Title:
Lost in translation: A sociological study of the role of fundraisers in mediating gift giving in non-profit organisations

Abstract:-
Recent years have seen a significant growth in the technical literature exploring charitable giving and 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 (1970) and colleagues to propose an alternative, more complex giving model to strangers. 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 between 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 for perceptions of the role of philanthropy and fundraising.

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Introduction

The ideal non-profit fundraising strategy is characterised by two main approaches. One is the recruitment of new givers that will increase the number of gifts received. The other is the development of a body of regular givers that will give repeat and ever-increasing gifts to the charity. The latter approach is based on evidence that suggests it is more cost effective to maintain and increase giving from existing givers than it is to recruit new givers (Burnett, 2002; Nichols, 2004; Sargeant, 2013). Thus, as observed by Dalsgaard (2007) in relation to blood banks that 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 institutionalised social interaction aimed at maintaining existing relationships to donors…. that [also] gives the donors motivations to return" (p. 105).

Nevertheless, much of the research that underpins fundraising strategy development focuses on providing evidence for the first of these two approaches – the recruitment of new donors. This literature 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 (as noted by Breeze & Jollymore, 2015). Whilst there is growing recognition that the actual act of giving is triggered by a direct solicitation or ask (Bryant et al., 2003; Bekkers, 2005; Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007; Breeze, 2017), these studies suggest that asking is simply one of many equal factors in the mix of elements that prompts as individual to make a charitable gift. The behaviours of the giver are prioritised, without considering variations in the practice of solicitation on the part of those seeking the gift. Furthermore, they provide little evidence to show how long-term, repeat giving relationships are developed and maintained.

The above is exacerbated by a lack of empirical investigation into the workings of the various fundraising processes implemented within organisations; there is even less investigation into who takes responsibility for fundraising and the methods used. Aside from texts that explore the impact of specific fundraising tools and techniques (e.g. Kelly, 1998; 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, towards an analysis of the social interactions that shape the ways in which giving is facilitated by fundraisers, and how long-term giving relationships are constructed and managed. The day-to-day practice of fundraisers is analysed from a perspective that draws on the theory of the reciprocated gift proposed by Mauss (1954). 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 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 fundraisers facilitate the journey of the gift from the giver, through the non-profit organisation, to the beneficiary, and back again.

Fieldwork and data collection

The empirical data for this article, which consists of interviews with 30 fundraising

professionals working in 14 non-profit organisations, was collected between February and December 2016. Data collection centred on qualitative in-depth interviews which are widely recognised as a mechanism through which to gain information about how subjects perceive their world and to gain accounts of their day-to-day practice (Silverman, 2013). However, whilst these interviews provided a rich dataset on how fundraisers perceive their role, as well as 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 were also included in the study, with a view to gaining insight into the gift management processes that fundraisers themselves were less able to shed light on. The accounts provided by these staff members corroborate many of those given by the fundraisers interviewed, and also provide a window into some of the tensions and conflicts inherent in organisations that are conducting fundraising and gift management strategies.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, based on a list of topics, 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 these activities. Interviews concentrated on fundraising from individuals where repeat giving relationships with donors at all levels are sought, whether through direct personal interaction, or more routinised mass communications. Whilst there is the tendency in the literature to suggest that direct, more personal relationships are reserved for major donors, this research produces a picture of a more nuanced reciprocal relationship continuum that is determined by at least five factors: (1) size of organisation and number of donors (and, thus, the extent to which interactions are routinised); (2) cause; (3) the organisation's fundraising history; (4) the skill set of the fundraiser; and (5) the donor's past and/or potential gift size. As such, the research covers lower levels of giving in smaller organisations, as well as major gift giving in larger organisations, where fundraisers have the capacity to include elements of reciprocal gifting in their practice.

Recruitment methods included approaching fundraisers already known to the author and a snowballing strategy using the personal recommendation of fundraisers who had participated in the study. This was an effective approach to recruitment, as personal recommendation and prior knowledge facilitate a warm introduction of the research and 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. A set of sampling criteria, including fundraisers' levels of experience and seniority, as well as organisation size and cause, was also enforced as far as possible to mitigate such bias. There remains the possibility, however, that the study includes a level of homogeneity in perceptions and opinions, as representativeness was difficult to achieve during recruitment. The final sample includes fundraisers from different sizes of charitable organisation: three medium, six large, two major and three super-major organisations (size categories as defined by NCVO, 2015); and the sample also represented several different causes and geographic locations within the UK.

