**Can’t Buy Me Love: Gift Giving among Members of Organized Crime Syndicates**

**Abstract**

This paper studies gift relations in criminal organizations. We describe gift giving as a double-edged sword designed to lure recruits into a network of binding obligations. We show how these fictive familial relations between criminals set up a durable system of credit and debt that is based on a delicate economy of sympathy, with any transgressions against it punishable. We show how these gifting rituals uphold a code of honor that, while a distortion of the notion of familial love, is effective in overcoming some of the difficulties inherent in criminal transactions.

Keywords: criminal organization, gift giving, fictive kinship

Organizational scholars have already demonstrated the importance of gift giving as a way of maintaining business, social, and personal relationships within and between organizations (Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2011; Fridman & Luscombe, 2017; Peng et al., 2020). Gifts, unlike commodity exchanges, tie both givers and receivers together in a bond of honor. The norms of reciprocity allow for a series of honorably balanced dealings between social actors whose behaviors can be difficult to predict or regulate (Graeber, 2011; Konstantinou & Fincham, 2010; Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2011). However, to effectively engage social actors, gift giving must appear as an act of selfless sharing while also implying a tacit expectation of a gift or favor in return. Thus, gifting actually binds the participants of the exchange rather than frees them (Mauss, 154; c.f. Rehn, 2014). The paradoxical character of gifting makes it an intriguing subject of inquiry, especially in organizations where legal contracts and marketplace norms do not apply. In particular, we need to understand how gifting becomes socially meaningful and structured, as it involves the such important qualities of voluntarism and obligation, generosity and self-interest. how it. This paper focuses on gifting practices that develop in criminal organizations. We explore how gifting practices are used as a means of governance, and how they are embedded in what Collins (1997) terms “a sympathy economy.”

This paper is part of a wider study on gift relations within criminal organizations. We argue that these organizations are typical of secret societies where gift giving is designed to embed members, potential partners, and even rivals in a durable yet precarious system of credit and debt that often masquerades as familial love. Our work focuses on the manipulative and coercive nature of gift exchange situations in organizations whose members operate under extreme constraints. For this, we synthesize the tenets of exchange theory and symbolic interaction to provide an effective framework for understanding how members of criminal organizations manage social relationships based on negotiated exchanges of emotional, social, and physical rewards, punishments, and resources (Rosenbaum, 2009). Combining insights derived from Mauss’s exchange theory and the concept of a sympathy economy found in Collins (1997), we explore how members of criminal organizations deal with situations of effectively unpayable debts. If debtors cannot do what it takes to restore parity for themselves, can they exit the organization?

**Secret Societies and the Construction of a Sympathy Economy**

Simmel defines secret societies as “an interactional unit characterized by the fact that reciprocal relations among its members are governed by the protective function of secrecy” (1906, p. XX). Secret societies are held together precisely because they need to keep a secret, so secrecy becomes an indicator of belonging and a statement about privilege and status (Parker, 2016). Reciprocal relations within secret societies are geared toward protecting the function of secrecy. In a criminal organization, gift exchange is employed principally to protect secrets. Favors, often involving illegal activities, are exchanged to maintain and strengthen various types of social bonds – cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic (Yan, 2012). Exchange is a good in itself, a “process benefit.” Acknowledgement, attention, acceptance, respect, reputation, status, power, intimacy, love, friendship, and kinship mean everything to people who have been outcasts most of their lives. These favors are therefore personalized because they involve the expression of individuality and require an extraordinary sacrifice on the part of the giver (Pizzetti & Gibbert, 2018). In this way, criminal organizations can better scrutinize the type of people they accept, control the internal distribution of sensitive information, and reduce attrition. The gift economy that develops has thus both an interactional and structural logic that is vital to understand with respect to the formation of social relations in criminal organizations (Meneghini et al., 2021). Gifts range from artifacts to unreciprocated favors, such as “putting oneself at the disposition of someone else” (Pipyrou, 2014). These are embedded in a “socio-emotional” economy that forms an “emotional trading system,” whereby a highly personalized display of kindness is carefully dispensed. Once bestowed upon others, it implies an endorsement of their character and capabilities, as well as their inclusion within the community. Consequently, we are focusing on the type of gifting that masquerades as the bestowal of “free gifts” ostensibly given to communicate esteem or care but, in fact, implicitly demand numerous obligations, even if subtle and covert. These gifting practices have an innate duality; they both create and deny connection, and facilitate and prevent the flow of its intrinsic knowledge (Graeber, 2010). Name, prestige, honor, and rank shape expectations from gifting and the norms of reciprocity it entails. These economies are formed and sustained not only for the accumulation of wealth, but even more importantly, for the creation and destruction of human beings (Graeber, 2010). Given these important functions, we must first understand what sort of credits and debits people in these organizations accumulate and to what do they entitle or oblige them.

