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EDITORIAL

Voluntas Virtual Issue: Philanthropy

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This Virtual Issue of *Voluntas* is about philanthropy. Philanthropy—or giving, gifting, generosity, and sharing—is a perennial and well-explored topic in *Voluntas*. The journal's broad focus on the third sector and civil society makes it a fitting home for articles on philanthropy which resources and intersects with many of the conceptual and practical elements of the field.

We present in this Virtual Issue a small group of *Voluntas* articles that offer perspectives on philanthropy from different locations, different theoretical lenses, and different decades. We were both surprised and pleased by the depth of philanthropic research undertaken by authors, then developed with *Voluntas*' Editors and reviewers, and ultimately published in just one peer-reviewed journal.

To curate these articles required us to consider the complex nature of philanthropy, and what criteria we would apply for the inclusion and exclusion of articles to republish. This demanded early decisions to clarify and tighten our focus to achieve a cohesive and closely linked selection. For example, we quickly excluded articles that focused primarily exclusively on volunteering (or the giving of time) from the scope of this Virtual Issue, noting it as worthy of a potential future Virtual Issue in its own right. We also considered focusing on individual giving versus structured or organized giving through a trust, foundation, or company but decided to leave this open.

Our exploration of the extensive archive of *Voluntas* began with a keyword search of article titles and abstracts. Search terms were philanthro* OR giving OR generosity OR foundation OR donor OR love OR "voluntary action". We imposed no date limit, so our search included articles since the journal's inception in 1990.

This initial search resulted in a list of 422 articles from 1990 to 2024. Each was then checked for philanthropy as the key and central concept. Noting that the definition of 'philanthropy' is always problematic, we decided to work initially with self-definition by article authors—if they identified their paper as about philanthropy or giving, then it was potentially included.

The articles were then short-listed with each Virtual Issue guest editor selecting papers in an iterative process, considering factors including their contribution to the discourse in *Voluntas*, their geographic scope, their conceptual themes, and citation count by number of years since publication. An enthusiastic discussion then slowly narrowed our selection to the six articles ultimately chosen for inclusion in this Virtual Issue. It is important to note here that we decided not to include two articles that had already been recognised in other Virtual Issues of *Voluntas*—those by von Schnurbein and colleagues (2021) and Wiepking (2021).

We recognise that while our decisions were robustly debated, they were nevertheless subjective and the result of a process of curation and selection, rather than articles being simply sorted according to criteria. In seeking a plurality and diversity of perspectives, we nevertheless brought in a lens of authors' (assumed) gender as a check only after we had in our hands our curated list of articles.

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Voluntas as a journal is known for its truly global scope, and its inclusion of articles from the broadest possible range of contexts and perspectives. We hope we have reflected some of these characteristics in our final choice of six articles, summarised below in order of publication.

Daly | Philanthropy as an Essentially Contested Concept

Daly's (2012) work underscores the enduring conceptual problematic in philanthropy research. Situating philanthropy as an 'essentially contested concept', Daly (2012) draws from the seven criteria developed by Gallie (1956) for identifying the contestability of concepts and from Payton's (1988) and Van Til's (1990) early work. She critically examines the many meanings, interpretations, and axiological and normative presumptions that constitute the conceptual ambit of philanthropy in its historical and contemporary usage. Daly (2012) urges philanthropy researchers to take into account its essential openness and many-ness, and calls for a pluralisation and democratisation of philanthropy as both concept and practice. Such 'conscious thinking' on the part of philanthropy researchers remains critical for theory building and scholarship that can interact with and remain responsive to the practice of philanthropy outside the academy.

Adloff | Foundations and the Charisma of Giving: A Historical Sociology of Philanthropy in Germany and the USA

Adloff (2015) sociological analysis examines the social relations of philanthropy that determine the social significance of philanthropic foundations. With a focus on Germany and the USA, Adloff (2015) offers a historical-comparative perspective on the shifts, breaks, similarities and divergences in the history of state-civil society relations that determine the institutionalization of philanthropic foundations. Adloff's (2015) work suggests philanthropy research take into account the complexities in historical and social conditions that determine elite relations and influence, and the legitimisation and accountability of philanthropic foundations. The article explores the working of charisma and hybrid action logics that institute philanthropic foundations as dominant philanthropic actors in our times.

