The mediated gift: a three-fold tactical approach

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a significant growth in the technical literature exploring charitable giving and the fundraising. However, there is little empirical research on the actual workings of the fundraising process *within* non-profit organisations. In this paper the day-to-day practice of fundraising is analysed from a sociological perspective that draws on the theories of the gift proposed by Mauss (1954), Titmuss (1971) and colleagues to propose an alternative giving model to strangers – that of the mediated gift.

Using qualitative data drawn from 44 interviews with fundraisers and their colleagues across 14 organisations, this study examines how fundraisers build and maintain long-term giving relationships with the individuals who provide financial support to NPOs.

Findings suggest that the primary gift giving relationship exists not between the giver and beneficiary, but rather the giver and fundraiser. The fundraiser, in this instance, actively employs tactics of reciprocity to both secure new gifts and ensure that givers continue to support their organisation. In doing so fundraisers construct a narrative of the donor's imagined direct connection to the beneficiary and their "good gift". Simultaneously, the fundraiser works with colleagues to construct the idea of the caring, connected and sacrificial donor as a means to solicit their support in maintaining the continued gifting from these supporters.

The paper concludes with a consideration of the ways in which these narrative constructions are incorporated into fundraising and organisational strategies; and two implications that these may have on our perceptions of the role of philanthropy and fundraising.

[247 words]

Introduction

The ideal non-profit fundraising strategy is characterised by two main approaches. One is the recruitment of new givers and donors to the organisation which will increase the number of gifts received. The other is to develop a body of regular givers that will give repeat and ever increasing gifts to the charity of their choice. The latter approach is based on evidence that suggests that it is more cost effective to maintain and increase giving from existing givers, than it is to recruit new givers. (Burnett, 2002; Nichols, 2004). Thus, as observed by Dalsgaard (2007) within blood banks who are also reliant on a regular corps of donors it can be concluded that "the economic interests" of non-profit organisations "require a particular form of institutionalized social interaction aimed at maintaining existing relationships to donors…. that [also] gives the donors motivations to return" (p. 105).

Yet, much of research that underpins fundraising theory and strategy development focuses on providing evidence and support for the first of these two approaches – the recruitment of new donors. This literature largely explores what motivates giving behaviour with the aim of understanding and predicting the main drivers of charitable giving, and thus, the most favourable fundraising tools and mechanisms. However, there is a tendency to investigate givers as if their giving practices stem entirely from their subjective moral identities and social experiences (Breeze & Jollymore, 2015). And whilst there is growing recognition of the fact that the actual act of giving is triggered by a direct solicitation or ask (Bryant et al, 2003; Bekkers (2005); Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007), these studies present asking as a simple step that is present or present in the mix of elements that prompts an individual to make a charitable gift (Breeze & Jollymore, 2015). Here again the reactions and actions of the giver are prioritised, without considering variations in the practice of solicitation on the part

of those seeking the gift or the nature of the relationship. And they provide little evidence to show how long-term, repeat giving relationships are developed and maintained.

This is exacerbated by a lack of empirical investigation into the actual workings of the fundraising process within organisations and even less on who takes responsibility for fundraising and in what ways. Aside from texts that outline and explore the impact of specific fundraising tools and mechanisms (e.g. Nickel & Eikenberry,2009; Nichols, 2004; Botting & Norton, 2001) and the professionalisation of fundraising (Bloland & Bornstein, 1991; Rosso, 2003) very little is understood about the ways in which fundraisers go about their work and the effect they have on non-profit and philanthropic practice.

This paper, thus, moves away from analyses of charitable gift giving that focus on the motivations of givers to an analysis of the social interactions within organisations themselves that shape the ways in which giving is solicited and enacted by fundraisers; and how these desired long-term giving relationships are constructed and managed. The day-to-day practice of fundraisers is analysed from a perspective that draws on the theories of the reciprocated gift proposed by Mauss (1954) and colleagues. The findings presented here form part of a wider study that explores how the "strategies of solicitation" (Barman, 2007, p. 1416) and "reciprocity and hospitality" (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.113) practiced by individual fundraisers activate the institutional contexts for charitable gift giving that non-profit organisations provide by simulating the gift exchange relationships identified by Mauss (1954) and Komter (1996) amongst others. More specifically, the paper considers what these strategies are within the concept of a mediated gift, in which the fundraisers facilitate the journey of the gift from the giver through the non-profit organisation to the beneficiary and back again.

