

Running Head: IDENTITY AND GIVING

**Why Do People Give?**  
**The Role of Identity in Giving**

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Forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 2009

ABSTRACT

Why do people give to others? One principal driver involves one's identity: who one is and how they view themselves. The degree to which identities are malleable, involve a readiness to act, and help make sense of the world has significant implications determining whether and how much people give. Drawing on the Identity-Based Motivation model (IBM; Oyserman, 2009), we provide a tripartite framework to help advance the research on the psychology of giving.

Giving is a \$350 billion industry in U.S (Giving USA Foundation, 2008). Yet, encouraging giving, both of time and money, is the single most important challenge of most charities and causes (West, 2004). Further, mounting evidence suggests that giving is on the decline (U.S. Labor Department Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). These challenges are vexing, particularly in light of recent work, which suggests that giving has a beneficial effect on people's lives (Harbaugh, Mayr & Burghart, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2007; McGowen, 2006). For example, people who give time (e.g., volunteers) and money (e.g., donors) tend to report greater well-being. And in turn, those who have greater well-being invest more hours in volunteering and donate more money (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Indeed, the relationship between giving and well-being appears to be bi-directional, making it difficult to answer the basic question - why do certain people give? And how to get more individuals to give?

Extant research addressing these questions have honed in on factors such as guilt (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), sympathy and empathy (Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007; Cryder & Loewenstein, 2008), and happiness (Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2008; Liu & Aaker, 2008). Less work has focused on the role of identity in giving. That which exists has focused mostly on a specific type of identity (e.g., moral identity; Reed, Aquino & Levy, 2007), leaving the larger role of identity relatively under-explored: exactly *how* does identity drive giving?

One way to address this question is to focus on the traits of the people who give time and money. For example, researchers highlight traits like empathy and helpfulness, which show significant correlates with length of service and time spent in volunteer activities (Finkelstein, 2008). Further, relative to unhappy people, happy people invest more hours in volunteer service (Krueger, Hicks & McGue, 2001). But to what degree do these traits cohere into a single personal identity (e.g., a “donor”, a “volunteer” or the broader identity of a

“someone who gives to others” - a giver<sup>1</sup>)? Under what circumstances is such an identity linked to a social group to which the person belongs or wants to affiliate? And how might that personal or social identity impact behavior -- whether and how much one gives?

To address these questions, we draw on the Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) model (Oyserman, 2009). Defining personal identity as the “traits, characteristics and goals that are not formulated as connected to membership to a social group or relationships” and social identity as the “traits, characteristics and goals linked to a social role or social group that the person was, is, or may become a member of,” respectively, Oyserman (2009) argues that identity-based motivation focuses attention on the pull toward identity-congruent action and cognitive procedures. The premise is three-fold: First, identities are highly malleable and context sensitive (even though people are unlikely to be aware of the impact of situations on behavior that they are attributing to identity). Second, identity influences what actions people take (action-readiness). And third, identity helps make sense of the world (procedural-readiness). In this commentary, we suggest that these three insights shed light on whether and how much people give, and indirect light on why people give.

### *Identity as Malleable*

Rather than a dichotomous impression of one’s self as a “giver” (to charities, causes, others) versus not, the IBM model suggests that there are contexts in which one thinks of one’s self as a giver. She argues that some identities are more likely to be situationally cued than others; broader identities (e.g., female) are more likely to be cued than narrower ones (e.g., professor). Thus, one premise to be tested is that being a “donor” or “volunteer” is more specific than the identity of “giver.” And, if yes, does evoking the broader identity increase the chance that the individual will agree and give in larger amounts? For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Webster defines a “giver” as “a person who gives resources, often in compounds.”

under what conditions will the simple question, “Will you help?” (evoking a broad personal identity) lead to greater giving than the more specific questions: “Will you give to X charity” (evoking a donor identity) or “Will you volunteer for Y cause” (evoking a volunteer identity)? Indeed, a promising line of research on propensity to help others has honed in on (a) how one is asked and (b) what identity is evoked in the decision making process (e.g., Flynn & Lake, forthcoming; Flynn, 2005).

