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)]

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; Kimani, 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/reipient 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
Giving and identity linkages in consumer research

Early work in anthropology on gift exchange (e.g., Gouldner, 1960; Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1924; Schwartz, 1967) notes the importance of identity in giving. The sociologist Barry Schwartz (1967) observes that “the gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver” (2). In some of the earliest consumer research on gift giving, Belk (1976) also argues for the salience of the giver’s self-concept during gift selection, and demonstrates that givers typically choose items congruent with their desires to project an ideal self, rather than offering gifts congruent with a recipient’s self-concept. Likewise, Sherry (1983) captures the tendency of givers and recipients to seek to confirm aspects of their identities when engaged in gift exchange. However, still absent is an in-depth exploration of how aspects of identity construction, maintenance, and reparation might shape a person’s gifting behavior.

To gain more insight into the intersection of gift giving and identity, we reviewed all articles published in the last 40 years on gift giving in the two most prominent consumer research journals: the Journal of Consumer Research and the Journal of Consumer Psychology. Within that sample, we found only four that had identity issues as a focus. Furthermore, each paper explores different aspects of identity that are unique, specific, and not tied to any overall theoretical framework exploring people’s core identities as givers or recipients. For example, Otnes et al. (1993) identify the six social roles people express through giving, and the shopping strategies they rely upon to express them. Joy (2001) examines giving within a collectivist culture and discusses how familial and private self-goals influence giving. Marcoux (2009) investigates gifts of time and effort offered to those moving house, and the recipients’ desire to avoid unwanted identities tied to indebtedness. Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) examine threats to identity when people give gifts that contradict their own tastes and desires. In sum, these four papers do not make identity their core focus; nor do they integrate each other’s findings into a more holistic framework that explores identity. In the present paper, we utilize IBM as such a framework in order to provide a greater understanding of the role of identity in gift giving.

The Identity-Based Motivation model

IBM links cultural and social identity perspectives to a social cognition framework, and outlines the ways social contexts trigger self-goals that motivate behavior (Oyserman, 2007). The notion of self-goals stems from the literature on “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), or images of one’s self in the future, including who one hopes to become, as well as less desirable selves one wants to avoid. Self-goals, or desired identities, can be conscious or unconscious, and can influence perceptions, judgments, and behavior (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003). Attaining self-goals is achieved through self-regulation (i.e., the process of focusing effort and energy toward a goal; Bandura, 1991).

Oyserman (2007) classifies the identities that motivate behavior as personal or social. Personal identities include traits, characteristics, and goals not originating from social-group membership. In contrast, social identities reflect those same elements that are derived from social connections. Such identities can stem from very broad social categories (e.g., gender), to narrower ones (e.g., mother). IBM views identity as malleable and emphasizes how context can trigger the salience of a given identity, thus increasing the likelihood that this identity will motivate behavior. Oyserman (2009) argues that although our identities might feel stable, they are continuously built and developed, and highly sensitive to contextual cues, including identity threats. Thus, people compensate for challenges to valued identities through actions that reinforce them.

IBM offers a promising approach to understanding gift giving. It illuminates behavior within a variety of contexts, including academic performance (Oyserman, 2013) and health (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). Researchers within consumer behavior also suggest that IBM’s rigor and robustness can enhance our understanding of product and brand choice (Kirmani, 2009; Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt et al., 2009). In fact, a recent conceptual paper in JCP suggests it as a fruitful framework through which to examine giving in the context of donation behavior (Aaker & Akutsu, 2009). By applying IBM to an identitystripping setting, we can illuminate how identity motivations operate when people’s need to restore identity is chronic and powerful.

Research questions

Given our interest in understanding how identity motivations may underlie gift-giving practices in identity-stripping contexts, we address the following questions: 1) What types of identity-based motivations emerge when gift giving occurs in identity-stripping contexts?; 2) How does applying IBM to giving in this context enable us to supplement the contributions of the extant gift-giving models?

Research context: gift exchange in Nazi concentration camps

From the time Hitler was named German Chancellor in 1933 until the end of World War II in 1945, the Nazi government implemented a system of concentration camps, where approximately 11 million European victims were imprisoned and exterminated (Fitzgerald, 2011). Six million Jewish people were killed in the Holocaust (Dawidovicz, 1975), along with political prisoners, homosexuals, and others the Nazis deemed undesirable.
The camps represented extreme forms of identity-stripping contexts. Life there was degrading and humiliating by design, and prisoners endured persistent assaults on their self-worth, dignity, and autonomy. People were torn from their homes and separated from loved ones, and guards made every attempt to reduce those under their control to the status of animals. Such extreme deprivation demanded a focus on individual survival, as each prisoner struggled to attain extremely scarce resources. As Birenbaum (1971, 119) recalls in her memoir of the camps, “...my fate was of no concern to anyone—on the contrary, we hindered one another in the crowded barracks, in the lines for soup or bread...the stronger defended herself from the weaker, pushed them away, killed them off.” Likewise, Steinberg (1996, 27) recalls: “Withdrawn inside himself, each man was fighting for his own survival. The dehumanizing machine had worked like a charm.”

Put simply, the structure of the concentration camp system and the horrific living conditions were not conducive to expressing concern for others (Cohen, 1953). Prisoners were overwhelmed with hunger, overworked to the extent that intense fatigue and pain were constant, and forced to cope with the immense grief resulting from losing their family members, friends, and homes. All of these forces, as well as the awareness of mass extermination and the possibility of their own death, drove prisoners inward. Thus, to show concern for another, and to give anything away to another, required tremendous effort and fortitude.

Those unfamiliar with this context may wonder about the sources of goods used as gifts. There were several. Auschwitz, for example, contained an area where incoming inmates’ possessions were processed. Referred to by prisoners as “Canada” (due to that country’s reputation as the land of plenty), inmates sorted possessions taken from the trains and packed these for shipment to Germany. This system afforded opportunities for both guards and prisoners to smuggle goods. But doing so was risky: prisoners were searched before returning to their barracks, and smuggling was punishable by a severe beating or death. Another source was connections with civilian workers or forced laborers not living in the camps. Further, some prisoners’ jobs gave them access to items they could steal (e.g., equipment, medicine). Inmates referred to stealing, smuggling, or trading goods as “organizing,” and black markets arose within the camps (Klein, 2003; Klein & Hill, 2008). Prisoners found it nearly impossible to survive on the meager rations provided to them, and relied on obtaining food and vital supplies through these unofficial exchange mechanisms.