Zhou and Han | Striving to be Pure: Constructing the Idea of Grassroots Philanthropy in Chinese Cyberspace

Zhou and Han (2019) consider the 'dominant discourse' of formal, professionalised philanthropy through their examination of the online discourse of grassroots philanthropy in China. Their enquiry highlights critical conceptual problematics in philanthropy research that shift the foci away from philanthropy as an affirmation of power and capital. They present philanthropy as small acts for the public good, a spiritual journey, or an effort in seeking happiness, reflecting both enduring Chinese traditions, and a transitioning Chinese society. Zhou and Han (2019) further demonstrate how the discourse of grassroots philanthropy may become a site of resistance to the dominant discourse of philanthropy—but also, in this case, a site of more plural and democratic conceptions of giving that (re)constitute the philanthropic imagination.

Fowler and Mati | African Gifting: Pluralising the Concept of Philanthropy

In their seminal exploration of African philanthropy or 'gifting', Fowler and Mati (2019) make a forceful argument for recognising the obstinate eurocentrism in philanthropy scholarship. They note the narrow, predominantly western conceptualisation of philanthropy, its enduring coloniality, and the marginalization of non-western traditions of giving. Fowler and Mati's (2019) work demonstrates the significance of ontological enquiry into philanthropy, and its contributions for theory building that consider its inherent plurality. They consider the diverse conceptual and normative presumptions and worldviews that constitute philanthropic imagination and practice. While rejecting both a reductionist and monolithic rendering of African philanthropy and the application of western conceptual and axiological frames in its study, Fowler and Mati (2019) offer a critical aperture into how distinct worldviews and moral considerations of trust, relationality and kinship may lead us to a different understanding of philanthropy. Their article also tempers the predominance of western narratives of formal, vertical, and elite-driven philanthropy.

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Herro and Obeng-Odoom | Foundations of Radical Philanthropy

Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019) recognise the limits of philanthrocapitalism — its premise of a conservative theory of poverty, scepticism towards the state, enduring paternalism, disenfranchisement of communities, and inability to account for market failures and effect fundamental systemic reforms. In this article, they critically examine radical philanthropy as an alternative to philanthrocapitalism. Embedded in a radical theory of poverty, Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019) argue that radical philanthropy can enable alternative forms of economic organizing, renew philanthropy's relations with the state, empower communities and bolster local solutions that address the structural roots of poverty and inequity. While radical philanthropy may be both complex and contradictory in practice, as Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019) argue, it can offer a critical semantic and ethical frame to reimagine philanthropy in our times.

Freeman and Williams-Pulfer | Liberating the Archive, Emancipating Philanthropy: Philanthropic Archival Layering as a Critical Historical Approach for Researching Voluntary Action in Marginalized Communities

Freeman and Williams-Pulfer (2021) recognise the eurocentrism of existing philanthropy scholarship and the enduring marginalization of under-represented communities, particularly, of communities of colour, in philanthropy research. They propose philanthropic archival layering as a method to uncover and understand the distinct philanthropic traditions amongst such communities. Freeman and Williams-Pulfer's (2021) work makes both critical conceptual and methodological contributions to understand historical philanthropic practices amongst Afro-Caribbean and African-American women. They call for unsettling the dominant western narratives in philanthropy research and a pluralisation of both its methodological and conceptual traditions to 'emancipate' philanthropy and its research from its Europeanised legacies.

The debates and developments informing our understanding of philanthropy globally, as recorded in Voluntas over the past three decades, are an account of changes and growth in the field. In this Virtual Issue, we would like to highlight four key themes: what is (and is not) philanthropy; the institutionalization of philanthropy; decolonizing both the practice and the study of philanthropy; and the effectiveness of philanthropy. Each of these four key themes is discussed below.