While violence and coercion are usually associated with means of governance in criminal organizations, little scholarly attention has been given to gift exchange as another means of such governance (Pipyrou, 2014). This study focuses on gift exchange as means for creating a latent potential for eliciting durable cooperation between partners, recruits, and even rivals operating in a risky environment. We review Mauss’s discussion on gift exchange to understand how gifting shapes the social fiber of the organization. To comprehensively understand how a sympathy economy is created and maintained and how individuals negotiate their position within it, we combine the tenets of Mauss’s exchange theory and symbolic interaction theory. We argue that practices of gift giving and bestowing favors create both entailments and debts that facilitate the smooth running of the organization operating in a highly turbulent environment.

Interviews conducted with 20 ex-convicts and 10 retired police associates (operating sources, state witnesses, and undercover agents) reveal the intricacies of gifting in a variety of criminal organizations. Gifting is embedded in the social and communal relations wherein people appear to be friends, neighbors, and kin with strongly positive feelings for each other. We therefore need to look beyond the compliancy instilled by terror and violence to understand how these organizations successfully engage in a creative game of trust and distrust. Furthermore, explaining the complexity of organized crime’s persistence in contemporary societies requires an understanding of the moral systems they construct of justice and retribution and their modes of relationships (Gambetta, 1988; Pipyrou, 2014).

This study adopts the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime’s definition of organized crime (OC): “A structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit” (United Nations, 2000, p. 5; c.f. Comunale et al., 2020).

The complex social dynamics underlying individuals’ involvement in OC has been shown to contribute to their resilience (Comunale et al., 2020). The strength of social ties among OC members enables these organizations to rapidly reorganize, constantly recruit new members, and consolidate themselves in certain geographic areas. Past studies have shown that people become involved in OC through social and work ties, with social ties creating a “social snowball effect,” whereby people are drawn into OC by those close to them (Kleemans & Van Koppen, 2014, p. 288). Close relations between individuals often bridge social and criminal networks, sometime internationally, providing new criminal opportunities and solving problems of cooperation in the hostile environments in which offenders carry out illegal activities (Comunale et al., 2020). Social relationships are central to overcoming informational asymmetries at the point of recruitment, creating relationships of trust, and assessing whether recruits are “criminally valuable” (Gambetta, 2009; 2011; Pyrooz & Densley, 2016). Prospective members of OC groups may engage in violent and serious crimes to signal a credible commitment to the group and such criminal activity may even be part of the training of young recruits embedded in crime-prone communities (Meneghini et al., 2021).

As in many developed nations, OC in Israel grew steadily from the 1960s, initially through familial crime networks conducting traditional mafia-type activities, such as illegal casinos, vice, loan sharking, “shakedowns” using violence and intimidation, and general gang-related crime (Amir, 2011). As OC became more organized and globalized, family-based organizations evolved into more professional ones. That said, OC groups still ritually and symbolically create a sense of family and identity in order to generate an enduring commitment to the organization. These fictive kinship ties among their members enables them to forge a collective identity, justify their existence, and create lifelong commitments (Paoli, 2020). As Paoli (2020) suggests, to convincingly establish and maintain these fictive kinship ties, OC groups impose status and fraternization obligations upon their members through elaborate initiation ceremonies (Weber, 1978, pp. 671–73). The exchange of gifts and favors plays a powerful role in this system of long-term and unspecified obligations. Ethnicity is also an important factor to consider for understanding the basis for recruiting members and maintaining operations. This dimension is the foundation of cohesion and solidarity between members and of the group as a unique whole (Amir, 2011).

In 2003, underworld warfare in Israel reached a new high with a series of car bombs exploding in residential neighborhoods in broad daylight, putting innocent bystanders, among them women and children, at risk. In 2015, the State Comptroller told the parliamentary Internal Affairs and Environment Committee that gangland killing was “terrorizing the public, to the extent that people are afraid to leave their homes.” A well-known crime figure, who for years was one of the top lieutenants of the biggest crime boss in Beersheba and who had later turned state witness, was murdered as an act of vengeance in the south of Israel In 2016. Apparently, his testimony had been key in a case that led to the conviction of the crime boss and four of his top lieutenants in 2009 for a litany of serious crimes, including extortion and conspiracy (Hartman, 2016). Later that year, a series of assassinations related to the defection of criminals from Abergil’s organization to Musli’s claimed 14 lives in all. Six suspects were indicted for murder, attempted murder by booby-trapping a car, alleged possession of various weapons stashed above a kindergarten, and the theft of weapons from an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer (Lior, 2016). In 2018, Israeli police, successful in bringing charges against the heads of the major crime organizations, announced that the sons of certain crime bosses had stepped into the vacuum left by their incarcerated fathers, thus becoming new targets for law enforcement (Breiner, 2018). Over the past few years, Arab criminal groups have proliferated and taken over locations vacated by state institutions and police. A 2020 *Times of Israel* article reported that a new reality has been created in Arab towns and cities, in which powerful protection rackets with access to an enormous quantity of weapons lend money and collect payments by threatening violence (Boxerman, 2020). Police sources acknowledge that the Arab crime organizations rule the underworld, with one anonymous senior police officer cited as saying: “They are strong, determined, forceful and they don’t screw around. They have enough weapons for an entire army” (Boxerman, 2020).

