

ISTR 2008 abstract  
Stream: Philanthropy and the Third Sector:

**Presenter**

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**Title**

I Give Therefore I Am: the role of philanthropic activity in identity work

**Relevance of paper to the conference call**

This paper addresses the conference themes of the development of organized philanthropy and the perception of giving in society.

**Summary**

This paper examines the rhetoric used by and about contemporary philanthropists in the UK in discussing their acts of philanthropy and describing their identities as philanthropists. The analysis is based on data drawn from a secondary analysis of charitable documents and a content analysis of media coverage. The findings are used to argue that philanthropy is playing an increasing role in the creation and maintenance of identity and that a shift has occurred away from philanthropy as an institution driven by concerns separate to the donor, and towards philanthropy as a lifestyle choice that presents an opportunity to make statements about the self.

**Theoretical context**

This paper draws on theories of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and the rise of emotional culture (Furedi 2003). It relates the emergence of modern philanthropy to the disintegration of previously existing social forms, the structural transformation of social institutions and the reconfiguration of the relationship of the individual to society. It also employs the concepts of identity work developed by Goffman (1959) to argue that 'new philanthropy' can be best understood as a communicative act and part of the public presentation of self by the wealthy.

**Data**

The dataset discussed in this paper includes 150 of the largest and most prominent philanthropists operating in the UK in 2005/06, representing a combined charitable asset base of just under £9 billion and annual grant giving of c.£0.5 billion. The sample was created by merging the donors identified in three sources: (1) the 100 largest UK personal and family trusts and foundations identified in Charity Trends 2006, (2) philanthropists identified in the Sunday Times Rich List Giving Index in 2006 and (3) philanthropists making multiple appearances in the UK national print media in 2006, as identified in the LexisNexis database.

## Findings

The findings are based on a secondary analysis of documents written by the sample, including governing documents, annual reports and foundation websites, and a content analysis of media coverage of the sample, including both claims made *by* and *about* these philanthropists.

It is found that the language used by philanthropists in the process of formally undertaking their philanthropic activity serves a wider purpose than simply fulfilling the legal requirements of establishing and reporting on their activities. In many cases these words take the form of a personalised 'mission statement', summarising a desired identity and justification of the donors' life. Media coverage reinforces this situation by focussing on the donors and the culture that surrounds them, rather than on the causes that they support and their beneficiaries.

The conclusion that philanthropy is, at least in part, about the donors' identity work, as well as its ostensible purpose to promote public benefit, confirms Frumkin's analysis of philanthropy as an "*uneasy juxtaposition of private interests on public needs*" (2006:3).

Beck, U. and E. Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences. London, Sage.

Frumkin, P. (2006). Strategic Giving: the art and science of philanthropy. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.

Furedi, F. (2003). Therapy Culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age. London, Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York, Doubleday.