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# Gift Giving in Anthropological Perspective

JOHN F. SHERRY, JR.\*

Gift giving is a universal behavior that still awaits satisfactory interpretation by social scientists. By tempering traditional consumer research with an anthropological perspective, our understanding of gift exchange can be enriched. A model of the gift exchange process intended to stimulate comprehensive research on gift-giving behavior is presented in this paper.

Gift giving is an intriguing, universal behavior that has yet to be interpreted satisfactorily by social scientists. Ever since Marcel Mauss' seminal essay (1924), anthropologists have been fascinated by it. As a form of reciprocity or exchange, gift giving is one of the processes that integrates a society. Schieffelin (1980) views the giving of gifts as a rhetorical gesture in social communication. Because exchange objects have a symbolic dimension, gift transactions can be understood as expressive statements or movements in the management of meaning: transaction becomes the basic expressive act by which symbols mediate cultural meanings. Gift giving, then, is properly a vehicle of social obligation and political maneuver (Schieffelin 1980).

In a series of articles, Bagozzi (1974, 1975) demonstrates the relevance of social exchange theory to consumer behavior. And in his excellent review of gift-giving behavior, Belk (1979) attributes four functions to the gift: communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. Each of these functions reflects the others and further highlights the importance of exchange, according to Belk. Gift giving has also commanded the attention of other consumer researchers, such as Banks (1979) and Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy (1982).

The significance of gift giving to national and regional economies is uncontested in terms of retail sales alone (Belshaw 1965; Davis 1972). That significance increases greatly when one considers other forms of giving that are of crucial importance to consumer behavior but that are virtually undescribed, such as charitable giving. Yet adherence to rigid disciplinary boundaries clouds our understanding of this fascinating behavior. With a shift in focus from a micro perspective to a holistic one, our interpretation of gift-giving behavior can become more comprehensive,

and the avenues of inquiry available to consumer researchers can multiply.

A rush to generalization has preceded a true grasp of the essential features of gift giving. As a result, little effort has been directed either toward understanding the process of gift giving or toward examining the behavior underlying the actual exchange of gift objects (including its structural and motivational components). In the attempt to distinguish gift giving from other types of consumer behavior, such as purchase for personal use, assumptions about giving and receiving have gone unchallenged. It is the process—not the mere event—of gift giving that captures the anthropological imagination. This process can be apprehended if we interpret the traditional, tightly controlled experimental studies by consumer researchers within the rich social context in which gift-giving is embedded.

When operationalized in a field study, the anthropological concern for holism, individual variability, and integration can make a substantial contribution to the consumer literature on gift exchange. Thorough investigation of the components of gift-giving behavior in such "naturalistic" settings as exchange rituals or shopping expeditions is essential. Rather than using artificial categories based on researchers' perceptions and assumed to be valid for all consumers, "native" perceptions relevant to gift giving—such as "propriety"—must be used to guide research. Unobtrusive measures (so rarely used in current investigations) might improve our understanding enormously. With the exception of studies incorporating a shopping-mall intercept tactic, most consumer research on gift giving has been entirely experimental. Again, with a shift in focus, the use of complementary methods to interpret gift exchange could prove rewarding.

Befu (1980) has observed that anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists generally employ contrasting measures in their analysis of exchange behavior. Anthropologists have favored a structural approach, examining prescribed rules of exchange and their interactions: they consider cultural frame of reference while commonly ignoring strategy and interpreting exchange as a system of

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norms and values. Sociologists and psychologists have preferred a motivational approach wherein individual strategies and decision making take precedence over cultural rules. Befu (1980) argues cogently that structural and motivational approaches must be synthesized to provide a comprehensive interpretation of exchange, and that the systemic relationship between the norm of reciprocity, rules and strategy of exchange, and cultural frame of reference would be revealed through such a synthesis. Behavior—in the present case, gift giving—is the medium through which structure and motivation are inferred. Similarly, Feil (1982) notes that most analyses of exchange focus on the functional value of maintaining or expressing social relations, while ignoring the material side of transactions.

A merging of perspectives occurs in this article. While Davis (1972) has clearly demonstrated the complementarity of anthropological and consumer research viewpoints in his discussion of the subsystems of a total economy, Poe (1977) has wisely suggested that exploratory research of gift exchange be undertaken. The exploratory phase is quite amenable to the ethnographic approach employed by anthropologists, and marketers have recognized the utility of qualitative techniques in the exploratory stage of research (Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Goldstucker 1976). Through field immersion, participant observation, and interview, the anthropologist aspires to produce what Geertz (1973) has called (after Ryle) a “thick description” of behavior in its cultural context. Laboratory and field investigation should be mutually informed, as each may profit from the other. Although experimental design and treatment manipulations are clearly valuable, they are perhaps somewhat premature, and may certainly be improved—and the resultant data better interpreted—with ethnographic feedback. Poe’s (1977) call for open-ended interviews, role-played reactions to hypothetical situations, examination of matched sets of exchange partners, and assessment of the effect of specific gifts on overt behavior illustrates the need for the kind of “thick description” that a sensitive ethnography can provide. The model of gift-giving behavior proposed in this paper permits extant research to be integrated into a holistic scheme, and provides a framework for further, more systematic study of the gift exchange process.

### SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF GIFT GIVING

The gift has been interpreted as an invitation to partnership, and as a confirmation of the donor’s “sincere participation” in a recipient’s tribulations and joys, despite the presence of an ulterior motive (van Baal 1975). Inferentially or implicitly attached strings are a connotative aspect of the gift, social bonds being thereby forged and reciprocation encouraged. The giving of gifts can be used to shape and reflect social integration (i.e., membership in a group) or social distance (i.e., relative intimacy of relationships).

The work of Mauss (1924) remains fundamental to contemporary interpretations of gift giving. Mauss viewed the giving of gifts as a prototypical contract (van Baal 1975)

and as a form of optimizing behavior (Schneider 1974). According to an assumed norm of reciprocity elaborated later by Gouldner (1960), an individual is obliged to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The imperative nature of this three-fold obligation derives from its cultural embeddedness.

Mauss understood the gift as a total social fact. Building on this notion of the gift as an integrator of numerous social behaviors, Lévi-Strauss (1949) extended the significance of gift giving through some previously unexpected cultural dimensions. For example, the exchange of women as a vehicle of alliance formation is conducted in some societies in the idiom of gift giving. Underscoring this integration, Riches (1981) has described the three-fold obligation discerned by Mauss as the “multiplex predicament.” An individual evaluates the circumstances of a single transaction in the context of multiplicity: because it is so thoroughly embedded, gift giving cannot be accurately interpreted in isolation from other behaviors. In Western society, giving appears to be somewhat more selective (insofar as all values are not exchanged via gifts), and is juxtaposed with direct exchanges (Schneider 1974). Firth (1967), Harris (1968), and Schieffelin (1980) have in turn extended these considerations.

Gift dimensions such as price or quality are used to create, maintain, modulate, or sever relationships with individuals or alliances with corporate groups. The boundary-defining potential of gift exchange is frequently invoked in ritual (Schneider 1981). Those to whom we give differ from those to whom we do not give. Those from whom we receive may differ still. Gifts are tangible expressions of social relationships.

The value of a gift partially reflects the weight of the relationship, and the changing nature of the relationship is partially reflected in a change in the value of a gift (Shurmer 1971). A charting of the gift-giving behavior of an individual as one moves through individual and family life cycles, and as one’s social network expands and contracts, would reveal this association. As an individual accumulates roles, the gift may be used to indicate the relative importance of those roles. As a male acquires the roles of son, brother, husband, father, and grandfather, a gift allocation strategy must be devised in the face of competing obligations. Similarly, as he becomes an employee, an employer, or a retiree, his giving will be altered. Within culturally prescribed bounds, the reciprocity involved in gift exchange cannot be more balanced than are the respective social positions of donor and recipient, unless the participants are willing to risk imputations of ostentation or meanness (van Baal 1975). Giving too much, too little, or too late can strain a relationship to the point of dissolution.

Perceived balance in a reciprocal relationship is a determinant of satisfaction (Poe 1977). Because giving is generally unbalanced when viewed at one point in time, a longitudinal perspective more accurately reveals the nature of gift giving. Belk (1976) has described the tension generated and reduced in unbalanced exchanges as an important dy-

dynamic in gift giving. A sequence of reciprocal gift exchanges establishes a transactional relationship between individuals (Barth 1966). Since transactions are marked by imbalance at any one point in time, some mechanism must enable a donor to evaluate the intention of a recipient to reciprocate, and permit a recipient to demonstrate trustworthiness in the short run. Blehr (1974) has suggested that the continuous flow of gifts forming the transactional relationship is undershored by token gifts occurring outside that regular flow. (We can speak, perhaps, of formal structural and informal infrastructural modes of exchange.) The recipient is thus able to symbolize recognition of obligation to the donor in periods between formal reciprocation. Such good faith is embodied in two preeminent contemporary American token gifts: the greeting card and the cup of coffee. In distinctive social contexts, each of these symbols reaffirms the social investment we have in our partner.

### PERSONAL DIMENSIONS OF GIFT GIVING

In the personal domain, gift-giving behavior reflects the perceptions of donor and recipient regarding the identity of self and other (Neisser 1973; Shurmer 1971). Self-identity may be confirmed by presenting it to others in the objectified form of a gift, or by conspicuous presentation of gifts. Conversely, acceptance or rejection of a gift can be a conscious affirmation of selfhood (Schwartz 1967). We give, receive, and reject gifts strategically, thereby symbolically predicating identity.

Studies by Belk (1976, 1979) indicate that projection of an ideal self-concept takes precedence over actual self-concept and perceptions of recipient in both gift selection and symbolic encoding of gift by giver. Recently, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have criticized depth psychology for its selective attention to object relations. Together with Mauss and Marx, these authors believe that once an individual invests psychic energy in an object, the object becomes "charged" with the energy of that agent. Objects become containers for the being of the donor, who gives a portion of that being to the recipient. This metaphoric conception of gift exchange alludes to the symbolic encoding of the gift with connotative meaning.