These sudden outbreaks of violence highlight the fragile interaction between aggressive behavior and the need to ensure trust and secrecy within these risky collaborative settings (Ayling, 2009). Illegality presents offenders with serious and chronic problems with respect to those with whom they collaborate, as the agreements, essentially contracts, between them, are not judicially enforceable. Their illegal activities must be concealed. People can be arrested and assets seized at any time. Moreover, lying and cheating are especially appealing when significant financial interests are at stake (Kleeman, 2012). In the absence of many of the institutional safeguards designed to compensate for the consequences of deceit and betrayal and given the threat criminal sanctions, the consequences of disloyal behavior are likely to be much more damaging in OC activities than in legitimate ones (Von Lampe & Johansen, 2003). This makes building trust and loyalty a persistent issue in such largely unregulated settings. Consequently, blood imagery is often invoked to mark and foster reciprocity. As with the Italian Mafia, relationships are often identified in several ways: agnatic kinships (consanguinity); affinal kinships; ritual kinships; and ritual friendship (brotherhood) (Block, XX). Bonds of kinship and friendship form coalitions that demarcate territories of influence. Selective recruitment, combined periods of testing and schooling, rigid enforcement of discipline, male bonding rituals, and secrecy each have a binding force in and of themselves.

**Methods**

The present article is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with ex-convicts, most rehabilitated, and 10 interviews with high ranking police handlers. All the interviewees were male, and their ages ranged from 30 to 60, with an average age of 40. To create as heterogeneous a sample as possible, we included interviewees, Jewish and Arab, from a variety of criminal organizations, with a wide range and frequency of prison terms served, crimes committed, and years of education. We encountered considerable difficulties in convincing ex-convicts to participate in the study. Several declined for fear of being discovered. Others were reluctant to talk about their pasts, claiming that they were now in a different place. The ones who agreed to participate cooperated fully and were mostly rehabilitated ex-convicts. To complement our data, we interviewed 10 police handlers, and analyzed published memoirs of notorious Israeli criminals and published police reports focusing on the management of criminal organizations. Despite the difficulties we encountered, we ceased our recruiting efforts only when our data had reached saturation, indicating data replication and redundancy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bowen, 2008).

All the interviews were conducted by three student research assistants. The interviewers asked for informed consent at the beginning of the interview, assured interviewees that all information would be anonymized, and that the transcripts of the interviews would be used for research purposes only. They told all interviewees that they could disregard any question they preferred not to answer and to end the interview at any point they felt too uncomfortable to continue. All interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed in full detail to allow for the accurate recording of intonation and unique use of language and argot. After the interview, each interviewer recorded notes reflecting on the dynamic of the interview and on any new thoughts that occurred to them as a result of the interview.

The interviewees were encouraged to speak about themselves their relationships with the head and other fellow members of their organization. They were asked about how they were recruited into the organization, their experiences in the crime organization, and how they managed to leave it. The interviewees refrained from talking about their activities in the organization and tended to speak at length about their emotional connection with the head of the organization and fellow members. Strong feelings of awe, fear, and dread emerged during the interviews, together with that of gratitude.

The interviews were conducted in cafes or in the interviewee’s home, so they could speak about their experiences in a neutral environment where they felt comfortable. Interviewees were asked not to tell the interviewers their names, but only their initials, and the names that appear in the paper are pseudonyms. The interviewers refrained from asking about their past criminal activity and left it to the interviewees’ discretion whether to discuss this issue. In most cases, interviewees preferred not to discuss their criminal past or the reasons for their incarceration. They also refrained from talking about their experiences in jail other than mentioning those who helped them while in there.

The two lead researchers coded the interview data, using a modified model of the grounded theory process outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967), for emergent themes in stages, until a theoretical framework emerged. For example, the theme of gift giving emerged as we analyzed the interview texts. No questions explicitly referred to gift giving, but the subject surfaced repeatedly as participants described the organization’s pulling power and the type of relationships that took shape in there.

