

Research Article

Identity-based motivations and anticipated reckoning: Contributions to gift-giving theory from an identity-stripping context[☆]

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Abstract

We utilize the Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) model to examine gift giving within the identity-stripping context of Nazi concentration camps, as reported in the memoirs of Holocaust survivors. By exploring gift giving in this crisis-laden context, we demonstrate the fundamental role gifts can play in reestablishing personal and social identities. In doing so, we provide insights into the motivations for giving that go beyond the existing paradigms that emphasize social exchange, economic exchange, or agapic giving. Further, we introduce the construct of anticipated reckoning, in which people self-regulate their behavior through an imagined future self whom they perceive to judge their current actions.

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My identity was the only thing left of me. And they stripped me of that as well.

[(Michlen (2004, 76)]

I survived not only through luck and persistence but also because, here and there, in the midst of hell, someone cared for me. Someone gave me a piece of bread after a beating. Someone gave me his winter coat on a frigid night. Someone stretched out his hand.

[(Neuman, 2000, 186)]

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Introduction

Gift giving is grounded in relationships. Within consumer research, each dominant theoretical framework that pertains to this activity—social exchange, economic exchange, and agapic giving—emphasizes different relational outcomes. Social exchange examines how people adhere to group norms that govern giving (in particular, reciprocity; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999). Economic exchange emphasizes how such exchange can assist givers and/or recipients with acquiring material gains (Sahlins, 1972). In contrast, agapic giving focuses on giving among intimate relationship members and does not require reciprocity (e.g., Belk & Coon, 1993).

Supplementing these three established paradigms, we offer evidence of a fourth—the identity-based paradigm—that explains giving as resulting from context-based identity motivations. We find giving plays a critical role in re-establishing lost identities in the identity-stripping context of Nazi concentration camps. Prisoners were desperate to rebuild and protect aspects of their individual and social identities, even as the camp system attempted to rob them of their humanity and impose upon them the identity of animals. We show that even while potentially on

the brink of death, people prioritize their identity restoration through giving. We find three distinct types of motivation within the identity-based paradigm: 1) giving to re-establish agency (e.g., individual identities related to autonomy and control); 2) giving to re-establish social identities (belonging to a family or group); and 3) giving to re-establish humanity (reaffirming one's identity as a moral human being). As our analysis demonstrates, these three identity-based motivations extend our understanding of giving beyond the economic, social, and agapic frameworks that dominate gift-giving scholarship.

We ground our discussion of identity-based giving in the Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) model (Oyserman, 2007, 2009). IBM views identity as malleable and emphasizes the role of cultural and social contexts in triggering the salience of a given identity. As many scholars aver (e.g. Aaker & Akutsu, 2009; Kirmani, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009), IBM is an appropriate theoretical lens through which to explore consumer-oriented behaviors salient to building and maintaining identity.

Central to IBM's core concept of a malleable identity is our key finding of an identity-maintenance process, which we label *anticipated reckoning*. This phenomenon occurs when the present self is regulated by an anticipated future self, whom people imagine will look back and judge their current actions. In the camps, prisoners knew their chances of surviving were slim. Yet as they struggled to stay alive, they also realized their behavior and any resulting consequences of their actions while in captivity would inform their future selves, should they survive. In that vein, a gifting incident could shape people's future identities, especially if it occurred in a context disruptive to the social norms governing everyday life, including those pertaining to gift giving.

Our data capture the fact that when people offer gifts in chaotic, identity-stripping contexts, many recognize that adhering to a moral code will allow their future selves to gaze back at their present selves with a positive (or at least a neutral) self-assessment, so they can "live with" the people they were in the camp. In the context of IBM, anticipated reckoning captures how people's identity fluidity is not only a result of adapting to short-term contextual changes, but also how long-term projections and anticipated states of existence can shape perceptions and management of core aspects of the self. Further, the construct of anticipated reckoning expands our understanding of future possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2007) as more than a specific end-state of who one will become, but also as a projected reflective stance.

Background

Giving in identity-stripping contexts

Decades ago, Belk (1976) and Sherry (1983) called for a better understanding of situational conditions shaping giving. Although the consumer-behavior literature highlights numerous contexts, most focus on culturally-commonplace settings such as gift exchanges within romantic dyads, family exchanges within pervasive holidays, and workplace giving—all among relatively affluent people (Belk & Coon, 1993; Caplow, 1984; Otnes, Lowrey, & Kim, 1993; Ruth, 2003). Only two studies highlight

gift giving during difficult times: Marcoux (2009) explores gift acceptance during times of relocation, and Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012) examine giving during the first Mardi Gras season in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Thus, the extant literature overlooks aspects and types of giving that may arise only in very constrained settings. Further, we know little about giving practices in identity-stripping contexts, such as conditions of war, totalitarianism, or slavery. Such contexts can deprive people of their homes, their roles in society, their possessions, their privacy, and their dignity. According to Goffman (1961, p. 48), such conditions contribute to the "mortification of the self." Clearly, the concentration-camp context we explore represents a unique historical setting. Nevertheless, many present-day contexts can impose great duress and hardship, and rob individuals of their identity. For example, by the end of 2013, over 51.2 million were living as forcibly displaced people due to conflict and persecution (UNHCR, 2014). In addition, 20 to 30 million people live in the dehumanizing state of slavery across the globe (Global Slavery Index, 2013; ILO, 2012).

We believe exploring giving in identity-stripping contexts will provide the field with a richer understanding of the intersection between identity and giving. The desperation and constraint of these settings enable us to examine the interplay between identity needs and physical needs, and the trade-offs people make when striving for identity maintenance and restoration. Further, we can expand our understanding of how, why, and what types of identity motivations and restoration tactics—including gift giving—emerge when identities are stripped.

Motivations for giving

Social exchange models assume the primary motivation for giving is to maintain reciprocal relationships (Belk, 1976; Belk & Coon, 1993; Sherry, 1983). As such, gifts serve as tangible expressions of social connections and as a means of relationship management (Areni, Kiecker, & Palan, 1998; Belk, 1976; Lowrey, Otnes, & Ruth, 2004). The symbolic nature of the gift outweighs its economic value (Ekeh, 1974). Generalized reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) is the norm; immediate gift reciprocity is neither required nor expected (Sahlins, 1972). Ultimately, however, a healthy giver/recipient relationship does require long-term balance in giving (Belk, 1976; Caplow, 1984; Joy, 2001; Sherry, 1983). Economic exchange models also focus on reciprocity—but within this rubric, the emphasis is on economic gain or profit, with both the giver and recipient holding the expectation of balanced and immediate reciprocity (Belk, 1976; Sahlins, 1972).

In contrast to both social and exchange models, agapic giving (Belk, 1996; Belk & Coon, 1993) focuses on giving within intimate relationships such as dating couples (Belk & Coon, 1993) and families (Belk, 1976; Caplow, 1984; Joy, 2001; Lowrey, Otnes, & Robbins, 1996). Exchange is not sought; what matters is the unselfish offering motivated by emotional expression, and concern for a loved one. An agapic gift—especially a "perfect" one (Belk, 1996)—reflects the recipient's needs and desires and often entails sacrifice by the giver.

Although these three perspectives provide insight into people's gift-giving motivations, their assumptions limit their

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