Method

The Holocaust is one of the most horrific examples of prolonged deprivation and programmatic genocide in human history. We are extremely sensitive to the fact that such contexts are painful to explore, and we recognize the moral and ethical issues implicit in doing so to better understand giving behavior. Any examination of life in the camps must acknowledge the fact that the vast majority of victims were brutally killed outright. Some survivors, however, chose to bear witness by telling the stories of their experiences. Most memoirists noted their strong desire to make the world aware of the atrocities endured, and to contribute to deterring any repetition of these acts. As such, our examination of their memoirs was not an opportunistic attempt to investigate a consumer behavior phenomenon in concentration camps. Instead, while coincidentally engaged in a larger-scale project related to the Holocaust, the first author noticed a large number of giving incidents in survivors’ memoirs. These spoke of the sacrifices and many acts of kindness among prisoners. Through these actions, we can begin to understand the primary role of giving as an act of defiance against the mortification of the self in identity-stripping contexts.

Data collection

It was important to utilize empirical methods that best captured prisoners’ actual experiences. We therefore relied on a research technique emanating from the qualitative tradition. Qualitative studies have contributed key constructs to the consumer-research canon that enhance our understanding of the roles of goods, services, and experiences in consumers’ lives, such as consuming sacred vs. profane phenomena (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), and how aspects of consumers’ identities help shape their relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998).

Our qualitative approach is historical. Although relatively rare in consumer behavior research (c.f., Belk, 1992; Karababa & Ger, 2011; Witkowski, 1989), others discuss its benefits to the field (Smith & Lux, 1993; Witkowski & Jones, 2006). In the case of the Holocaust, survivor memoirs clearly serve as the most critical data sources. Memoirs are specific forms of biography, and are important forms of interactional texts (Goffman, 1983), or written records of people’s locations in social situations. These textual products contain the “prose of the world,” or the everyday language people use to describe and reflect upon their own experiences (Denzin, 1989, p. 25). Furthermore, they support an interpretive-interactionist perspective, one asserting “meaningful interpretations of human experience can only come from those persons...thoroughly immersed...in the phenomenon they [scholars] wish to interpret and understand” (Denzin, 1989, p. 26).

Two types of immersion help us obtain what we believe is a valid and reliable understanding of gift giving within the camps. First, because our text emanates from memoirs of survivors, the memoirists’ immersion in the camps is an established fact. Each memoir is a case study of one person’s experience (Stake, 1995). Second, we engaged in deep study of these memoirs, supplementing them with academic (non-memoir) accounts to ground ourselves in the work of Holocaust scholars who provide deeper reflection on the sociocultural milieu.

Our data collection and analysis proceeded in two phases. In Phase One, we relied on memoirs from a convenience sample the first author accumulated during a larger-scale study. Identifying this original set of 21 memoirs by 19 different authors was facilitated by searches on amazon.com; these were chosen to reflect a variety of nationalities, camps, and both men and women. This process also allowed us to supplement the original data set with...
memos from eleven more survivors. Our total Phase One sample therefore includes 33 memoirs by 30 different authors (see Table 1 for details).

The overriding criterion for each included memoir was that it had to be a firsthand account by a survivor. We did not select memoirs a priori because we knew their content focused on giving; rather, we selected and reviewed each in its entirety. We restricted our analysis to giving within the camps, rather than places such as ghettos (parts of cities and towns where Jews were forced to live, but where they generally had greater access to goods). This allowed us to focus on giving where deprivation was the most extreme.

During Phase One, we also consulted two academic accounts of the camps (Des Pres, 1976; Todorov, 1996) to include careful scholarly study of life in these contexts; these served as external audits of our interpretation of the memoirs. Again, we did not pre-select these accounts for their potential to discuss gift exchange. We subjected them to the same rigorous analytical audits of our interpretation of the memoirs. Again, we did not.

We also add an additional academic account suggested by a reviewer (Agamben, 1999).

**Data analysis**

Our first task was to engage in a close read of the memoirs, or the “mindful, disciplined reading of an object [text]...to [gain a] deeper understanding of its meanings” (Brummett, 2010, p. 3). We scrutinized the texts for instances where prisoners recorded giving or receiving. Although the terms “gift” and “giving” appear only occasionally in the primary sources, we nevertheless uncovered acts that met Belk’s (2010) “family resemblance” criterion. Using his giving prototype, giving includes behaviors where the giver desires to please a recipient, and the recipient expresses appreciation. Further, giving involves the transfer of ownership. Prisoners received individual rations, and sometimes came upon extras. They could decide to give some of these personal possessions to others, and this transfer was irrevocable. Sharing, in contrast, involves distributing a collectively-held resource (Belk, 2010) which was a rarity in the camps. We also classified instances of social support—a mechanism that helps buffer individuals in stressful situations (Cohen & McKay, 1984)—as gifts. Most of the giving we uncovered could be understood as a type of social support. Although usually material, they could be non-material as well, echoing Sherry’s (1983) definition of gifts as including intangible items as well as tangibles.

We analyzed each of the 43 memoirs to determine which incidences met our criteria. We subjected each incidence to the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This analysis is an integral component of the grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and qualitative researchers rely on it across a variety of academic domains (Fischer & Otnes, 2006). Specifically, we unitized each instance of giving in the texts and analyzed the motivational aspects of each vignette. As these motives became salient, we then linked the ways each impacted the identity of the giver and/or recipient, depending upon whether and how the narratives within each vignette related information about the givers and recipients. We are confident we achieved theoretical saturation and derived both mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive analytical categories, as our analysis of the last few memoirs in Phase One elicited no new themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More tellingly, none emerged in the memoirs we selected in Phase Two, our validation sample.

We engaged in iterative cycling between the literature on gift giving and on identity—a key analytic procedure in the qualitative tradition, and recommended by consumer psychologists (Suzuki, 1999). During this process, we discovered the linkages between IBM (Oyserman, 2007, 2009) and gift giving. Our reading of IBM convinced us it would be an illuminating theoretical framework for structuring an analysis of our data. In the identity-stripping context of the camps, identity-restoration should be strongly motivated, as identity needs would be very difficult to fulfill and thus should be chronically accessible.

Our grounding in IBM helped us to see that giving is motivated by prisoners’ contextually-primed identity needs to re-establish 1) agency; 2) social identities; or 3) their sense of humanity. Our experience as gift-giving researchers and the extant literature concur that these motivations are not discussed in commonplace gift-giving contexts. The prominence of these three identity-based “tropes” (or higher-level abstract categories in the data; Spiggle, 1994) spurred us to offer a theoretical contribution grounded in IBM that both unpacks these tropes and explores emergent constructs to explain their presence.

**Overview of the data**

Table 2 presents an accounting of giving and receiving incidents in the memoirs. Each contained between three to thirty instances of giving (mean = 4.18), as well as one to twelve of receiving (mean = 5.18). In addition, memoirists reported observed giving/receiving that did not directly involve them (range of 0–6; mean = .76).