Fieldwork and the gathering of data
The empirical data for this article, which consisted of interviews with 30 fundraising professionals working in 14 non-profit organisations, was collected between February and December 2016. Data collection centred around qualitative in-depth interviews as these are widely recognised as a mechanism through which to gain information about how subjects perceive their world and gain accounts of their day-to-day practice (Silverman, 2013). However, whilst these interviews provided a rich data of how fundraisers perceive their role, and indeed the processes and networks of relations involved in soliciting repeat charitable gifts, there remained significant questions about how fundraising and gift management is perceived by other actors within these organisations. Thus, 14 non-fundraising staff have been included in the study, with a view to gaining insight into the gift management processes that fundraisers themselves were not able to shed light on. The accounts provided by these staff members have both corroborated many of those given by the fundraisers interviewed, but have also provided a window into some of the tensions and conflicts inherent in determining organisational fundraising and gift management strategies.

Recruitment was carried out using a combination of approaching fundraisers already known to the author and a snowballing strategy using the personal recommendation of fundraisers who had already participated in the study. This was seen to be a more effective and speedy approach to recruitment, as personal recommendation and prior knowledge facilitate a warm introduction of the research and the researcher. However, as Bryman (2012) cautions, there is a risk of creating bias within the sample, as participants are likely to recommend fundraisers with similar views and experiences. This has been accounted for and where the sampling matrix indicated that too many fundraisers or organisations of a similar ilk had been approached or there were gaps in the dataset, the focus of recruitment was adjusted. The study sought to explore the experiences of fundraisers at differing stages in their careers, and at various levels of seniority; as well as interrogate whether fundraising practice varied across organisational size and cause. To this end the final sample includes fundraisers from 3 medium, 6 large, 2 major and 3 super-major organisations (NCVO, 2015), as well as a number of different causes and geographic locations within the UK (CAF, 2014).

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, based on a list of interview guidelines, which included questions about participants' day-to-day work; their relationships with other staff members; involvement in fundraising activities; and the perceived challenges and rewards related to this. Interviews concentrated on fundraising from individuals where repeat giving relationships with donors at all levels are sought, whether this be through direct personal interaction or mass communications. Whilst there is the tendency in the literature to suggest that direct relationships are reserved for donors of larger amounts, this research produces a more nuanced "relationship" continuum that is determined by size of organisation and numbers of donors; as well as gift size and, most importantly, the quality of the simulated reciprocal relationship.

The mediated gift: a three-fold strategy

Fundraisers in this study emphasised the need to develop a base of givers that trusts that the organisation to which they are giving spend their gifts responsibly and effectively. As McDonald et al (2011) observe "giving flows when a trusting relationship is in place between the donor and the organisation." (p. 164) As such, fundraisers in this study placed far more importance on their capacity to establish relationships of trust between givers and themselves when seeking regular and larger gifts, than any other skill. However, to build these relationships, fundraisers describe needing to solicit the assistance and co-operation of other staff within the organisation, in addition to building relationships with givers. What has thus emerged is the description by fundraisers of an approach to gift solicitation that incorporates three distinct strategies enabling the fundraiser to build and manage reciprocal relationships both external and internal to the organisation.

1. **Strategy one - constructing and managing the reciprocal relationship**

    Fundraisers believe that if donors are to be encouraged to give regularly at ever increasing levels they need confirmation that both their initial reasons for giving are justified and their desire to help is being fulfilled. For this to happen, fundraisers suggest that givers need to know what their previous gifts *have* done in conjunction with what a new gift *will* do, if they are to be encouraged to give again (Cluff, 2009). To achieve this fundraisers, describe various means of dividing non-profit organisations' work into a series of discrete projects which enables fundraisers to match sections of the organisation's mission to the interests and motivations of the giver. In doing do so, fundraisers claim to make the complex activities of any given organisation more accessible to givers and provide a framework around which they can build a narrative of how their gift has had a positive impact that can be tracked back directly to their giving activities.