Next, following Lieblich et al. (1998)’s principles of narrative analysis, we analyzed the stories as complete units, noting the skeletal description of fundamental events and focusing on how themes such as gift giving, loyalty, trust, and betrayal related to each other (see also Fransozi, 1998). We then conducted categorical content analysis to identify specific utterances and linguistic usage that evinces specific sensitivities. We dissected the texts to discern the use of closely related words, such as loyalty, commitment, and trustworthiness. During this stage, the theme of gift giving emerged as a meta-theme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During our repeated reviews, reports of gift giving were tagged with codes extracted from the data, thus elucidating the concept of human economy as a leading theoretical framework for the understanding relationships in criminal organizations.

**Findings**

**Generosity is its own Form of Power**

The use of the word “gift” and all its variants was dominant in our narrators’ stories, even when other linguistic choices would have been grammatically more correct: “He gave me the feeling” rather than “he made me feel;” “He gave me the idea/thought” rather than “he made me think;” “He gave me appreciation and status” rather than “he appreciated me.” Other examples are: “He gave me anything I wanted;” “These are people that can give you whatever you need and want;” “He gave me his name, so I became his man;” “He gave me a chance.” The extensive use of the verb “give” in relation to the benefactor indicates his overwhelming influence over the recipient’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, almost as if criminal subjectivity is shaped in relations to an omnipotent benefactor. The recruit is moreover reborn: he is given a name, social standing, an education, and his material needs are satisfied. The criminal organization becomes a home in which the recruit can express his personhood. Raz, for example, reached a high ranking position in his crime organization. His story exemplifies how “non-persons” are transformed into valued people:

My family cut all ties with me. I befriended Z and after a while, his son A came up to me and asked me to do something for him, to help him. Being associated with A was something! My family abandoned me. I felt rejected and alone. At the beginning, I was thrilled. It did wonders for my ego. He gave me precisely what I needed: someone who would care for me. He gave me appreciation [the Hebrew also means “he valued me”]. He gave me this status…He gave me everything…He filled this emptiness. He sensed exactly what I needed, and provided it, no questions asked. Everything and anything I ever wanted, he gave me free of charge. A. magnetizes people. He knew how to get people to do stuff for him. He gave people money, but it wasn’t just money, it was that he took care of them. He took me under his wings. When a person comes to you and gives you everything you need, you can’t tell him “No,” and you can’t abandon him. It’s scary. I gave him everything I could give, so what went wrong?

Maor tells a similar story of rebirth.

I was born and raised in K.S.[[1]](#footnote-2) to an alcoholic father. The police stormed our house and my seven brothers and I were sent away to boarding schools. I moved around from one institution to another until at one point I had enough. I decided to take charge of my life and refused to be pushed around any longer. I was clueless as to where my life was going. I hid behind these masks. You know, when you grow up in institutions, you must act as if you belong. It’s an act. I drank heavily; I wanted to be anyone but myself. I acted tough, as I did growing up. I had no one to care for me. I decided to return home to K.S. There, I befriended this hot shot criminal. Everyone in the underworld was shocked that he chose me for his partner. I wasn’t a criminal back then. I had no jail experience. I had never even been arrested…He took me in and simply loved me. This huge hole in my heart filled up…I was a sailor once, and I used my connections to help him smuggle drugs in and out of the country. It was a huge accomplishment for me. I chose to be there. I wanted to have this sort of responsibility. It was exhilarating. I felt wanted. I felt important; walking around with A., I could do whatever I wanted. I was his partner. He trusted me. Highly esteemed criminals offered to partner with him, but he told them they had to go through me. That really offended them. He fancied that I had this unique take on things. I wasn’t out to get him. I didn’t want to play him. That is why he confided in me. He listened to me…We grew up in the same tough neighborhood as I did. It’s like we came from the same home.

Both Maor’s and Raz’s stories open with the de facto social death and rebirth of the narrators. The benefactor endows them with the gift of life, so to speak. They are singled out for the first time in their lives and are reborn as people of unique value and qualities.

These gifts and favors that are exchanged forge a singular bond between the benefactor (the adopting father) and the recipient (the adopted son). It is within the confines of this system of give and take that recruits negotiate many aspects of their identity and social worth. The initial gift may be driven by an impulse of regard, by the desire to elicit regard, or by both. The fear of losing regard provides a strong incentive to continue and the penalty for failure can be the loss of regard and exclusion. In this vein, withholding regard signifies indifference and rejection. Ostracism means the social death of the actor: a denial of name, status, and protection. And since a father’s love can never be fully repaid, a distorted type of paternal relationship is formed based on debt and a subtly implied threat of disowning and even violence. Hence, gifting not only embodies a bond, but also communicates it. By accepting these gifts, the recipient puts himself at the disposal of the benefactor, subject to the benefactor’s will. The following descriptions show a typical recruiting process where the leader of an organization intuitively senses the weaknesses of the recruits and preys on them.

