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# Checking in on the State of Nonprofit Scholarship: A Review of Recent Research

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The complexity and diversity of the nonprofit sector provide a rich landscape for academic scholarship; and, growing numbers of nonprofit scholars and their associated research publications have established the field of nonprofit research. Yet, it is unclear if this research has been applied appropriately to the evolving landscape of the sector. Although literature reviews have helped us to understand the status of academic scholarship in the field of nonprofit research, these reviews have primarily focused on particular topics without considering the field as a whole. Thus, in this study, we review all contemporary nonprofit scholarship ( $n=972$ ) from three prominent nonprofit journals. The review documents the development of nonprofit research as presented in these journals over the last five years and offers recommendations for future research consideration.

**Keywords:** Nonprofit Research, Literature Review, Research Trends

Nonprofit research, by its very nature, is interdisciplinary. Indeed, nonprofit research questions emerge from both within and beyond the nonprofit sector. Among this research, related and divergent streams of inquiry have developed; and, although not unique to the nonprofit sector, this research is nuanced by its questions, units of analysis, theory application, and approaches.

For those looking to enter this stream of research, trends and gaps in knowledge can at times be challenging to identify. Even as doctoral students poised to contribute to nonprofit scholarship, we (the authors) were eager to comprehend the depth and breadth of nonprofit research, including the theories applied and the research methods employed. We were also eager to discover our own niches among this research environment.

Prior to entering our doctoral education, each of us had experience with the nonprofit sector as a practitioner and/or student; and, we drew upon this experience to inform our course of study. The work of Allison and colleagues (2007) and Jackson, Guerrero, and Appe (2014) allowed us to understand that our department was one of a few that offered a specific course to enhance doctoral students' knowledge, growth, and development as emerging nonprofit scholars; and, from our course discussions, we identified a gap—that is, that the nonprofit field has, in recent years, not provided a higher level assessment of its research landscape or ways to identify areas for research development. Although there have been some exceptions, e.g., Ma and Konrath (2018) and

Marberg, Korzilius, and van Kranenberg (2019), these studies have largely been broad and general scans of the field; and, for the most part they have not provided an in-depth scan of nonprofit research.

As such, we were curious to identify where nonprofit research was emerging, what topics were being addressed, what nonprofit subsectors were being studied, what sources of data were being utilized, and which methods and theories were being employed. Our guiding research question was: “*What is the current state of nonprofit research?*” We sought to answer this question through a descriptive content analysis of nonprofit research in the three prominent journals of the field. These journals were: *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ)*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership (NML)*, and *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations (Voluntas)*.

It should be noted that our purpose was to not merely inform our own personal research agendas. On the contrary, we sought to develop a foundational review that helps identify trends and new horizons for future nonprofit scholarship. Such an endeavor should provide nonprofit researchers with greater information about recent trends in the field as well as areas deserving of greater scholarly attention. The article proceeds with a review of the three journals in our sample, an explanation of our data and methods, descriptive analysis of our findings, and discussion of the implications for the nonprofit sector and future nonprofit research.

### **Sources and Outlets of Nonprofit Research**

In order to understand the field of nonprofit research, we first sought to understand the sources where this research emerged, the academic departments where this research emanated, as well as the outlets that published this research.

According to Hammack (2002), the nonprofit sector rapidly grew between 1900–1960 because of the administrative and legal ease of nonprofit incorporation. Post-1960, Hammack (2001) attributes growth of the nonprofit sector to the civil rights movement, the Great Society programs started by Lyndon B. Johnson, and the increasing affluence of the populace. Increasing affluence, in particular, allowed for the purchase of more services from the nonprofit sector (Hammack, 2002). Federal subsidies from the Great Society programs continued through other administrations, which led to sector expansion (Hammack, 2002); and, the civil rights movement encouraged courts to permit the creation of organizations that had been previously denied (Hammack, 2002).

Alongside expansion of the overall nonprofit sector, there was also parallel growth in the nonprofit education industry. According to Hall (2010), education growth reflected an “increased need for professionally trained nonprofit managers and entrepreneurs—people who could master an increasingly complex and turbulent policy and funding environment” (p. 24). Simply put, nonprofit employers needed employees trained and skilled in their mission-related work.

Mirabella (2007) identified 284 nonprofit graduate programs in 1996; and, she identified 426 of these programs in 2007. This equates to a growth of 150%. The programs that Mirabella (2007) identified were in several forms, e.g., standalone certificates, masters programs, or even directed programs of study under the umbrella of public administration or business. Undoubtedly, then, the field of nonprofit education is diverse, reflecting the dynamics governing the field (Young, 1999). This diversity has elicited a “best place” debate in terms of where the appropriate intellectual home for nonprofit education should be (Mirabella & Wish, 2000).

For doctoral students just entering the field, Allison et al. (2007) noted that major conceptual and paradigmatic arenas may seem untouched and the conceptual knowledge may appear incomplete. Allison and colleagues (2007) further noted that although a high demand may exist for nonprofit-

related doctoral education, appropriate courses for future nonprofit scholars are often few. Jackson et al. (2014) provided an update to these findings and found that progress has been made in the nature and state of doctoral education in nonprofit and philanthropic studies, as seen in the seminars and consortiums that have evolved to accommodate doctoral studies in the field. There have also been a number of nonprofit-specific research centers and institutes that have emerged as sources of research production and sector engagement (Hall, 2013). Still, despite these improvements, Jackson and colleagues (2014) concluded that there remains a need for research and curricular development in nonprofit doctoral studies.

Reflecting on the diversity of the nonprofit field, Horton Smith (2013) documented more than 100 academic journals that incorporate elements of altruistic research. These journals include topics related to “civil society, third sector, social economy, philanthropy, social movements nonprofit organizations, participation and engagement” (Horton Smith, 2013, p. 654). More recently, Walk and Andersson (2020) uncovered 75 distinct journals relevant to nonprofit scholarship. It should be noted that many of the journals identified by Horton Smith (2013) and Walk and Andersson (2020) focus on specific nonprofit subfields, such as finance, and not solely on general nonprofit research.

There are three peer-reviewed journals, however, that have emerged with an emphasis specifically on the nonprofit form. These journals are *NVSQ*, *NML*, and *Voluntas*. Brudney and Herman (2004) describe these journals as the “three leading general purpose journals in the field of nonprofit sector studies” (p. 300). These journals were reaffirmed as the leading journals in the field by Walk and Andersson (2020). In their study, Walk and Andersson (2020) administered a survey to determine scholars’ perceptions of high quality publication outlets in the nonprofit field. They found that scholars consistently ranked *NVSQ*, *NML*, and *Voluntas* as top journals, with *NVSQ* receiving nearly unanimous rating as a top tier publication outlet. Walk and Andersson (2020) also noted that these three journals and their subsequent rankings correspond to the Social Science Citation Index, which uses impact factor to rank and compare social science journals.

Marberg et al. (2019, p. 5) also conducted a review of recent nonprofit literature. They found that although several journals published nonprofit literature, nonprofit research “in the non-specialty journals was not consistent with regard to time.” Thus, they focused their study only on research published in *NVSQ*, *NML*, and *Voluntas*.