    More importantly, however, this presentation of projects provides opportunities for social interaction - both face to face and through written communications - with givers as fundraisers involve them in deciding how, when and where their gift will be spent. Through this interaction givers and fundraisers refine and negotiate the relationship they might want to establish, whilst reaffirming the giver's role as an important cog in the work of the organisation and lives of those whom it serves. This then furnishes the fundraiser with the opportunity to ask the giver to support further iterations of that work or project. In short, fundraisers seek out, create and exploit every moment they can to encourage the donor to contribute and for that contribution to be acknowledged, appreciated – reciprocated. In this way, fundraisers and givers become locked in a reciprocal relationship with social interactions that closely resemble the prestations and counter-prestations of regard observed by Mauss (1954) within gift exchange.

    However, gifts that are solicited and maintained using these reciprocal tactics tend to be what both fundraisers and staff describe as restricted, in the sense that they "must be put to use in the spirit of the way it was donated" (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.110). Fundraisers emphasise what they view as their moral obligation to provide acknowledgement of gifts given and their impact. Many expressed a fear that a lack of reciprocation will inject what Schwartz (1967) describes as an "element of hostility" into the giving relationship and that the donor will simply end their giving if they are not satisfied with the level of reciprocation they have received (p.77).

    In this sense, whilst many theories of the gift tend to focus on the gift giving relationships between closely tied individuals, they do provide a suitable metaphor for the relationships that fundraisers seek to build between giver and organisation (McDonald et al, 2007). Relationships in which supporters begin as strangers to the organisation, and through a series of intentionally manufactured back and forth reciprocal interactions and information exchange develop a relationship with the organisation that leads to repeat cycles of gifting and reciprocation. The result is the establishment of a what feels like, certainly to fundraisers, a real relationship between the fundraiser and giver - fundraisers talk of the friendships and often close bonds they form with individual donors. And it is through this real relationship that fundraisers aim to provide the giver "with acceptance and appreciation" for their monetary gift. By employing various "strategies of reciprocation" fundraisers seek to draw and keep givers into a long-term cycle of gifting and re-gifting to the organisation (Dalsgaard, 2007, p. 109).

2. **Strategy two - simulating the giver-beneficiary connection**

    A recurring theme in all the interviews with fundraisers across the study is the idea that donors give because they wish to be part of "something that is bigger than them" (Fundraiser 4). Fundraisers express an obligation to make sure that donors understand how it is that their gifts make a difference. To so do they build on the interests expressed

by donors in their interactions with them, and consciously seek to create a sense of a connection to those to whom fundraisers feel givers perceive their gift reaching. In doing so fundraisers encourage givers to interact with beneficiaries and hold them in their thoughts through correspondence with and gifting practices such as sending Christmas cards to a beneficiary. Givers are sent updates that contain stories about the beneficiary's progress – often written in the first person. These updates are provided through newsletters, individualised reports, as well as ad hoc emails and phone calls to the donor. Donors are invited to visit the organisation's headquarters to meet with staff, as well as too participate in conversations and activities that feature beneficiaries talking about their experiences both in person and from a distance. In many cases, donors are often encouraged to host visiting frontline staff and project managers in their homes or meet with them to talk about the work being carried out. And, if possible, donors are encouraged to visit the projects that they fund so that they can meet with representatives of the beneficiary group. All the while fundraisers talk about conveying stories of transformation and change that could not have been achieved without the donor's gift.

Thus, many of the reciprocal tactics used to keep the donor in a giving relationship with the organisation, are framed in such a way as to offer affirmation of the "good" being achieved by the donor and of the deep connection their financial "sacrifice", in the words of some fundraisers, has created between the beneficiary and donor. Donors are made to feel like they are making a difference in the lives of real people, because they are constantly told they are doing so in every communication. In this way, fundraisers build up the "symbolic value" of connection and communion of the gift (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.102) on which far more emphasis is placed than the amount of money given.