**Can’t Buy me Love – Gifting as a Foundation of an Economy of Regard**

Hezi, an ex-convict and a one-time member of one of Israel’s most notorious crime organizations claimed:

There isn’t an ounce of trust between criminals. It’s not about trust. A man [head of the organization] steps up to you and *asks you* to do something for him, and you do it. If you do this for him, he will have faith in you. In a criminal organization, it is all about money and loyalty – loyalty to a specific person.

Another interviewee was even more explicit in linking the impressiveness of the gift (often measured by the level of personal risk, and selflessness) with the display of loyalty:

That’s the way it works. A man has two or three friends for whom he will give his life. They took care of each other ever since they were children running around in the neighborhood. He recruits them because he knows them. They do everything together. In prison, they are the ones to slip him canteen money and protect him from being knifed. [Their bond] is like blood. They are the only ones in this world who really care for him. So, this man is forever in their debt. It’s loyalty. That’s all.

The personalization of gifts, as Hezi describes, allows for the authentication of regard. It is intended to evidence care, and even love. It is founded on a strong emotional bond between givers and receivers and, although binding, it is therefore viewed as moral and just rather than oppressive or manipulative. Gifting creates opportunities for recruits to reveal their “true colors” and demonstrate their level of dedication and loyalty to the leader. The obverse of this is that the givers are constantly driven to maintain the bond by increasing the emotional and material value they offer (Offer, 1997). In this way, they create a debt founded on a strong emotional bond between recipients and benefactors. A senior police officer offered a concrete example:

[A renowned criminal belonging to one of the six major crime cells in Israel] was 17 when he started serving his 13-year sentence. While he was in prison, he cultivated this small group of followers. He saw these poor kids who were thrown into jail with no one to care for them and offered them his help. He gave them canteen money and tons of phone cards. He must have spent thousands of shekels on each of them. He quickly became known as “the nobleman.” They worshiped him. They went through thick and thin for him. Some of them even went to jail for him. Their relationships lasted a very long time.

This type of gift exchange opens a line of credit that determines the amount of favors the benefactor can demand or “call in,” depending on their social position within this socio-emotional economy (see also Jacques & Wright, 2014). Both interviewees describe what Clack (1998) calls “sympathy credit” – the right to call on others when in trouble or to collect on past favors. As the recruits become people of some worth, they become responsible for misdeeds perpetrated upon and by their benefactors; and in the process, commit themselves to a life of crime and violence. Acts of violence thereby become gifts intended to publicly demonstrate one’s loyalty, defend one’s honor, and avenge attacks on allies. Thus, the gifts or favors obtained through these exchanges bear the personal stamp of both the benefactor and the recipient. Since the gifts and services rendered have a value that is essentially priceless, they act as “substitutes for life” never to be fully repaid or compensated for. Graeber (2011) coined the term “human economies” to denote a system of exchange that is meant to realize the value of the lives of askers, givers, and receivers (see also Klaites & Mclean, 2015).

Tahir, an ex-convict who joined a witness protection program, explains how honoring one’s commitments is crucial to preserving a sense of personhood:

In a criminal organization, it’s all about money and honoring your commitments. I wanted to be loyal to someone. It is not about trust. There is no such thing as trust…They test you all the time. They asked me to take a weapon and fire on houses in a village nearby. And I did. I sure did. I wanted them to think I was reliable. I grew accustomed to the lifestyle they offered me. I made a lot of money. I lived well. I spent on myself. I owned a luxurious car. They helped me open all these businesses. I owned a cement factory and a money exchange operation. I had this sense of security. It took me three years to reach this kind of a peak. The head of the organization was a quiet guy, young, and very suspicious. He was clever and callous. He was always in control. When I met him, he had already done time for murder. I never trusted him, not really, because I knew who he was. I trust no one and especially not someone who has killed in cold blood. We became close friends. He meant everything to me. I didn’t leave his sight. We were buddies. Today, he is in prison. He has eight years left of his sentence. He asked me to vouch for him so he could get out on a short vacation, and I did in a heartbeat. He was my source of power. Everywhere I went, I used his name and doors opened. I was so powerful. After a year or so, people started to know me for myself. I didn’t have to trade on his name anymore. Being part of an organization gave me a sense of security; it’s like having immunity. I knew that nobody will dare mess with me. Not even the police. But if the head of the organization turns on you, you are in real danger.

In Hebrew, the word for commitment (*mehuyavut*) is derived from the word for obligation (*hayav*) and is defined in the Eben-Shoshan Hebrew dictionary as “someone who is indebted to another, with no restrictions.” Yet, loyalty is defined as “devotion to someone who has been proven trustworthy, and therefore worthy of being assigned special responsibilities” (Eben-Shoshan Dictionary). The ritualistic gift exchange described above is designed to elicit both loyalty and commitment. The recruit proves his loyalty by acknowledging the moral imperative to commit. To be trustworthy, the recipient (recruit) must acknowledge the benefactor’s generosity and demonstrate his gratitude in action. Honoring debts forms the basis of the bond between benefactor and recipient. Intimacy thus emerges as a dialectical process grounded in the relative predictability of debt and honoring the debt.

