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The Social Psychology of the Gift

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ABSTRACT

In the first section of this essay gift exchange is discussed in terms of its relevance for the development and maintenance of identity. The acceptance of a gift, it is suggested, is in fact an acceptance of the giver's ideas as to what one's desires and needs are. Gift giving as a mode of social control and expression of unfriendliness is considered. The relationship between gift exchange and social structure is analyzed from the standpoint of the "gratitude imperative." The essay is concluded with a treatment of benefit exchange as a technique for the regulation of shared guilt.

THE GIFT AS A GENERATOR OF IDENTITY

Differential emphasis has been placed upon form and content in social analysis. Simmel's discussion of "sociability" is perhaps the most radical statement on form in social life, for it is with regard to this mode of sociation that content is asserted to be of no consequence.[1] Goffman expresses a similar idea, the "Rule of Irrelevance," in his essay "Fun in Games." The content of the game, as that of sociability, must be "self-sufficient" or irrelevant to the relationship between players in non-game encounters.[2] This is especially true of the gift, over whose contents an excessive display of pleasure or displeasure would affront the giver, violate the Rule of Irrelevance, and take the entire encounter out of the sphere of "pure" sociability.

The rules of self-sufficiency or irrelevance must not be understood to imply that the contents of things can be stripped of their meanings. Thus, despite the principle which subordinates the content or quality of the gift to its significance as a token of the social relationship itself, it is clear that the presentation of a gift is an imposition of identity.

Gifts are one of the ways in which the pictures that others have of us in their minds are transmitted. This point is seen in recurrent controversies over the prevalence of "war toys" on American gift lists. And the function of "masculine" and "feminine" gifts relative to sexual identification is clear enough. By the giving of different types of "masculine" gifts, for example, the mother and father express their image of the child as "a little soldier" or "a little chemist or engineer." Doubtlessly, an analysis of the gift-buying habits of parents would be a significant contribution to our knowledge of socialization. One important aspect of such an investigation would surely focus upon the increasing popularity of educational toys, the bisexual distribution of which may contribute to and reflect the

[1] Georg Simmel, "Sociability" in Kurt Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 40–55.

[2] Erving Goffman, "Fun in Games" in *Encounters* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), p. 19.

lessening differentiation of American sex roles.

The gift as an imposition of identity is well seen in its burlesqued form, the "Office Pollyanna," the ideal type of which obtains when gift recipients are chosen at random and presented with inexpensive items which make comical or witty reference to that part of their personal makeup which, in the eyes of the giver, is most worthy of exaggeration.

If gift giving socializes and serves as a generator of identity, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the existence of gifts which facilitate or impede maturation. One way in which upwardly mobile parents cause anxiety in their children is to provide gifts for which they are not yet ready—or even gifts whose level they have long ago outgrown. In this light, regressive possibilities exist on both sides of every gift-giving relationship. What has been implied here is that gift giving plays a role in status maintenance and locomotion. This is illustrated best in the "rites of passage" which gifts normally accompany. In such instances, they not only serve the recipient (e.g., a newlywed) as tools with which to betray more easily his or her former self but symbolize as well the social support necessary for such a betrayal.

THE GIVER

The gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver. On the one hand, gifts, as we noted, are frequently given which are consonant with the character of the recipient; yet, such gifts reveal an important secret: the idea which the recipient evokes in the imagination of the giver. This point enables us to appose to Cooley's recognition of the social looking glass an additional source of self-concept: this is our "ideas of others"—which, when made public, are self-defining. Indeed, gift giving is a way of free associating about the recipient in his presence and sometimes in the presence of others. This principle is recognized by the maker of a last will who is obliged to distribute benefits among two or more persons. The identity he thereby generates for himself is perhaps the most important of a long career of identity pronouncements, for it is his last—and is unalterable.

The act of giving is self-defining in a more direct way. Men tend to confirm their own identity by presenting it to others in objectified form. An extreme instance of this type of self-presentation is the display of masculinity through the giving of gift cigars following the birth of a child. Emerson, in fact, has suggested that this tendency toward self-objectification be made explicit (and in so doing provides insight into that which the new father's gift cigar symbolizes):

> The only gift is a portion of thyself. . . . Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to its primary basis, when a man's biography is conveyed in a gift.[3]

It is common knowledge that men present themselves publicly by the conspicuous presentation of gifts. Generous contributions to charity have always been a source of prestige in the United States. This is especially true when such gestures are made by individuals rather than corporations, and has been carried to an extreme by the members of movie society, for whom giving is an aspect of public relations. But professional fund raisers recognize this tendency in general society as well and therefore provide "I Gave" stickers which are generally affixed to the front door as certification of the family's willingness and ability to give away wealth. The charity potlatch is an important mode of the public presentation of self.

