Giving and Receiving Humanity: Gifts Among Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps

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Abstract

Gift-giving research in the field of consumer behavior has expanded our understanding of what a gift can be and of what it means to give. However, this research has been conducted in fairly normal contexts such as romantic dyads and family holiday exchanges. But what happens when the context becomes much more extreme and gift-giving embodies life and death decisions? The purpose of this paper is to explore instances of gift-giving in Nazi concentration camps. In spite of intense pressures toward selfishness, prisoners gave gifts to one another, demonstrating the basic personal need to express humanity through generosity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gift-giving research in the field of consumer behavior has expanded our understanding of what a gift can be and of what it means to give. However, this research has been conducted in fairly normal contexts such as romantic dyads and family holiday exchanges. But what happens when the context becomes much more extreme and gift-giving embodies life and death decisions? The purpose of this paper is to explore instances of gift-giving in Nazi concentration camps. In spite of intense pressures toward selfishness, prisoners gave gifts to one another, demonstrating the basic personal need to express humanity through generosity.

A careful textual analysis of personal memoirs as case studies (Stake, 1995) and historical accounts was conducted. All of the memoirs were written by Jews, who are widely acknowledged to have suffered the greatest deprivation and mistreatment of all prisoners in the camps. Thus, their gift-giving was done under the most difficult of circumstances. The historical accounts (Cohen 1953; Des Pres, 1976; Todorov, 1996) were used as a way to include the perspectives of authors who have carefully studied life in concentration camps, as well as to verify our interpretation of the memoirs used in our study.

The structure of the concentration camp system and the dismal conditions endured by prisoners were not conducive to concern for others. All forces pushed one to focus on survival. As Cohen (1953) writes of his initial days at Auschwitz, “I had only one thought left: How can I survive? (p. 123)” This drive for survival necessarily put prisoners at odds with one another as they fought for extremely scarce resources: “Will you survive, or shall I? As soon as one sensed that this was at stake everyone turned egoist (Lingens-Reiner, 1948, p. 23).” As Louis de Wijze (1997) writes of Auschwitz, “Everyone lives for himself. Our one and all-encompassing credo is: Survive! Between the outer limits of life and death, previous values and norms lose their meaning, and our spiritual baggage gradually erodes. The only norm that counts is ‘I’. All our senses, thoughts, and deeds are used only for our own benefit (p. 67).”

Yet, we found many instances of helping and gift-giving in the camps. Further, we found that the act of giving was in part a defiance of the dehumanizing forces. Along with other attempts to re-establish humanity such as engaging in intellectual activities (Levi, 1987), religious observances (Cohen, 1953), and the modification of uniforms to express individuality (Klein, 2003), giving to others helped both the giver and the receiver feel more human. Some gift-giving was more directly instrumental, and thus we present instances of gift-giving along a continuum from the very instrumental (i.e., bribes) to giving that is motivated by the simple desire to demonstrate humanity. Giving on this end of the continuum was not by expectations of return but simply by the notion that helping is the correct and human thing to do. Sometimes this helping was very reflexive and natural in nature.

Gift-giving was most likely to take place within dyads or small groups (i.e., cliques). Dyads were sometimes governed by a norm of true balance (i.e., circular reciprocity), while other giving relationships were notably skewed in a particular direction because one member of the pair had greater access to resources (Belk, 1976). In some cliques, the norm of equipollence (Lowrey, Otnes, and Robbins 1996) seemed to play a major role, in that every member tended to expect equivalent treatment and violation of this norm caused distress to all concerned. In other cliques, it was recognized that dyads within the group—such as sisters—would give primary support to one another.

Although the concentration camp setting is certainly extreme, we believe that our findings are relevant to consumer behavior researchers in a variety of other contexts as well. The recent tsunami disaster points to one area ripe for future study. Do inhabitants of relief camps exhibit similar acts of giving, perhaps establishing normative guidelines and pressuring those who fail to comply? Similarly, refugee camps, often more long-term in nature than temporary disaster relief situations, may offer further evidence of a widespread “need” to give. These contexts can still be classified as somewhat extreme, but we would argue there are situational factors inherent in these settings that are not that different from living in a totalitarian regime, or living in dire poverty. Past gift-giving literature has stayed mainly in the realm of middle-class respondents (or higher income levels), but those at lower levels, and in more restricted life circumstances, give nevertheless. Despite pressures toward selfishness, we argue that both giving and receiving helps us to feel more human, which is a strong behavioral motivator regardless of circumstance.

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