In order to protect anonymity of both interviewees and their organisations, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper. There now follows the findings of the study, organised around a description of gift solicitation that incorporates three distinct strategies enabling the fundraiser to build and manage internal and external reciprocal relationships. This is followed by a summing up of the idea of the mediated gift, and a final section on implications for practice.

The mediated gift: a three-fold strategy

Fundraisers in this study emphasised the need to develop a base of givers that trusts their gifts will be responsibly and effectively spent. 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 place far more importance on their capacity to establish relationships of informed trust between givers and themselves when seeking regular and/ or larger gifts than on any other skill. As an example, Paige, Head of Fundraising at a small, national youth charity explains:

> "*People do give out of the kindness of the heart, but I think at the same time you can't expect someone just to do that without any relationship to the organisation, without any feeling of trust, without any understanding of what their giving is doing, without any kind of reporting back and all that kind of stuff. Without any substance to what you want their donation for and how you are going use that.*"

However, in addition to building relationships with givers in the ways that Paige outlines, fundraisers describe needing to solicit the assistance and co-operation of other staff within the organisation to build and secure these relationships. What emerges is a description of gift solicitation that incorporates three distinct strategies that enable 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. 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. Becca, Fundraising Support Officer from a large international development charity, explains the process like this:

   > "*It [regular feedback] keeps the donor engaged with the project. If you can send them a report and then you can say, by the way, the project is extending this year into this district or village, then they are more likely to give in the next year, because they were inspired by what they have read.*"

   To achieve this, fundraisers describe various means of dividing non-profits' work into discrete projects or themes that allow them to match elements of the organisation's mission to the specific interests of the giver. Anita, Regional Fundraiser at a national charity supporting people who have served in the UK armed forces, provides an example of what is needed:

   > "*For someone like the local mayor, they want evidence that we are supporting the local community. From their point of view, they would want to know that it is [local] families being helped or that there are specific main projects being funded in the area. And I can do that.*"

   In doing so, fundraisers attempt to make the complex activities of their organisation more accessible to givers by creating a framework around which they can build a narrative of how their gift has had a positive impact, and that can be tracked directly back to their giving activities. More importantly, however, this process of "projectisation" (a term coined by Krause, 2014) provides opportunities for social interaction with givers since

they are involved in deciding how, when and where their gift will be spent. Through this interaction, givers and fundraisers negotiate the relationship they wish to establish, whilst reaffirming the giver's role as an important cog in the work of the organisation and lives of its beneficiaries. This then furnishes the fundraiser with the opportunity to ask the giver to support further iterations of that work or project. Frieda, Major Gifts Fundraiser at a major international development organisation, provides some examples:

> "*Some of the stuff we try to engage our supporters with, would be coming to an event, meeting the CEO, letting them in a little bit on internal conversations. If we are writing a paper, running the paper past them – what are your thoughts and your opinions as we'll publish it. Offering to take them out to see work if they would happen to fund that. Kind of helping them out with that. Bringing them into the office; meeting staff. ... It might be that we can open up networks and conversations for them. So, we might have a particular topic event that people can come to and share ideas, meet with so-and-so or meet one of our public figures... We talk about restricted funding so that they can get updates and information on what they are supporting to feel engaged and hear more about what's happening.*"

In short, fundraisers seek out and exploit every opportunity to encourage the donor to contribute, to acknowledge that contribution and give something back to the donor. 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 generic gift exchange.

However, gifts that are solicited using these reciprocal tactics tend to be "restricted" (as noted in the previous quote), in the sense that they "must be put to use in the spirit of the way [they were] donated" (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.110). Fundraisers emphasise what they view as their moral obligation to provide acknowledgement of gifts given and evidence that these have been spent as imagined. An example of this moral expression is provided by Major Donor Fundraiser, Anna:

> "*I have a very strong view that any charity does have a moral obligation to tell people where their money is going. And I don't think it actually should matter whether the gift is £10 or £10k or £100k; there's still a moral obligation to be transparent about where the money is going.*"

Many fundraisers express a fear that a lack of appropriate reciprocation will inject what Schwartz (1967) describes as an "element of hostility" into the giving relationship (p.77). The donor will simply stop giving and seek more satisfactory recognition and acknowledgment elsewhere, as suggested by Frieda below:

