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Economic crisis and blood donation: How are donors' motivations changing?

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ABSTRACT

Background: The economic crisis has exasperated people's feelings of loneliness; job instability often does not allow people to commit to voluntary work. The present work proposes to examine whether the motivations to donate blood have changed before and during the period of economic crisis, taking into consideration donors' gender. We adopted Omoto & Snyder's functionalist approach, which states that blood donation serves different functions for any one person, who may have different motivations from those held by other people.

Materials and Methods: We compared six-year pre–post (t1 “pre-crisis”: 2008 – t2 “during the crisis”: 2014) data on a sample of blood donors in a single blood donation center situated in Northern Italy. T-test was used for data analysis. Three hundred thirty donors (age range 18–60, M = 32.6, SD = 9.53; 54.5% male) were administered a survey at t1 and 444 (age range 18–60, M = 37.8, SD = 10.16; 68% male) six years later at t2. In both surveys, participants were administered a questionnaire with socio-demographic items and a version of Omoto & Snyder's Motivations to Volunteer scale adapted to blood donation.

Results: Donors' motivation priorities did not vary over time. Values and Self-enhancement motivations are the most prevalent. Knowledge and Ego-protection motivations decreased with the upsurge of the crisis. Women, in general, report higher mean values than men do for Values and Ego-protection motivations.

Conclusion: These results can offer valuable clues for the agencies that manage blood collection.

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1. Introduction

The global economic crisis, which began in 2008, has been the most significant economic slowdown since the Great Depression. The crisis is having a major effect on all areas of society, touching both individuals and the organizations of civil society. In Italy, as in the rest of the world, the effects of the latter – both direct and indirect – have been widely reported in the media: a reduction of the resources that constitute the social fabric, fewer services offered, less liquidity,

increased criminality, etc [1]. If we turn our attention to the individuals, we see that the crisis has clearly made them less affluent and more vulnerable, but it is commonly believed that it has also intensified their feelings of isolation and reduced their hopes for the future and trust in politics and institutions. Moreover, the economic crisis seems to have affected females to a greater degree [2]. In fact, according to UNAIDS – Impact of the global economic crisis on women, girls and gender equality [3]: “Globally, women are more vulnerable to these economic shocks [...] Financial crises and the policy responses put in place impact men and women differently, and yet the effects of austerity measures on women and girls are rarely considered” (2012, p. 2).

Now, people often distance themselves from many forms of participation precisely because they harbor resentment

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toward anything having to do with institutions: not only state and local entities, but also the third sector and labor unions, which they perceive as unsupportive [4]. Furthermore, working conditions, being changed and more precarious than before, often do not allow people to feel at ease making a commitment to after-work activities such as volunteerism. Nevertheless, organizations such as those involved in volunteerism constitute an immediate alternative for anyone who finds him or herself facing the effects of the crisis, especially unemployment. In fact, volunteerism allows one to actively maintain one's skills, to develop new skills, to maintain a sense of belonging and community, and to broaden social bonds and networks [5].

Blood donation, besides being an altruistic and charitable act [6], is also a unique way to volunteer [7–9], and as such, can contribute to bringing about the aforementioned benefits.

One of the most important determinants of engagement in volunteerism is constituted by motivations. According to the functionalist approach adopted by Omoto and Snyder [10] to understand the motivations underpinning voluntary action, people are spurred to act on the basis of multiple motivations, and these change over time and in relation to the context in which people find themselves [11]. In light of this consideration, the present work proposes to provide a preliminary answer to the question: have the motivations to donate blood changed since the crisis began?

To date, we find no studies that have investigated change in blood donors' motivations during this time period. The present work proposes to fill this gap for theoretical as well as operative reasons. It is important for the agencies responsible for blood donations and donor loyalty to understand whether the motivations that drive donors to donate have changed in this period of economic difficulty, and how they have changed, with the goal of implementing adequate means for reinforcing the motivations of already-committed donors as well as effective strategies to sensitize potential future donors to donate.

1.1. The functionalist approach toward motivations to donate

The approach in literature that best allows us to capture a change in motivation over time is surely Omoto and Snyder's [10] functionalist approach. The functionalist approach to the analysis of human behavior [12] is widely used in psychology (for a review, see Snyder [13]) and is in line with approaches that emphasize that both personal and social factors for drive people to pursue motivational "agendas" [14]. It has been widely applied to the vast context of volunteerism, including several applications to blood donation (see, for example, Guididi et al. [15]).

According to this approach, volunteerism is able to meet some of the *needs* of the people who engage in it. These needs correspond to the *motivations* that spur people to get involved. By the term *motivation*, we mean the process of activating the individual in order to reach a goal, taking into account the conditions of the environment in which the person is situated. However, people who engage in voluntary activities are driven by multiple motivations concurrently, and not only by one. Moreover, these moti-

vations can vary throughout time and relative to the individual's stage of life. To better understand what drives people to engage in or continue voluntary activities, it is necessary to consider these motivations conjointly [10]. One of the strong points of this approach is that it has identified a wide spectrum of motivations. Clary et al. [5] identifies six motivations for which people may begin or continue to engage in volunteerism:

- Values: has to do with the opportunity that volunteerism offers people to find a context where they can express and share their altruistic and humanitarian values;
- Knowledge: concerns the opportunity to have new learning experiences and exercise skills, abilities, and knowledge not otherwise practiced in other sectors;
- Social: entails the possibility of meeting new people, broadening one's friendship circle, or carrying out a voluntary activity in the company of a friend;
- Career: has to do with the possibility of learning and exercising skills through volunteering that could prove to be useful for one's profession and for discovering job opportunities;
- Protective: has to do with the defense of the ego, with particular reference to the fact that often people feel guilty about being more fortunate than others. Therefore, involving oneself in the social realm can compensate for feelings of unease related to one's own good fortune;
- Self-enhancement: concerns the fact that engaging in volunteerism improves one's mood and increases self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, and one's general self-concept.

According to this approach, the motivations that drive people to donate blood are not fixed or immutable, but can vary over time [15] and depending on one's life cycle phase [11]. Blood donation can thus be understood as a *process*; and throughout this process, combinations of motivations will change according to numerous personal and social-contextual factors.

Moreover, gender constitutes an important factor for motivations to donate [15,16]. In general, women seem to be driven by more altruistic motivations while men are spurred by individualistic ones; nevertheless, such motivations in females are not supported by the evidence of the number of women donors, which is decidedly lower than that of male donors, particularly in Italy [16]. In a recent study conducted by Guididi et al. [15], it emerged that women report higher levels of Social, Ego-protection, Self-enhancement, and Knowledge motivations than men do. These findings thus affirm the importance of studying motivations taking donors' gender into consideration.

1.2. The present work

The present work is configured as a trend analysis and proposes to examine whether the motivations to donate blood changed before (2008 – t1), and during (2014 – t2), the period of economic crisis. The analyses will be carried out taking into consideration donors' gender. In particular, the donors from a specific blood donation center located in a northern Italian city will be considered. This is a city

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