Furthermore, we classified each instance in terms of which of the three motivations best characterized the giving behavior. Thirteen percent reflected the motivation to reestablish agency, 65% to reestablish social identities, and 19% to reestablish humanity (with the remaining three percent unclassifiable due

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1 The two academic accounts by survivors Donat (1963) and Cohen (1953) were not included in this analysis. Further, to avoid double counting, we only included one memoir per memoirist (Levi’s *Survival at Auschwitz* and Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Survivor</th>
<th>Memoir title</th>
<th>Date first published (vs. edition analyzed)</th>
<th>Nationality and gender</th>
<th>Camp</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Hope is the Last to Die:</td>
<td>1971 (1996)</td>
<td>Polish female</td>
<td>Maidanek</td>
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<td>A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror</td>
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<td>Halina Birenbaum</td>
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<td>Neustadt</td>
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<td>Livia Bitton-Jackson</td>
<td>I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in the Holocaust</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Hungarian female</td>
<td>Auschwitz</td>
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<td>Edith Bruck</td>
<td>Who Loves You Like This?</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Hungarian female</td>
<td>Plaszow</td>
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<td>Elie Cohen</td>
<td>Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Dutch male</td>
<td>Auschwitz</td>
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<td>Alexander Donat</td>
<td>The Holocaust Kingdom: A Memoir</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Polish male</td>
<td>Dachau</td>
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<td>Lucille Eigengreen</td>
<td>From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>German female</td>
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<td>Zdenka Fantlova</td>
<td>My Lucky Star</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Czech female</td>
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<td>Victor Frankl</td>
<td>Man's Search for Meaning</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Austrian male</td>
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<td>Recollections: An Autobiography</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>Rena Kornreich Gelissen</td>
<td>Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Polish female</td>
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<td>Hugo Gryn</td>
<td>Chasing Shadows</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>Mira Ryczke Kimmelman</td>
<td>Echoes from the Holocaust: A Memoir</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Polish female</td>
<td>Auschwitz</td>
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<td>Cecilie Klein</td>
<td>Sentence to Live</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Czech female</td>
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<td>Bergen-Belsen</td>
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<td>Freddie Knoller</td>
<td>Desperate Journey</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Austrian male</td>
<td>Auschwitz</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Moments of Reprieve</td>
<td>1986 (1989)</td>
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<td>Sara Nomberg-Prytyk</td>
<td>Auschwitz: True Tales From a Grotesque Land</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Polish female</td>
<td>Stutthof</td>
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<td>Isaac Neuman</td>
<td>The Narrow Bridge: Beyond the Holocaust</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>Of Blood and Hope</td>
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<td>George Lucius Salton</td>
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to inadequate information). We subdivided the social-identity incidents into two types of giving. One-third of individual instances were not part of a sustained giving relationship, and the remainder reflected repeated, sustained giving in an ongoing, supportive dyadic or group relationship. Because it was impossible to know the exact number of instances within these continuing relationships, we counted all acts of sustained giving within a group or dyad as one ongoing instance. As such, giving and receiving in the camps was more frequent than our estimates reflect. We did not observe differences according to nationality, camp or gender, with the exception that there was a tendency toward more instances of agentic giving in the memoirs of men.

Findings

As we observe above, the camp context was strategically designed to strip prisoners of their identities. Upon arrival at a major camp such as Auschwitz, prisoners were forced to relinquish all possessions, have their heads and bodies shaved, wear uniforms, and be addressed by numbers (often tattooed on their forearms) instead of their names. As Cecile Klein (1988, 80) states, “...we were not only stripped of our clothes, but of our own identities, to the depths of our souls.” de Wijze (1997, 14–15) describes:
Not a hint remains of those who just jumped off the trucks. Our strength and self-assurance have been replaced by a sense of deep humiliation. In one fell swoop everything has been taken from us. We’re only numbers, statistics. Just like everyone else in this horrible place, we’ve become ghosts, shadows of ourselves.

In responding to this degrading initiation, many prisoners vowed to hold on to as much of themselves as they could. Friedman (2002) states: “I knew that...they wanted only one thing, to murder my soul. I swore that I would never submit.” (58)

In general, we find prisoners relied on giving and receiving as central tools to restore their lost individual and social identities. Our first research question asks, “What types of identity-based motivations emerge when gift giving occurs in identity-stripping contexts?” In Table 3, we summarize three emergent motivations and the salient dimensions of each. For each motivation, we consistently uncover an overarching process akin to that posited by IBM. That is, the identity-stripping context of the camp triggers an identity motivation, which prompts behavioral readiness and results in self-regulatory behaviors, including giving. When successful, these acts contribute to positive identity outcomes, and when unsuccessful, they can lead to undesired identities.

Our second research question asks how applying IBM to giving in identity-stripping contexts allows us to broaden the contributions made by extant gift-giving models. As we will show, we find people prioritized identity restoration in the camps, even while starving. They took life-threatening risks and made sacrifices for others that defied the expectations of exchange and agapic models, but that can be explained from an identity perspective.

**Giving to reestablish agency**

We observed many instances of giving that allowed prisoners to at least occasionally feel autonomous, strong, and in control, even in such a confining and demeaning context. Agentic giving allowed prisoners who faced vast external constraints to perceive they could occasionally manipulate the harsh environment to their benefit. Within this random, unpredictable context, agentic giving enabled prisoners to assume a modicum of control over their suffering.

Many memoirs concur that it was impossible to survive without some access to extras, typically obtained through “organizing”. People sometimes gave possessions obtained in this way as gifts in the hopes of obtaining future goods or favors. Through his connections to a civilian laborer, Steinberg (1996) obtained sugar cubes, a tin of sardines, and cookies. He made a strategic decision to give some of this bounty to a capo (a prisoner in charge of other prisoners):

I thought long and hard and decided to invest my goods productively; ... He [the capo] protested like a flustered virgin, a two-hundred pound virgin, then accepted the tin of sardines, not without insisting that I take a sausage in return. That proved to be the most profitable investment I ever made in my life, paying splendid dividends. (88)

Here, Steinberg gave as an investment with clear hopes of return; he was amply rewarded with a lighter work detail. Giving in this case did not allow him to self-identify as generous or caring. Instead, he stated:

I was perfectly aware that I was behaving like a whore, and at the same time I felt like a tamer of wild beasts entering the tiger’s cage armed with a chair and a slab of gamy meat. I stroked the tiger’s whiskers. (88)

Despite the negative identity of whore, Steinberg revealed that this act of strategic giving also allowed him to view himself as clever, talented, and brave.

Positive personal identity implications that result from agentic giving were common in the memoirs. Many of these identities are those taken for granted in ordinary life, where people generally can exert control over their actions and exercise autonomy. In the camps, such identities of being powerful and autonomous were lost. This deficit cued self-regulatory actions to regain these identities.