Horton Smith (2013) explains that the nonprofit sector became more organized in the 1970s, after the founding of the *Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action* (ARNOVA) and its associated research journal the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* (*JVAR*), later renamed *NVSQ*. The establishment of a scholar community and an outlet for research provided a prototype for other types of associations and journals on the nonprofit and voluntary sector. *NVSQ*, however, was the first of its kind. Thus, prompting us to select it for our review. *NVSQ* is a pioneering academic journal in the field of nonprofit studies; and, it offers an interdisciplinary and research-based haven for the voluntary sector to learn, develop, and contribute to the growing conversation regarding the field.

Approximately 20 years after the development of *NVSQ*, two other journals arose simultaneously. According to editors Young and Billis (1990), *NML* was established as “a journal for the scholar and thoughtful practitioner devoted to advancing the theory and practice of management and leadership of private, nonprofit, and voluntary organizations” (p. 2). The aim of this journal was to bridge the gap between theory and practice on a variety of apropos topics such as the proliferation of the field, skills needed for nonprofit management and leadership, and working with funders and boards (Young and Billis, 1990).

At the same time, *Voluntas*, which is affiliated with the *International Society for Third Sector Research* (ISTR), established its directive for an international scope on nonprofit research.

Anheier and Knapp (1990) described *Voluntas* emerging from a desire for an interdisciplinary journal attentive to the global voluntary sector. Within ARNOVA and other international associations, Horton Smith (2013) estimated that more than 8,000 active researchers are involved in scholastic explorations of the altruistic field.

The diversity of the nonprofit sector and its related field of research has many accompanying challenges. Literature reviews, however, can be used as a methodological tool to sort this research, identify patterns and trends, and point to gaps and directions for future research. Although the nonprofit field has had its fair share of literature reviews, they have primarily been topical in nature. For example, there have been comprehensive literature reviews of nonprofit advocacy activities (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014), value creation (Chen, Ren, Knoke, 2014), volunteer performance (Englert & Helmig, 2018), nonprofit strategies (Laurett & Ferreira, 2018), fundraising (Lindahl & Conley, 2002), revenue structures (Lu, Lin, & Wang, 2019), and commercialization (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016).

For the emerging nonprofit scholar, these reviews certainly provide insight into academic niches; however, there have only been two explorations of nonprofit research using samples derived from published work in peer reviewed journals. The first is a study by Ma and Konrath (2018). In this study they focused on bibliographical records and an individual publication's cited references. This study is impressive for the volume of literature that it considered ( $n$ =of 12,016 records in their initial dataset and  $n$ =311,312 associated references). Their study went as far back as 1925 and incorporated sophisticated data analytics to identify historical themes and patterns in nonprofit research. They examined sources, locations, topical themes, and networks of themes to indicate how streams of research connect (Ma & Konrath, 2018).

A relevant finding from Ma and Konrath (2018) was that several of the most cited references among their sample were in fact topical literature reviews. Despite the breadth of their study and analysis, they were limited in analyzing more in-depth topics, such as the research methods and theories employed. Indeed, since they feasibly could not read each full-text article in their sample, they were left to provide only a cursory review.

The other study by Marberg et al. (2019) relied on topic modeling of nonprofit research from 1990–2010. This study is useful because it highlights common themes and subtopics of nonprofit research over time with a specific focus on professionalization. However, the study did not depict other trends related to these studies, such as the methods employed or the context of the study.

Although it is not a literature review, it should be noted that Shier and Handy (2014) conducted a review of dissertation abstracts published between 1986–2010. They generated a sample of 3,790 dissertations focused on nonprofits. Through their descriptive study, they determined that there has been a 1,500% increase in dissertations with a nonprofit focus between the first year and the last year of their study. The dissertations included in their study were primarily published in the United States (US) and were narrowly defined in terms of topic (similar to the published results described above).

When examining other fields, including public administration where many nonprofit programs are housed (Mirabella & Wish 2000), literature reviews have also been used to make sense of research topics and fields. Houston and Delevan (1990), for example, explored the question of who publishes in the field of public administration. They found that most scholarly articles are single authored and come from current scholars in the field. They also discovered that public administration research is funded at a lower rate than other fields and that a major gap in the field is research that evaluates public policy (Houston & Delevan, 1990).

In the field of business administration, Gorman, Hanlon, and King (1997) conducted a literature review of entrepreneurship research and discovered that the field would benefit from the incorporation of more theories from outside of business in order to move the field's theoretical

**Table 1.** Summary of Sample across Journal Sources by Year

Journal	Year of Publication						Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
<i>NVSQ</i>	54	57	57	75	59	11	313
<i>NML</i>	24	24	29	30	30	8	145
<i>Voluntas</i>	51	73	120	125	114	31	514
Total	129	154	206	230	203	50	972

findings forward. Similarly, in marketing, Luchs, Swan and Creusen (2016) conducted a review of 252 articles on product design over a 14 year period and discovered many existing gaps in research including how differences between people, cultures, and other elements influence product design.

These literature reviews (from both within and beyond the nonprofit sector) have uncovered patterns, trends, and gaps regarding how topics have conceptually and theoretically been used in research. Following these studies, we conducted a descriptive content analysis (i.e., an inventory and analysis) of all articles published within a five year period (2008–2013) in *NVSQ*, *NML* and *Voluntas*. In the section that follows, we explain our research methods and data sources. We then provide our findings and discuss the implications in an effort to identify gaps and bolster future research in the field.

**Data and Method**

To explore recent nonprofit research, we created a five-stage data collection process. At the first stage, we defined the sample for this study from the population of nonprofit research. Three prominent academic journals for nonprofit research were included based on the aforementioned rationale, *NVSQ*, *NML*, and *Voluntas*. We identified all articles published between 2013 to the first issue of 2018 ( $n=927$ ). This sample included research articles, research notes, and theory pieces only. We excluded issue information, editor’s notes, information for contributors, and book reviews. Table 1 provides a summary of the sample by year and journal.

At the second stage, we identified the data points that reflected our research interests. We then developed a data collection protocol for consistency. This protocol included step-by-step instructions and identified 16 data points for collection (summarized in Table 2). To identify these data points, the research team consulted prior studies of literature reviews from other fields (e.g., Hossain & Kauranen, 2016; Laurett & Ferreira, 2018; Suykens, De Rynck, & Vershuere, 2019). Specifically, we collected article title, author(s), publication information, country where the research occurred as well as the country that produced the research, type of research article and study, subsector of interest, keywords, theory used, and sources of data.

Information on article title and publication information was used to situate and identify the research. The location of the research was used to identify “where” the primary author was located (represented by the location of the university affiliation of the first author and the location of the research subject). This data point helps to identify which the countries are being studied in nonprofit research and in which countries more scholarly attention is warranted. Type of study refers to the method used in the study. This information helps identify the research design as well as the methods most prevalent in the field. We categorized type of study based on the four types methodologies identified by Laurett and Ferreira (2018). These were qualitative, theoretical, quantitative, and mixed.