The impact of objects on patterns of thought and emotion is little understood (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Goods create intelligibility, and à propos of Lévi-Strauss, are "good to think with." That is, commodities make the categories of culture stable and visible; they are a nonverbal medium for the human "creative faculty" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Gifts can facilitate role modeling by transmitting an already articulated set of social values or by structuring a new set of expectations (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Toys and engagement rings each perform this function efficiently. Traditionally, gender expectations are encoded in the former, and fidelity expectations are encoded in the latter.

### ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF GIFT GIVING

The economic domain of gift exchange deals perhaps most directly with the ideology of the gift. The giving of gifts is a way of conferring material benefit on a recipient. Gift giving is typically conceived of as exchange that is nonexploitive and characterized by a high level of sociability (Johnson 1974). Ostensibly, there is no expectation of equivalent or formal return (Beals 1970). Although—again ostensibly—the act of giving takes precedence over the gift itself, acknowledgement of the gift invariably involves reference to the value and benefit of the gift itself (Shurmer 1971). Scammon et al. (1982) have distinguished "obligatory events" from gift occasions on the grounds that calculation of fair exchange is involved in the former transaction.

In a delightfully didactic satirical essay, Harris (1972) examined the latent self-interest of the gift. Ideally, the giving of a gift does not establish obligations for exchange. However, Western donors violate the "basic etiquette" of reciprocal exchange by calling attention to their generosity. Pressure to reciprocate is greater than in other forms of reciprocal exchange. To avoid feeling inferior and to safeguard reputation, the recipient must reciprocate. Failure to reciprocate appropriately can result in an asymmetrical relationship.

Cancian (1966) believes Americans attempt to maximize the equality of exchange when giving gifts. Satisfaction is proportionate to the accuracy with which one gauges the level of exchange at which one's partner operates. Exchange partners attempt to modulate their relationship by using gifts to maintain the desired degree of intimacy. We can conceive of a cost accounting, in terms of time and money, of gifts relative to the receiver's relationship to the donor that might illustrate this principle empirically. Caplow (1982) has recently examined Christmas gift giving in terms of kinship networks, and has found that gifts are frequently scaled to the formal relationship between donor and recipient. However, status can be maintained by manipulating symbols of generosity, rather than by actual exchange behavior. The ideology of exchange which dictates that accounts between social equals be roughly balanced permits unbalanced accounts to be maintained "without rancor" (Pryor and Graburn 1980). While indicating that more research is needed on the impact of a range of role relations on the process of exchange, Brinberg and Castell (1982) have shown that resources perceived as similar are more likely to be exchanged than are dissimilar resources. This discovery supports the "modulated relationship" function of gift giving.

A final issue involving the economic dimension of gift giving may be introduced at this point. Van Baal (1975) has stated the need for research distinguishing the phenomenon of "gift" from "bribe." In particular, a "grammar" of each is needed to account for the regularity with which the bribe follows the law of the gift, despite its lack of

sanction by either law or morality. Such a grammar would distinguish between "bribe" as "illicit payment" and as "surcharge." Jones' (1964) study of the strategic behaviors underlying ingratiation is an appropriate point of departure. The grammar might aid in rendering such laws as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act less ambiguous and anticompetitive. Anecdotal material pertaining to the distinction and interplay between gift and bribe exists in the literature of international marketing: each is occasionally mistaken for the other in transcultural interactions, and the nature of this "mistake" ranges from earnest to contrived. The consequences of misinterpretation may be especially grave when exchange partners represent corporations or governments. The gift-bribe dynamic may be less accessible to consumer researchers interested in domestic marketing and organizational behavior than to those interested in international marketing.

## A TYPOLOGY OF COMPONENTS IN GIFT GIVING

### Gifts

Virtually any resource, whether tangible or intangible, can be transformed into a gift. Objects, services, and experiences may be conferred as gifts. The transformation from resource to gift occurs through the vehicles of social relationships and giving occasions. Gifts are frequently context-bound, and canons of propriety are tailored to specific situations. The "gag" or "joke" gift given to a prospective groom at a bachelor party would be inappropriate as a wedding present. The nature of the gift presented to a relative hospitalized for a minor ailment might change if that same relative were subsequently diagnosed as terminally ill. A gift presented to a corporate recipient frequently shapes and reflects the corporate nature of that recipient; a newly married couple may receive utilitarian gifts expressive and supportive of their status as a couple. Consumer gift categories that are situation-appropriate reveal much about world view and ethos, as Chukwukere (1981) and Good (1982) have demonstrated.

Some objects, such as greeting cards, are perceived solely as gifts (Davis 1972). Other objects, depending upon the situation and the relationship between the actors involved, may be perceived as inappropriate or even antithetical to giving. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) note that in many situations a careful line is drawn between cash and gift. Items identified exclusively as gifts—or disqualified or deemed inappropriate as gifts (designations, incidentally, deserving much more research)—pose particular difficulties for their respective industries. Marketers of the former may attempt to reduce the purely gift element of sales, or to heighten the gift element and increase the number of annual gift-giving occasions. Marketers of the latter must persuade potential exchange partners that the item is suitable as a gift (Davis 1972). Objects may be repositioned, occasions may be created, or eligibility for partnership in a gift relationship may be broadened.