**Fictive Paternal and Fraternal Love**

The multiple referencing of terms like “care for,” “help,” and “take care of,” in conjunction with gift giving, suggests that this relationship pattern is embedded and sustained within a specific moral context. Consider for example how Raz speaks of his benefactor:

His reputation preceded him. He helped a lot of people. He gave donations. He took care of his soldiers. He was a giver. I felt a strong sense of commitment to him. I didn’t work for anyone else but him. He gave me money. If I needed to buy groceries, he’d pay for it out of his own pocket. He indulged me. He trusted me implicitly. He was impressively powerful. Many wanted to be around him, just for his power and connections. He was a mediator, and very respected for it. I got hooked on this respect thing. I loved the way people looked at me…Someone accepted me and appreciated me…It built me up. The thought of getting out never crossed my mind. I didn’t look for a way out. I was happy. He never had to threaten me. He was always pleasant. Nobody else wanted to leave him either. Everyone was having too much fun. He provided us with everything we needed and everyone kept saying how committed they were to him. We bragged about risking our lives for him. We competed for his love.

Raz describes intense emotions of love and gratitude. For him, the material tokens serve to “insert the self into the mutually-obligating bonds of gift exchange” (Klaits & McLean, 2015; See also Premawardhana, 2012). These are tangible symbols of a coherent identity that the recruits can stage to others (Klaites & Mclean, 2015). Moreover, it outwardly signifies that the recruit has completed his transformation and has been found to be worthy.

Roni Harari, who once headed the infamous Ramat Amidar crime organization, wrote a memoir in which he idealizes the relationships between the head of the organization and his soldiers:

You see my entourage? The media refers to them as “my soldiers,” as if I were this general in the army. These people are my friends. They are my brothers. I would kill for them. If they ever run into trouble, who will they turn to for help? They’re not robots. These are very dedicated and loyal people. This is their home. I solve all their problems, and they know how to show their appreciation. They are respectful, appreciative, and grateful. These are people who know [how to give respect] and that is why I [give them] respect. Andrei is my right-hand man. I share all my secrets with him. He is always by my side. He advises me. And I know that whenever I need him, he is there for me. (Harari, p. 256)

Roni depicts a type of fraternal friendship that is mythologized in Israeli culture. As Kaplan & Yanay (2006) suggest, such Israeli male bonding reflects a powerful connection between masculinity, courage, and devotion through combat and self-sacrifice. Manhood is exhibited through the courage to die for your fellow men who have fought together on the battlefield. In its ideal form, this type of male bonding epitomizes what Giddens (1991) calls a pure relationship: one that encompasses voluntary commitments based on intensified intimacy and a tendency toward symmetry (see also Kaplan & Yanay, 2006).

Aharon is an ex-convict and part of a witness protection program who was in charge of extorting money from businesses. He elaborates on the bond between members of the organization:

In my testimony I was careful not to give away those who are dear to me. I made sure that those that worked with me on jobs and took care of me would not be harmed. A man who has two or three such friends, will make sure they stay his friends for life. They are like blood. You sign on them (vouch for them) because they already proved themselves. They are the only ones in this world that truly care for you.

Ben, a senior police officer, also notes that the bonds that are formed between members of an organization are based on genuine and authentic concern for each other:

Trust is fostered through genuine care, real concern, and respect. The head of the organization owes his people for the crimes they have committed on his behalf. They go to prison knowing that the organization is fully behind them. They need to know that there is someone out there looking out for them, their wives, and children. They need to know that nobody will mess with them while in prison. Otherwise, they have no chance. If someone was sent to “do a job” on behalf of the organization, it is only right that the head of the organization will arrange for a lawyer to represent him and slip him canteen money for his whole stretch. His rivals, both inside and outside the organization look to see how dedicated he is to his people. Supporting these people and their families for 10 years or more is no small change. People are looking to see if he is influential enough to arrange for this kind of funding. It says a lot about the leader’s influence and means.

Kaplan & Yanay (2006) describe the homosocial group, prevalent in Israeli culture, as one characterized by rule-governed aggression enabling men to negotiate the tensions between their need for heterosexual intimacy with other men and their fear of losing autonomy. The fraternal love which Raz and Roni describe facilitates a communication system that they can use in public while maintaining a sense of exclusivity. By conjuring up the heroic image of fraternal friendship, the ruthless battles of the underworld are depicted as principled and honorable, an image far removed from the stereotypical one of criminals as narcissistic, self-serving, and uncaring (Van Duyne et al., 2001). Roni insists that the people accompanying him are “brothers-in-arms” and not mercenaries, as they are falsely described in the media. By alluding to this mythical notion of fraternity, Roni describes a system of moral accounting that combines masculinity, courage, honor, and devotion. It is a type of sociality that celebrates self-sacrifice at the expense of rational self-interest (Pateman, 1989, p.49). Tomer, a reformed criminal explains how this exchange of favors creates an emotional bond fueled by fear and awe.