Subsector refers to the nonprofit subsectors that have been studied. This data point is used to identify the subsectors that have been frequently researched by nonprofit scholars as well as those that have received less attention. Recurring themes were identified by the keywords included in the articles to help identify which subject areas have trended in nonprofit research as well as gaps

**Table 2.** Summary of Data Points and Definitions

Data Points	Definitions	Initial Collection	Spot-check
Article Title	Name given to article in publication.	X	
Author(s)	Person or people mentioned in the research article as being involved in writing the article. ( <i>Authors were separated into first and secondary authors.</i> )	X	
Date	Year of journal article publication.	X	
Journal	<i>NVSQ, NML, or Voluntas.</i>	X	
Journal Volume	Volume from that an article was published.	X	
Journal Issue	Issue that an article was published.	X	
Country of Research	Location of the sample for the research study.	X	X
Country of Origin	Location of the university where primary author is from or associated with.	X	
Type of Article	Research study, research note, or non-empirical article.	X	
Type of Study	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed method, or non-empirical (e.g., conceptual, theoretical).	X	X
Subsector	Nonprofit subsector studied in the research, classified according to NTEE categories.	X	X
Keywords	Words identified by authors as “keywords.”	X	
Theory	Theory informing the study (or theoretical contribution).	X	X
Data Source	Primary or secondary data (or both).	X	X
Primary Data Sources	If study relied on primary or both types of data, the primary method(s) were recorded.	X	X

that exist in the nonprofit research field. Theories employed were also identified to provide insight into theory building among nonprofit research. These includes theories unique to the sector and those from outside the sector that have been applied to the nonprofit context. Lastly, we identified source(s) of data (i.e., either primary or secondary). For studies using data secondary sources, we made note of the source and created an inventory of data sources relevant to nonprofit research (see Appendix A).

The third stage in our methodological process was to implement data collection. Each of the authors was assigned journal volumes for data collection to ensure equal responsibilities for data collection. The articles from the three selected academic journals were downloaded from the library of North Carolina State University. The research team then identified data points from the articles by reading the entirety of each assigned article.

The fourth stage involved spot-checking the initial data collection. A preliminary spot-check of coding was necessary in order to ensure intercoder reliability across the full sample. All articles in the sample were confirmed. We developed a protocol for rechecking coding and included the data points identified in Table 2. To recheck the coding, articles were assigned to four members of the research team; and, these assignments were made in a way that ensured that no researcher rechecked (i.e., confirmed) data they had initially collected. If there was disagreement regarding any data point, research team members collectively decided on the outcome. In the final stage, analysis was undertaken. Prior to initiating the analysis, the research team conducted a final coding spot-check in order to ensure data integrity.

**Table 3.** Location (Country) of an Article’s First Author

Total	Frequency	%
Australia	34	3.50
Belgium	30	3.09
Canada	43	4.42
China	16	1.65
Germany	61	6.28
Israel	16	1.65
Italy	27	2.78
Netherlands	31	3.19
Spain	30	3.09
Sweden	17	1.75
Switzerland	19	1.95
UK	80	8.23
USA	411	42.28
<i>Other Countries</i>	157	16.15
<i>Asia</i>	50	
<i>Africa</i>	7	
<i>Oceania</i>	10	
<i>Europe</i>	69	
<i>North America</i>	11	
<i>South America</i>	10	
Total	972	100

Note: Countries that had more than 15 articles (>1.5% of the total sample) authored are specified in this table. For countries that had less than 15 articles authored, these are grouped as “other countries” and sub-labeled according to their continent.

## Analysis and Findings

### *Authors and their Location*

The articles in the sample were primarily written by multiple authors with each article having on average approximately two authors. The number of authors ranged from one to eight. Single authored manuscripts accounted for approximately 31% of the articles in the sample ( $n=297$ ). Of the multi-authored manuscripts, approximately 51% ( $n=342$ ) were written by two authors. There were approximately 34% of manuscripts written by three authors ( $n=228$ ); and, approximately 15% of manuscripts had four or more authors ( $n=102$ ).

The United States (US) was the primary location of authors. This was followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. The US dominating as the country of the primary authors is not entirely surprising since *NVSQ* and *NML* are based in the US. Author locations comprising at least 1.5% of the total sample are summarized in Table 3. Authors represented 56 countries and spanned six continents. Not surprising given its mission and focus, *Voluntas* had the greatest international diversity with publications from 57 countries. During the study period, *NVSQ* published articles from 26 countries; and, *NML* published articles from 21 countries.

### *Research Location*

The location of the research represented among the sample spanned 79 countries and six continents. Comparing the location of the researcher and their research, approximately 71% of the research was conducted in the same country as the author ( $n=689$ ). Research locations are summarized according to their continent in Table 4.

Given various initiatives across the nonprofit academic community to be more inclusive, we also investigated the data to understand emerging diversity among nonprofit scholars. Specifically,

**Table 4.** Research Locations by Continent

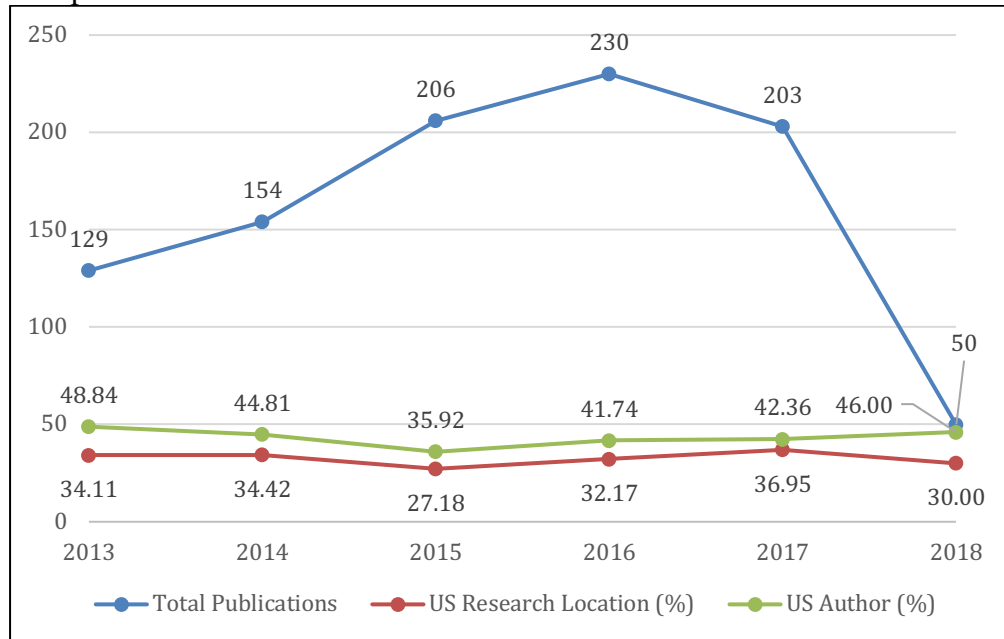
Continents	Frequency	%	Continents	Frequency	%
Africa			North America		
Burkina Faso	1	6.25	Canada	30	8.45
Burundi	1	6.25	Guatemala	1	0.28
Egypt	2	12.5	Haiti	1	0.28
Ghana	2	12.5	Mexico	2	0.56
Liberia	1	6.25	Nicaragua	1	0.28
South Africa	1	6.25	USA	317	89.30
Uganda	1	6.25	Multiple	1	0.28
Multiple	5	31.25	Unspecified	2	0.56
Unspecified	2	12.5	Total	355	100.00
Total	16	100			
Asia			Europe		
Bangladesh	2	1.71	Austria	5	1.73
Cambodia	5	4.27	Belgium	23	7.96
China	30	25.64	Croatia	1	0.35
Hong Kong	3	2.56	Czech Republic	2	0.69
India	7	5.98	Denmark	4	1.38
Indonesia	1	0.85	Estonia	1	0.35
Israel	14	11.97	Finland	2	0.69
Japan	17	14.53	France	6	2.08
Jordan	1	0.85	Germany	45	15.57
Korea	1	0.85	Greece	2	0.69
Kyrgyzstan	2	1.71	Iceland	1	0.35
Lebanon	7	5.98	Ireland	7	2.42
Malaysia	3	2.56	Italy	19	6.57
Pakistan	1	0.85	Kazakhstan	1	0.35
Saudi Arabia	2	1.71	Netherlands	14	4.84
Singapore	1	0.85	Norway	4	1.38
Taiwan	5	4.27	Poland	5	1.73
Turkey	3	2.56	Portugal	2	0.69
Vietnam	1	0.85	Russia	6	2.08
Multiple	3	2.56	Serbia	1	0.35
Unspecified	8	6.84	Spain	21	7.27
Total	117	100.00	Sweden	11	3.81
			Switzerland	11	3.81
South America			Oceania		
Argentina	1	5.56	Australia	24	72.73
Brazil	8	44.44	New Zealand	9	27.27
Caribbean	2	11.11	Total	33	100.00
Ecuador	2	11.11			
Peru	2	11.11			
South America	1	5.56			
Uruguay	2	11.11			
Total	18	100.00			
Other					
Global	24				
Multiple Continents	51				
Unspecified	69				

