a few pages to any particular program; some offer a chapter. Of course, the best scholars can fit in an impressive amount of analysis into tight spaces, but still, this approach does not encourage the sort of detailed, strenuous accounting of impact that GiveWell seeks.

The works surveyed that have most ably grappled with the question of impact are those that are circumscribed in some respect, often around a particular program or some discrete time period or geographical region (John Etting's *The Germ of Laziness*, on the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission, for instance, or Kevin Quigley's work on democracy promotion in Central Europe). Several of these works examine programs from the earliest period of American foundations, the early decades of the twentieth century. There are several reasons for this. First, there were only a handful of major foundations in existence, led by the Rockefeller and Carnegie funded philanthropies, and the sources for these programs have been made relatively easily available to scholars. There are no access restrictions that still limit the material associated with more recent philanthropic initiatives, and the Rockefeller archives were especially well maintained.

But perhaps more importantly, in the early period of the development of modern American philanthropy, questions of causality were more easily established. Not only were there fewer foundations on the scene, but local, state, and especially federal governments were also much more limited in size and scope (in fact, many philanthropic efforts were prompted by the recognition of the inadequacies of the state's involvement). In many arenas of policy—public health, for instance—foundations wielded greater sums for distribution, and harbored greater reservoirs of expertise—than other institutions. And so the impact of their programs was more easily mapped out.

But tracing the lines of causality from any one particular philanthropic initiative outward becomes much more difficult with the growth of the regulatory and social welfare state, as well as of government grantor agencies such as the National Science Foundation and of myriad other foundations and nonprofits that might be working in the same field. In fact, much of the scholarship on philanthropy in the second half of the twentieth century takes as a premise this difficulty and examines how foundations struggled with it. In her work on the Carnegie Corporation, for instance, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann explains how foundation officials embraced the concept of “strategic philanthropy,” which meant promoting programs meant to spark the involvement of other institutions, both public and private.

Somewhat paradoxically, the focus that this scholarship sheds on internal foundation strategies to leverage its own resources to harness those of other institutions tends not to extend as intently toward the actual mechanics of that influence. So while

many sources feature dense accounts of internal deliberations and shifts of strategy in the course of constructing pilot programs that could be ultimately be picked up and supported by government agencies, there is rarely a careful accounting of how that transfer of responsibility did (or did not) take place; ie, how exactly a program got from point A (a foundation boardroom) to point B (some governmental agency).

The works surveyed also rarely offer a detailed examination of how programs are implemented by government, as if the mere fact that philanthropy managed to shape public policy is a sufficient ending point for analysis of impact. (A version of a similar dynamic is evident in some of the histories of progressive philanthropy that I examined. In works that focus on philanthropy that promotes grass-roots activism, such as Susan Olander's account of the Haymarket People's Fund, the empowerment of community activists is itself the primary objective, and so there is little consideration of the effectiveness of the programs the activists were promoting.)

More generally, I wonder whether some scholars shied away from a strong engagement with the question of impact not because the topic did not interest them but because they decided that with such causal complexity, it was simply too difficult a task; or perhaps they came to believe that in a time of multiple and tangled vectors of influence, the search was chimerical, that is—actually impossible. That question lies at the heart of this project.

There is another way in which the rise of the American state and the concomitant rise of “strategic philanthropy” shaped the historiography and made the question of impact even more difficult to engage. As philanthropy became increasingly invested in shaping public policy (though never as much as some advocates would have liked), a considerable amount of attention was focused on the world of ideas; this was the case especially among conservative philanthropy in the last decades of the century. But it is very, very difficult to map out the influence of an idea, or even of a report in which an idea is embedded. Histories of philanthropy—John Miller's account of the Olin Foundation, for instance—often cite the influence of certain ideas incubated in foundations—welfare reform or school choice—but rarely is considerable effort expended in actually tracing that influence. Various measures of the influence of the prominent intellectuals who receive foundation support are often cited—book sales, various accolades—but few of the sources I encountered in my survey actually traced an idea from its inception to its ultimate implementation. Understanding the route an idea takes is essential in order to address the counterfactual possibility of a social outcome having arisen without it.

It is quite possible that to find the sort of a robust causal narrative that I set off to look for, one that explains both the mechanism and the scope of philanthropic impact, one must look beyond the distinct historiography of philanthropy to histories of institutions and movements—histories of civil rights organizations, or the environmental movement, for instance. In doing so, one would almost necessarily have to sacrifice the primacy of philanthropy in the narrative, but this might be a worthwhile tradeoff. I have only begun to expand my search to incorporate these sources; and this could be another stage of the project. I will also continue my survey of the sources within the historiography philanthropy, which I have by no means exhausted (I plan, for example,

on combing the bibliography of *Creative Philanthropy*, ed. Helmut Anheier, and I have several other sources lined up in my queue). But I have reached a point where I feel fairly comfortable making the above generalizations about the state of the literature.

I also hope to look more closely at the reports produced by foundations themselves; in recent decades, philanthropic officials have become somewhat more committed to a public accounting of the effectiveness of their own programs, though rigorous evaluations that can match the deep contextualization supplied by works of history are still rare. I have begun looking at the reports published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation of its own programs (the RWJF is a leader in the campaign to promote philanthropic public accountability) and I hope to extend my survey to other foundations as well. I would also like to examine some of the contemporary work produced on impactful philanthropy by the National Committee for Responsibility Philanthropy and the Center for Effective Philanthropy, among other institutions. Ultimately, I consider this an open-ended, dynamic inquiry into the state of the literature, and I would welcome any suggestions as to strategies or sources that might be useful in my search.