Another example demonstrates the impact of agentic giving on personal identities. Isaacson (1991) described her mother’s innovative giving scheme, designed to obtain a more nutritious dinner:

She borrowed a pair of scissors from the camp seamstress and stole them into the factory under her dress. Knowing the punishment would be losing her newly grown hair, she stealthily cut off a strip from her rubber apron...she fashioned three stylish roses: one for the head seamstress, one for the chief cook, and one for the kapo. The seamstress took it as her just due, having lent the scissors and the needle, but our big-bosomed cook was pleased. She dipped

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her ladle deep into the pot for all three of us that evening, fishing out plenty of potatoes and turnips. “Here,” she said in her gruff tone. “Eat.” (96)

Generally, accounts of agentic giving revealed a sense of pride at having worked the system. Such gifts allowed prisoners to self-identify as resourceful and adaptive, and to counteract more pervasive, context-induced, helpless identities. Further, extras obtained through agency often became gifts for closely-held others, supporting social identities, as discussed below. Prisoners gave to those in greater power hoping that doing so would bestow authorities with respect and entitlement, and the sense of responsibility to reciprocate. Notably, prisoners generally did not give agentic gifts to SS officers, whose response to any such opportune action could be a severe blow, or even death. Capos were safer, though still risky, gift targets; before the war, many were criminal prisoners. As such, they possessed dubious morals, and were under intense pressure to be brutal. A fellow prisoner (e.g., a kitchen worker) might feel more responsible to reciprocate with needed resources—yet even in these circumstances, the desired result was not guaranteed. Such workers might feel obligated to reciprocate, and might in fact suffer negative identity implications of being (or being perceived as) selfish and unfair by failing to do so. However, they generally experienced much ingratiations from hungry prisoners. Thus, they might not, and likely could not, repay every gift offered to them.

In sum, agentic giving to authorities differs from economic exchange because balanced reciprocity and immediate return are not guaranteed. Further, the timing of giving often depended on many random factors that affected when a recipient might come into possession of something of value. Givers could not predict whether a return gift would be forthcoming in the future; often, they had to make their initial offerings on faith.

Prisoners not only offered agentic gifts to those in authority; this strategy to re-establish agency also prevailed in gifts to equals. Donat (1963) described his pride in navigating the difficult contingencies of camp life. He had pleaded with his barrack mates for something with which to bribe a capo, who had placed him on a list to receive 25 lashes. In the harsh climate, this punishment could be a death sentence. A fellow prisoner gave him four precious sugar cubes. The bribe was successful, and Donat sought to obtain a gift for his helper in return:

I now had a debt of honor to pay. The four lumps of sugar had saved my life and I somehow had to pay my benefactor back...I spent two hours carrying out a series of transactions which I shall always consider my greatest commercial exploit. I helped one man get soup for bread, another to get cigarettes for soup, and so on, until I emerged with two cigarettes clear profit [which] were the equivalent of four lumps of sugar and when I handed them over to my benefactor, I was very proud of myself. (207)

Through a series of clever transactions, Donat came to see himself as embodying the identity of a savvy businessman, and also someone able to avoid arbitrary punishment. Most importantly, he perceived himself as possessing honor.

Engaging in agentic acts enabled more than the restoration of identity; it also enabled prisoners to avoid a very undesirable identity, that of Muselman (sometimes referred to as Muselmesses by women). The term originated among prisoners to signify a person who walks with a stoop, face downward (like a praying Muslim; hence the name). The Muselman has given up and has lost the will to live (Agamben, 1999). Michlen (2004) portrays the Muselman as “Emaciated and haggard… the physical wasting and malnutrition these men suffered from had left them listless (78).” As Levi (1996) describes:

Their life is short, but their number is endless; … they… the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical… the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (90)

The term Muselman appeared in most memoirs, and was clearly common across camps, nationalities and gender. Prisoners were frightened at the thought of becoming a Muselman, one with no individuality or self-awareness, and who inhabits the zone between life and death. Thus, the Muselman represents a feared possible self (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Gelissen (1995) expressed worries about herself and her sister, who had stopped eating her soup rations: “...we will both turn into Muselmänner [sic], and from there, there is no way back. If we become emaciated we’re goners (113).” To avoid this feared possible self, prisoners took action: they organized, strategized, planned, and engaged in agentic giving.

Giving to reestablish social identity

The second identity-based motivation emerging in the memoirs is that of giving to re-establish a social identity. Once imprisoned in a camp, most if not all of prisoners’ social identities were stripped away. Societal roles, meaningful social domains, and relational connections were severed. Even aspects of social identities deeply ingrained in prisoners—such as gender or religion—were threatened in the degrading process of camp initiation. Thus, the camp context made the desire for social identities highly salient, and this salience regulated behavior.

Evidence for this phenomenon emerges in the sacrifices prisoners made for others to reestablish desired social connections and identities.

The need to belong is a “powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Not only do we seek succor from others, we also are motivated to take responsibility for their care (Levinas, 1972). It is not surprising, therefore, that this need spurred prisoners to develop close and caring connections with others, in spite of contextual pressures.
toward self-centeredness. Further, gift giving played a critical role in the formation of these new social connections.

Giving within family-like cliques

Family is a central social identity for human beings (Epp & Price, 2008). Many prisoners had no family members with them, and those who did typically had suffered the loss of numerous others. This made family identity very salient. Thus, many prisoners sought to recreate a sense of family, and to define themselves as members of this social unit. For example, Birenbaum (1971) was invited into a family-like clique through the gift of food. She reconnected with a former school friend, Celina, who brought her into her social circle that included a mother and daughter. The mother told Birenbaum, “We will always find a way, we will help you (125)” and pressed onion and garlic into her hands. These gifts signaled inclusion in a new family, and resonated with powerful implications:

I went back to the barracks as though on wings; it seemed to me my feet were not touching the ground, so light and good did I feel… Celina often gave me a piece of bread, or a little soup. She always welcomed me affectionately and warmly, and in those days I needed affections no less than I needed food. For my part, I always tried to sneak something from the underwear workshop that Celina might find useful. (125)

The memoirs offer ample evidence that family identity and giving went hand-in-hand in the camps. Membership in a family-like clique required giving, even if emotional support was all one had to offer. As a result, prisoners were able to see themselves as part of a collective, and not as alone, when facing the everyday brutality of the camps. Fantlova (2001) stated: “We felt sure the five of us could help one another. If one stumbled, the others would lend moral support and keep her head above water. There would be mutual reliance, come what might.” (133) Similarly, Steinberg (1996) wrote about the clique he had met in the camp:

There I was with two uncles, or surrogate fathers, and an older brother, my intellectual mentor. My emotional void was filled…. Our little community practiced mutual assistance. I was by far the richest. My contribution consisted of a liter of soup… and of course any potentially exploitable tidbits of information I gleaned through my contacts. Pierre Bloch did his utmost for me. He was always there, wherever he was needed. No doubt he was the one among us who’d best managed to preserve his dignity… He always had something to offer, a needle and thread, a pair of gloves, Russian socks to protect our battered feet from the cruel clogs, and if nothing else, a kindly presence on despondent evenings. (90–91)