Theme 1: What is (not) philanthropy?

Taken together, and drawing from Daly (2012), our selected articles make clear that philanthropy remains a contested concept. Philanthropy is understood differently by different authors and actors working in different times, in different contexts, or with different epistemic and ontological traditions. The term might refer to vertical and/or horizontal relationships, professional and/or informal groups, organizations and/or individuals, a way of life and/or a one-off action.

In some of the selected articles, philanthropy is presented as a vertical, or hierarchical relationship – giving by individuals and organizations, or raising funds from individuals and organizations (Daly, 2012; Adloff, 2015; see also von Schnurbein et al., 2021). For others, philanthropy represents a horizontal relationship—a social exchange that aims to promote collaboration or build community assets (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Freeman & Williams-Pulfer, 2021; Zhou & Han, 2019). While many *Voluntas* articles focus exclusively on formal, legally registered organizations, others refer to individual actions, informal groups, or indigenous practices. This suggests another divergence in understanding: is philanthropy an action like donating or volunteering, a belief or philosophy, a spiritual journey, or a way of life? Or is it possible for these understandings of philanthropy to co-exist?

Some authors question whether philanthropy is an appropriate or universal term, with several scholars recommending alternatives, such as giving, gifting, or generosity (Fowler & Mati, 2019; see also von Schnurbein et al., 2021; Wiepking, 2021). In reviewing and talking about the different understandings about philanthropy in *Voluntas*, even our small editorial team, which includes three female scholars with practice experience in the Asia Pacific, Europe, North and South America, suggest different boundaries for what counts, and what does not count, as philanthropy. In the absence of consensus, the need for clarity is key. In the future, it would be helpful for authors to begin by outlining their understanding of philanthropy, for example, by offering the definition adopted for the purposes of their research, and acknowledging what is (and is not) included in that definition.

Theme 2: Reflecting on the institutionalization of philanthropy

Five of the six articles selected for this Virtual Issue address the institutionalization of philanthropy, directly or indirectly, raising distinct issues. These articles reveal how institutionalization can change relationships with the state and with communities (Adloff, 2015; Fowler & Mati, 2019; Herro & Obeng-Odoom, 2019; Freeman & Williams-

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Pulfer, 2021; Zhou & Han, 2019). Half consider what is missed when institutionalized philanthropy is the focus (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Freeman & Williams-Pulfer, 2021; Zhou & Han, 2019).

Institutionalization can change how philanthropy relates to the state and to the communities it sets out to serve. Adloff (2015) and Herro & Obeng-Odoom (2019) both explore how institutionalization can guide philanthropy toward complementing the work of the state and away from holding the state responsible or challenging the *status quo*. Meanwhile, we read examples focusing on the African continent, the USA, and China that demonstrate how the institutionalization of philanthropy can shift community relations from a more horizontal to a more vertical orientation (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Herro & Obeng-Odoom, 2019; Zhou & Han, 2019). Collectively, these articles highlight the importance of critical studies into how institutionalization can influence relationships with other actors, such as communities, regulators, and for-profit businesses.

What happens when institutionalization becomes a dominant practice? The growing focus on institutionalized philanthropy, by governments, by society, and by the academy, can result in the marginalization, or the silencing, of different forms of philanthropy taking place in a community. Since philanthropy remains a contested concept, is it important to acknowledge these different understandings. Several articles in this issue elevate contextual practices, such as African gifting, mutual aid, and grassroots philanthropy, which go unaccounted for in dominant philanthropy discourses (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Freeman and Williams-Pulfer, 2021; Zhou & Han, 2019).

Theme 3: Decolonizing (the study of) philanthropy

Among practitioners, the call to decolonize philanthropy is growing. Simultaneously, inside the academy, there are demands to decolonize the study of philanthropy. Many of the articles selected for this Virtual Issue contribute evidence for why decolonization of (the study of) philanthropy is necessary (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Freeman & Williams-Pulfer, 2021; Herro & Obeng-Odoom, 2019; Zhou & Han, 2019). More importantly, they offer ideas, methods, or efforts towards decolonization.