Note: “Multiple” is research conducted in multiple countries on the same continent. “Unspecified” is research conducted on a specific continent, but no specific country identified. “Global” is research conducted in unpecific global or international contexts. “Multiple Continents” is research conducted on more than one continent. Other “unspecified” is research with no location identified.

total research by year was compared to the number of authors and research locations in the US (see Figure 1). Across the five years in the sample, the dominance of the US for authorship and research location appears to be steady, with a slight decline in 2017.



**Figure 1.** Number of US-Based Authors and Research Locations Compared to Total Publications



*Type of Study*

The articles in this study primarily represented quantitative research ( $n=495$ , approximately 51% of articles). This is followed by qualitative research ( $n=265$ , approximately 27% of articles). Articles identified as mixed methods accounted for 15% of the sample ( $n=146$  articles). Articles that were either historical, theoretical, or otherwise non-empirical (e.g., conceptual) in nature comprised approximately 7% of the sample ( $n=66$ ). Comparing journals, *NML* (at approximately 66%) and *NVSQ* (at 61%) published quantitative research more frequently than *Voluntas* ( $n$ = approximately 41% of articles) during the five-year period (see Figure 2).

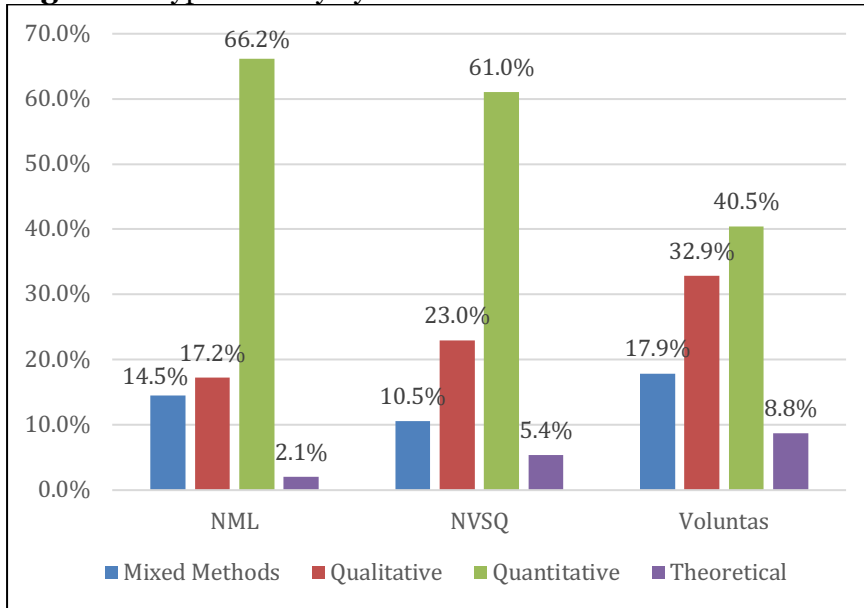
*Data Sources*

The research represented among the articles primarily relied upon primary data sources (i.e., data the research team collected for the purpose of the research study) ( $n=391$ , 40.2%), followed by secondary sources (i.e., pre-existing data the research team used for the study) ( $n=343$ , 35.3%). Research relying on both primary and secondary sources of data accounted for 18.6% of the sample ( $n=181$ ); and finally, 5.8% of the articles had no identifiable data source ( $n=56$ ). Of the primary data collection methods employed by the studies, the most prevalent was interview research ( $n= 301$ ; 31%). This was closely followed by survey research ( $n=297$ ; 30.6%). Figure 3 provides a summary of the various primary data collection methods.

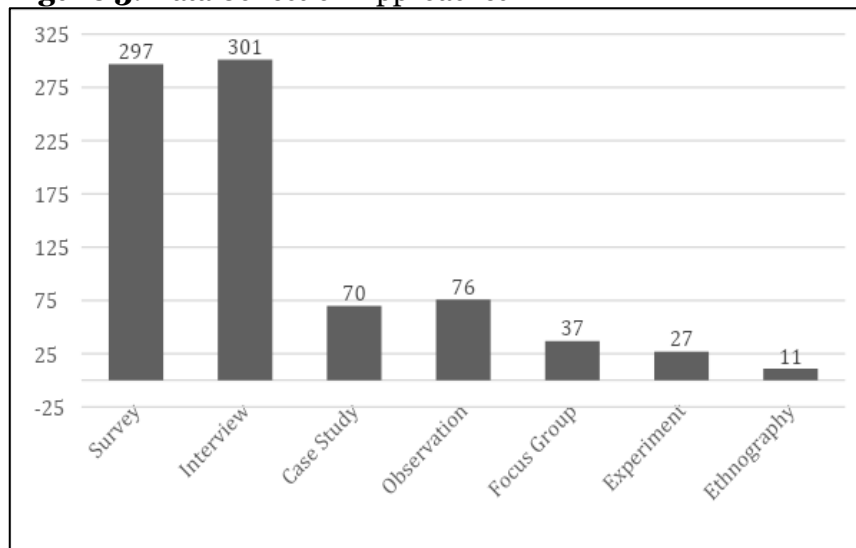
Focusing on the secondary data sources, document reviews were the most common source of secondary data ( $n=94$ , approximately 10%). Examples of document reviews include nonprofit websites, annual reports, and social media accounts. Secondary survey data of individuals, such as the US Current Population Survey was another common source of data ( $n=75$ , approximately 8% of studies relied on this data source). The US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990 data, commonly collected by the National Center for Charitable Statistics, was the third most common source of secondary data ( $n=68$ ; 7% of studies relied on this data source).