Although Steinberg’s interaction appears similar to sharing, note he often managed to obtain multiple servings of soup through his connections, decided to give some to his family-like clique, kept some for himself, and gave some to others outside the group. Steinberg observed that “…when the Stubendienst [barracks capo].. calls me over for a second ladleful… I go get the second helping and offer it to my nearest pal. He [the pal] obviously doesn’t believe his eyes…” (67). We see here a clear transfer of ownership (Belk, 2010) from Steinberg to another prisoner. Further, giving the soup to his group supported a social identity of rich provider, one important to Steinberg, and that would not emerge through mere sharing of a common good. This can be contrasted with a true sharing episode that Salton related (2002), where bowls of soup were distributed to two prisoners:

He [the other prisoner] had me sit on the grass across from him, with the bowl between us. He dipped his spoon into the soup, lifted it to my lips and fed me. I swallowed hungrily, not sure what to do. He told me, ‘Get your spoon and feed me. If you give me half a spoon, I will give you half a spoon. If you feed me the watery part or dip to the bottom, I will do the same for you…’ (152)

Family-style cliques, and the gifting practices within them, helped clarify and define social identities obfuscated by camp life. In an experience that Gelissen (1995) relayed, we see identities as family members clearly negotiated through giving. She recounted an incident where a woman who reminded Gelissen of her mother (who had been killed), offered her a piece of bread:

“I want to give you something. Will you take this?” She holds out her portion of bread.

“No, I can’t.” I shake my head retreating from her gesture.

“Please, you are young. I want you to live,” she pleads…

“I can’t take it from you. That would be like taking bread from my own mama.”

“Your mama wants you to have her bread, to live for her.”

“…Thank you, but I cannot take it. Please. Promise me you will eat it.” I hold her hand, folding it firmly around the crust that is so precious.

“You are a good daughter, Rena.” (169–170)

Here we see that the identities of both parties coalesced around the mother–daughter relationship. The woman offering the bread attempted to take on the identity of mother by trying to feed Gelissen. In the end, Gelissen refused the gift because in her mind, taking it would reveal she was an uncaring daughter to her now-surrogate mother, an identity she was unwilling to incur even while starving.

In another instance, Gelissen gratefully accepted two gifts from her childhood friend Erna, who worked in Canada. This position allowed Erna to regularly bring gifts back to their clique. On one occasion, Gelissen was upset after seeing hundreds of Jewish children from an orphanage marched to the gas chambers:

“I have something for you.” [Erna] reaches into her hem.
“Erna, you have to stop risking your life bringing me things.”... She takes my hand, slipping something long and smooth, and something else very small into my palm. “I know how neat and clean you are.”

I glance quickly into my hand. There is a nail file and a small silver elephant. I am overwhelmed by her generosity.

“The charm looked as if it belonged to a child and I thought of you,” she whispers. “Elephants are supposed to be good luck. I don’t want it to go to the Germans.”

...The silver elephant is a reminder of the children I watched walk to their deaths. It is the only mark of their passing—a tiny gravestone in my hand (138).

The elephant charm is representative of an agapic gift, as it is selfless and imbued with strong symbolic meaning, singularizes the recipient, and is strongly expressive and emotional (Belk & Coon, 1993). Further, it possesses the six characteristics Belk (1996) suggests make a perfect gift: Erna made an extraordinary sacrifice; she wished solely to please Rena (Erna knows she is transferring to another camp and thus no reciprocity will take place); Rena was surprised by the gift; Rena was delighted; the gift was uniquely appropriate to Rena’s recent experiences; and in this context, the gift was a luxury. An identity approach takes us beyond the nature of the gift itself to the identity motivations and impact of the giving. Rena was afforded the social identity of loved friend, or even sister, and able to share motivations and impact of the giving. Rena was afforded the social identity of loved friend, or even sister, and able to share with Erna the depth of her feelings about the horror she has witnessed.

More generally, we find that desired social identities motivate behaviors such as sacrificing to others in the social group. As Birenbaum (1971) recalled, “...despite my spiritual breakdown and despair, I never stopped smuggling things out of ‘Canada’ for other people, not for a single day” (143). Even during her darkest times, she maintained the role in her group as a provider of goods. In the worst of her despair she was unwilling to surrender this social identity.

Prisoners often found pragmatic ways to reciprocate the gifts of a better-off benefactor, and this behavior allowed for the maintenance of desired social identities. Often, when one prisoner was “wealthier” than another, gifts of goods were reciprocated with intangibles. Knoller (2002), who received extra food from a friend working in the camp hospital, sometimes gave bread to his bunkmate who provided a service in return: “Very occasionally I would bring back a piece of bread for Pierre, and in this way repaid him for his guardianship of me and for the fact that every morning it was he who lovingly continued to make up our bunk” (181). Likewise, Cecile Klein (1988) remembered: “Mina’s selfless devotion and Fela’s shielding me from selection parades [in which prisoners could be sent to the gas chambers] kept me alive. All Fela asked in return was that I recite a poem for her” (88).

Memoirs also reflected strong identity repercussions from failing to practice generalized reciprocity. Salton (2002) provided a stunning example. He had been temporarily assigned to wash soup kettles, a job that allowed him to obtain extra soup. One day Salton encountered a fellow prisoner sitting in the snow. Near death, he cried out to Salton:

“Lueck, you ungrateful son of a bitch, I hope you die!”... The prisoner looked at me with a terrible, crazy anger and muttered: “Yes, you, Lueck, you ungrateful murderer...You eat and stuff yourself with soup but do not repay your debts to those who saved your life. You should die. I curse you...You should die.” I did not know who this prisoner was and why he hated me so. To survive I had done some selfish things in the camps but not anything that deserved such anger and hate. (194)

Salton realized the man is a friend from a former camp who once helped him when he was sick: “No. No...Please do not say that,” I pleaded. “I do not have all the food that I want and I did not know that you were so sick...this evening I will bring you soup. I promise.” (194–195). Salton’s accuser threatened his identity as a fair person and supportive friend, and this realization motivated Salton’s readiness to reciprocate. Unfortunately, Salton’s effort failed; when he brought the man soup that evening, he found him dead in the snow. Devastated, Salton took the soup inside the barracks to eat: “But it tasted bitter and I could not swallow it. I gave it to a prisoner I knew...He was surprised and most grateful. I was too upset that I had been too late to help my friend and rescuer...” (195)

Thus, even in the very constrained context of the camps, norms of generalized reciprocity existed, although they are more flexible in terms of timing and balance than in more normal gift-exchange settings. Of greater interest, however, were the emergent identity motivations and implications for following, or failing to follow, these norms. Because failing to reciprocate could lead to the loss of life, these actions wielded profound consequences for identity.

Further, we found instances of sustained giving that could not be explained by reciprocity. For example, Orenstein (2010) discussed one group’s sustained giving to a weak member who was unlikely to ever become a strong contributor to the group: “We all liked Bencio and didn’t have the heart to see him turn into a Muselman...” (148). Here, the avoidance of the dreaded Muselman identity for a closely-held other, rather than norms of reciprocity, motivated giving.

