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NEW VOICES

Titles as identity: applying self-determination theory to increase sponsorships by experienced private refugee sponsors in Canada

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Abstract

Private refugee sponsorship is a desirable behaviour – it leads to positive outcomes for sponsors, refugees, the Canadian government and the general public. The most commonly reported motivations to sponsor are related to identity, including moral and national identity. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that identity is a strong intrinsic motivator; individuals who identify more strongly as a sponsor may be more intrinsically motivated to take on additional sponsorships. This proposed behavioural policy uses the components of SDT to design a certificate programme that bestows an official title on sponsors after completing a sponsorship. The certificate design reflects the three components of SDT (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and encourages moral and national incentives. Official titles are shown to increase identity with a role – titles act themselves as mechanisms of identity-building, which can lead to identity-motivated behaviours. The proposed certificate programme aligns with existing practices and resources already used by the Canadian government. It suggests that official titles could be a cost-effective mechanism for encouraging subsequent sponsorships.

Keywords: self-determination theory; private refugee sponsorship; moral identity; Canadian identity; titles

Introduction

In 1976, Canada introduced the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme, allowing citizens to privately resettle refugees in the country. Sponsors are responsible for providing the equivalent of 12 months' social assistance for the sponsored refugees, as well as social and cultural assistance. Their duties include finding housing, medical services, schooling and introductions to cultural communities and activities, among other resettlement needs (Hyndman *et al.*, 2017). Sponsor groups range from five to dozens of citizens, who volunteer a significant amount of their time and money to resettle refugees they have never before met (Phillimore and Dorling, 2020).

It is in all stakeholders' interest to maintain and increase private sponsorship. The Canadian government is aided in maintaining its role on the world stage as

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benevolent and welcoming (Bauder, 2008) without paying additional settlement costs. A key component of private sponsorship is ‘additionality’: privately sponsored refugees are not to replace government-sponsored refugees (Lenard, 2016). However, it is very likely overall resettlement numbers would reduce if sponsor efforts were not increased, resulting in fewer refugees than the annual government target (Labman, 2016). Regarding refugee success, research shows that privately sponsored refugees experience similar, or improved, integration outcomes compared to government-sponsored refugees (Hyndman *et al.*, 2017; Ritchie, 2018). The sponsorship programme also reflects citizens’ preference to give voluntarily. Harbaugh *et al.* (2007) observed higher rates of pleasure in participants via a brain scanner when they donated to charity, as opposed to being taxed the same amount. Similarly, the sponsorship programme allows Canadians to voluntarily support refugee resettlement, while reducing the tax burden for the wider population. Most importantly, immigration is seen as beneficial socially, culturally and economically in Canada (Gustin and Ziebarth, 2010; Bloemraad, 2015), framing refugee resettlement as both a positive societal contribution and a moral action. Private sponsorship is positive for the Canadian government, refugees, sponsors and the general public.

The prime target population to take on sponsorships is individuals or groups who have previously been sponsored under the PSR programme. Sponsorship is an act of adult learning, in which individuals grow and gain new skills (Ohlsson, 2017). As a result, experienced sponsors are the most often used resources in sponsorship networks (more than sponsoring institutions, settlement professionals, or government websites), a clear recognition of their experience as valuable knowledge (Phillimore and Dorling, 2020).

Financial incentives, such as honorarium payments or increased government aid per sponsored family, are unlikely to increase sponsor recruitment. External incentives like payments can crowd out intrinsic motivations (Frey, 1994), particularly the commonly reported incentives to sponsor. Financial incentives link the desired behaviour to the market, reducing moral and civic incentives (Sandel, 2013), two key motivations in sponsorship.

The most commonly reported motivation to undertake a sponsorship is ethics or morals, often phrased as ‘doing the right thing’ (Macklin *et al.*, 2018). This sentiment can be further broken down into four key factors identified in sponsor motivation: religion, diasporic attachments, national identity and cosmopolitanism – the latter defined as ‘personal moral obligation owed to others with whom we may share little more than common humanity’ (Macklin *et al.*, 2018, 40). Each factor is propelled by a source of the sponsor’s identity, whether religious, national, ethnic/cultural or moral. Other identified motivations include ‘social justice’, moral outrage, a desire to act as a community and a desire to build new connections and develop skills (Phillimore and Dorling, 2020). The motivations already observed in sponsors, particularly those tied to moral and national identities, can be used to increase sponsorships under a framework of self-determination theory (SDT).