In middle- and upper-class society, the wife is a ceremonial consumer of goods, for

[3] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *Emerson's Essays* (Philadelphia: Spencer Press, 1936), p. 358.

decency "requires the wife to consume some goods conspicuously for the reputability of the household and its head."[4] Thus, the husband elaborates his identity by the bestowal of gifts upon the wife, who becomes the public exponent of his selfhood. Children, furthermore, are more and more assuming the role of family status representatives as the adult female moves from the social to the economic sphere. The gift presentation of automobiles and other expensive items to children and teenagers testifies to this drift. Of course, the negative side of an excessive giving—receiving ratio in favor of the parents consists of a denial to the child of those rewards to selfhood which accompany the giving of gifts, the chief of which is an image of oneself as a source of gratification to others.

This leads into the interesting area of the giving of gifts to oneself. This is normally spoken of in terms of "self-indulgence," opposition to which, stripped to its essentials, represents an unwillingness on the part of the ego to strike a bargain with the id. This inflexibility is dangerous when other people (as sources of satisfaction) are not available, for it makes adjustment to hostile or impersonal environments unlikely. Deprived of material demonstrations of recognition from others, the internalization of such disregard can only be avoided by the utilization of oneself as a source of pleasure. The "self-gratifier" is an interesting product of the non-intimate community who, despite his pervasiveness, has received little attention from the social sciences. This is the person who, without significant affectional bonds, somehow makes it through life in one piece. He creates his own (emotional) "nutrition" and survives.

GIFT REJECTION

Earlier, in our treatment of the gift as an imposition of identity, it was suggested that the acceptance of a present is in fact an acceptance of the giver's ideas as to what one's desires and needs are. Consequently, to accept a gift is to accept (at least in part) an identity, and to reject a gift is to reject a definition of oneself. It follows that the receipt of gifts from two incompatible persons or groups raises questions as to the real source of one's identification.

At another extreme are found outright rejections of gifts with a conscious view to affirming the selfhood whose status an acceptance would threaten. A radical illustration from Ruth Benedict makes this type of reaction clear in our minds:

> Throw Away invited the clan of his friend to a feast of salmon berries and carelessly served the grease and berries in canoes that had not been cleaned sufficiently to do them honor. Fast Runner chose to take this as a gross insult. He refused the food, lying down with his black bear blanket drawn over his face, and all his relatives, seeing he was displeased, followed his example.[5]

The covering of the face suggests that Fast Runner is defending himself against the disparaging definitions of his selfhood which the dirty canoes imply. And from the standpoint of the giver of the rejected gift, we see an immediate world that has somehow lost its dependability. As Helen M. Lynd notes, the giver trusts himself to "a situation that is not there" and is thereby forced to cope with the dilemma of shame.

GIFT EXCHANGE, CONTROL AND SUBORDINATION

Levi-Strauss has written that "goods are not only economic commodities but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skillful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of maneuvers, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against

[4] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. 83. See also pp. 85, 149.

[5] Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), pp. 175–76.

risks incurred through alliances and rivalry."[6] In other words, the regulation of one's bonds to others is very much part of the matter of the exchange of goods. Similarly, Homans and Malinowski have convincingly argued that men are less constrained in their actions by separate controlling activities and institutions than by obligations which they incur in reference to one another.[7] Furthermore, it is generally true that men maintain ascendancy by regulating the indebtedness of others to them. An exaggerated instance of this is described in Korn and McCorkle's essay on prison socialization:

> Once an inmate has accepted any material symbol of service it is understood that the donor of these gifts has thereby established personal rights over the receiver. The extreme degree to which these mutual aid usages have been made dependent to power struggles is illustrated by the custom of forcing other inmates to accept cigarettes. . . . Aggressive inmates will go to extraordinary lengths to place gifts in the cells of inmates they have selected for personal domination. These intended victims, in order to escape the threatened bondage, must find the owner and insist that the gifts be taken back.[8]

The principle of reciprocity, then, may be used as a tool in the aspiration for and protection of status and control. William F. Whyte, for instance, notes that the leader takes care not to fall into debt to his followers but to insure, on the contrary, that the benefits he renders unto others are never fully repaid.[9] Parents are especially aware of the fact that the child pays the cost of social inferiority when he accepts a gift from them and fails to reciprocate. "What is more," notes Homans, "he may, in becoming an inferior, become also a subordinate: the only way he can pay his debt may be to accept the orders of the giver."[10] This principle is perhaps nowhere better seen than through the character of Santa Claus, the greatest of all gift givers, whose powers of surveillance and ability to grant and withhold benefits are annually exploited by parents as instruments of control over their children.