Connectivity beyond family-like cliques

In addition to family-like cliques, social identities stemming from nationality, gender, and religion motivated giving. Nationality proved to be a strong basis for solidarity (Des Pres, 1976; Todorov, 1996). We found many mentions in the memoirs of giving to others who shared national origins, and where gifts reinforced national identity. At Auschwitz, de Wijze (1997) met a fellow Dutchman who asked:

‘Are there any more Dutch in your block?’ From under his coat and pants he takes some food, after he’s made sure no one can see us. ‘Just promise me to share it with your
...Back in Block 11... I tell Eddie and Walter what has happened to me. They are delighted over all these goodies. In the evening, under cover of darkness, we relish our festive meal in the corner of our bunker. (22–23)

Prisoners also connected through gender-related activities that included giving. The degradation of the camps was emasculating to men, and for women, prison uniforms and the shaving of hair led to a loss of femininity. We were masculine to men, and for women, prison uniforms and the shaving of hair led to a loss of femininity. We find that solidarity through giving among women allowed for the rebuilding of gender identity. Gerda Klein (1957) marked her 19th birthday in a textile manufacturing camp and received gifts from her clique that enhanced her feminine gender identity:

...shoelaces made from factory yarn; three bobby pins made from the wire on which spools were suspended over the loom; a pair of stockings not too badly darned; a new kerchief...; and a few green leaves with one posy plucked from the director's garden through the barbed wire fence. I felt a lump in my throat—the girls had been wonderful to me! (140)

Our data are also replete with prisoners relying on connective giving to reinforce religious and cultural identities. Unsdorfer (1961) recounted a clandestine Hanukkah celebration that involved much organizing and giving, and noted, "We were a group of Jewish people fulfilling our religious duties, and dreaming of home and of bygone years" (149–150).

In summary, consistent with IBM, social identities contain beliefs about who one is and the groups one is connected to (e.g., family member, male, Jewish), a readiness to engage in action (taking risks and making sacrifices to give to others), and the ability to derive meaning from struggle by viewing it as something that can be survived in solidarity with others.

Giving to reestablish humanity

We tried to cling to life and maintain our humanity in this perfect system designed to strip us of everything by reducing us to the level of beasts ready to kill each other, willing to accept anything in order to prolong our existence... I would need to remain a man, forget nothing and maintain my dignity. I would have to hold on...not become an animal or even worse, a non-human. (82)

Writing about his first days at Auschwitz, Michlen (2001) clearly demonstrates the third identity-based motivation that emerged in our sources—giving to reestablish humanity. Both agentic and connective giving indirectly contributed to enhancing a person's humanity, either through allowing one to take control or through caring relationships. Giving to reestablish humanity is directly motivated by the desire to maintain an identity of human rather than animal.

Our text is replete with instances of prisoners acting as givers, or observing others as giving, to people who were essentially strangers. Orenstein (2010) described a fellow prisoner that he admired:

When a guard hit a prisoner in his presence he would protest loudly, sometimes even placing himself between the guard and his victim... I was fascinated by Willie's bravery and his willingness to absorb punishment, even risking his own life for complete strangers. (216–217)

These acts of great sacrifice to strangers enabled the giver to reap the identity benefits of humanity assertion. As Frankl (2000) wrote, "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread." (104)

In addition to identity implications for the giver, implications emerged for recipients. Todorov (1996, p. 87) stated that any prisoner on the receiving end of generosity gained the benefit of "being recognized as a human being...one doubts one's own worth, one's very reason for being, if not confirmed by others." The quote by Neuman (2000) that opens this paper reveals the profound impact of being a recipient. In addition, when a capo gave Frankl (2000) a piece of his bread ration, he offered humanity as well: "It was far more than the small piece of bread that moved me to tears at that time. It was the human 'something' which this man also gave to me—the word and look which accompanied the gift (137)."

Most prisoners acknowledged the dichotomy of moral standards in the camps: there were tremendous pressures toward selfishness, but many inmates felt the pull to maintain moral standards as well. The potent forces that drove them toward selfishness led them to struggle with basic existential identities: were they human beings, or beasts? de Wijze (1997) wrote 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. (67)

In stark contrast to this assertion, de Wijze (1997) revealed he took an extremely risky gamble to help someone else. Having already passed a selection for the gas chamber, he took the place of a very weak prisoner—a mere acquaintance—waiting in line, and passed through the selection again:

Then it happens, almost involuntarily. Like a zombie, I walk toward him, hand him my bundle of clothes, and unobtrusively push him out of the line...It's like a swarm of bees inside me buzzing me into a deep sleep...Later, in the dark on my straw bed, my sanity returns... Undoubtedly he will soon go through the chimney of Birkenau. I needlessly risked my own life. For a brief moment, I allowed myself to be guided by feelings from a previous life, feelings that I did not know still existed. (85)
As de Wijze wrestled with the undesired personal identity of being a fool, he acknowledged he was driven by internal moral standards that he brought with him into the camp. Through his actions, he bestowed the recipient with a sense of dignity, as someone worthy of sacrifice.

The memoirs contained many instances of prisoners obtaining a sense of dignity, humanity, and morality by giving to others. Gelissen (1995) provided such an example when giving to an intensely disliked recipient, her cousin’s wife, who she knows would be unlikely to return the favor. The woman begged Gelissen to obtain medicine for a facial skin condition that would have sent her to the gas chambers in the next selection:

…I trade my only meal to get her the salve she needs. I know that if our roles were reversed she would not give up her bread for me…. I do not feel virtuous or good about myself. I feel used and hungry, but I also know that I will never look back and regret trying to help my cousin’s wife…There is little we can avoid in Birkenau, but trying to act with a little bit of dignity helps me, reminds me of home. (149)

In noting she will never look back with regret, Gelissen alluded to an imagined, future self who will weigh her actions in the camp by the level of humanity she exhibited. This process demonstrates that the present self is regulated by an anticipated future self who will look back and judge the present self—a process we label anticipated reckoning. This construct is distinct from the usual notion of possible selves that encompass what one might become, hopes to become, or fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves motivate behaviors toward goals that allow one to move toward a hoped-for self, or to avoid becoming a feared self. In contrast, anticipated reckoning involves a reflective aspect to the future self: that is, the response of the future self will depend on what it looks back and sees when it recalls the current self. This self in turn must be regulated because the future self is, in a sense, watching:

To survive as a man… as a debased and degraded but still human being, one had first and foremost to… be aware of what made up one’s personal point of no return, the point beyond which one would never, under any circumstances, give in to the oppressor, even if it meant risking and losing one’s life. It meant being aware that if one survived at the price of overreaching this point one would be holding onto a life that had lost all meaning. It would mean surviving—not with a lowered self-respect, but without any (Agamben, 1999, cf Bettleheim, 1960; 157).

