

The Perplexities of Gifting

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Abstract

People participate in gift giving worldwide depending on what each culture prioritizes. It is very dependent on the context and situation. Each person has different values, some give an emphasis to rites of passage while others emphasize rites of progression. The reason why the cycle of gift exchange has been persistent is because of solidarity. The term is used to describe how social process have such a huge influence on gift exchange. It is because of these social values that people feel obligated to take part in it and that is a big motive beneath altruism. Due to the said obligation, people feel like they are not being given a choice, which makes one question whether there is even an altruistic motive at all. Because reciprocity is also a huge driving factor, it creates an aura of debt which inevitably gives rise to social imbalance that would rather be avoided. Marketers take advantage of the obligation and reciprocity by advertising gifts in a way that individuals get coerced into buying gifts to prove that they value the person.

Keywords: solidarity, obligation, reciprocity, debt, social imbalance

Complexities of gift giving

The formalities of giving and receiving gifts is celebrated worldwide albeit in distinct social practices. Depending on the alliances, circumstances, and contexts the prevailing motivations consequently vary (Rugimbana et al., 2003). Although, the apparent majority reasons encompass building reciprocal bonds, forming trustful connections and dependence in order to establish greater social affiliations that could prove to be beneficial in the future. The entire process of gift exchange may be valued differently amongst both parties as they may hold diverging perspectives on the reasons underlying the gift exchange (Rugimbana et al., 2003). While gift givers fixate on choosing an appropriate gift, receivers feel anxious by anticipating how the gift reflects the perception of social bond between the two, that is, how well does the giver supposedly know them.

Understandably, people engage in the gift selection and giving process according to the occasion – context and situation. Some people hold rites of passage, including weddings, to a high regard whereas others hold rites of progression, including birthdays to a higher regard. Hence, the priorities differ for each individual (Rugimbana et al., 2003). It is contingent upon a number of factors that bounce around socialization and status hierarchies, self-gifting, romance, gift worth, anxiety presenting, power relations, social exchange relations and the nature of the relationship.

Bounded by solidarity

Controversially, it has been contended that gifts are held firmly because of solidarity rather than exchange. Solidarity is the social web that intertwines society together, which is driven by wealth sharing and not striving toward self-interest. Emile Durkheim who is known as the Father of Sociology was recognized for his famous work on “The Division of Labor in

Society”. Through this he introduced the concept of how social norms influence society (Crossman, 2020). He claimed that the way an individual presents themselves has to do with social process, a term called *sui generis*. Therefore, the social bond is prioritized rather than the motivations that lie behind giving and reciprocating especially during gift exchange. For example, even the smallest of favors such as watching someone's belongings for a few minutes and bigger favors as well like covering shifts for each other at work, is part of the assistance carried out in everyday life. These itself can be considered as gifts freely distributed without carrying expectations in gaining something in return. In practice however, at times these favors can be counteracted with a favor of their own that may not exactly be equivalent or even immediate (Fourcade, 2020).

These back-and-forth favors given and return creates a culture of obligation and gratitude, exchange of credits and debt making up the social fabric. The consistent process of gift exchange is the cohesion between people upon which social structures arisen. Institutions have gained the biggest advantage from this ritual per se by feeding off the profits made (Fourcade, 2020). However, the origin is long forgotten and the mechanisms that are brought forward are questioned. It is wounding to have an invitation not returned or to be bothered by unshared wealth, but one forgets to address where these feelings originate from. Keeping in mind that human beings do not act on the basis of self-interest but are driven by the imperative to create and maintain social alliances, can cloud judgement. Despite being aware of it, the whole obligatory gift giving and receiving tradition portrays that both self-interest and maintenance of social relationships are blended into the process (Fourcade, 2020).

Falling into the trap of obligation

Gifts represent the development and maintenance of social ties that are significant in the duration of friendships. It helps with encouraging conversation involving the sharing of emotions as well as tucking away any distressing feelings. There is an immense amount of positivity exhibited from the giver because it is shielded from conceit and amplified through confidence, partially because the act of giving enhances social status and supremacy. Gifts have ability to eradicate underlying resentment between people allowing peaceful coexistence (Fourcade, 2020).

Nevertheless, lurking beneath the altruistic motives lie obligation. This occurs when moral or religious instances are encompassed, when a social image has to be maintained, as a gesture of peace or merely the expectation of reciprocity. It is paradoxical that although gifts are used to express affection, at the end of the day there is still the sense of obligation. Thus, the motivation stems from the stress of buying the gift in order to fulfill moral obligation. Yet gift exchange occurs as if there is no compulsion to carry it out, when clearly there are three components involved: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate (Fourcade, 2020). This is what seals the affirmation of one's standing in a social group, recognition in the social group, and an augmentation of peace. Moreover, it can be a competitive move where one's position in the group is at risk notably, when the symbolic action behind gifts remains unnoticed.

The richer are under a moral obligation to distribute at least some of their wealth to good use or risk losing dignity. There still exists the obligation of having to appear genuine, despite experiencing cognitive dissonance i.e., undergoing discomfort when holding two inconsistent attitudes, beliefs, or ideals (Cherry, 2022). If the giver solely thinks about how giving a gift will make them appear superior in the eyes of the beholder, then its purpose is to boost ego, and kill

two birds with one stone – enhancing one’s social hierarchy and at the same time, insinuating the feeling of obligation in the receiver (Fourcade, 2020).

To accept or to not accept?

Gifts serve as an acknowledgement of a social relationship, ideally without having any expectation of wanting something in return. Yet there are complexities involved. The obligation to accept a gift when it seems way too expensive for the receiver to ever be able to repay back is a heavy burden. But it is the ultimate social relationship test (Fourcade, 2020). If the receiver rejects the gift, it can be an act of humiliation towards the giver that in turn cause conflict between the two. Yet it sets up the relationship to be reciprocal creating an atmosphere of disproportion and debt in it. Some so strongly this notion of reciprocity that they would prefer to simply reject the gift in order to avoid this social imbalance, than to maintain the lasting cycles of reciprocity. Hence, to reciprocate is a heavy baggage to carry and one would strive to avoid it at all costs.

The ambivalent nature of gifts

Given the intricate nature of gift exchange, it is questionable why gift exchange is mainly seen in the light of altruism when in fact there are also multiple ‘darker’ motives entailed. Since obligation is quite prevalent, endorsing the belief of the extent to which people value their social relationship depending on the context e.g., Valentine’s Day is a compelling sales factor (Rugimbana et al., 2003). This sends the wrong memo that there is a need to purchase gifts in order to make the other person feel special. Not only that, it emphasizes how giving is like a pathway towards bringing to fruition the giver’s obligation while attaining self-interest of feeling rewarded (Rugimbana et al., 2003). Marketers utilize these strategies to drive their sales up, by encouraging consumers to purchase specific gifts for certain occasions, so as to conserve the gift

exchange culture by excessively underscoring its importance. Overall, there are many negatives on top of the positives of gift exchange that have to be addressed to grasp the whole picture of its mechanisms.

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