We Are Not All the Same: a Typology of Donor Identities

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Previous research has examined a generic donor/moral identity. Through interviews with blood donors and non-donors, we uncover four distinct donor identities (Life Saver, Community Carer, Practical Helper and Extraordinaire) and one perceived identity (Sacrificer) by non-donors. This typology captures the multidimensionality of donor identities and has implications for donor recruitment/retention.

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We Are Not All the Same: A Typology of Donor Identities

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has long acknowledged the importance of identity in shaping and predicting individuals’ motivations, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Aaker and Akutsu 2009; Belk 1988; Oyserman 2009a, 2009b; Reed 2004). Despite its importance, few studies have examined the concept of identity in the context of prosocial behaviors. Further, these studies have mainly conceptualized it as a generic donor/volunteer and moral identity (Aquino and Reed 2002; Reed and Aquino 2003; Reed, Aquino and Levy 2007; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009). In this research, using blood donation as a pro-social context, we question the uni-dimensional representation of donor identity, and subsequently uncover its multi-dimensionality. Doing so not only offers a new and unique way to understand donor identity, but also helps us to understand why donors have different motives, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions towards donation. This has implications generally for the understanding of prosocial identity, as well as specific strategic implications for donor recruitment and retention.

Identities are used to gain self-understanding and to be understood by others in a social context (Markus 1977; Reeds et al. 2012; Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckz 2011). A more focused conceptualization of the role of identity in shaping and predicting motivations, attitudes, and behaviors has been provided by Oyserman (2009a, 2009b) in the identity-based motivation (IBM) model. In the context of prosocial behaviors, identity has been studied from a role-identity perspective, where continuous participation in prosocial activities leads to an internalization of the role, which then becomes a part of the self (Callero, Howard, and Piliavin 1987; Grube and Piliavin 2000; Lee, Piliavin and Callero 1999; Piliavin, Grube, and Callero 2002). Within consumer research, it has been found that people with a moral identity are more likely to have favorable attitudes towards charitable requests (Reed and Aquino 2003; Reed, Aquino, and Levy 2007; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009). Specific to blood donation, Armitage and Conner (2006) found that identifying oneself as a donor is associated with blood donation intentions.

Although this body of research has established the applicability of using an identity lens to explore prosocial behavior (e.g., blood donation), its conceptualization of identity as a uni-dimensional concept fails to fully capture the differences between donors in terms of their attitude and behavior. Further, the donation literature has mainly characterized donation as giving and often uses the terms interchangeably (Aaker and Akutsu 2009), implying that a donor identity is akin to a giver identity. By definition, however, identity is expected to differ among people as it reflects how people subjectively perceive who they are as a result of their individual traits, characteristics, and social roles (Belk 1988; Callero 1985; Reed et al. 2012). Therefore, we argue that the presumption that donation is uni-dimensional, or solely akin to giving, is worthy of further exploration.

Thirty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with donors at a large central blood collection center, two mobile collection units, or the donors’ home or workplace in a large city in Australia. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1976). Seven key themes were identified which were labeled: motive for donating; public versus private identity; perceptions of personal costs of donating; emotional consequences of donating/not donating; role model influence; and payback. These themes were then used to look for distinct patterns of sentiment polarity and amplification that may define a unique donor identity.

Four donor identities with distinct profiles emerged from the analysis. We label these identities the Life Saver, the Community Carer, the Practical Helper and the Extraordinaire (see Table 1 for descriptions). Specifically, Life Savers donate to help and save the lives of individuals; they like others to know about their donor identity, appreciate small token incentives, and feel pride and happiness after a donation. Community Carers donate to give back and contribute to the community; they prefer to keep their donor identity private, do not care for recognition or token incentives, feel happy and a sense of well-being after a donation, but can be deterred by the personal costs of making a donation. Practical Helpers donate because they recognize there is a need for blood and that they can do it; they do not care for token incentives, feel little emotion after a donation, and downplay any personal costs of making a donation. Extraordinaires donate to show they are special; they love others to know that they are a donor and appreciate recognition and token incentives. Although they are similar to Life Savers in feeling pride and happiness after a donation, they are very resistant to donation deferrals.