Critical theory emphasizes the need to reveal inequities, account for histories, confront power dynamics, and focus on systems. Several articles in this issue feature, or recommend, one or more critical methodology. Four articles include historical analysis, which attends to social, political, and economic factors influencing the practice of philanthropy in their respective contexts (Adloff, 2015; Fowler & Mati, 2019; Freeman & Williams-Pulfer, 2021; Zhou & Han, 2019).

The article by Herro & Obeng-Odoom (2019) focuses specifically on decolonizing the practice of philanthropy. They present principles for radical philanthropy, such as the need to confront power dynamics and prioritize the reduction of inequities, and incorporate examples from practice to show how this might be done. Meanwhile, Freeman & Williams-Pulfer (2021) present philanthropic archival layering as an approach to decolonizing the study of philanthropy. Using illustrative cases from their respective research, the co-authors demonstrate how archival layering recovers the philanthropy of African-American women and Afro-Caribbean civil society, ensuring that these representations of philanthropy are no longer excluded.

Theme 4: The impact of philanthropy as an underexplored theme in *Voluntas*

This last theme focuses on a hot topic in philanthropy that feels underexplored in *Voluntas*: the impact of philanthropy. With some exceptions, the editorial team was surprised by the small number of articles considering the long-term impact of philanthropy. While many articles consider the number of people or organizations engaging in philanthropy (variously defined) and/or the amount of their contributions (in cash or in-kind), there are few articles in *Voluntas* that assess or conceptualise the long-term impact of philanthropy. Two exceptions include Carboni and Eikenberry's (2021) study testing the democratic potential of giving circles, and Mosley and colleagues' (2024) study identifying distinct approaches among large US foundations to the kinds of knowledge they use to demonstrate their contributions to society.

In the field, there are on-going debates as to whether philanthropy is realizing its potential for strengthening communities, reducing inequality, or contributing to democracy building efforts. How well is philanthropy achieving its goals, whether instrumental or expressive? Is philanthropy uniquely suited to achieving these goals, compared with government or business? It would be wonderful to see more articles in *Voluntas* tackling these difficult but important questions addressing the "raison d'être" of philanthropy.

As this Virtual Issue affirms, there is already a thriving interest in the many meanings and articulations of philanthropy as both concept and practice. We call for clarity in the definitions/boundaries authors use when they write about philanthropy. We, as guest editors, would also value further research and scholarship that contributes to this important critical theme. There is a need for rigorous scholarship that examines not only the diversity and plurality of philanthropy as an empirical referent but which can also bring in a critical epistemological pluralism. To

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enrich the thought and practice of philanthropy, we need to expand our theoretical toolkit, requiring not only greater cross-cultural explorations but also thinking across and through diverse conceptual and normative traditions.

Scholarship on emerging alternative models of philanthropy such as trust-based philanthropy, relational philanthropy, social justice philanthropy or decolonial philanthropy is still nascent. Future research can appraise their philosophical foundations, practices, and impact. *Voluntas* and its community may be uniquely positioned to draw practitioner perspectives in the growing body of philanthropy research. Bridging the somewhat obstinate theory–practice divide in philanthropy scholarship is necessary if philanthropy research is to remain responsive to the inherent dynamism and diversity of its field; and if it is, as we hope, to exchange ideas and learn from practitioners at the frontlines of philanthropy as critical praxis.

We present these six articles as a diverse and fascinating collection that showcases the richness of philanthropy research, as well as the important role played by the editors and reviewers of *Voluntas* in advancing the field. We wish to express our sincere thanks to current *Voluntas* Editors Susan Appe, Galia Chimiak and Fredrik O. Andersson for the invitation to guest edit this Virtual Issue. We commend both *Voluntas* and its parent organization, ISTR for the breadth of the contexts, phenomena and conceptual lenses in these articles, now freely available from the *Voluntas* archive. Lastly, we hope this Virtual Issue inspires new questions, new researchers, and new collaborations that advance both the research and practice of philanthropy throughout the world.

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