

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/02/the-joy-of-giving-emotion-as-rationality-in-the-moral-economies-of-survival.html>

## The Joy of Giving: Emotion as Rationality in the Moral Economies of Survival

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By Stacey A. McKenna

The so-called moral economy of the poor has been defined as the coming together of “a consistent traditional view of the social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community” (Thompson 1971: 79).

This particular angle on the construct of the moral economy, deriving primarily from historical, sociological, and anthropological research among “pre-industrialized” and “non-industrialized” societies, has in recent years been used to elucidate the complex systems of reciprocity that operate as a key to daily survival for many impoverished, homeless and housing-insecure folks who also happen to heavily use or be addicted to drugs. Drawing on this take on the moral economy, Bourgois and Schonberg’s photo-ethnography, *Righteous Dopefiend*, poignantly and explicitly illustrated the problematic intersection of mutual obligation, rational generosity, and generalized reciprocity with a neoliberal harm reduction ethos (which promotes “empowerment,” autonomy, and individual responsibility) and injection-related risk practices. For example, as they demonstrate, “the best protection from withdrawal symptoms is to maintain a generous reputation, because everyone is eager to help someone who will reciprocate in the future” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 83). That is, an individual’s engagement in high-risk practices such as needle sharing ought not be framed as irrational, but as driven by a pragmatic drive to participate in an established moral economy, one that will secure survival or even well-being down the line. Such networks are akin to Fafchamps’ solidarity networks, arising in a context of scarcity and making it survivable through systems of shared expectation and trust (1992). This particular application of the moral economy has been influential in re-evaluating the unintended harms that may result from interventions as well-intentioned as syringe exchanges and other public health outreach and education programs. And, it has provided a powerful lens through which to view and make sense of the multiple ways diverse and multi-level risk environments (Rhodes 2002) may render those who use drugs structurally vulnerable (Quesada, et al. 2011).

This perspective on the moral economy is the one to which I originally

turned when seeking to understand “getting by” and everyday life among active methamphetamine users in Northern Colorado. But, as always seems to be the case with anthropological data, there are pieces that don’t quite fit the assumption of rationality as it stands. I want to use this post as an opportunity to consider an extension of the moral economy from one that privileges the physical and material to one that is inclusive of the emotional as part of what is considered rational in the navigation of the everyday.

\* \* \*

I first met Dorothy\* in 2011, while conducting ethnographic interviews with women who use methamphetamine. I was at the local harm reduction organization, and she was in to get a routine HIV test and pick up supplies (condoms, food, etc.). Seeing my flyer, she wanted more information and, possibly, to set up an appointment for an interview. Dorothy was the fourth person I met in the course of conducting my dissertation research and today, three years later, she remains one of my closest and most “reliable” research participants. When she came in for that first interview, only a day or two after we first met, Dorothy was dressed as if for church, wearing jewelry and make-up (the only time I’ve ever seen her in the latter). Before I could even begin the consent process, she began telling me about her work with the homeless, how, on a regular basis, she uses her food stamps to buy groceries which she then preps and brings to a group of about twenty (mostly) men who spend their days drinking in a central city park. When I asked her, What got you interested in (it), why is that your passion right now? Dorothy responded with no hesitation:

Umm, because I lost my kids and my home and somebody I thought I was in love with in 24 hours . . . and I was homeless for 12 years . . . I got a place now.

Although she was only recently off the streets herself and depended upon a variety of government subsidies and whatever cash she could hustle up cleaning houses or selling burritos to local businesses at lunchtime to make ends meet, I learned over the years that Dorothy routinely spent her food stamps on other people. Sometimes this was her on-again off-again boyfriend, sometimes it was for buddies passing through town, but most often it was on food that she prepared and served to this group of chronically homeless men who would likely never be able to reciprocate. If we look at this as Dorothy does, though, she has two motivations. The first is the one evidenced by her quote, above: She is “giving back.” This action fits very neatly with a central component of her identity; she is a caretaker at heart. It is not just something she does, it is who she is.

In this sense, Dorothy's generosity can be viewed as fitting into an established societal system of generalized reciprocity, one that conceptualizes ethics as something internalized, as a manifestation of "discipline" in the Foucauldian sense (Fassin 2012). To give back is something ethical, something good, and as such, something she wanted me (and others in her network) to know about. This perspective abates the assumption of the rational actor, but arguably reduces the individual to her subjectivity, something formed, in this instance, without her knowing. It also continues to privilege the practicality and tangibility of the action, positing that Dorothy benefits from disciplining herself, from "fitting in," rather than acknowledging that Dorothy also benefits emotionally: she derives pleasure from the act of giving itself. And that is the second motivation that is clear in talking with Dorothy. Giving back is not just who she is. It is what makes her happy.