Of the research conducted in the US that relied on secondary data, approximately 18% ( $n=60$ ) of studies relied on IRS 990 tax forms. Literature reviews ( $n=31$ ; approximately 3% of studies) were

**Figure 2.** Type of Study by Journal



**Figure 3.** Data Collection Approaches



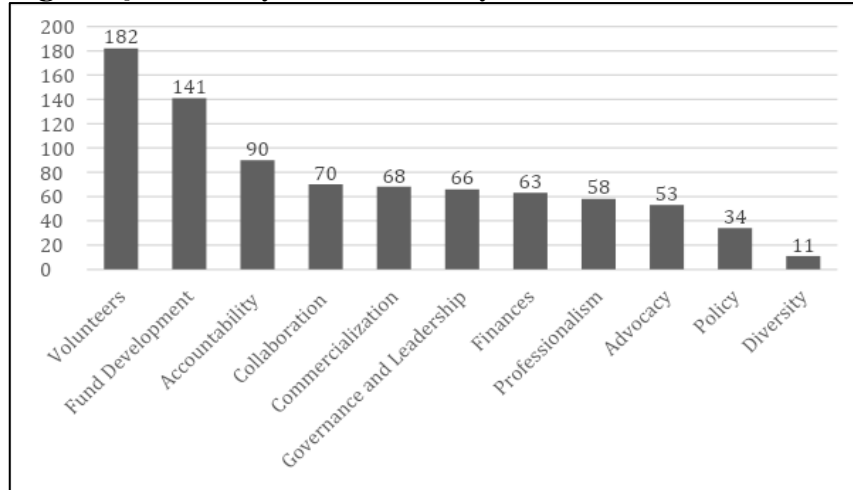
another source identified as secondary data. Many secondary sources were specific to the research study and singularly used among the studies in this sample. In total, we identified over 100 different secondary sources (see Appendix A).

### *Subject of Study*

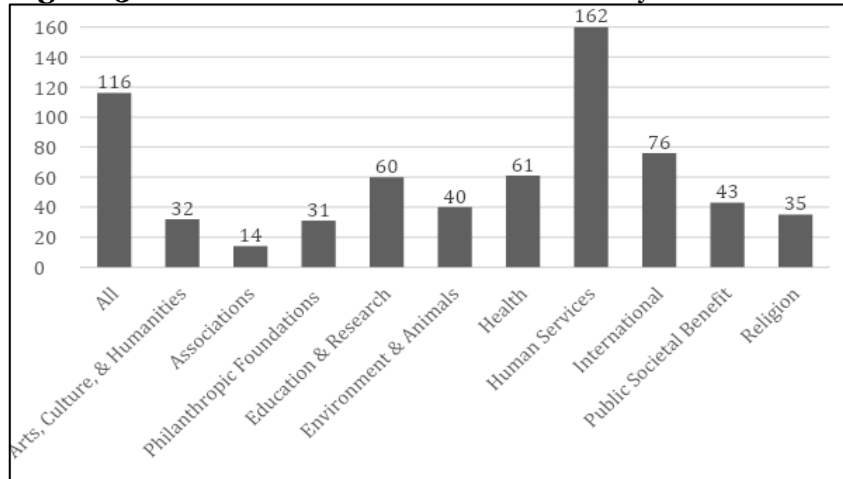
To explore the focus of research represented in the sample, we first identified patterns emerging from the author-identified keywords. In an iterative process, we then noted recurring themes. The keyword “volunteers” was the most frequently identified keyword during this period ( $n=182$ ; approximately 19% of studies). This was followed by “fund development” ( $n=141$ ; approximately 15% of articles), and “accountability” ( $n=90$ ; approximately 9% of articles) (see Figure 4).

We also explored the most salient topics in each of the journals based on keyword patterns. “Collaboration” ( $n=45$ ; approximately 64% of articles), “volunteers” ( $n=101$ ; approximately 56%

**Figure 4.** Summary of Thematic Keywords



**Figure 5.** Subsector Identified in Research Study



of articles) and “accountability” ( $n=37$ ; approximately 64% of articles ) were most frequently used in *Voluntas*. “Fund development” was most frequently used in *NVSQ* ( $n=56$ ; approximately 44% of articles). Among the four themes, *NML* was fairly balanced, with “accountability” being the most frequently used theme ( $n=22$ ; approximately 24% of articles).

Next, using the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) “Major Groups,” we identified the subsectors that provided the context for the research.<sup>1</sup> Over half of the research studies specified at least one subsector ( $n=661$ ; 68%); and, of those specified “human services,” “international,” “health,” and “education and research” subsectors were the most common (See Figure 5). Nearly 12% ( $n=116$ ; approximately 12%) of all articles considered the nonprofit sector as a whole. There were 2.5% ( $n=24$ ) of articles that referenced more than three subsectors. Some research ( $n=173$ ; approximately 18%) was not focused on a subsector but instead considered an individual perspective (e.g., an individual donor or volunteer regardless of subsector).

### *Theory Salience in the Sector*

To examine the degree of each article’s use of theory, we identified which theories researchers applied in their studies. Over one-third of the studies did not explicitly identify any theory (whether underpinning the study or in terms of a theoretical contribution of the research) Of the theories identified in the articles, resource dependency was the most commonly tested and

**Table 5.** Frequency of Articles Applying Various Theories in Each Journal

Theory	<i>NVSQ</i>	<i>NML</i>	<i>Voluntas</i>
Resource Dependency Theory	26 (5.33%)	15 (6.91%)	39 (5.10%)
Institutional Theory	21 (4.30%)	8 (3.69%)	34 (4.45%)
Organizational Theory	15 (3.07%)	8 (3.69%)	35 (4.58%)
Agency Theory	8 (1.64%)	9 (4.15%)	20 (2.62%)
Economic Theory	11 (2.25%)	1 (0.46%)	20 (2.62%)
Failures Theory	10 (2.05%)	2 (0.92%)	20 (2.62%)
Stakeholder Theory	6 (1.23%)	4 (1.84%)	20 (2.62%)
Social Capital Theory	8 (1.64%)	5 (2.30%)	14 (1.83%)
Social Exchange Theory	9 (1.84%)	5 (2.30%)	10 (1.31%)
Motivation Theory	6 (1.23%)	7 (3.23%)	10 (1.31%)
Network Theory	6 (1.23%)	7 (3.23%)	10 (1.31%)
Self Determination Theory	6 (1.23%)	--	14 (1.83%)
Stewardship Theory	2 (0.41%)	4 (1.84%)	10 (1.31%)
None (i.e., No Theory)	118 (24.18%)	49 (22.58%)	175 (22.91%)
Other Theory	231 (47.34%)	99 (44.62%)	332 (43.46%)
Total	488 (100%)	217 (100%)	764 (100%)

utilized theory ( $n=80$ , approximately 8% of studies somehow incorporated this theory). This was followed by institutional theory (approximately 7% of articles somehow incorporated).