It creates a type of loyalty that is enmeshed with fear. I do things out of awe/respect/ fear [the Hebrew word denotes all three], but also because I love him [the head of the organization]. The two are inseparable. I felt kept. I knew that there was someone in this world that looked out for me. He gave me gifts. He showed me the ropes. At one point, he asked me to take someone out [kill someone for him]. He told me that if I do, it will prove to him that I’m trustworthy. And I did. I desperately wanted him to trust me. I wanted to prove myself to him.

The allusion to the mythicized form of fraternal love depicts the members of the crime organization as following a legitimate and normative moral code. It also provides the emotional basis for a sympathy economy that governs the exchange of favors. However, it normalizes a warped notion of paternal and fraternal love, one that constantly puts the recruit at risk. These tests of devotion are not performed for the recruits’ benefits, but to guarantee servitude.

**The Tyranny of the Gift**

Fraternal love, in its ideal form, should be prompted by nothing other than the emotional rewards that the relationship provides (Giddens, 1991, p.90; Misztal, 1996). Moreover, fraternity assumes the equality of men. Yet, the exchange of gifts and favors described here is intended to create and maintain unmistakable asymmetries of power. Gifting is a designed to create non-repayable debts to cement these power plays (Graeber, 2011). Grand displays of generosity and the heroic actions of his recruits publicly demonstrate the benefactor’s omnipotence and the subordination of the grateful beneficiaries (Graeber, 2011).

Timing is key to constructing this type of gift giving relations. Bourdieu (1991) shows how the “time-gap” between the gift and the return gift gives the relationship its meaning. This time-gap is the moment when it is neither too early nor too late to reciprocate. If the gift is almost immediately reciprocated, it can be construed as an eagerness to discharge one’s obligation, and, in effect, amount to a rejection of the initial gift. It can be mistaken for ingratitude” (Bourdieu, 1991, p.105). If, however, too long an interval can be mistaken for indifference. This time gap is fraught with tension, but also allows the return gift to seem spontaneous and given out of free will (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2006). Since such fraternity exists in perpetuity, partners to the relationship can be called upon at any time to return past favors. They are “on-call” all the time, waiting in suspense. Avner explains:

They tried to contact me several time since I got out of prison…I told them I wasn’t interested. But it isn’t easy to get away from them. They take it for granted that, once you’re out, you’ll immediately get back to business. Once a person [the leader] comes up to you and gives you everything you ever wanted, how can you just walk away from him? It’s scary. He’ll say: “I gave you everything and now you betray me?” People who join a crime organization are usually ones already mixed up with crime. And he [the head of the organization] solves their problems. It starts when he offers to make your problems go away. And now you are in awe him. Now you’ll do everything you are asked to do, no questions asked. If you don’t, it’s like you dishonored him. You are ungrateful. If you do what he asks, you are now in deeper trouble. For the leader to ask for favors is very risky. He can’t afford to have people say no to him. And so he carefully chooses to ask those who wouldn’t dare refuse him. I will do everything for him, even taking the blame for crimes I did not commit. If you go to prison, you will need his support…so there is no getting out of it.

Shlomo tried to maintain his autonomy by avoiding the norms of gifting:

I was everyone’s friend but befriended no one. Every time I got into trouble, I bailed myself out. I told myself: “Don’t rely on anyone’s help, it’s a trap.” If you do, it’s like you already committed your next felony because there will come a day when they’ll call on you to collect on this favor. They [the heads of the organizations] are obsessed with honor and with being honored, and this is how they size their honor. I drew a very definitive line. I always told the people who worked with me: it’s every man for himself. I’ll take care of my problems, and you of yours. We can work together. We can commit felonies together. But should one of us get into trouble, its every man for himself. Early on, I understood that, if you let someone help you, you are obligated to help him, and then it is a never-ending cycle that draws you in deeper and deeper. A crime organization is built on knowing what you are involved in and holding it over your head. I wanted to be indebted to no one. Once you owe someone for bailing you out, it never ends. It’s like a quick send.

Ahmad is a reformed criminal who turned state witness. He reflected on the head’s power to disown members of the organization and leave them defenseless and alone.

There is no way out [of the criminal world]. It is either you are with him, or six feet under. I am not locked up, but really I’m in prison. And I will continue to be for the rest of my life. I am hardly alive. I can hardly survive the day. I always look over my shoulder. And there is no one to turn to for help. I am as good as dead. I don’t fear him. He [the head of the organization] cannot hurt me any more than what I did myself by turning on him.