Self-determination theory

The assumed need for external incentives is based on a model of rational behaviour (Ostrom, 2000). However, external incentives can reduce intrinsic motivations if

perceived by individuals to be controlling (Oliver, 2017). This can lead to diminished self-determination and self-esteem, reducing intrinsic motivation for the controlled behaviour. Conversely, intrinsic motivation is enhanced when individuals are supported and have the freedom to act – or not to act (Ostrom, 2000).

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

SDT posits that individuals can be motivated both externally and autonomously (or ‘intrinsically’ and ‘extrinsically’). Deci and Ryan (2000), the founders of the theory, further break down these two groups. External motivators can exist either as external regulations with consequences and rewards, or as introjected motivation – feelings of shame or pride due to the perceived (dis)approval of others. Introjected motivation may not be explicitly controlled, but instead pressured by surrounding individuals; an example is cutting one’s lawn due to fear of neighbourly judgement, rather than personal enjoyment. Research shows that external controls tend to push individuals to take the shortest path to completion, often involving cheating or sub-par performance (Ryan and Brown, 2005). External motivation is also associated with a decrease in well-being (Moller *et al.*, 2006) and a sense of autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Autonomous motivation can fall into the category of intrinsic interest, in which a behaviour is motivated by personal satisfaction and interest, or moral motivation, in which a behaviour is driven by the actor’s identity (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Oliver, 2017). Autonomous motivation requires feeling a sense of choice and fully endorsing one’s own actions (Ryan, 1995). Choices must also be meaningful to the individual. Moller *et al.* (2006) differentiate between choosing among many trivial options, in which case there is no real experience of autonomy, and making a single, truly self-endorsed choice. Autonomous motivation can be undermined if individuals are motivated by tangible external rewards (Deci *et al.*, 1999).

Behavioural change interventions are more effective and satisfaction levels are higher when motivations fall into one of the autonomous categories, rather than being externally motivated (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Providing free choice results in autonomous motivation, personal endorsement of one’s own behaviour, psychological well-being, more effective performance and fuller engagement with one’s chosen behaviour. Even framing messages as intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals have been shown to result in increased long-term behaviour changes (Moller *et al.* 2006).

Components of SDT

SDT explains intrinsic motivation as a result of three fundamental psychological needs (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2009; Ryan *et al.*, 2019; Ryan and Deci, 2020). The first, autonomy, concerns ownership over one’s own actions and is supported by the experience of interest and value in a behaviour. The second, competence, concerns the mastery of a behaviour and the belief that one can succeed and grow when faced with challenges. It is supported by positive feedback and opportunities for further growth. The third, relatedness, concerns belonging and connection, and can be supported by care, respect and community.

Identity as motivation

Motivations are not fixed; they can change over time. For example, an individual may begin a behaviour due to external regulation or approval of others, but start to identify with the behaviour until identity itself is a motivator. Behaviours with which people identify are the strongest motivator in SDT (Oliver, 2017) and thus identity can be used to encourage intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Oliver, 2017). Identity can be explained as ‘people’s subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become’ (Brown, 2015, 20). SDT has been used to help explain a wide range of identity-building, from exercise identities (Vlachopoulos *et al.*, 2011) to video-gaming identities (Neys *et al.*, 2014). Krettenauer (2020) writes on SDT and moral identities; he agrees that the SDT framework is the best way to understand the motivation behind moral actions – internal moral motivation is stronger and more self-sustaining than external motivation, i.e. acting morally for the approval of others or to appear moral. Though sceptics may say moral behaviour is (at least partially) externally motivated, Hepach *et al.* (2013) have found evidence that internal moral motivation exists as early as infancy. Further aligning with SDT, moral identities are fluid and change over time. Individuals must seek a balance of behaviours as they strive to be moral (Mazar *et al.*, 2008). This development occurs through actions and behaviours – Krettenauer (2020) explains moral identity is best understood as the goal of moral actions, as individuals must continue to act morally in order to uphold and maintain their moral identities.