Our analysis supports the assumption that anticipated reckoning is particularly relevant for self-regulation in a crisis, where discrete selves emerge and interact. From the standpoint of the self within the crisis, there is the past, pre-crisis self, living with moral standards forged in a relatively normal, non-crisis context. The present self, the self enduring the crisis, must try to maintain morality. How well he or she does so depends on the pressures of the crisis context and the individual’s ability to self-regulate behavior in an unknown and difficult milieu. As some of the excerpts above attest, self-regulation in a crisis setting is difficult: when one is struggling to survive, trade-offs between helping oneself or helping others are extremely challenging. From a moral standpoint, a crisis context may be one in which all hell has broken loose, and one must pull from one’s past or imagine one’s future to reconstruct a moral compass.

After emerging from a crisis, a person will carry forward a record of the crisis self. These memories might spur negative affect (guilt or shame) because the world in which the survivor must reinteegrate is ruled by moral standards very different from, and perhaps diametrically opposed to, those in the crisis context. The present self thus imagines a future, post-crisis self that will take a reflective stance back at the behavior of the present self. Fig. 1 depicts this process.

Many survivors viewed surviving and bearing witness as one in the same, and acknowledged that as witnesses they would also judge their own actions, as well as those of others. As Levy-Hass (2009) stated in her diary written in Bergen-Belsen, “I will measure each man against the criteria of today’s reality, from the perspective of what he was or could have been in these conditions of ours” (86).

Levi (1986, 78) opined that prisoners accuse themselves of “having failed in terms of human solidarity… almost everyone feels guilty of having omitted to offer help.” In his analysis of his own behavior, Levi recalled giving encouragement to a young, newly arrived prisoner: “I forget what I told him, certainly words of hope, perhaps a few lies…at any rate, I made him the gift of a momentary attention. But I also remember, with disquiet, that much more often I shrugged my shoulders impatiently…” (78). Similarly, Frankl (1963) recounted a time he gave an uplifting speech to the men in his hut, but goes on to say: “But I have to confess here that only too rarely had I the inner strength to make contact with my companions in suffering and that I must have missed many opportunities for doing so” (133).

Taking from others—the opposite of giving—also appeared to result in serious long-term identity ramifications. Frister entitled his memoir The Cap, a reference to an incident that still deeply troubled him decades after liberation: he stole another prisoner’s cap after his own was stolen (caps were mandatory for prisoners). This act of self-preservation led to that prisoner’s death, and Frister wrestled for the rest of his life with the moral-identity implications of this action.

“Only rarely do moments from the past re-ascend from the soul’s depths to the upper levels of consciousness. This one still does. Again and again I feel compelled to analyse it. But by what standard of morality was my behavior to be judged, by absolute or relative ones? If the former, I was guilty. If the latter, I was innocent, if only by benefit of the doubt.”

Steinberg (1996) entitled a chapter of his memoir The Slap, referring to the time he slapped an old, dying prisoner, albeit restraining himself at the last moment and just grazing his cheek, “For a moment I couldn’t move. Then I walked away,
and that incident, a banal event in the daily life of a death camp, has haunted me all my life.” (126). Even in the most extreme settings, people appeared to retain self-expectations that they would, and should, maintain their dignity and humanity. Incidents when they fell short of this expectation wielded lasting consequences for identity.

Although prisoners hoped they would survive to bear witness, they knew they could die at any time. But even so, they might still live on in other’s testimonies, and it would matter who they had been. Neuman (2000) told of a prisoner he did not know well, but whom he greatly admired because of the man’s grace and dignity. As they lay next to each other on the wintry ground at Maltheusen, the man said to Neuman:

“I want you to have my coat tonight for I am going to die… You must live. You must remember me as you must remember all of us… help others try to understand what happened to us.” I did not take his coat from him, but neither did I protest when he placed it over my body. (148)

Discussion

We demonstrate the value of IBM as a model that provides deep understanding of the roles of identity in gift giving. Our analysis reveals gifts can play an important part in helping people re-establish their identities in contexts designed to strip these away. Giving allowed prisoners to find meaning in their existence within the camps. They knew their chances for survival were slim, but they wanted to persevere with agency, human connections, and a sense of humanity. They also knew that if they lived, it would matter to their future selves who they had been as they faced the challenges of survival in the camps. If they died, they wanted to be remembered as dignified and moral.

Gift-giving scholars (Belk, 1976, Belk, 2013; Sherry, 1983) have called for a better understanding of the effects of context on giving. Because of its emphasis on the malleability of identity, IBM allows us to understand the dynamics in identity motivations as situations change. We examine Nazi concentration camps, a context in which identities were brutally and systematically torn away. Our first research question asks what types of identity-based motivations emerge when gift giving occurs in these contexts. We find prisoners report they were highly motivated to reestablish lost identities and bolster threatened ones. We identify three broad categories of gift-giving motivations: giving to re-establish agency, social identities, and humanity.

Our second research question asks: what we can learn from applying IBM to giving in identity-stripping contexts that allows us to expand upon the implications of extant gift-exchange models? We find that giving provides important identity implications for both givers and recipients, and thus the IBM approach allows for a much deeper understanding of why people give. Agentic giving allowed people to experience a
sense of control in an impossible environment. The fact that such giving was difficult, dangerous, and required ingenuity enhanced the identity payoff. This is consistent with Destin and Oyserman’s (2009) finding that engaging in a difficult behavior enhances the perception that one’s actions are meaningful. Their findings also suggest that the strength of the identity motivation—or in this case, the desire to regain fundamental but oppressed and suppressed personal identities—makes risky giving even more worthwhile.

In giving to reestablish agency, motivations extended beyond mere economic exchange-based instrumentalism: immediate and balanced reciprocity were not guaranteed, and a return gift might not ever materialize. However, the courage and resourcefulness that agentic giving required allowed for the reestablishment of identities that the camp context had stripped away. Further, prior research finds that strategies linking possible selves to actions are a critical determinant of whether possible selves become self-regulating and lead to positive outcomes (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Strategic thinking was a key aspect of agentic giving, and the great constraints of camp life made elaborate and clever planning a clear hallmark of such behavior.

Agentic giving also permitted prisoners to avoid the dreaded possible self of Muselman. Possible selves can give rise to self-efficacy and control (e.g., Bandura & Cervone, 1986), and a feared possible self can be highly motivating (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1990) particularly in a failure-likely context. Avoiding the Muselman identity (synonymous with a complete loss of identity) motivated agentic giving, as well as other more general organizing activities. Through the reestablishment of agentic identities and the avoidance of becoming a Muselman, we see a balance of motivations to obtain desired possible selves, and to avoid feared possible selves among the memoirists. Oyserman and Markus (1990) find that feared possible selves are most effective when paired with positive, expected possible selves that allowed for a specific view of how to avoid the feared self. Our findings within this context are consistent with their assertion: descriptions of the desire to avoid becoming a Muselman were intertwined with discussions of the desire to reestablish agency.

