

AREA SIX: THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES
AND THEIR ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO THE SPIRITUAL IDEAL OF
UNLIMITED LOVE

This topic area examines the significance of concepts of “love for all humanity” in a sociological context, giving attention to the ways in which this spiritual ideal is implemented within faith traditions through volunteerism and service to the neediest. While religious communities can and do fall short of the ideal of “unlimited love,” and sometimes even descend into in-group insularity, love for all humanity is nevertheless a key precept that often translates into personal and organizational altruistic behavior.

Research Area Consultant

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1. A National Study of Altruistic and Unlimited Love

The project will allow key variables on aspects of unlimited love to be added as a new module to the General Social Survey (GSS), one of the most utilized and highly respected social science surveys in the world, located at the University of Chicago. Led by Dr. Tom Smith, Director of the General Social Survey, the project will include the introduction of a pilot module in 2003, that will be based on the best data from previous research on the subject. Based on the pilot, the new module on unlimited love questions will officially be added to the GSS in 2004. Housed within the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the GSS will bring much needed social science attention and credibility to the topic of unlimited love as NORC holds substantial capital within the academic community and well beyond. The GSS is a very large, random, representative survey that allows social scientists to analyze national level trends and patterns. This new module will provide unprecedented opportunities for junior and senior scholars to explore the relationship between unlimited love and other socially important factors, including the roles of religion, religious practices and beliefs. Because the GSS is so accessible, it will provide researchers with quick access to some of the best social survey data available. This project has the potential to be super catalytic by providing future

researchers with nationally representative data on unlimited love, as well as hundreds of other relevant and important social science variables. Such data will make it possible to “fast-forward” the research and scholarship in the area of altruism and unlimited love – which is perhaps the main overall objective of the Institute.

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2. Faith-Based Service Organizations, Altruistic Caregiving, and Understandings of Love

Led by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow, this study is part of a larger community study of the social agencies and churches in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. The proposed study will focus on persons volunteering for caregiving for the poor, needy, or elderly. Wuthnow hypothesizes that among people working in nonprofit agencies, caring leads to trust, and trust in turn engenders effectiveness. Wuthnow goes on to postulate that faith-based organizations (FBOs) are more likely than non-faith-based organizations to exhibit the caring and loving attitudes that lead to trust and effectiveness. The proposed research is extremely important because it is perhaps the first to provide a strong theoretical foundation for the assumption that faith-based organizations are more effective than their secular counterparts. Wuthnow plans on conducting 120 in-depth interviews with volunteers that will yield rich data on motivations, understandings of unlimited love, beliefs about God’s love, and much more. Interviews will be conducted with representatives from both faith-based and non-faith-based organizations. Importantly, Wuthnow plans to relate the attitudes and behavior of the volunteers to their own religious beliefs and practices. This is an important step in helping to understand the linkages between volunteer motivation and religious commitment, as well as the linkage between religiosity and community agencies, including churches. The sophisticated nature of the study methodology and its tight theoretical underpinnings lead us to believe that Wuthnow’s study will eventually become a sociological classic. In summary, this study will shed important empirical light on the relationship among faith, spirituality, and motivations toward volunteering, trust, and the efficacy of caregiving.

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3. Antecedents and Correlates of Civic Engagement for African American Adolescents and Their Parents

The proposed study takes advantage of recently collected longitudinal data from the University of Rochester Youth and Family Project. The research is a multi-method, multi-informant investigation of civic engagement among a sample of African American adolescents. Judith Smetana, the principal investigator, posits that there is a relationship between adolescent love and trust for parents, racial socialization, religiosity, and how these influence adolescent involvement in their communities. Civic engagement is a topic of key interest; the issues of civic engagement among African American adolescents and their parents is particularly important. The proposed study will provide new and much needed knowledge about the role of religion or faith-based communities in encouraging civic participation within many black communities. We need to increase our understanding of civic engagement among minority populations and adolescents who face adversity; this project does both. This important study will advance our understanding of how spirituality, religiosity, compassionate love, and concepts of social justice in family contexts become instantiated in African-American late adolescents' involvement and service on behalf of the well-being of others.

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4. Self-Forgetfulness in Seeking the Lost: A Sociological Study of Relentless Love and Compassionate Service at Ground Zero

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the country will long remember the thousands of construction workers, firemen, police, and chaplains who poured into Lower Manhattan to conduct the rescue, recovery, and clean-up operation. They worked around the clock for days in the early weeks, then in grueling 12-hour shifts looking for survivors and the dead. At St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel on Lower Broadway in New York, located on the precipice of Ground Zero, some 5,000 volunteers fed these workers, gave them sleeping quarters, comforted them, clothed them, and built a spiritual community of mutual gratitude. What motivated these particular individuals to volunteer for this work? What human attributes were displayed in greatest abundance? With all the array of resources at ground zero, why did these persons make the Chapel their home? What was it about the experience of life in the Chapel that sustained the massive work? This study will provide scientifically-based explanations for questions surrounding such notable and sustained altruistic behavior. Led by Dr. Courtney Cowart, a theologian in the St. Paul's ministry at ground zero, and Dr. Bambi Schieffelin, a cultural anthropologist and linguist, this important study will document the role that religious perceptions may have played in

motivating and sustaining this remarkable human response to the tragedy of September 11.

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In addition to the above 21 grants, the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love partnered with the Fetzer Institute initiative on the Science of Compassionate Love to fund four additional studies that are currently in progress:

1. Benevolent Love and Marriage

This study examine “benevolent love,” (described in classical terms as the love of true friendship and in contemporary terms as unconditional love) within long-term marriage. Benevolent love exhibits virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence, and charity. The study will focus on the relationship of benevolent love to attractive love, marital quality and stability, and partners’ religiousness.

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2. Volunteerism, Community, and Compassionate Acts among Older Adults

This study examines the role of service, spirituality, religion, and older persons’ personal identity in individuals at a religiously-oriented retirement community and a comparison community. The interviews and self-reports will focus on the personal meanings of service, religion, altruistic love, and the role of each, and will examine whether the religiously oriented have a more highly integrated sense of concepts.

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3. The Development, Antecedents, and Psychosocial Implications of Altruism in Late Adulthood

This project studies altruistic love in terms of Eric Erikson's concept of generativity, the concern for, and commitment to, guiding the next generation. The data are from a longitudinal sample of Americans born in California in the 1920s (140 participants interviewed 4 times over the years, with the latest in 1997/2000). It will examine the vocabulary and the reasoning people use as they refer to generative/altruistic acts and the relationship of these acts to social background, personality characteristics, religion, health, and attitudes.

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4. The Impacts of Religious, Intellectual, and Civic Engagement on Altruistic Love and Compassionate Love as Expressed Through Charitable Behaviors

This study supports analysis from the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, which is intended to measure a US representative sample of people's "social capital" – i.e., the wealth of connections among people thought to lead to pro-social behaviors and attitudes. This data analysis will examine connections between people's acts of giving and volunteering and their religious, intellectual, social, and civic development.

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