Behavioural intervention

The proposed intervention intends to bolster identity as an intrinsic motivation to re-sponsor under an SDT framework. After the completion of their first sponsorship (12 months after the refugees’ arrival), sponsors are given the title of ‘Official Refugee Sponsor of Canada’ and sent an accompanying certificate from the Ministry of Immigration. The intervention intends to promote identity-building as a private sponsor, especially as a form of moral identity-building, given the significant role of morality as a reported sponsorship motivation. As explained above, identity can lead to action, translated here as subsequent sponsorships. The tone is modelled after the citizenship certificate template for new citizens, as well as maintains the word limit. The text reads:

As the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship,

I would like to thank you for your immense service to your country and its newcomers, and bestow upon you the title of

Official Refugee Sponsor of Canada

You exhibited a remarkable performance as a first-time sponsor and, should you wish to sponsor in the future, will be able to bring a wealth of experience to the endeavor.

As a sponsor, you have invited those in need into our home and built their success in a new country. Your work within your community is deeply valued. My colleagues and I extend our sincerest gratitude to you for working to build our multicultural family.

Titles as identity

SDT suggests individuals who identify more strongly as a sponsor may be more intrinsically motivated to take on additional sponsorships. The intervention uses titles due to their strong ties to identity; they have been described as ‘prominent identity badges’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 417) and useful ‘to anchor workers’ identities’ (Baron and Bielby, 1986, 563). Titles are not only closely tied to identities, but act themselves as mechanisms of identity-building due to their deep social and cultural meaning. They communicate specialized knowledge, competency, status and values, acting as a source of both pride and identity to the title holder (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Titles are known to play a significant role in ongoing identity formation (Melling, 2019), suggesting the bestowment of a title will have an impact on sponsors’ identities.

Literature has shown the identity-building that accompanies a title can translate into actions. Job titles further encourage individuals to act on their affiliated identities in order to embody their identities and values through behaviours (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Receiving new job titles has additionally been shown to result in increased output (Swiercz and Smith, 1991), motivation (Baron and Bielby, 1986), work satisfaction, identification with one’s company, and reflection on one’s contribution (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Sponsors who receive a formal title may be more likely to act on the reflected identity – behaving as an ‘official sponsor’ by engaging in subsequent sponsorships.

Most research that has been conducted on the intersection of titles and identity is based on employment titles. However, sponsorship and formal employment share enough similarities that the theory would likely transfer – both involve large amounts of labour input, time and significant stress (Phillimore and Dorling, 2020). A sponsor title could even be more appreciated than a job title: Greenberg and Ornstein (1983) found that ‘earning’ a job title in a proof-reading task by superiors helped in offsetting inadequate financial compensation and in maintaining a high level of performance. Sponsors may also experience increased satisfaction compared to a job promotion due to their differing reference points (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979); a sponsor receiving a title for their labour has a reference point of no title at all, whereas a job promotion has a reference point of a previous title.

SDT language

The language used to support intrinsic motivation must be autonomy-supporting instead of controlling (i.e. ‘could’, ‘may’, ‘if you like’ vs ‘must’, ‘should’, ‘have to’) (Moller *et al.*, 2006). The text reads ‘should you wish to sponsor in the future’. It suggests re-sponsoring is an option, but does not mandate or pressure sponsors to take such action. This reflects the first component of SDT, autonomy in decision-making.

The second component, competence, is reflected in phrasing such as ‘remarkable performance’, ‘wealth of experience’ and ‘built their success’. The text notes that sponsors would bring experience and knowledge to subsequent sponsorships, declaring their ability to learn and grow when faced with new challenges.

The third component, relatedness, is promoted through terms such as ‘community’ and ‘family’, as well as terms of respect used in sharing gratitude (‘immense

service', 'deeply valued'). The language of relatedness further embodies the sponsor-reported motivation to 'act as a community' and 'build new connections and develop skills', as listed above. The 'relatedness' terms remind sponsors of their work with others throughout their sponsorship and their new belonging in the wider sponsorship network. Each of the three components of SDT is intended to support the three psychological needs for intrinsic motivation.

Canadian identity

Moral identity is a major aspect of sponsorship identity, but as Macklin *et al.* (2018) find, national identity is also a common motivation for sponsorship. This facet of sponsors' identity is also bolstered through the intervention and requires a brief explanation on sponsorship in a Canadian context.