Fundraisers also work to make sure that the donors feel that they control the gifting process by allowing them to choose from a range of options as to where their gift will be directed; how and when they will give their gifts; when they wish to receive feedback on what their gifts have achieved; and when and through which channels they wish to communicate with the organisation. In many ways, whilst the gift is framed as voluntary and freely given, the practice of inviting the donor to control the destination and impact of their gift means that the gift is never really fully released by the donor. Which serves to reinforce both the narrative of a connection with those whom the gift will benefit and further entrench the reciprocal giving relationship between the fundraiser and giver.

Yet, fundraisers explain that very little direct interaction takes place between beneficiaries and givers. And where it does, it is in highly managed circumstances in which the fundraiser is usually present. This reflects a reticence on the part of both fundraisers and staff to allow donors to become too involved with either beneficiaries or the decision-making processes of the organisation for fear of allowing what Clohsey (2003) terms "institutional surrender" (p.128). This protection of the organisation's mission could divorce the giver from the impact of his/ her gift, which many fundraisers fear will risk the termination of the giving relationship, especially if it dilutes the recognition for their gift. Fundraisers actively seek to counteract any such alienation by constantly constructing the connected donor-beneficiary narrative both discursively and by practically enacting a reciprocal relationship in which the donor and his/ her desires, needs and interests to help are proactively affirmed.

In this way fundraisers establish themselves as "exchange partners" (Dalsgaard, 2007 p.102) between the giver and non-profit organisation. In both creating and managing opportunities to solicit, receive and reciprocate the financial gifts provided by givers they relieve the organisation and beneficiary of the obligations that are inherent in gift giving.

3. **Strategy three - conjuring the deserving, sacrificial donor**
Thus, the constructed reciprocal relationship generates a sense of obligation to provide givers with constant feedback on the gift sought and given, as well as access to staff and beneficiaries. To ensure the authenticity of these approaches, fundraisers describe the need to elicit project data, stories and staff participation in maintaining the narrative of connection between giver and beneficiary. However, when speaking to both fundraising and non-fundraising staff, fundraisers assign much greater importance to meeting these obligations. This is, in part, because fundraisers view this as an important part of their job. However, fundraisers also describe establishing rather close and meaningful relationships with givers, in which they begin to identify with what they believe to be "the sacrifices of the donor" (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.106). This bears out in descriptions by fundraisers of givers as not being vastlys wealthy or giving gifts that go beyond what they initially intended. Several fundraisers go as far to describe the gifts given as "sacrificial".

Fundraisers recognise that frontline and project staff are simply not as connected to donors and have their own set of priorities. As such, staff often do not see the point of the feedback and direct interaction that fundraisers outline as being vital in establishing and maintaining their reciprocal relationships with givers. Fundraisers express great frustration that staff often do not recognise the level of engagement and commitment invested in these relationships. They often describe feeling that they and the givers they build relationships with are often viewed as "pots of money" by staff (Fundraising Support 4). As such, fundraisers describe themselves as having to "educate, mentor…. and cajole" (Fundraiser 2) staff into participating in the giving relationship.

To do so, fundraisers describe how they mimic and piggy-back the tactics employed in building relationships with givers to conjure up a very human vision of the giver for staff. They intentionally seek out and establish formal and informal relationships with key staff within the organisation to advocate on behalf of the giver. Staff are encouraged to meet with donors and share their own personal stories with them at every opportunity – all closely managed and facilitated by the fundraiser. In encouraging, staff to participate in these ways, fundraisers draw on many of the concepts and narratives used to affirm givers' gifts and reinforce their connection with beneficiaries to construct a narrative of the very human, sacrificial and deserving donor.