Santa Claus should not be taken lightly by the sociologist for, as we have seen, he plays an important role with respect to social control.[11] It must also be noticed that he is not only a Christian but a Caucasian—and a blue-eyed Nordic one at that. This has particular significance for the non-Christian and non-Caucasian. That little Jewish boys and girls, for example, must depend upon a blue-eyed Christian for their gifts may lead to many hypotheses concerning the role of the myth in general and of St. Nicholas in particular with respect to ethnic dominance. Most Jewish parents are very aware of Santa's great seductive powers and of his ability to confound the developmental problem of ethnic identification. Therefore, the existence of Santa Claus is sometimes denied straightaway, and in his stead the hero of

[6] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Principle of Reciprocity" in Lewis A. Coser and Bernard Rosenberg (eds.), *Sociological Theory* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 76. Similarly, Michael Polanyi is quoted by Norman Brown: "He [man] does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets" (Brown, *Life against Death* [New York: Random House, 1959], p. 262).

[7] George C. Homans, *The Human Group* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), pp. 284–92; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959), pp. 58, 59.

[8] Richard Korn and Lloyd W. McCorkle, "Resocialization within Walls," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCXCIII (May, 1954), 90.

[9] William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 258.

[10] George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 319.

[11] For a general discussion of the social role of Santa Claus, see James H. Barnett, *The American Christmas* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1954). See also Warren O. Hagstrom, "What Is the Meaning of Santa Claus?" *American Sociologist*, I (November, 1966), 248–52.

the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, Judas Maccabee, is placed. But there is no contest: first of all, Judas is not a gift giver and as such is due neither promises of loyalty nor obedience. Further, there is no connection between the Hanukkah gift and the Maccabees. It is little wonder that Jewish children feel themselves shortchanged in December, for Hanukkah is indeed an imitation Christmas—and the very existence of imitation implies a dominant object and an inferior one. The Hanukkah gift, moreover, lacks the sociological quality of the Christmas present. The former, often given in the form of cash or Hanukkah *gelt*, merely (in Simmelian terms) "expresses the general element contained in all exchangeable objects, that is, their exchange value, it is incapable of expressing the individual element in them."[12] By contrast, the concrete Christmas present, especially chosen in terms of the personality of giver and receiver, is more specifically reflective of and incorporable into their respective life systems. To this extent, the giver of Hanukkah *gelt* inevitably surrenders to the recipient a measure of control because money, unlike a particular commodity, does not presume a certain life system: it may be used in any way and thus becomes a more flexible instrument of the possessor's volition.

Incidentally, the above point, it seems, is relevant to the area of public assistance, where there has been some debate about whether benefits to the needy should be given in the form of cash or goods. Social workers are more prone to argue in favor of the former alternative, often on the basis of its implications for the psychological autonomy of the recipient. Opponents of this policy argue that the presentation of money severely limits the welfare department's band of control, for cash may be spent on disapproved commodities. Its abstractness dissolves the authority of the giver, which is inherent in concrete items.

[12] Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude," *op. cit.*, pp. 390–91.

GIFT GIVING AS AN UNFRIENDLY ACT

Once a connection is made between gift exchange and social control, it becomes necessary to explore the possibility of unfriendliness as a component of gift giving. One need not look far before ample evidence for such a possibility is found. Lowell's assertion that "a gift without the giver is bare" implies that sincere affection is not a necessary correlate of gift presentation. But the popular warning, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth," is an even more direct acknowledgment of gifts as expressions of hostility. And the practical joke is an instance of man's need to give gifts which hurt or embarrass the recipient: "hot" chewing gum, cigars that blow up, gift-wrapped boxes containing a replica of a portion of feces, etc., are all purchased with a view to the direct or indirect satisfaction of this need.

The very nature of the gift exchange provides a condition for unfriendliness. Although gift giving is itself rewarding (in ways to be later described), it is accompanied by obvious deprivation as well, for the giver presents to another that which could have been employed for self-gratification. While he may receive a gift in return, there is certainly some loss of personal control over income and output of goods and money. The recipient in this light becomes a depriver about whom various degrees of ambivalence may emerge.

But the most obvious instance of hostility in gift exchange is found in the potlatch, which has as an essential aim the degradation of the recipient. Among the Arapesh, for example, a *buanyin* or exchange partner is assigned in early male adolescence. It is the duty of the *buanyins*, writes Mead, to insult one another continually and to try to outdo one another in gift exchange.[13] But it is the Kwakiutl who carry this practice to its extreme. Here, the boy who receives his first gift selects another person to receive a gift from him.

[13] Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament* (New York: New American Library, 1962), pp. 34–35.