While agentic giving was motivated by individual identity, the social identities that giving afforded helped prisoners make sense of their lives in the camp as a collective rather than solitary struggle. Social-identity goals promote collectivist thinking and sensemaking through a social lens (Oyserman, 2007). Consistent with IBM, we find that the stripping of social identities prompted the strong motivation to reestablish these identities, and gifts provided the mechanism for developing new groups. The social groups to which one belongs (e.g., family, religions) can impact behavior in very important ways (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Oyserman, 2008, 2013; Oyserman et al., 2007). Once cued, social identities may override individual ones (Oyserman, 2007). The self-control and sacrifice that we observed are outcomes of readiness to take action consistent with obtaining a desired social identity.

A social-exchange approach to understanding connective giving would obscure these insights and would instead emphasize the maintenance of social relationships (e.g., Gouldner, 1960; Sherry, 1983) through generalized reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972). The scarce resources in the camps, however, made even the more relaxed social exchange norms of generalized reciprocity very challenging. IBM recognizes the meaning of identity in a given context is an ever-changing function of pragmatic options for action and the identity-based meaning these options imply (Oyserman, 2009). In the camp context, reciprocity was often made impossible due to the fact one person in a dyad or group had greater access to resources, usually through a work unit or connections to higher-status prisoners. Thus, negative personal identity designations that might be attributed to non-reciprocators are not attributed to the recipient; nor does the giver imply them. In dire situations, givers and recipients can hardly be concerned with norms that govern “normal” gift exchange, such as worries that gifts might be perceived as paltry or ostentatious (Joy, 2001; Sherry, 1983). Thus, our analysis allows us to go beyond the social exchange paradigm to a deeper understanding of the contextual ramifications for identity, and how these impact giving.

Past research finds gifts serve as tangible expressions of social relationships and can strengthen (or weaken) bonds between parties (Areni et al., 1998; Ottes et al., 1993; Sherry, 1983). But in the camps, giving played a more formative role in such relationships, creating social bonds where none had existed before. We see this formative role most strongly in how giving allowed prisoners to identify as pseudo-family members. This type of giving was the most prevalent in the memoirs, and resonates with Epp and Price’s (2008) notion of family as a collective enterprise, building identity through consumption experiences.

Giving to reestablish humanity was seen most clearly in actions toward strangers. This giving was a purely human and moral behavior, and cannot be understood from an exchange perspective. Giving to strangers was not pragmatic, reciprocal or instrumental: recipients were unlikely to be able to return the gift and indeed might never be seen again. The paradigm of agapic giving (Belk & Coon, 1993), however, offers us some insight. Like agapic giving, humanity-motivated giving is embedded in idealism and altruism, and falls outside of an exchange paradigm. In contrast to the agapic acts that Belk and Coon (1993) and Joy (2001) discuss, however, humanity-motivated giving was not centered in romantic or familial relationships. Bajde (2009) calls for research on agapic giving occurring beyond the sphere of close relationships. Here we find that it emerges in giving to distant others, and even strangers, and has powerful identity implications given the contextual pressures toward selfishness.

Further, past research has not considered commodities to be agapic gifts because their blatant market value tends to usurp any symbolic value (Belk & Coon, 1993). While we find symbolic agapic gifts in the camps (such as the elephant charm), much of the agapic giving we identify involves commodity transfer. Although a camp’s black market assigned value to a slice of bread, giving food was imbued with strong emblematic value as well. Food was a gift of life and represented a heavy sacrifice, symbolizing caring toward others.
We add the concept of anticipated reckoning to our understanding of how identity motivates behavior. Anticipated reckoning encompasses the notion of the possible self, but goes beyond current theorizing. Possible selves are conceptualized as desired end-states (e.g., me with an exciting career) or feared end-states (e.g., me as unemployed; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). More than a possible self that one might become in the future, anticipated reckoning conceptualizes that a future self looks back at the present self. This retrospective aspect of a future self is new to the literature, and suggests a moral regulatory function played by an imagined future self who sits in judgment of one’s current actions. We find that connecting to the cultural moral norms of the past and future allows people to re-establish a sense of humanity, even amidst forces toward animalism. One must behave as a human being in order to be judged positively by one’s future self.

In summary, we offer three identity-based motivations for giving in an identity-stripping context, all of which contribute to re-establishing lost or threatened identities. Further, we show that an identity paradigm based on IBM allows us to go beyond exchange and agapic-giving models, providing a substantially deeper understanding of why people give to others.

Limitations and future research topics

All of the memoirs ever written represent the experiences of only a small sample of prisoners. The vast majority were killed, and only a small group of survivors wrote about their experiences. Therefore, we cannot be sure whether giving was as pervasive among those who did not publish their memoirs, or who did not survive. In addition, Belk (1992) observes all personal texts are subject to selectivity, self-deception, oversimplification, artificial consistency, memory errors, and mood effects. It is true that most Holocaust memoirs were written years, even decades, after the experiences described. Thus, they are impressions of events, and could be influenced by the reconsolidation of memories over time, making them subject to error and bias. That being said, the fact that all authors in our samples remember and report giving among events experienced during daily camp life reinforces the significance of this activity. We are aware authors might be more likely to remember and report instances where they were helpful rather than selfish. Yet we also find that authors report receiving as well as giving gifts; in fact, receiving instances are more prevalent in the memoirs. In the case of receiving, we would not expect self-aggrandizement to motivate the narrative. We also find that many survivors openly wrestled with their guilt about times when they did not give to others, suggesting they reported much of their self-perceived selfishness. Still, we acknowledge the potential for self-enhancing reconstruction among the memoirs.

Our findings offer important implications for researchers interested in how identities regulate emotions and judgment, particularly when people are subjected to identity-stripping contexts, as is the case with modern-day slavery and many refugee camps. Future research can examine how anticipated reckoning operates in these or other crisis settings, where victims might see themselves as having a past pre-crisis, current, and future post-crisis existence. The relationship between humanity, dignity, and morality in the context of the anticipated future self gazing back on crisis behavior is a rich area for investigation.

Beyond crisis contexts, the construct of anticipated reckoning may have implications for regulating behavior in other domains. For example, people who are not in crisis themselves often make sacrifices for others who are suffering, through charitable donations. Is there an anticipated reckoning component to this type of consumption decision? Research indicates donations fuel our current moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). Perhaps the ability to foresee looking back positively upon oneself is one of the benefits gleaned through donation behavior.

In conclusion, Bajde (2006, p. 70) contends that showing compassion to someone in need is central to the “production of the self,” implies a sense of communal indebtedness, and is essential to the expression of humanity. This is very consistent with our findings and our conceptualization of the gift as central to humanity. In his analysis of life in Nazi camps, Des Pres (1976) states, “…behaviour which does not support day-to-day existence tends to vanish in extremity. We may fairly conclude that what remains is indispensable…” (191). Our research supports the assertion that even in the most dire of circumstances, giving is indispensable, and serves as a fundamental expression of who we are.

References