In this way, whilst fundraisers are mediating the meaning of the gift and creating a sense of relationship and connection to the recipient on behalf of the donor; they describe themselves as simultaneously having engage in as much activity to mediate the value of the gift to frontline staff, thereby becoming guardians of the gift relationship.

Summing up the mediated gift
More recent analyses of gift giving via organisations by Titmuss (1973), Silber (1998) and Elder-Vass (2015) claim that the value of gifts to strangers facilitated by a third party such as a non-profit organisation, lies in their ability to create gifts free of any reciprocal obligation for vulnerable beneficiaries. However, conversations with fundraisers suggest that these theorists fail to recognise the journey the gift makes from giver, through the organisation, to the beneficiary. In doing so, they conflate "what is actually a number of transactions and social relations into just one - that between donors giving and [beneficiaries] in need." (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.108) Whilst acknowledging the role of organisations in creating and mediating opportunities to give to strangers, the role of the fundraiser in processing the gift from solicitation to delivery and then addressing how organisations maintain longer term, reciprocal giving relationships, remains unrecognised in these assessments of charitable giving. What this research uncovers, is the way in which fundraisers, instead of removing the obligations that come with the gift, redefine and reaffirm Mauss's (1954) original observation of the three-fold gift cycle to give, receive and reciprocate. In doing so, fundraisers position themselves as exchange partners who mediate and manage the obligations inherent in the gift exchange between donors, organisational staff and beneficiaries. In this way, new obligations and relationships of power are established that have implications for the way in which non-profits engage both the supply and demand-side of their "business".

The Mediated Gift: Implications for practice
The placing of the concept of the mediated gift at the heart of philanthropic practice raises a number of questions about our theoretical understanding of both fundraising and charitable gift giving, as well as contemporary gift practices. This paper ends with a short consideration of what two of these questions may be for consideration in future research.

1. **What does the aligning of the quality of reciprocation and depth of connection with the economic value of the gift mean in terms of the equitable treatment of givers?**
   Cluff (2009) observes that it is common practice for "most organisations [to] set a financial level for gifts – above which the donor is considered a major donor, below which he or she is not" (p. 373). She contends that this poses a fundamental problem in engaging donors, as they are often not given the opportunity, once classified to give larger gifts or are even asked to. Cluff's observations are corroborated by the fundraisers in this study who describe, because of the limitations of how many personal relationships any one fundraiser can build, how the depth and quality of reciprocation and engagement a giver receives is determined by their perceived capacity to give or level of gift. Many of the fundraisers interviewed express corresponding unease that this kind of relationship is essentially being purchased by the donor or is only offered to those givers who give at a certain level. This raises questions about how the construction of tiered reciprocal relationships, contributes to existing

social inequalities and exclusion, if those who are perceived to give less, are asked less often to give or their giving goes unreciprocated or underacknowledged.

2. **How are social solidarity and close social bonds between strangers created, if the connection between giver and beneficiary is a constructed narrative?**
In McDonald et al (2011), Greiling highlights the social distance inherent in the non-profit sector where those "who finance the services are also often not present when the service is provided" (p. 164) The gift literature suggests the gift, whether it takes place via organisations to strangers or in close relationships, serves to reduce social distance by creating social cohesion and solidarity (for e,g, Titmuss, 1974; Komter, 1996). This data demonstrates, however, that whilst the mediated gift creates *a sense of social bond* between the giver and the beneficiary, the relationship actually exists between the fundraiser and the giver. In this way, fundraisers in effect establish another layer of separation between the recipient and the giver. In their attempts to balance donor "dominance" and ease the obligations of the gift for beneficiaries, do fundraisers inadvertently widen the gap between those who have and those who do not? (Clohsey, 2003)

Thus, whilst fundraisers may well serve to create the *idea of solidarity* with their beneficiaries, the idea expressed by Ostrander & Schervish (1990) that philanthropic givers and the recipients of their gifts could come together to co-create a more equitable world may seem rather utopian as long as they act as gatekeepers to the gift relationship. Thereby, contributing to questions of whether fundraisers act as agents for change or reproduction when it comes to social inequality?

[3830 words]

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