A second premise to be tested involves the contexts that activate identities associated with giving. As background, researchers in one study asked participants ( $n = 178$ ) why they gave to charities (Aaker, Akutsu & Liu, 2009). Three of the most frequent responses involved identity, including familial identity (e.g., “My mother had breast cancer, and that impacted who I was, how I grew up and what I believe in”), community identity (e.g., “I am part of a community service club”) and personal identity (“I have always given to that charity. Even before it was ‘cool’”). Thus, whether one gives and how much one gives may be activated by the context in which one is asked. For example, if the request involved a donation or volunteering at a cancer-related event (e.g., Avon’s Walk for Breast Cancer), the chance of an individual acquiescing should increase significantly when one’s family identity is salient (e.g., when the ask was made by a family member, or made in the home; e.g., Wheeler, DeMarree & Petty, 2007).

Further, future research is needed to examine the bidirectional relationship between giving and identity. Indeed, previous research shows that the degree to which self-concept dynamically shifts, is influenced by contexts and behaviors (e.g., Chen, English & Peng, 2006; Spencer-Rodgers, Boucher, Mori, Wang & Peng, 2009). Thus, when does giving to a person or cause (e.g., participating in the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer), have a subsequent impact on one’s identity? One hypothesis that merits exploration would focus on the emotional

antecedents of giving. For example, if the reduction of a negative emotion (e.g., guilt) fuels subsequent giving, one's self-identity may not be fundamentally impacted (after all, one was simply giving as to reduce the guilt felt at a particular moment). In contrast, where approaching a positive emotion (e.g., happiness) fuels the giving, we posit that identity is more likely to be impacted (Aaker, et al., 2009).

Such a stream of research would also benefit from a broader examination of how identity shifts over the life span. The mechanism underlying identity shifts over one's lifetime has received little attention in aging research, which, to date, has focused more on shifts in cognitive functioning (Yoon, Cole & Lee, 2009). However, considerable research has illuminated how emotional goals and ways of thinking change as one ages (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles 1999; John & Gross, 2004; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Thus, research is needed to explore how those changes (a) create distinct identities that morph over the course of time, and (b) play out in the domain of giving.

### *Identity and Action-Readiness*

Identity influences what actions people take and how easy it is to act. In the case of giving, even though a cued identity may influence action-tendencies (i.e., whether to give), how much to give may still be unclear. Insight on this question might be shed by exploring the action-tendencies associated with personal versus social identities. For example, consumers give more money to a public radio station if they are told that a previous donor who shares their social identity (i.e., female or male) also made a large contribution, suggesting that cueing a social identity has a significant impact on amount to give (Shang, Reed & Croson, 2008). However, what are the contexts in which one's personal (vs. social) identity is associated with stronger action-tendency?

To identify the conditions in which personal versus social identity differentially impact how much one gives, research needs to dive into the general contexts in which individuals give, and identify the contexts in which personal versus social identity becomes important. For example, in cultures where independent self loom in importance, personal identities may be more powerful predictors of giving than social identities. In cultures where interdependent self loom in importance, social identities may be more powerful predictors of giving than personal identities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Further, action-tendencies may be influenced by the type of ask made. For example, Liu and Aaker (2008) distinguished between two types of donation requests: a time ask and money ask. The results reveal that, when one is asked first for their time (e.g., “How interested are you in working for HopeLab?”) instead of their money (e.g., “How interested are you in giving money to HopeLab?”), people give more money to the cause or charity. The mechanism fueling this effect appears to be a more emotional mindset evoked when time was asked, and a more utilitarian mindset evoked when money was asked first. However, an open question is whether a general identity is being activated and may also play a role in guiding behavior. In other words, to what degree does the emotional meaning of giving become part and parcel of a larger identity? For example, when first asked for time, certain identities may be cued (e.g., being caring, other-oriented, generous), which in turn leads to identity-congruent actions (e.g., more giving). In contrast, when first asked for money, a distinct set of identities may be cued (e.g., being transactional, self-focused, efficient), followed by the identity-congruent actions (e.g., less giving).