And the thing is, she's not the only one.

I finished my dissertation research in 2012 and immediately moved on to a study of methamphetamine acquisition and survival strategies. This means I have now been working in a research capacity with active meth users in Northern Colorado for three years and Dorothy's story, her generosity in the face of scarcity, is far from novel, though for her, giving may be a more deeply significant aspect of her identity than for others. Participants in my research can often be found cooking meals for those who are less fortunate and offering to share what little they have, often to their own detriment.

Meghan is another example. She and I were sitting on the lawn outside the library, playing with her grandson, when she looked at me sadly. I relapsed, she said. A few weeks ago. I had a whole year and I blew it. I haven't used again, but it's so hard. When I first met Meghan, she was approaching a year of post-treatment sobriety. She had acquired housing, was volunteering, and attending AA and NA meetings several times each week. Despite insisting that she prioritized her own sobriety, she remained embedded in the relationships that had dominated her days as a homeless methamphetamine user. She routinely offered a helping hand to members of her former drug using and survival network, many of whom were homeless, most of whom still used, and some of whom continued to offer her meth even though she turned them down and asked them to stop. Meghan knew these continued relationships were potentially harmful to her sobriety, but she repeatedly told me with pride how the "kids" still referred to her as "mama." Not long after she told me about her relapse, two teens approached us, Hey, mama and updated her on their latest struggles, their latest drama. She offered comforting words, a hug, some advice, and when they left, she turned to me and smiled. The risk was worth it.

And while the concept of emotion has perhaps been gendered, such that the privileging of the physical over the emotional has been credited to a persistent patriarchal hierarchy, men are not removed from these struggles. I saw Charles at least once a month for five or six months. Like Meghan, he was struggling to quit using meth. He was living on the streets, couch-surfing occasionally, generally avoiding the shelters. His girlfriend had recently gone to jail when we first met and our interviews and meetings were regularly interrupted by very brief phone calls from jail. Though Charles had a very meager monthly income, most days he put whatever money he earned on his girlfriend's books. This kept him from getting a room and, perhaps, excluded him from participating in the broader solidarity networks. According to Faichamps' interpretation, this action could almost be seen as a means of accumulating wealth, something that is generally frowned upon in these moral economies of the poor (1992). From Charles' perspective, he was taking care of Deb. He knew she might leave him immediately upon her release, and he recognized that she might just be spending the money he was putting on her books, not planning for their future. But he was adamant that his role was to take care of her, and his compassion was key to his choice. Like Dorothy and Meghan, when Charles told me of his acts of giving, he lit up, not just with pride, but with joy.

I am by no means the first person to argue that the emotions of drug users can be of importance (see, for example (Simmons and Singer 2006)), but I assert that the recognition of emotion as playing a role in rational decision making is underdeveloped. In focusing our conversations around the concrete, tangible, physical aspects of survival, we once again privilege a particular conceptualization of "the rational," one that positions it in opposition to the emotional, which becomes, thus, irrational. My early analysis of this ongoing research suggests, however, that, for many, the emotional gains associated with generosity may be just as important as the practical ones, in some cases more so, and as such, the choosing of emotional benefit, of subjective well-being need not be framed in terms of economics or even support. Even where discipline may be at play, this needn't undermine or overshadow the significance of the emotion itself. If the internalization of social norms as a means of promoting or enforcing self-control were the only explanation for the prideful adoption of a caretaker or provider role, all would derive considerable, sacrifice-worthy joy from it, or all would feel martyred.

This attention to emotion is not an attempt to discount the rational as we have previously conceptualized it, or to gloss over the significance of the pragmatics of physical and material elements of survival. Rather, it is an attempt to begin the process of considering an integration of the emotional in relation to rational decision making, to highlight the importance of attending to emotion, even in the context of ration, even in the context of

the political and the economic.

After all, there is something decidedly humane in an effort not to rationalize how someone is feeling, but to recognize that perhaps that feeling itself is sufficient drive to act. By attempting to situate our understanding and explanations of behavior in a context that frames only the physical or material as rational, are we in fact simply reflecting and as such perpetuating the construction of the “selfish addict”? Perhaps more troubling, I wonder if by excluding the role of emotion from discourse on the rational we risk obfuscating the humanity of it all, forgetting that suffering, too, can be/often is emotional, and perhaps the most rational choice in all of this is to choose a moment of joy, even at the expense of survival.

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## Notes

\*All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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