Designations of "gift" may arise through cultural convention, or through such directed intervention strategies as advertising. Appeals for redistribution of inalienable rights to consumers who are structurally or functionally deprived of them are couched in terms of the gift. "Life" and "hope" are among the intangible essences that have been successfully transformed into gifts through such appeals. Beneficiaries of such largesse include orphans, the handicapped, the infirm, and the destitute. The extent to which items are perceived as gifts as a result of their availability in "gift stores," the power of such institutions to shape consumer canons of propriety, and the response of consumers to the manipulation of traditional conceptions of "gift" are worthy of additional field investigation. The gift shop provides a microcosmic "natural laboratory" for consumer research; it is an especially appropriate field site for an ethnographic study of gift exchange.

### Donors and Recipients

Exchange partners constitute another component of the gift-giving domain. Specific roles may be absolved or prohibited from giving. Others may be enjoined to give. The rules may vary considerably for individuals "betwixt and between" positions assigned by law, convention, or ceremonial, whose structural status thus has few attributes of past or future status (Turner 1967, 1969). Gifts to individuals perceived as status subordinates—such as the news carrier, the postman, or the waitress—generally carry no expectation of equivalent return. Similarly, the status of "monk," "student," "transient," or "patient" may carry with it a temporary or permanent absolution from giving. Harris (1972) notes that recipients who are of low status or relatively subservient to the donor are usually exempted from the obligation to reciprocate. Johnson (1975) observes that the elderly are frequently excluded from the gift relationship. Youth and relative paucity of resources may also mitigate a person's obligation to reciprocate in a balanced fashion (Belk 1979).

Donors and recipients may be either individuals or corporate groups. "Corporate" is used here in the anthropological sense of a group recognized and empowered to act as a single unit. Thus business corporations and nuclear families may each act as individuals in the gift-giving process, but their behaviors may differ from those of an individual. Further, a donor and a recipient may be the same individual or group, as Schwartz (1967) has suggested in his discussion of self-indulgence, and as Levy (1982) has noted in reinterpreting the concept of self-use.

To distinguish the strategy prompting exchange from the structure of the exchange itself, it is essential to gauge the motivation, intention, reaction, and status of each exchange partner relative to the other. Gift giving may range from *altruistic*, where the donor attempts to maximize the pleasure of the recipient, to *agonistic*, where the donor attempts to maximize personal satisfaction. Since a coherent, consistent conception of altruism has eluded social scientists,

the term is used here not to denote selflessness, but rather to indicate a primary intention to please one's exchange partner. Similarly, the term "agonistic" attempts to connote a primary concern with power strategies and calculated transaction: the donor uses the exchange as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement. Typically, gift exchange results from multiple motives that fall between the poles of altruism and agonism on a motivation continuum. A husband or wife may spend many thoughtful hours searching for exactly "the right" 75¢ anniversary card with which to delight a spouse (altruistic); s/he may select the first card encountered (mixed); or s/he may choose one to reinforce the identity s/he wishes the spouse to assume (agonistic). The typical greeting card purchase may be the outcome of a compromise between sentiment and expediency. Further, actors may choose to attain some minimal level of satisfaction, or to avoid some maximum level of dissatisfaction.

Exchange between individuals is perhaps the most common type of gift giving. Gifts characteristic of this type of exchange are more easily susceptible to utilitarian and expressive ascriptions than those of the other types of exchange. We invest expressive gifts with greater (or primary) symbolic value than utilitarian ones: we might expect utilitarian gift exchange to occur where role distance between partners is relatively great (Tournier 1963).

Gift exchange between corporate groups is another common occurrence. Dillon (1968) has investigated the gift element of foreign aid between governments. Foundations and institutes such as CARE, UNESCO, and UNICEF typically contribute to programs of international relief. Churches work at both domestic and international levels on similar philanthropic enterprises. The indistinct boundary between gift and bribe on a cross-cultural basis is successfully exploited by business corporations. Local level organizations such as the Boy Scouts frequently contribute gifts in the form of community service. Finally, primary corporate groups such as couples and families exchange gifts on occasions ranging from weddings to house-warmings.

Gift exchange between the individual and the corporate group is less frequently described and less perfectly understood than other types of giving. Much of the gift giving that involves individual donors and corporate recipients is charitable in nature. Socialization literature that examines the development of generosity among children notwithstanding, research into philanthropy is still in its infancy (Simon 1979). The slow growth of this inquiry might be attributed to a presumed difficulty of access to data, or to the assimilation of the topic into the domain of social marketing and its consequent (and unfortunate) neglect. Whatever the cause, the recipient in many of these cases actually solicits a gift. Frequently the role of solicitor is formally institutionalized within the corporate group. Alumni contribute to their alma maters, philanthropists contribute to charitable causes, individuals donate blood or organs to medical facilities (Titmuss 1971), patrons endow guilds, and the faithful tithe to their churches. Gifts may take the form of objects, money, service, or body parts. Gifts to

couples and families are frequently markers of life cycle or status change.