> "*I feel like we are in an ever-increasing competitive charity environment. If you're not going in and saying thank you and honouring and stewarding that gift well someone else will be doing that - another charity.*"

In this sense, whilst many theories of gift exchange tend to focus on gift-giving relationships between closely tied individuals, they also provide a suitable metaphor for the relationships that fundraisers seek to build between givers and organisations (McDonald et al., 2011). These are relationships in which supporters begin as strangers

to the organisation, and which then develop through a series of manufactured reciprocal interactions and information exchange, leading to repeat cycles of gifting and reciprocation. The result is the establishment of what many fundraisers describe as a real and intimate relationship between giver and fundraiser. And it is through this real relationship that fundraisers aim to provide the giver "with acceptance and appreciation" for their monetary gift, thereby drawing givers into a longer-term cycle of gifting and re-gifting (Dalsgaard, 2007, p.109).

2. **Strategy two - simulating the giver-beneficiary connection**
A recurring theme across the study is the idea that donors give because they wish to contribute to a wider issue and cause: something that is 'bigger than them'. Fundraisers express an obligation to make sure that donors understand how it is that their gifts make a difference. To do so, fundraisers build on the interests expressed by donors in their interactions with them, and consciously seek to create a sense of connection with those to whom they feel givers wish their gift to reach. Givers are sent updates in newsletters and individualised reports, as well as *ad hoc* emails and phone calls that contain stories about beneficiaries' progress. In some instances, fundraisers create opportunities for givers to interact with the beneficiaries they are told about through mechanisms such as sending Christmas cards or other messages of support. Depending on circumstances, ranging from gift size to fundraisers' capacity, donors may be invited to visit the organisation's headquarters to meet with staff, as well as to participate in conversations and activities that feature beneficiaries talking about their experiences both in person and from a distance. Where it is practically and ethically 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 that could not have been achieved without the donor's gift. Becky, Fundraising Support Officer, describes the various approaches used:

> "*I think probably through trips is the best way to connect a donor to a beneficiary directly. Next would be to have, when a country representative is coming to the UK, to have them meet with the donor so that they can report directly to the donor about the project. And then they can often tell the most amazing stories of transformation and show photos and things like that. The next level up from that is what a donor would receive in a proposal or a report.*"

Thus, 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 connection their financial "sacrifice" – in the words of a number of interviewees – has created between the beneficiary and the donor. Donors are made to feel 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 on the amount of money given.

Fundraisers also work to make sure that donors feel they control the gifting process by allowing them to choose from a range of options as to where their gift will be directed, this includes: 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. Diane, Major Donor and Legacies fundraiser, at a

medium sized site loss charity explains how she achieves this with one of her donors:

> "*One of our donors who has supported research in memory for her sister for 3 or 4 years now… gets to choose which research project she funds within reason. I mean she can't pick one. We have to give her the ones that our research committee have picked and then she chooses one or two of those. It's up to how much money she gives each year. We send her reports on those projects.*"

This serves to reinforce the narrative of a direct connection with those whom the gift will benefit, as the donor receives feedback and reports on the beneficiaries and projects they are most interested in.

Yet, fundraisers describe very little direct interaction between beneficiaries and givers. And where it exists, it is in highly managed circumstances, such as those described above, in which the fundraiser is usually present. This reflects the reticence on the part of organisations, observed by Clohsey (2003), to allow donors to become too involved with either beneficiaries or non-profits' decision-making, for fear of allowing what he terms "institutional surrender" (p.128). However, this protection of the organisation's beneficiaries and mission carries the risk of divorcing the giver from the impact of their gift and diluting the narrative of deep connection with beneficiaries, which many fundraisers fear will result in the termination of the gifting relationship for which they are responsible.

Fundraisers actively seek to counteract any feelings of detachment by constantly constructing the connected donor-beneficiary narrative, both discursively and by practically enacting a reciprocal relationship in which donors' desire to help is 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 now inherent in this constructed reciprocal gift relationship.

