

Psychology of Gift-Giving

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**GiftAFeeling**

### **Gift giving by definition**

When we look at gift-giving solely for what it is we see that the common understanding of what it entails is centred around voluntary items given without a need for reciprocation. This could be in the form of a present or action given to honour a person, occasion or just provide assistance. Gifts are given to commemorate important life events, foster personal relationships, and encourage economic exchange. The power of a gift in itself can mean so many things to different groups of people while sending different messages such as "the status of a relationship, a promise of future interaction, or a statement of love, concern or domination" (Poe 1977).

Thus, there seem to be some cultural norms and differences when we look at the way we interpret gifts and reciprocate them. The need to give may be rooted in religious or moral imperatives, this could be by just providing a gift that conveys a sense of status hierarchy where one can indicate the importance of someone or even provide them with a sense of acknowledgement to feel seen. A gift within the world of psychology could certainly be presented and understood in many ways "A gift is a ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another" (Cheal 1987, p. 152). When someone works to give specific gifts that are well-thought-out they work to define the importance of the interaction. As they strengthen the bond that the people within that relationship have. Hence, gift-giving alone has the power to reflect both the giver and the receiver, as well as their unique relationship. Giving a gift to someone we care about allows us to express our feelings and gratitude to them. Meaning they work as a medium to a means of gratification, a way in which to help others reinforce or show feelings. That is their importance within the world of psychology. In situations where a gift is not as well thought out and one opts to provide money, simply as a gift, this can convey a variety of

negative messages, such as a lack of effort while a practical gift given to a business associate communicates that the relationship is not intended to be close or intimate.

### **What Motivates Gift-giving?**

Marcel Mauss (1954) proposed a detailed evaluation of the gift-giving process. Within his research into gift-giving, he looked at several different isolated or primordial communities and concluded that gift-giving is a self-perpetuating system of reciprocity and broke down that there are three obligations which make up gift-giving. He stated that there is the obligation to give, receive, and repay. These motives become incorporated within the day-to-day norms of our society, to the point an individual is socially compelled to give in the right circumstances. While being on the receiving end we must be open to getting these gifts as this is what has been deemed socially acceptable. Not receiving a gift creates conflict, and Mauss credited this to the fact that someone accepting a gift may seem as accepting that they are dependent on the giver, that they rely on and need this gift and thus this view weakens their social status. Therefore, he says to mitigate this tension that gifts bring we opt to repay the gift in the way we feel is adequate and failure to do so creates a sense of low self-esteem as one accepts their loss of status. This creates a cycle of repeated actions and provides a guide to the system in which gift-giving occurs in our day to day life. We see such attitudes in workplaces or new relationships where gifts are bought with caution where the price is matched in hopes of not overdoing it or creating pressure on others where buying an extremely expensive gift may send mixed signals.

Gift-giving not only feels great for those who are receiving the gifts but to those who provide the gifts as a smile on a face or even the sense of satisfaction that is met with the seeing expressions given by those who have received gifts.

We would hope that gifts are given out solely to help, and fulfil the needs of others but a lot of gift-giving is done to fulfil the needs of the giver, a gift is sometimes easily used as a form of inevitable debt, one that must somehow be repaid in an equal way as Mauss(1954) states.

Barry Schwartz(1967) continued this idea of inevitable debt with his writing and theorising of gift-giving reciprocity and showed that it was based on “deliberative justice” He explains that "a gift-giver will experience discomfort if reciprocity does not occur," but they will also be uncomfortable if they have been given flawless reciprocity”. Where in the situation you gave someone a gift and they emphasize paying back the true price of the present in cash. As a result, each gift has an effect on the amount of relationship debt without ever cancelling it out. Stating that in a relationship there is a constant imbalance of debt between the people in the relationship and this is what motivates the giving to continue as in one case a gift is reciprocated with payment then another gift could be offered later in the form of an act. This continuous cycle is what strengthens relationships as a whole and highlights the importance of gift-giving in relationships to ensure gratitude constitutes the continuation of the relationship.

### **Strengths of Gift-giving**

Gift giving does enhance parts of the brain linked to altruism and happiness where we see that the act of gift-giving has chemical reactions and not just psychological. We see this in a study conducted at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Where they told 50 people they'd be receiving \$100 over a few weeks. Half of the people were asked to spend the money on themselves, while the other half were asked to spend it on someone they knew. Those who agreed to spend money on other people made more generous decisions throughout the experiment than those who agreed to spend money on themselves. They also had more interaction between the parts of the brain associated with altruism and happiness, and after the

experiment, they reported higher levels of happiness. A release of dopamine is associated with gift-giving which in turn only creates positive impressions and associations in the brain between the giver and receiver which could strengthen the relationship in the future.

The act of gift-giving also pushes the notion of empathy and kindness where we promote the emotions of feeling as if someone is willing to go out of their way to provide you with a gift they feel you would like. This in itself is a thoughtful act that works to make others feel thought of or heard. This could be in romantic relationships, platonic or even in workplaces where they want to provide their workers with the opportunity to feel as if they are appreciated or noticed. A gift works to convey this message with ease. As per data gathered by Random Acts of Kindness, a nonprofit foundation that invests resources into making kindness the norm states that trying to express kindness to others in a simple way such as gift-giving may lead to an increase in energy, lifespan, feelings of love and happiness, and can even help relieve pain and lower blood pressure.

### **Reciprocation**

Repaying gifts is socially acceptable as an understanding that the gift is valued because there is a sense to want to give the same feeling, act or service back to the person who provided it to you. Although, one must not always feel pressured to do so or even feel the anxiety accompanied by gift-giving. It is very optional and can acceptably be a one-way street Schwartz and Mauss stated the norms aligned would lead to one repaying as that is what is commonly understood as being the way to show consideration and compassion although this is not the only response to a gift that is commonly seen around the world. From businesses to businesses or even businesses to clients there is no real rule of reciprocity outside the notion of being thankful. Generosity is easily accompanied by acts of kindness or service in the future which is the real bond that is shared, there is no need to financial express generosity in all situations.

### References

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