Corporate donors and individual recipients constitute another kind of giving. These transactions are characterized most accurately, perhaps, in terms of reward and influence. Deal and Kennedy (1982) illustrate the use of gifts for purposes of conflict resolution, alliance formation, and socialization in their discussion of strategic vision at Visa International. The indistinct boundary between gift and bribe has motivated the American Medical Association to condemn the flow of gifts from pharmaceutical companies to physicians (Sethi 1979). The element of obligation—gift with implied contingency—operates here. Added value incentives, premiums (Seipel 1971), promotions of various kinds (including free samples and gift certificates), scholarships, and prizes illustrate this type of giving, as does the giving of bonuses or service awards to employees. Charitable giving, such as the distribution of food baskets by churches, may also be included here.

Pierce (1980) has examined the practice of corporate gift giving and its implications for specialty advertising. Where corporate groups occupy the role of recipient, there is a tendency for the initial gift to be redistributed, frequently to individuals who are unknown to the donor. This mediation by the corporation between donor and ultimate recipient suggests that anonymity may characterize some forms of gift exchange, and that an altruistically motivated gift can be transformed into an agonistic exchange (or vice versa) through redistribution. Both secular and religious proselytizing are often contingent upon such a process. The obligation of a recipient to reciprocate may well be abrogated in such cases. In his excellent reinterpretation of the spirit of the gift as conceived by Mauss, Sahlins (1972) considers the mechanics of this transformation.

### Situational Conditions

Perhaps the most fascinating and varied dimension of gift exchange involves the situational conditions of giving. Recently, Kakkar and Lutz (1981) have called for research into situational influence that would account for both "objective" and "psychological" elements. The difficulty of distilling these elements into discrete, integral factors has been widely recognized. Belk's (1975) synthetic "skeletal notion" of situational factors—physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition, and antecedent states—illustrates this difficulty while providing the researcher with some fundamental guidance. Many of these factors are emergent, and in the case of gift giving, may arise largely as a function of the relationship of exchange partners (which might include motivation, intention, status differential, the life cycle of the relationship, interaction, and feedback).

Johnson (1974) has examined reciprocal gift giving as a concrete representation of an individual's social network, observing that the nature of the gift changes as intimacy decreases. In his study, Johnson found that the medium of exchange changed from personal items to specified amounts

of money as network members changed from intimates to mere acquaintances. As the social circle widens to include more people, this shift in exchange media becomes expedient, if not necessary, with regard to time and monetary budgets. Further research would do well to focus on budgetary expenditures on gifts proportionate to total income, and on the dynamics of decision making (and consequent behavior) as they are affected by increasing network density. Belk's (1979) examination of gift price categories by types of recipient and occasion is a step in this direction, as is the cross-cultural study of gift exchange by Jolibert and Fernandez-Moreno (1982). Clearly, perception of self, other, and gift contributes to the character of differential giving.

Temporality or periodicity affects the situation that precipitates the giving of gifts. While gift exchange may be synchronized with the cultural calendar, it also occurs ad hoc. Gift-giving occasions can be formal structural events marked by ceremony and ritual, as in the case of commemorative dates, social decorum (where token giving and hospitality figure prominently), and rites of passage. Timing of this sort is also an important part of the exchange ritual itself, as the giving of gifts is frequently embedded in ceremonial behavior. Gift exchange may be ongoing or, as in cases such as the bequest, nonrecurring. Reciprocation may occur with inappropriate haste, or may be inappropriately deferred. On the other hand, gift-giving occasions may also be emergent, transient events, such as reconciliation attempts following marital disputes. The obverse of conflict resolution is alliance formation. The dynamics of initiatory giving might be instructively compared with those of reciprocation. Shurmer (1971) suggests that the first gift usually involves little social or material risk, and that it is usually disguised as a reciprocation of some ostensibly intangible previous gift (e.g., hospitality as a counterflow (reciprocation) to neighborliness). She notes that the first gift is generally easier to give if the recipient is in a position obviating immediate reciprocation (e.g., ill or pregnant).

The spatial and interactional components of the situational conditions of gift giving warrant additional investigation. Giving may involve the exchange of a tangible gift for an intangible return, or it may involve the exchange of two material gifts. While time investment in terms of decision making and shopping is generally determined by social intimacy (Banks 1979; Belk 1979, 1982; Heeler et al. 1979; Ryans 1977; Scammon et al. 1982), relative effort is often mediated by situational factors. Of related interest is the point of origin and the point of exchange of the gift. A structural, functional description of both shops (or agencies) and actual gift-giving settings from the consumer perspective of "the appropriate," together with an analysis of the interactions in these situations, would vastly improve our understanding of gift giving. Models for such research can be found in the work of ethnographers who have studied such rituals as the potlatch (Boas 1897) and the giveaway (Grobsmith 1981; Schneider 1981). Sherif and Sherif (1963) have demonstrated the feasibility of a research strategy designed to integrate specification of ecological and

sociocultural setting with that of group structure and norms into an intensive investigation of small group behavior.

Finally, antecedent and consequent conditions are important situational factors in gift-giving behavior. Both giving and eliciting strategies must be explored. Violations of gift-giving etiquette are currently imperfectly described. A gift may be rejected forthrightly, or more subtly in its subsequent disposition. Discussions of aborted gift exchange and of terminated gift relationships are currently unavailable in the consumer research literature.

