Humanity Assertion and Anticipated Reckoning: Insights From Gift Exchange in a Crisis Context

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Using Identity-Based Motivation (Oyserman, 2007) to examine gift giving in Nazi concentration camps, we analyze a new gift-giving motivation, that of humanity assertion, which reinforces moral identities and basic human dignity. We then introduce the construct of anticipated reckoning: self-regulation through an imagined future self who judges one’s current actions.

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Humanity Assertion and Anticipated Reckoning: Insights from Gift Exchange in a Crisis Context

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Decades ago, Belk (1976) and Sherry (1983) called for a better understanding of how situational conditions shape gift exchange. Nevertheless, the literature reflects a fairly narrow range of gift-giving contexts (e.g., romantic dyads, family holiday exchanges, and workplaces; Belk & Coon 1993; Caplow 1984, Otnes et al. 1993; Ruth 2003), among relatively affluent people. Little is known about gift exchange in impoverished or constrained settings, including crisis situations.

This paper examines gift exchange occurring within Nazi concentration camps. Life in the camps was degrading and humiliating by design, and prisoners endured persistent assaults on their self-worth, dignity, and autonomy. Extreme deprivation demanded a focus on individual survival, and prisoners struggled to attain extremely scarce resources through black markets and other unofficial exchange mechanisms, including gift exchange. In exploring gifting within this context, we draw upon the theory of Identity-Based Motivation (“IBM”; e.g., Oyserman 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry 2003) which views identity as malleable, and emphasizes how cultural and social contexts can trigger self-goals related to a given identity. These salient identities then influence perceptions, judgments, and behavior.

We conducted a careful textual analysis of 28 personal memoirs of Holocaust survivors from various countries, and academic accounts of the camps, focusing on gift-giving incidents within the extreme-deprivation contexts of the camps. Our sources were not selected a priori because of their focus on gift-giving; rather, each was reviewed in its entirety and included in the study. We analyzed each memoir to locate acts that could reasonably be interpreted as “giving.” We subjected these incidents to the constant comparative method of data analysis outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1994). We first analyzed the motivational aspects of each unit of analysis, and then linked the ways each motive impacted the identity of the giver and/or recipient. As such, we cycled iteratively between the archival material and our emergent findings to ensure that we reported phenomena that could enrich and expand our understanding of gift exchange. We are confident that the memoirs we analyzed provided saturation, because in analyzing the last few memoirs in our selected set, no new themes arose (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Three clear motivations for giving emerge from the data: instrumental, connective, and humanity assertion. Instrumental giving is motivated by the giver’s possibility of gaining something in return. For example, recipients are often other prisoners with greater access to goods. In connective giving, prisoners give to re-establish desired social connections and identities. Such giving plays a formative role for prisoners in developing new social groups. Because of space/time constraints, in this paper we focus on the third emergent motivation: humanity assertion. We explore the following emergent research questions: 1) How does humanity assertion shape behavior in crisis contexts?; and 2) What are the implications of this motivation for the identities of givers and recipients?

We find that giving motivated by humanity assertion is agapic in nature: it is neither pragmatic nor instrumental, is unlikely to be reciprocated, and is idealistic and altruistic. In keeping with IBM, we find that numerous acts of giving are propelled by the givers’ desires to adhere to a moral code that allows them to rise above the primitive struggles and conflicts of the camp. Recipients of gifts via humanity assertion are often strangers, mere acquaintances, or people unlikely to be able to reciprocate. The type of giving allows the giver to assert his or her humanity: to see oneself as human and moral. Recipients, in turn, are bestowed not only with a gift, but also with a sense of their own humanity.

In contrast to extant research, we find that agapic giving extends beyond the contexts of romantic partners, close friends or family members. In the camps, it reinforces identities of “human” and “alive” for givers and recipients. Furthermore, prior research does not consider commodities as agapic gifts, because their blatant market value tends to usurp any symbolic value (Belk & Coon 1993; Ekeh 1974). Yet we find that much agapic giving in a crisis context takes the form of commodities, as extreme deprivation imbues gifts of food and other commodities with strong symbolic value.

According to IBM, our identities continuously develop in response to environmental pressures. Yet people respond to these pressures in different ways. In this case, we see that humanity assertion is associated with the self-standpoint, or point of view from which a person judges him or herself. The self-standpoint is oneself in the distant future, the survivor self who must live with one’s past actions. The present self is thus regulated by an anticipated future self who looks back to judge the present self. We label this construct anticipated reckoning. The future self regulates the actions of the current self; the future self is, in a sense, watching. We offer evidence that anticipated reckoning is particularly relevant for self-regulation in a crisis. Yet how well people adhere to the moral standards of their pre-crisis selves depends on the pressures within the crisis context, and the individual’s ability to self-regulate behavior in a context where socially-derived moral standards of selfishness may conflict with internal pre-crisis standards. After emerging from a crisis, the individual carries forward a self-digest of the crisis self, which can spur negative affect; the survivor must reintegrate into a world where moral standards are likely very different than those in the crisis context.

We thus make several contributions to gift-giving research. First, we demonstrate the efficacy of the IBM and related theories to understand the interplay between gift exchange and identity. Second, we expand the theoretical domain covered by existing models of giving by highlighting distinctions between giving in commonplace versus crisis contexts. Third, we illustrate the fundamental role gifts play in establishing moral identities and basic human dignity, demonstrating that agapic gifts are not just reserved for closely-held others, but are offered to strangers as well. Within conditions of extreme crisis, agapic gifts allow the giver to reaffirm his or her own humanity.