A 2018 survey found that Canadians believe the country's top contribution to the world is 'multiculturalism and diversity', with an emphasis on the acceptance of immigrants (Adams, 2018). Canadian nationalism has been identified as a 'multicultural nationalism' – a national identity which embraces diversity as a core component. In fact, those with the strongest sense of their own Canadian identities tend to embrace newcomers and immigration more than those who identify less with the national identity (Banting, 2010).

The multicultural national identity is integral to private sponsorship. Private resettlement of refugees has been repeatedly identified as a component of the country's compassionate self-image (Bauder, 2008; Hynie, 2018). To privately sponsor is to be Canadian, a premise bolstered by its ground-breaking history – Canada has sponsored over 12 times more refugees than any other country (Bertram *et al.*, 2019). In fact, private sponsorship is often constituted in academia as an act of (specifically Canadian) citizenship (Macklin *et al.*, 2018; Haugen *et al.*, 2020).

Sponsors' national identity is promoted by the use of 'of Canada' in their new title, as well as the certificate's form as a personalized message from the Minister of Immigration. The language 'service to your country' and 'multicultural family' is also used to instill a sense of nationalism. According to SDT, sponsors may take on further sponsorships as a way to act on their national identity; they may sponsor because it is 'the Canadian thing to do', and they strongly identify with their national identity.

Discussion

A concern for the intervention is that sponsor motivation data is largely self-reported. How can we ensure motivation to sponsor is autonomous, not external? One rebuttal is that individuals who attempt to be perceived as moral (i.e. introjected motivation) will try to avoid the costs of moral actions whenever possible (Batson *et al.*, 1999; Batson *et al.*, 2002). As there are high unavoidable costs accompanying private sponsorship, we can assume sponsors are largely truthful in their reported intrinsic motivations.

However, it is true some sponsors may experience introjected motivation. One study on sponsor motives notes that sponsorships can be large group affairs; motivation to participate may be due to a sponsor's affinity for an institution or the

individual who invited them to participate (Macklin *et al.*, 2018). Even if motivated by introjected motivation, the intervention could be effective. Titles and certificates are easily shared with others in both personal (e.g. displaying at home, telling friends and family) and public (e.g. displaying on social media, adding to resumes) circles. Titles also are affirmed by others when they match the owner's identity (Elsbach, 2003), leading to positive reinforcement from external sources.

A neglected aspect of SDT in the intervention is the provision of a rationale to support autonomous motivation (Moller *et al.*, 2006). This is because providing a rationale to experienced sponsors would be redundant and potentially off-putting. By the time they receive their title and certificate, the sponsor has already experienced the struggles of resettlement second-hand, as core supporters of new refugees. A rationale may be perceived as diminishing their experience and knowledge. There may be an argument for a rationale to re-sponsor ('more families are in need'), but this may appear as pressure, violating the tenant of autonomy.

Due to the small, interconnected population of sponsors, as well as the designed sharing potential of the certificate and title, there are gaps in evaluation with an RCT that could be buffered by a qualitative component. The first is that bestowing titles to only some of the small population may decrease feelings of relatedness. The second is that individuals in a control group may assume the official title regardless of whether they received a certificate. Interviewing sponsors about their decision to re-sponsor or not after the intervention can help to ascertain whether their sense of identity as a sponsor played a role, and whether the official title impacted this facet of their identity.

The only prominent political objection may be the intervention's attempt to further diminish additionality, as explained above. However, any objection on the grounds of additionality is a concern with the institution of sponsorship as it exists in Canada, not the behavioural intervention itself.

Costs for the behavioural intervention should be extremely low. Certificates are sent to Canadians from varying levels of government for activities such as high school graduations and passing citizenship tests. Many government offices are already experienced and equipped to create certificates and receive free postage. If even a single-digit number of sponsors are encouraged to re-sponsor due to their titles, the intervention will become cost-effective.

It has been noted elsewhere (Phillimore and Dorling, 2020) that more research needs to be conducted on the motivations of private sponsors. Further research may also want to explore the differences between one-time sponsors and multiple-time sponsors to find key differences and whether these can be addressed through behavioural interventions.

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