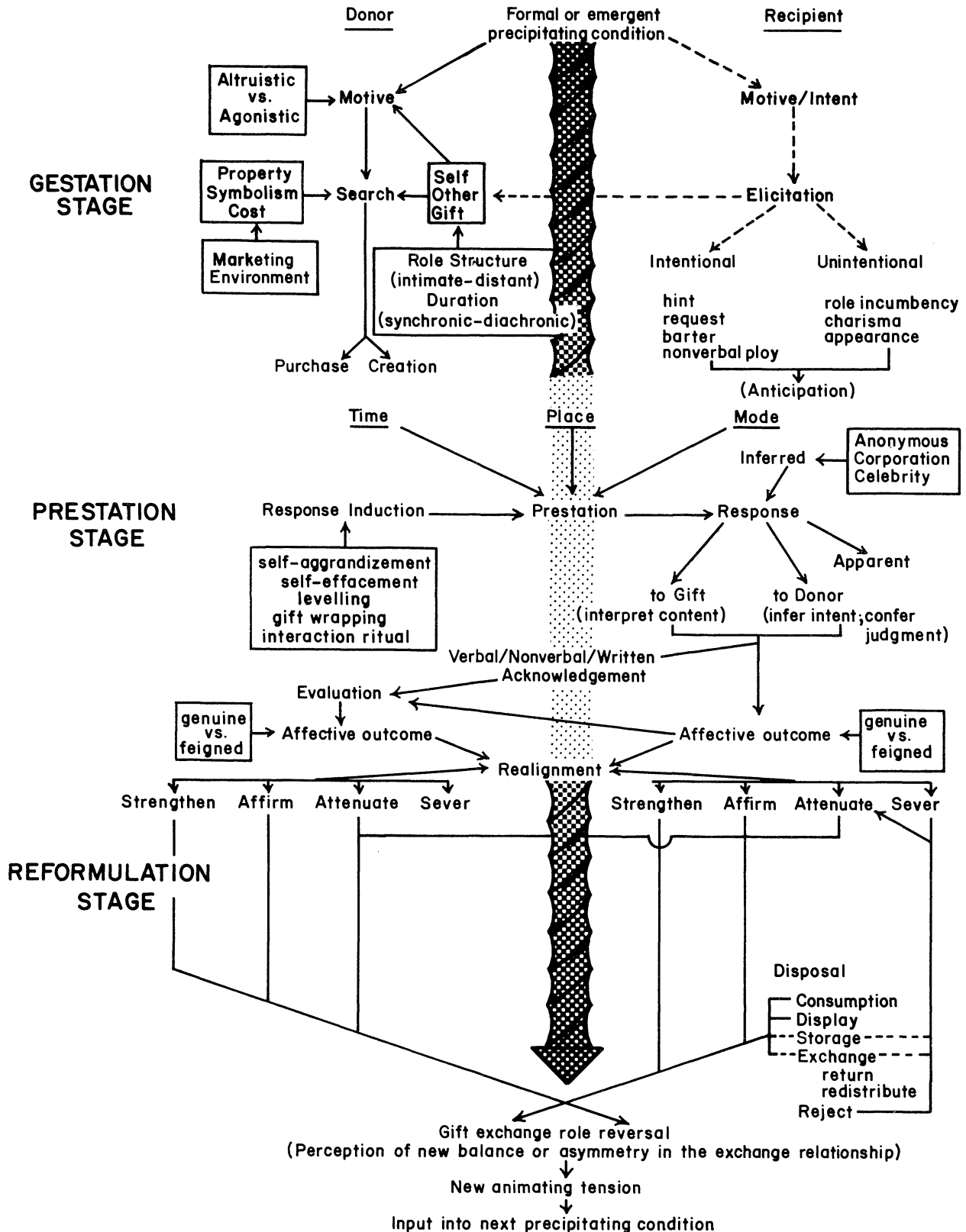
## A MODEL OF THE GIFT EXCHANGE PROCESS

Banks (1979) has proposed an interactive paradigm of gift giving which describes the behavior of both donor and recipient through four stages of transaction: purchase, interaction, consumption, and communication. While the model is clearly an important contribution in that it aspires to comprehensiveness and raises significant questions, its effectiveness is limited by the misarticulation of the stages of gift-giving behavior and their respective dynamics. For example, interaction and communication occur throughout the transaction, and neither seems diagnostic of a particular stage. "Purchase" may be understood as the culmination of a larger process explicit in the presentation, and hence may be construed as an inappropriate label as well. Further, because the impact of the exchange ritual (or insulation activity, in Schwartz's (1967) terms) may supercede that of the actual gift, the influence of the "interaction" stage may be weaker and the influence of the "consumption" stage much stronger on both interpretation and reciprocation than Banks implies. This is frequently the case at children's birthday parties and at retirement banquets. The value of the gift may become apparent only with time. We can discuss gift giving more accurately by modifying the Banks paradigm.