Yohay was a member in an OC group who later became the head of a division in the Israeli Police. He corroborates Ahmad’s account:

The head of these organizations take serious risks on recruits. First, they would ask them for small favors, say throw a grenade. But then the favors will get bigger. Now they will ask the recruit to take out someone. And if he does, the recruit is forever in their hands. He is theirs for life. But if the head of the organization does not have his back and “reward” him for his gift, he will turn on him. If he does not support the recruit while he is in jail and keeps his promises to the recruit, the recruit will turn on him.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we have shown both the structural and interactional benefits of gifting and that gifts can come in many forms: material goods, protection, a sense of belonging, and a sense of self-worth. The changing nature of gifts and favors creates an enduring economy of regard where debt can never be fully repaid. Collins (1997) concludes that emotional gift giving addresses the creation and negotiation of hierarchy, the obtaining and retaining of power, and rank and social position. Gift exchanges fulfill a threefold function: those taking part in them recognize each other as human beings; those taking part in them also recognize each other as possible partners; and once the relationship is established, they ratify the intention to continue the relationship, even to the point of coercion (Romele & Severo, 2016). Yet, in the criminal context we studied, gifting denotes the value of people (Graeber; 2011; Klaites & McLean, 2015). The public awarding of material tokens is design to mold the criminal’s subjectivity and enmesh it in a human economy of unrepayable debts. In a human economy, valuables are transacted to denote the value of human lives. Debts are incurred by the loss of a human being and therefore cannot be truly repaid except with another human life (Graeber, 2011; Jacques & Wright, 2014). This entanglement makes the risk of trusting others tolerable, as those who endow that trust can hope for the best while also holding the possibility of social and physical annihilation over the recipient’s head.

The high visibility of indebtedness, coupled with normative expectations concerning the use of “credit” and the “accrual of debt” in these organizations makes the negotiation of debt and repayment crucial to our understanding of these organizations’ governance. As we have shown, the timing of gift giving is also important. Often, new recruits are showered with gifts and attention as they are initiated into the organization. They are enticed in when they are most vulnerable and susceptible to emotional manipulation. Hence, gifting is part of a morality that dictates modes of relationships. The exchange of gifts and favors is such an effective means of governance because it creates a personalized system of entitlements and debts. Simmel suggests that “the condition of gratitude easily has a taste of bondage” (1964, p.393; c.f Åkerström, 2014). Though not explicitly coercive, gift giving creates moral, ethical, and social obligations which create co- dependencies (Skinner et al., 2013).

These exchanges give rise to a human economy where a person’s social worth and moral standing is determined by his involvement in the public exchange of gifts and favors. Two principles regulate participation in this human economy: the imperative to be grateful in acknowledging the debt; and the moral obligation to honor one’s debts. Those who fail to acknowledge those powerful enough to provide livelihoods can be devalued to the point of their social or physical death (Graeber, 2011). Thus, participation in this human economy is predicated on the molding of a certain personality type, an individual who willingly submits himself to the moral code of gift giving. Assuming the role of benefactors and recipients, criminals can balance their need for intimacy, care, and a sense of belonging with the imperative to repay the debts they have incurred (See also Benisti, 2010; Maruna, 2001). In this human economy, denying the possibility of “sympathy credit” is tantamount to death. As Guenther astutely notes: “It takes a whole network of interconnected obligations to create and sustain social personhood, but isolation destroys that personhood”(2013: p.XXX). In a community where social standing is derived from the power to both grant favors and collect on past ones, excommunication means annihilation.

Focusing on the norms of giving and reciprocating facilitates an emic understanding of how an economy of regard or sympathy is created, negotiated, and sustained. It also allows a glimpse into the vulnerabilities of power and coercion. In so doing, we have contributed to an expanding area of research called “positive criminology” (Ronel & Toren, 2012). The main goal of positive criminology is to highlight how positive components such as acceptance, compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude strengthen normative forms of unity between offenders and other members of the community. Focusing on such positive qualities can increase ex-convicts’ chances of turning their lives around for the benefit of themselves and society (Ronel & Toren, 2012).

The study’s main limitation is its limited sample size and possible selection bias, being based on 20 interviews with rehabilitated ex-convicts and 10 with police handlers and officers. To counter this possible bias, we triangulated our data collection by also interviewing senior police officers and collecting police reports, newspaper articles, and published criminal memoirs. While it is possible that the rehabilitating processes that the ex-convicts underwent influenced their perspectives, it is also possible that these processes helped them reflect on their experiences in ways that enriched their stories. Thus, in general, the study profited from their current point of view. We believe that their unique experiences and the openness with which they talked about them shed light on how criminal subjectivities are shaped and on how gifting is an effective means of governance in crime organizations.

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1. A poor neighborhood known for its delinquent activity [↑](#footnote-ref-2)