We also conducted seven interviews with non-donors and compared them to donors. Based on the result of this negative-case analysis, we discovered a distinct, fifth identity perceived by non-donors, which we label the Sacrificer (see Table 1). Specifically, Sacrificers are seen to sacrifice blood, strength, time, and effort, and endure significant discomfort for the benefits of others; they do not care for recognition or any form of incentives, feel a quiet sense of satisfaction after a donation, and accept the personal costs that may be incurred in donating.

In conclusion, we believe that our research fundamentally redefines the concept of donor identity by putting forward a multi-dimensional view which represents blood donors’ self-identity and non-donors’ perceptions of donors. Specifically, we find that above and beyond the generic donor or moral identity, donor identity can be subdivided into four types – Life Savers, Community Carers, Practical Helpers, and Extraordinaires – and one perceived identity by non-donors, Sacrificers. Theoretically, this typology not only offers a new and unique way to understand donors, but also helps us understand why donors differ in their motives, desire for privacy, attitude towards personal costs, and attraction to incentives. It also gives us insights into how non-donors view blood donors, especially in terms of the high perceived sacrifices that they are assumed to make. Practically, our findings will help organizations such as blood collection agencies better target their recruitment and retention strategies to the different identities. This also opens up a potentially promising and untapped avenue for the more effective management of donation behaviors.

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Table 1: Donor Identity Descriptions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Life Saver</th>
<th>The Community Carer</th>
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<td>These types of donors donate blood to help and save the lives of individuals. They are focused upon the one-to-one relationship between the donor and the recipient. These donors feel pride, happiness and a sense of well-being following a donation as they have given something special. They like others to know that they are a blood donor and they appreciate the small tokens (badges, stickers, key-rings, diary) the Blood Service gives them to display this. They are disappointed, but accepting when they are unable to donate for some reason. They typically began donating through someone’s influence, and they encourage others to donate.</td>
<td>These types of donors donate blood because they want to give back and contribute to the community. They are focused upon the effective working of the blood supply system, both for the benefit of community members who are in need, and in case they themselves are in need sometime in the future. They view blood donation as a private act and do not actively tell or try to recruit others. These donors are very aware of the personal costs (e.g., time, effort, and physical discomfort involved) of making a donation and will stop donating if it exceed their threshold. They do not care for recognition or token incentives given by the Blood Service for their donation. Their initial donation was typically influenced by a role model and they feel happiness and well-being following a donation.</td>
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<th>The Practical Helper</th>
<th>The Extraordinaire</th>
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<td>These types of donors have a very practical view about blood donation. They donate blood simply because they know there is a need for it and that they can do it. These donors downplay any personal costs (e.g., time, effort, and physical discomfort involved) that may be incurred in donating. They feel little emotion following a donation or if they are unable to donate for some reason. They also do not care for the small tokens that the Blood Service may offer them and do not actively recruit donors.</td>
<td>These types of donors donate blood because they feel they are stronger, healthier or possess a blood type that is unique compared to most people; in other words, they feel special. Alternatively, they believe blood donors are rare and thus special compared to the general population. They love others to know that they are a blood donor and appreciate any recognition or tokens they receive from the Blood Service, especially if it allows them to advertise blood donation to others. These donors feel pride, happiness and a sense of well-being following a donation and get very upset when they are unable to donate.</td>
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<th>The Sacrificers</th>
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<td>These types of donors are seen to sacrifice blood, strength, time, effort, and endure significant discomfort for the benefits of others. They do not desire any form of (tangible or intangible) rewards or acknowledgement as this would likely diminish their offering. They are also not sensitive to the high costs they endure in making the donation as they perceive these as necessary for their choice of this type of donation.Whilst not elated they do gain a quiet sense satisfaction from donating.</td>
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