The larger question here is: do social (vs. personal) identities involve systematically different action-readiness? The answer to such an empirical question will not only shed light on extant research in the domain of giving, but provide a new path toward work in this area.

For example: what *combinations* of identities provide more detailed action-readiness related to giving? Swann, Gomez, Seyle, Morales, and Huici (2009) suggest that extreme behavior emerges when people undergo a process of identity fusion -- wherein their stable conceptions of themselves as individuals (i.e., personal identities) become fused with their identities as group members (i.e., social identities). The researchers argue that the self-other barrier is blurred for fused individuals and the group comes to be regarded as functionally equivalent with the personal self. Future research is needed to explore whether such interactions will be observed in the domain of giving, where greater action-tendencies follow when the personal and social identity are fused.

### *Identity and Procedural-Readiness*

Identity helps make sense of the world (procedural-readiness). However, how exactly identity helps makes sense of the world may also depend on what identity is evoked. For example, in the aforementioned research on giving, Liu and Aaker (2008) suggest that asking first for time (rather than money), participants viewed a subsequent request for actual donations with a more emotional mindset. However, the time-ask was posed to subjects when their personal identity was made salient. Would similar effects accrue if their social identity were made salient? More generally, how would the social identity help make sense of the request to give?

To shed light on this question, Aaker, et al. (2009) replicated the experimental paradigm but evoked a social identity by adding the words “joining others” to aforementioned time vs. money questions. Specifically, participants were asked: “How interested are you *in joining others* working for HopeLab?” and then “How interested are you *in joining others* donating to HopeLab?” The added social context (i.e., “joining others”) presumably cued social (vs. personal) identities that made people pay more attention on relationships with other givers.

Next, participants were asked whether they wanted to donate to HopeLab. Consistent with Shang et al. (2008), the results showed that participants gave more money when first asked for money, thereby reversing the original pattern of results. One possible explanation for this varying pattern relies on procedural-readiness: That is, a procedural shift might distract people from emotional involvement with the cause as evoked by a time ask, resulting in less giving. Another possible explanation relies on the interaction between procedural and action readiness: while a procedural shift might make participants focus more on relationship, they may be more ready to donate (vs. volunteer) because it is easier to imagine being among a group of donors than among a group of volunteers.

Thus, future work on giving is needed to examine whether the type of cued identities (e.g., personal vs. social identities) may lead to identity-congruent procedural readiness, which in turn, suggests different appeals to facilitate giving behavior. To date, research is silent on the degree to which each of these categories of identities might influence whether and how much one gives. More research is needed to elucidate the types of identities which differentially color the way in which one sees the world.

### *Looking Forward*

In the last two decades, research has examined how identity influences choice. However, although choices are often identity-based, the linkage to identity is not always explicit and obvious for many reasons. By honing in on those reasons (e.g., identities are more malleable than they feel, identities include action-tendencies and procedural-tendencies), the IBM model (Oyserman, 2009) makes a significant contribution to the work on identity, re-energizing this stream of research with concrete directions for new work.

In this paper, we carved a set of implications that stem from this tripartite framework, highlighting the need for work to examine topics such as:

- the impact of evoking a specific vs. broad identity on giving
- the identification of contexts that activate identities associated with greater giving
- the bi-directional relationship between giving and identity
- the emotional underpinnings of giving
- how identity shifts over the life-span
- the impact of the type of ask on giving
- the types of identities that differentially color the way in which one sees the world

By carving out the implications of the IBM model in the context of giving, we hope to stimulate future research that more deeply addresses the questions: whether and how much one will give.

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