We used the “other” category to capture theories that were referenced too few times to constitute a singular category. Figure 6 summarizes theories that were referenced by at least 15 articles or 1.5% of the sample. Table 5 sorts the theories among the three journals.

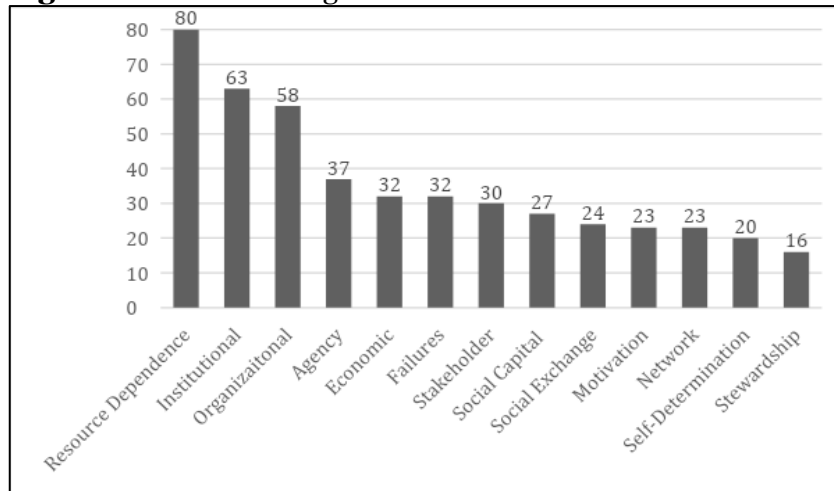
## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a contemporary survey of nonprofit research from the field’s three prominent journals. Our findings should be encouraging for those who study the nonprofit sector, those who prepare future nonprofit researchers and scholars, and those who provide outlets for publication for nonprofit research. This discussion overviews our findings.

### *US-Centric Research*

Given the origins of the nonprofit academic community and associated outlets for academic publication, the dominance of the US as both country of primary author and location of research

**Figure 6.** Theories Integrated in Research Studies



is not surprising. Yet, the steadiness of this dominance in the midst of special initiatives and emerging scholarly communities across the world may be a bit disappointing for some. This trend may reflect the US-centric orientation of the journals and their associated editorial boards as well as the expectations and norms for nonprofit scholarship considered for publication in these journals. Regardless, there is some need for concern that with limited outlets for publication of peer-reviewed nonprofit scholarship, the interests of promoting diverse scholars and research in diverse contexts may be hampered without more intentional and targeted initiatives.

#### *Dominance of Quantitative Methods*

Our findings confirm a commonly held assumption about the preference of nonprofit research toward a quantitative methodological orientation. This finding mirrors Ospina, Esteve, and Lee (2018), who conducted a review of research methods in six leading public administration journals between 2010–2014. In their study, they documented the dominance of quantitative research with qualitative research consisting of less than 8% of the research they reviewed. Ospina and colleagues (2018), therefore, advised that qualitative researchers be transparent in providing connections among the “epistemological and theoretical assumptions and their methodological consequences, on the one hand, and decisions about research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, on the other” (p. 601).

Although there is certainly training in doctoral programs for quantitative inquiry, which may arise from post-positivist epistemological frames and a broad emphasis on generalizable findings, it should also be understood that the complexity of the nonprofit sector and its operations often necessitates the use of qualitative research designs. We acknowledge, however, that the remedy for balance between quantitative and qualitative research does not lie solely with journal editors and reviewers. The onus also falls upon authors to ensure the necessary rigor and trustworthiness to ensure research quality. Our intent here is not to evaluate qualitative research, but rather highlight that the nonprofit field has (at least in the recent past) disproportionately published quantitatively oriented research. Scholars, however, should be mindful that qualitative methods are often a path to theory advancement (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

A commonly held assumption in nonprofit research is the need for sector specific theory building. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted that qualitative designs often start with a theoretical position in order to adequately contribute to a conversation in the field and enhance theory building. Existing theory is the foundation for theory building but scholars must be “moved out of the laboratory and into natural contexts” in order to understand the phenomena (Lincoln, 1990, p. 78). Authors undertaking qualitatively oriented research should strive to demonstrate the empirical nature of their research, precisely define terms, clearly outline steps in data collection

and analysis, and reference sources that have employed similar approaches or provide insights on the merits of qualitative research (Nowell & Albrecht, 2018).

#### *Variety of Primary Data Collection Methods*

The sample includes a diversity of primary data collection methods. This diversity signals a proficiency among nonprofit scholars to design and implement data collection protocols, navigate the requirements of Institutional Review Boards, and oversee complex research projects that span long durations. Academic programs intended to train future nonprofit scholars should, therefore, consider and teach students about the range of methodological tools that effective nonprofit researchers should have in their methodological tool kit. This should help in furthering the larger community's (i.e., practitioner and academic) understanding of the tools that are appropriate and necessary for nonprofit scholarship.

#### *Broad Range of Secondary Data Sources*

Given the assumed dominance of IRS 990 tax forms as the primary source of data for nonprofit scholarship in the US, the diversity of data sources represented in this research is interesting to note. Indeed, we identified over 100 secondary data sources, and many of these are publicly available (see Appendix A). We, therefore, see great opportunity for nonprofit scholars to think creatively about data sources that may help them answer their research questions. Given this broad diversity, there is little need to allow data sources to guide research interests.

#### *Diverse Foci*

The keywords in the sample also represent diversity of research interests. This diversity makes it challenging to summarize cohesive trends in nonprofit research. Although there is some clustering among topics identified from this analysis, it remains unclear if the commonalities are sufficient enough to represent a cohesive research stream or if it is merely a matter of common keywords and individualized interests of the authors.

One focus in particular, however, is interesting to note—that is, the volume of studies related to volunteers. This volume may be due to the growing professionalization of the nonprofit sector. Questions remain, though, whether this focus is a reflection of the available data and the origins of the sector or a contemporary need to understand the changing dynamics of the sector.

#### *Limited Integration of Theory*

With the roots of nonprofit scholarship sourced from many disciplines, the diversity of theories identified in the sample was no surprise. The large portion of the sample that did not integrate or reference a theory (nearly one-quarter of articles across all journals), however, (some while still purporting to be “theory-building”) was surprising.

The role of theory in research is to help systematically predict, describe, and explain phenomena. Thus, with the neglect of theory among some articles in this sample, the question arises whether scholars hold too narrow a lens to contribute or integrate theory more broadly; and, for those who do, it is questionable whether their reference to theory is perfunctory as opposed to genuinely contributing to building theory. We should point out that we refrained from evaluating the authors' use and application of theory; and, a number of authors ( $n=15$ ) described their research as grounded theory, implying they were constructing theory from their inductive research inquiry.