3. **Strategy three - conjuring the deserving, sacrificial donor**
   The constructed reciprocal relationship, thus, 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 non-fundraising staff participation in maintaining the narrative of connection between givers and beneficiaries. However, fundraisers assign much greater importance to meeting these obligations than do non-fundraising colleagues. This is because fundraisers tend to view this as central to their role. However, fundraisers also describe establishing close 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 not being vastly wealthy or giving gifts that go beyond what they initially intended. Several interviewees 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 other priorities. As such, non-fundraising staff often do not see the point of feedback and direct interaction, something that fundraisers insist is vital in maintaining relationships with givers. Fundraisers express great frustration that their colleagues 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 viewed as "*pots of money*" by non-fundraising staff (Becky, Fundraising Support Officer). As such, fundraisers describe themselves as having to "*educate, mentor…. and cajole*" (Heather, Major Donor Fundraiser, County University) other staff members 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 their non-fundraising colleagues. They intentionally seek out and establish relationships with key non-fundraising staff members to advocate on behalf of the giver. Non-fundraising staff are often encouraged to meet with donors and share their own personal stories with them. In one faith-based organisation, non-fundraising staff are asked to pray for givers. In others, they are asked to consider how they can assist in giving decisions and be present when donors meet beneficiaries. In some organisations, non-fundraising staff are encouraged to take time out to meet and build relationships with the givers who sponsor them and to be part of the teams that host givers at various events. In encouraging colleagues to participate in these ways, fundraisers draw on many of the narratives used to affirm the value of givers' gifts to construct a narrative of the very human, sacrificial and deserving donor.

In this way, 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 to engage in as much activity to mediate the value of the gift to frontline staff as their activity with donors, thereby becoming guardians of the gift relationship.

Summing up the mediated gift

Analyses of gift giving via organisations by Titmuss (1970), Silber (1998) and Elder-Vass (2015) claim that the value of gifts to strangers that are facilitated by a third party such as a non-profit organisation, lies in their ability to create gifts free of any reciprocal obligation between the giver and beneficiary, especially in situations where they do not meet in person. However, these theorists arguably fail to recognise the journey the gift makes through various individuals in the organisation to reach the beneficiary. In doing so, they conflate what Dalsgaard (2007) observes as "a number of transactions and social relations into just one – that between donors giving and [beneficiaries] in need" (p.108), thereby simplifying the strands of reciprocity and obligation that are established in the mediated gifting process. 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 underexplored in these assessments of charitable giving. What this research uncovers is a far more complex gift exchange process that, instead of removing the obligations that come with the gift, redefines and reaffirms Mauss' (1954) original observation of the three-fold gift cycle: to give, receive and reciprocate. However, this is done in a way that diverts, rather than removes, reciprocal obligations from the beneficiary to the fundraiser. 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. Therefore, new and more complex obligations are established between fundraisers, donors and staff 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 several questions about our theoretical understanding of both fundraising and charitable gift giving, as well as contemporary gift practices. This paper ends with briefly reflecting on two of these questions for consideration in future research.

1. **What does the alignment of the quality of reciprocation and the depth of connection with the gift's economic value 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 even asked to. Cluff's observations are corroborated by the fundraisers in this study who describe how the depth and quality of reciprocation and engagement a giver receives is determined by their perceived capacity to give or their actual level of gift. This is down to the limitations of how many personal relationships any one fundraiser can build. 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?**

   Greiling (2007, in McDonald et al., 2011, p. 164) 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". 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 (e.g., Titmuss, 1970; Komter, 1996). This research demonstrates, however, that whilst the mediated gift creates *a sense of a social bond and solidarity* between the giver and the beneficiary, the relationship exists between the fundraiser and the giver, and to a large extent the beneficiary becomes an object of, rather than a participant in, the gift cycle. Fundraisers then, in effect, establish another layer of separation between the recipient and the giver. In the attempt to balance donor "dominance" and divert obligations of the gift away from beneficiaries, do we risk excluding vulnerable populations from the potentially beneficial social bonds involved in direct gift exchanges (Komter, 1996; Clohsey, 2003)? In doing so, do current methods of fundraising inadvertently contribute to widening the gap between those who have and those who do not?

Fundraisers may, thus, create the *idea of solidarity and connection* between givers and beneficiaries. However, the hope expressed by Ostrander & Schervish (1990), that philanthropic givers and the recipients of their gifts could come together to co-create more equitable interactions, seems rather utopian given that fundraisers serve as gatekeepers of this idealised gift relationship. The key question is, thus: Are fundraisers agents for change, or do they, in effect, act as agents for the reproduction of social distance between those who give and those who receive charitable gifts?

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