A model that depicts the process of gift giving is presented in the Figure. The process consists of three stages: Gestation, Prestation, and Reformulation, which specify a major gift-giving transaction through which donor and recipient progress. As noted earlier, donor and recipient may be linked in a relationship supported in part by token gift exchange involving hospitality, amenities, favors, and the like. This ongoing pattern of exchange integrates social relationships informally. It is as accepted a form of interaction ritual as are other routinized, "round of life" activities, and it becomes remarkable to participants primarily in the breach. A spiral is used in the Figure to illustrate the relationship between partners. The broken spiral indicates that token giving is a secondary or background consideration in the Prestation stage; there token giving is largely ritualistic. The outcome of these stages is usually a reversal of exchange roles: donor becomes recipient, and vice versa. While the proposed model is descriptive and not intended to generate specific research hypotheses, it does define the boundaries of distinct domains of inquiry. Within those domains, appropriate questions may be raised. Transitional



FIGURE  
A MODEL OF THE PROCESS OF GIFT-GIVING BEHAVIOR



NOTE: Spiral indicates token gift exchange relationship. Dots indicate decreased significance of token giving. Parentheses indicate potential thoughts, feelings or actions. Broken lines indicate possible antecedents to or consequences of thoughts, feelings or actions.

or mediating phenomena between those domains might also be explored.

The Gestation stage incorporates all behavior antecedent to the actual gift exchange. It is the period during which "gift" is transformed from the conceptual to the material realm. It is also the prelude to creating or strengthening a social bond. A precipitating condition (whether structural, as in the case of a recognized holiday such as Christmas, or emergent, as in the case of an ad hoc decision to purchase flowers as a "peace offering" in a marital dispute) is perceived that permits the expression of some motivational state (e.g., love or penitence) through a giving strategy. That strategy may be primarily altruistic or agonistic. In the former case, a father may express esteem for his child; in the latter, a wife may seek to regain the affection of her alienated husband. The recipient acts strategically as well.

An elicitation or guidance strategy may be employed in the service of a particular expectation. Elicitation may be unintentional in certain cases. Incumbents of such social roles as "president" or "movie star" may attract gifts merely by occupying those roles. Charisma may also serve to attract gifts. Finally, appearances can trigger gift-giving behavior, as in the case of almsgiving. A prospective recipient may provide hints ranging from subtle to obvious in order to elicit or guide the selection of a gift. Frequently, a direct request is made, in which case the recipient's input into the selection process may be greater than that of the donor. Such potential behaviors appear in parentheses in the "Recipient" column of the Figure.

During the Gestation stage, the donor conducts an internal search involving conceptions of self, other, and gift, and frequently conducts an external search involving appropriate shops or agencies. If personal services or personally crafted goods are given as gifts, this external search may require some "sourcing" activity (procurement of raw materials). Indeed, some gifts (e.g., an experience or an art object) are more "created" than "purchased." Both creation and purchase require selection of a gift and investing it with symbolic meaning, and both require preparation of gift and self in the service of impression management.

Issues addressed by consumer researchers that are worthy of extended investigation in the context of a Gestation phase include: What is an appropriate gift? Are there categories of propriety? How is a gift selected and how is it obtained? How much money proportionate to income is allotted to gift purchase? How are gifts symbolically encoded? What precipitates initiatory giving, and what factors encourage or discourage ongoing reciprocity? On what occasions are gifts given? Who gives gifts, and who receives them? Who influences selection, and who makes the actual purchase? Who is enjoined, and who absolved? What effects do factors such as status and network density have on gift exchange? How much time is devoted to search (internal vs. external)? How much time elapses between the decision to give and the actual gift exchange? How does gift selection differ from personal use selection? What institutions are associated with gift giving? Who are the entrepreneurs in

the giving process, and how do they function? How can the marketing environment of gift exchange be described?

The actual gift exchange occurs during the Prestation stage. While anthropologists have used "prestation" as a synonym for "gift giving," the term is restricted in this model to a specific component of the exchange process. Both donor and recipient are attentive to the time, place, and mode of transaction: ritual or ceremonial ambience may heighten the impact of the giving, or increase the value of the gift. In this stage the donor is immediately concerned with response induction. The recipient's response is twofold: first, the recipient decodes the instrumental and affective content of the gift, and second, the recipient responds to the donor, inferring intent and conferring judgment. The donor in turn evaluates this dual response, which has been elicited verbally and nonverbally according to initial intentions and goals. The interaction ritual of the Prestation stage can be understood as a vehicle of the major exchange process, the substance of the token exchange process, and as a precipitant of affective outcome. Each partner experiences an affective outcome varying from satisfaction to disappointment, and this outcome is affected in turn by the mode of presentation as well as by the gift itself.

In gift interactions other than those involving individuals or face-to-face exchange, a considerable amount of time may be necessary to complete the Prestation stage. In some cases, recipient response may have to be inferred by the donor, or felt vicariously. For instance, anonymous, celebrity, or corporate recipients may not respond directly to the donor, or may respond in a diffuse or impersonal manner. The donor may in turn construct imaginary response scenarios, the counterflow (reciprocation) from which might include respect, gratitude, affection, indifference, or even hostility. The quality of the inferred response will affect the donor's intention to continue or discontinue giving.

In interactions between individuals, simultaneous giving frequently occurs. Simultaneous giving increases the complexity of the operations performed during this stage, since donor and recipient replicate each other's behavior.

