

# The paradoxes of blood donors' representations of blood: a complex scientific, religious and cultural amalgam

## Research Chair on the Social Aspects of Blood Donation

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## Introduction

**Debates about blood donation have largely focused on the circulation of blood (donation) rather than on the representations of blood**

- Beliefs are some of the oldest among those pertaining to blood and bodily fluids
- Symbols, rituals, metaphors relating to blood can still be found today
- Throughout modern history, blood symbolism = lineage, descentance, heredity, race, identity

### Quasi-universality of blood

Even if blood adapts to historical context, representations of blood are comparable in “high-level civilizations” and in “primitive societies”.

**In light of the diversity of social and cultural representations of blood : where do blood donors and non-donors stand ?**

## Blood: at the paradox of life and death (1)

### Paradoxical and bipolar properties of blood

*Intimately tied to images of death and even more to those of life—which, ultimately, always triumphs—blood has been considered at once dangerous and salutary, harmful and beneficial, impure and pure. If it has never stopped repulsing and attracting [people], it is because, like everything that is sacred (and even more so), it is essentially ambiguous ... Blood remains in people, deep inside but intact, a metaphysical blood as necessary to their spiritual life as material blood is to their physical life (Roux, 1988)*

### 1) Blood = life

#### Blood= strenght, fertility, regenerative, life-saving, medical virtues

*'For man, blood is the best of substances,' a philosopher-physician Zealander noted in the mid-16th century, 'a familiar and most domestic food, and nourishment for life.' [...] People were bled in order to be purified or ritually purged at the end of a seasonal cycle, and forced themselves to purify their humours with an astrological passivity that we have no right to criticize today, being ourselves obsessive consumers of uncertain and poorly defined chemical products (Camporesi, 1990: p. 24 and 27).*

#### Blood and its mysterious properties

- Fight diseases, purify / strengthen the body, freeing oneself from spell, inherit qualities of animals via its ingestion

## Blood: at the paradox of life and death (2)

### 2) Blood is death

#### Fears associated with blood

- Blood can attract death, symbolize vengeance, stain
- In many cultures, it is dangerous to cross corporeal boundaries (Douglas 1966)

**Blood = ambiguity and disorder** (when outside the body)

### Controlled and voluntary vs. uncontrolled and involuntary blood flow

#### Disenchantment of objects (Attali 2004)

*Blood will be given a financial value, **just like any other merchandise**. It is an identifiable object; it possesses physical reality; it is divisible and rare, and consequently it can be given a price. In this sense, we have all the reasons to say that it is no more than merchandise like any other. **But blood relates to life**, which could in no way be an object of commerce in our societies. In numerous communities, until recently, the circulation of objects was ritualized. Indeed, all objects were seen as “living,” endowed with the spirit of those who had possessed them. **With modernity, objects have in a sense been progressively equalized, assassinated and disenchanted**. They no longer carry within themselves the lives of their former owners. The symbolic charge and aura have been dispelled, making them even easier to circulate. Blood consequently follows this logic common to other objects (p. 272).*

## Blood donation and symbolic representations: an empirical analysis

### Empirical data

Four separate studies conducted in Québec between 2009 and 2011

- a) Blood donation and living environments;
- b) Families, altruism and blood donation;
- c) Youth, altruism and blood donation;
- d) Ethnocultural communities and blood donation in Québec

### A total of 234 semi-structured interviews with:

- 184 donors (including lapsed donors) / 50 non-donors;
- 106 women / 128 men;
- 84 aged 30 - / 150 aged 31+
- 76 with ethnocultural informants / 158 informants from the majority society

## Blood: a vital and mysterious substance? (1)

### “Disenchanted” blood

Informants perceived blood as:

- A concrete substance = enables body (the machine) to function
- Can be fragmented into various products to increase its medical uses
- Easily extracted, lost if not donated

**This does not mean that blood is trivial: noble character of an altruistic act**

### “Giving blood, giving life”?

Not presented as such by our informants, but rather to:

- Help
- Do as others have done before them, like one's parents
- To participate in a family outing or with friends
- Because one witnessed a relative or friend needing a transfusion

## Blood: a vital and mysterious substance? (2)

**A vital blood fluid.** Blood as life can:

- Help improve someone's quality of life
- Give hope to continue living
- Prolong life (incurable disease)
- Re-giving life

**Blood is rare and precious**

- Can justify one wanting to give to family members or friends (ethnocultural informants)

**Types of blood communities**

- Rare blood groups: can constitute primary motivation to donate and can make those who do not regularly give blood feel guilty of not doing so
- Carrying or not carrying cytomegalovirus = value.
  - CMV is a virus that causes infections; it mostly goes unnoticed and is very common. Adults are immunized against it but not children.
- Quality and rarity of blood type

**Devaluation of interpretations not considered rational by our informants** (i.e. regeneration of blood)

## Blood: a vital and mysterious substance? (3)

### Giving blood for oneself: the beneficial effects of modern bloodletting

- A motivation for giving blood because of beneficial effects: regeneration
- For ethnocultural informants, blood donation can also mean loss of energy
  - Elders more likely to mention loss of energy than younger informants

### Blood: a witness to death and impunity is rare and precious

- A reminder of the pure / impure dichotomy
  - Giving blood is a privilege for those who have “healthy blood”
  - Refused blood can be perceived as judgment on one’s blood “purity”
- Informants (including donors) remain anxious of being at receiving end of transfusion

### The skin: a worrisome barrier

- Fear of needles: needles pierce through the body’s boundaries
  - Informants are conscious that is it an irrational fear
- Contact of blood with air is believed to corrupt the blood
- Reluctance to donating plasma



## Conclusion

**The symbolism of blood: disenchanting for many and mysterious for others**

**Giving blood: a seemingly common practice that is not so trivial**

- Belief in regeneration
- Fear of needles / spilt blood
- Through it, part of one's identity can be transmitted to receiver
- Deception that one's blood does not qualify to be given to a dignified recipient
  - (even disgust towards the idea that a criminal might benefit from one's donation)

**It is not conceivable that informants should suddenly give up these beliefs**

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