#### *Divergent Research*

Each article in the sample was unique, comprised of various authors, foci (i.e., keywords), locations, theory application, methods, and data sources. Although there was some cohesion

among the research themes in this study, it should be noted that isolated inquiries can prove challenging when seeking to understand the intellectual structure of a research field. It is, therefore, important that nonprofit researchers and authors highlight practical considerations of their research (e.g., implications for future research) that often conclude research publications. This should help to foster more research to practice connections. Future research should also consider the use of topic modeling, as demonstrated by Marberg et al. (2019) in their analysis of nonprofit research, to investigate in-depth the convergence and divergence of contemporary nonprofit scholarship.

### *Research into the Sector's Fringes*

The diversity uncovered in this study is, collectively, a strength, a challenge, and an opportunity for nonprofit scholarship. Although the diversity of the nonprofit sector is widely acknowledged, some researchers are challenged to think about their research in terms of generalizability and theoretical importance. In scanning the prevalence of nonprofit scholarship among the sector's many subsectors, we identified clustering in some areas while neglect in others.

Although we relied on the 10 broad categories of the NTEE to categorize articles in the sample, we realize that a broader diversity of subsectors would be represented if we attempted to match each article to the NTEE's 26 major groups (or the 400+ subcategories). Future should consider the full range of nonprofit subfields.

### *Precision in Terms*

As trained scholars in the nonprofit field, we found ourselves in the midst of data coding challenged to interpret what some authors self-identified as characteristics of their research. This challenge could be the result of terminological confusion on the part of authors, an oversight, or missed components of the peer-review process. Beyond the challenge of self-reported theory mentioned previously, we sought (and sometimes did not find) precisely used terms that described the type of study, the methods, or the analytic process. Although beyond our study's scope, this issue may extend to the constructs the research is intent on investigating. Although we understand that this issue is not unique to our nonprofit field, it should be understood that precision in terms helps to foster cohesive bodies of knowledge.

## **Limitations**

Given our unique and large sample, this study is not devoid of limitations. First, the data points are limited by the use of the authors' definitions. We relied on the definitions and information provided by the authors of the sampled articles to create the data points. This information may or may not be accurate in terms of some of the data points. For instance, what an author identified as theory may not necessarily be the appropriate use of theory in the article.

Secondly, the scope of the study is limited. We reviewed only three, out of many other nonprofit-related journals available. The sample was also based on a 5-year period (2013–2018). Greater trends and diversity may be identified by reviewing additional journals and focusing on a broader segment of time.

## **Conclusion**

With the diverse and complex nature of the nonprofit sector, this study advances the field by focusing attention on a broad sample of contemporary nonprofit research and evaluating trends over the last five years. This review improves our understanding of the scope of nonprofit research for existing scholars. It also informs emerging scholars about research trends and gaps that exist.

From the three prominent peer-reviewed nonprofit journals, we explored areas where nonprofit research has emerged, topics that have been prominent, nonprofit subsectors that have been studied, data sources that have been used, and methods and theories that have been employed. Using a sample of 972 articles, our data collection and analysis indicated that most articles were authored by multiple authors. This demonstrates the importance of collaboration within the field of nonprofit research. Authors represented approximately 56 countries across six continents. Conferences, trainings and seminars, where researchers converge and connect, should provide greater opportunities for future research collaborations.

Quantitatively-oriented research dominates recent nonprofit scholarship. This highlights the importance of (and opportunities for) training emerging nonprofit scholars in diverse research methods. Primary data sources dominated the sample, but we also found substantial diversity in the sources of data available to nonprofit-related inquiry (see Appendix A). A recurring theme in nonprofit research is volunteers; and, most research focuses on a single nonprofit subsector. Limited theoretical underpinnings may be an opportunity for future scholars to seek stronger grounding in theory so that the field can draw greater connections across research topics and also so that new theories specific to the sector can develop.

In sum, our analysis heartens us as emerging scholars in the growing field of nonprofit research. However, our analysis also illuminates where we might contribute to strengthening the direction of future nonprofit research.

## **Note**

1. National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) Codes retrieved from <https://nccs.urban.org/project/national-taxonomy-exempt-entities-ntee-codes>

## **Disclosure Statement**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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**Appendix A.** Secondary Sources Used in Recent Nonprofit Scholarship

Name	Website (as of August 1, 2020)	Date	Individual/ Organization / Countries	Description	Citation	Registration Required	Type(s) of files
Afrobarometer Surveys	<a href="http://www.afrobarometer.org/data/merged-data">http://www.afrobarometer.org/data/merged-data</a>	Ongoing	Individual	Surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in 35+ countries in Africa.	Compion, 2017	N	.sav
American Community Surveys	<a href="https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs">https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs</a>	Annual	Individual	Premier source for detailed population and housing information about our nation.	King, & Lewis, 2017	Y	.csv
Americans’ Changing Lives Data	<a href="https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACDA/studies/4690/datadocumentation#">https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACDA/studies/4690/datadocumentation#</a>	1986, 1989, 1994, 2002, and 2011	Individual	Includes topics regarding American lifestyle choices.	Kim, & Jang, 2017	Y	.csv, .dta, .sas, .sav
British Household Panel Survey	<a href="https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=200005#!/access">https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=200005#!/access</a>	1991–2009	Individual	Further understanding of social and economic change at the individual and household level in Britain.	Winters, & Rundlett, 2015	Y	Unsure
Canadian Equality, Security, and Community Survey	<a href="http://www.isr.yorku.ca/download/ESC/esc.html">http://www.isr.yorku.ca/download/ESC/esc.html</a>	1999/2000 & 2003	Individual	Explores the economic, social and political factors that shape public policy, and how these policies determine societal values, attitudes and well-being among individuals/communities.	Wang, & Handy, 2014	N	.pdf, zip
Current Population Survey	<a href="https://www.census.gov/programs-">https://www.census.gov/programs-</a>	Ongoing	Individual	Provides information on many of the things that define us as individuals and as a	Spera, Ghertner, Nerino, &	N	.csv, DOS/ Windows,

	<a href="https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos/en/surveys/cps/detailed-detail.html">surveys/cps/detailed-detail.html</a>			society—work, earnings, and education.	Ditommaso, 2015		gnu zips, pdfs, .sas
Eurobarometer 62.2 Survey	<a href="https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos/en/surveys/cps/detailed-detail.html">https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos/en/surveys/cps/detailed-detail.html</a>	11/22/2004–12/19/2004	Individual	Standard Eurobarometer measures as well as agricultural policy, development aid, social capital, and information and communication technology.	Pennerstorfer, & Neumayr, 2017	Y	.csv, .dta, .sas, .sav
Eurobarometer 75.2 Survey	<a href="https://www.gesis.org/?id=3421&amp;tx_eurobarometer_pi1%5Bvol%5D=3421&amp;tx_eurobarometer_pi1%5Bpos1%5D=1050">https://www.gesis.org/?id=3421&amp;tx_eurobarometer_pi1%5Bvol%5D=3421&amp;tx_eurobarometer_pi1%5Bpos1%5D=1050</a>	4/11–5/11	Individual	Crisis management. Volunteering. Attitude towards environmental protection. Audio-visual media. Helplines for social services.	Veal, & Nichols, 2017	Y	.dta, .pdf, .por, .sav, .sps
European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions	<a href="https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions">https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions</a>	Four year periods	Individual	Collects timely and comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal multidimensional microdata on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions.	Quaranta, & Dotti Sani, 2016	N	zip
European Values Survey	<a href="https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/GDESC2.asp?no=0009&amp;DB=E">https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/GDESC2.asp?no=0009&amp;DB=E</a>	1999 and 2008	Individual	Provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens all over Europe.	Gil-Lacruz, Marcuello-Servós, & Saz-Gil, 2016	Y	.dta, .por, .sav

Faith and Organizations Project	<a href="https://www.soc.p2.upenn.edu/research/special-projects/faith-organizations-project/">https://www.soc.p2.upenn.edu/research/special-projects/faith-organizations-project/</a>	2005–2010	Organization	Concrete information and targeted materials to help clarify specifically religious aspects of the relationship between founding communities and their organizations.	Wittberg, 2013	Y	Unsure
Giving and Volunteering Survey	<a href="https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NADAC/studies/35584/summary">https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NADAC/studies/35584/summary</a>	1988–2001	Individual	Explores how socioeconomic conditions and tax laws affect the charitable behavior of Americans.	Wang, Yoshioka, & Ashcraft, 2013	N	.csv, .dta, .sas, .sav
Giving in the Netherlands Panel Survey	<a href="http://www.giving.nl/giving-the-netherlands/">http://www.giving.nl/giving-the-netherlands/</a>	Ongoing	Individual	Macro-economic estimates of philanthropy and volunteering by households, foundations, corporations, and lotteries.	De Wit, & Bekkers, 2016	Written request required	Unsure
ISTAT Multipurpose Survey	<a href="https://www.istat.it/en/archive/129934">https://www.istat.it/en/archive/129934</a>	Annual	Individual	Covers the resident population in private households, by interviewing a sample of 20,000 households and 50,000 people.	Quaranta, 2016	N	.html, .pdf
Japanese General Social Survey	<a href="https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/series/209">https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/series/209</a>	2000–2006, 2008, 2010, 2012	Individual	Looks at the society and culture in Japan .	Hanada, 2013	Y	.csv, .dta, .sas, .sav
MixMarket	<a href="http://www.themix.org/mixmarket">http://www.themix.org/mixmarket</a>	1999-2019	Organization	Collected from financial service providers targeting the unbanked in developing markets	Bezboruah, & Pillai, 2015	Y	.csv, .xlsx Tabbed TXT



National Center for Charitable Statistics	<a href="https://nccs-data.urban.org/index.php">https://nccs-data.urban.org/index.php</a>	1989-2016	Organization	IRS Business Master Files, NCCS Core Files, Digitized Data Files, and IRS Statistics of Income Division Exempt Organizations Sample Files.	Van Puyvelde, & Brown, 2016	N	.csv, Excel
National Congregations Study	<a href="http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcongr/">http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcongr/</a>	1998, 2006, & 2012	Organization	Surveys a representative sample of America's churches, synagogues, mosques and other local places of worship.	Lee, 2018	Y	.csv, .dta, .pdf, .sav, .xlsx
National Credit Union Administration Call Report Quarterly	<a href="https://www.nCUA.gov/analysis/Pages/call-report-data/quarterly-data.aspx">https://www.nCUA.gov/analysis/Pages/call-report-data/quarterly-data.aspx</a>	Quarterly since 1994	Organization	Quarterly financial and miscellaneous information from credit unions.	Mook, Quarter, & Maiorano, 2015	N	.txt
National Organizations Survey	<a href="https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/35011">https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/35011</a>	2010	Organization	Quantifies domestic and international sourcing of business functions of US private and public sector organizations.	Chen, Ren, & Knoke, 2014	Y	.csv, .dta, .rda, .sas, .sav
Net Official Development Assistance	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.O DA.ALLD.CD">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.O DA.ALLD.CD</a>	1960-2017	Countries	List of countries with government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries.	Pallas, Anderson, & Sidel, 2018	N	.csv, .xlxs, XML
Office of Scottish Charity Regulator	<a href="https://www.oscr.org.uk/about-oscr">https://www.oscr.org.uk/about-oscr</a>	Ongoing	Organization	Independent regulator and registrar for over 24,000 Scottish charities, including former charities	McDonnell, 2017	N	.csv

*Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*

Panel Study of Income Dynamics	<a href="https://simba.isr.umich.edu/VS/f.aspx">https://simba.isr.umich.edu/VS/f.aspx</a>	1967–present	Individual	Collects information on health, wealth, expenditures, philanthropy, child development, the transition to adulthood, and much more.	Peck, & Guo, 2015	Y	Unsure
Pew Research Center	<a href="http://www.pewresearch.org/">http://www.pewresearch.org/</a>	Ongoing	Individual	Nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world.	Reddick, & Ponomariov, 2013	Y	.sav
Portraits of American Life Study	<a href="http://www.thearda.com/pal/s/">http://www.thearda.com/pal/s/</a>	2006 & 2012	Individual	Panel study focused on religion in the U.S., with a particular focus in capturing ethnic and racial diversity.	Eagle, Keister, & Ghazal, 2018	Y	.dta, .sav
Statistics of US Businesses	<a href="https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/susb/data/tables.html">https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/susb/data/tables.html</a>	Annual	Organization	Series that provides national and subnational data on the distribution of economic data by enterprise size and industry.	Teckchandani, 2014	N	.xlsx
Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe	<a href="http://www.share-project.org/data-access.html">http://www.share-project.org/data-access.html</a>	2004–present	Individual	Multidisciplinary and cross-national panel database of micro data on health, socioeconomic status and social and family networks of more than 120,000 individuals aged 50+.	Kehl, & Stahlschmidt, 2016	Y	.dta, .sav
Survey of Texas Adults	<a href="https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACDA/studies/4297">https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACDA/studies/4297</a>	2004	Individual	Series of several data collection efforts aimed at learning more about the lives of adults who live in Texas.	Yeung, 2017	Y	.dta, .pdf, .sas, .sav

The IRS Statistics of Income Data	<a href="https://www.irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-irs-data-book">https://www.irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-irs-data-book</a>	Annual	Individual	Data on collecting the revenue, issuing refunds, enforcing the law, assisting the taxpayer, and the budget and workforce.	Qu, & Osili, 2017	N	.pdf, .xlsx
The Statistic Division of the United Nation (UN)	<a href="http://data.un.org/">http://data.un.org/</a>	Ongoing	Countries	Topics include; development, economy, environment, geospatial information, and population/society.	Kim, & Kim, 2016	N	.csv, .xml
World Development Indicator of the World Bank	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/products/wdi">https://data.worldbank.org/products/wdi</a>	Annual	Countries	The primary World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially-recognized international sources.	Kim, & Kim, 2016	N	.csv, .txt, .xlsx
World Values Survey	<a href="http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp">http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp</a>	1981–2014	Individual	Global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life.	Jeong, 2013	Y	.csv, .dta, .rdata, .sas, .sav, .xlsx

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