The interpersonal dynamics of the Prestation stage are fascinating, and they influence behavior in the subsequent stage. A donor may attempt to mask an intention through self-effacement, or by belittling the gift (leveling, as in the Figure), yet call attention to the exchange symbolically through the vehicles of ritual or giftwrapping. The recipient may feign either delight or disappointment in an effort to control the direction of the relationship or in the hope of influencing future gift selection. In some cases the gift may be accepted unconditionally, and in others, with reservation.

Several questions are appropriate to the Prestation stage of gift-giving behavior. What kinds of ritual or ceremony attach to gift exchange? How does ritual or ceremony affect perception of the gift? Under what circumstances is giving obligatory and receiving optional? What are the consequences of violating exchange norms? What effect does the donor's initial perception of the recipient's response have

on future gift purchases, and on the subsequent social relationship?

Reformulation is the final stage in the process of gift giving. During this time, attention is focused on the disposition of the gift, which is subject to consumption, display, or storage. It may also be exchanged (i.e., returned or redistributed) or rejected. In the process of disposition, the gift becomes a vehicle by which the relationship of the donor and the recipient is realigned. The social bond may be strengthened, affirmed, attenuated, or severed in accordance with the partners' assessments of reciprocal balance. Disposition may be intended (and is frequently perceived) as an expression of the recipient's regard for the donor. Each party has the option to preserve or dissolve the major or the token gift exchange relationship that has existed to date. A realigned relationship frequently takes the form of gift exchange role reversal, with recipient becoming donor. Thus the relationship may continue to develop. Conditions precipitating future gift exchange are strongly influenced by perceptions arising in the Reformulation stage.

The researcher interested in the Reformulation stage might ask several questions. What kinds of relationships does gift giving create? How do gift-giving relationships change, and how are they terminated? How is token giving affected by dissatisfaction with the primary gift-giving relationship? What is the appropriate disposition of gifts? How is misperception of gift disposition discovered and rectified by the recipient? What kinds of gift-giving behavior are nonrecurring? Under what conditions other than reciprocation is initiatory giving transformed into repetitive giving? What is the relationship of the gift economy to the market, redistributive, domestic, and symbolic economies (Davis 1972) of the group to which exchange partners belong?

An extended case study approach is one effective way of addressing each of these issues. The production of systematic ethnographies of gift exchange in contemporary society would permit the exploration of an area which, with few exceptions (Mauss 1924; Reardon 1981), has been unexamined: cross-cultural gift giving. We also have much to discover about gift giving in multicultural settings.

## **THE CHALLENGE TO CONSUMER RESEARCH**

A host of issues raised by consumer researchers interested in gift giving awaits resolution. Lutz (1979) recognizes a need to address the underlying determinants of gift-giving behavior in terms of psychological dynamics and situational influence. Individual canons of propriety must include budget range and product class selection. Tigert (1979) also raises the question of "the appropriate" in terms of product category and price. He is most concerned with marketing strategies that might be generated from an understanding of gift giving. Banks (1979) suggests that more detailed attention be devoted to the donor's search

process and to the conditions surrounding a recipient's decision to return a gift to its place of origin. By using the model of the gift exchange process as a framework for further research, each of these questions may be systematically addressed.

In characteristically thorough fashion, Belk (1979) has called for investigations of donor perception of recipient needs and tastes (and its situational accuracy), the relationship of self-worth to gift exchange autonomy among children, differential risk reduction strategies, the relationship of donor satisfaction to recipient gift elicitation and to the search effort, factors influencing generosity, and the relationship of gift characteristics to the donor's desire to change the recipient. Belk also advocates expansion of research to include corporate and anonymous giving. The data provided in Pierce's (1980) study of corporate gift giving could be used to design a number of fascinating studies in intramural and extramural organizational behavior. The recent interest in and inconsistent results derived from distinguishing between purchase behavior for gift giving and for personal use may mask a more pertinent issue: the effect of the specific gift occasion on donor involvement in the search (Belk 1982). Scammon et al. (1982) support this contention, and have called for more research into purchase occasions. Finally, the work of Warshaw (1980) raises interpretive questions regarding the moderation of social normative influences by product price. Once again, the model of the gift exchange process may be used to structure research in an effort to produce a comprehensive understanding of gift giving.

Davis (1972) has synthesized several avenues of potential exploration in anthropological perspective. He has called for a focused investigation of several factors: gift type, occasion, and point of origin; the mechanics of reciprocity; and the symbolic value of gifts relative to specific occasion. As a means of improving exchange theory, Davis proposes an especially ambitious study of comparative exchange that accounts for the differential commodities, symbolic meanings, and institutional settings involved in transactions. This kind of study would examine issues of mutual interest to anthropologists and consumer researchers, and would combine methods from each discipline.

A comprehensive perspective requires that gift giving be interpreted in the context of behaviors in which it is embedded. Unobstrusive measures such as participant observation—conducted in a field setting where gift giving occurs in a naturalistic context, and geared toward exploration and discovery rather than toward the testing of hypotheses—could be used initially to reveal categories of gift exchange and mediating influences relevant to the target group. Poe (1977) is persuasive in this regard. Although the researcher would face some obstacles in achieving the studied alienation necessary to investigating phenomena in one's own culture (Messerschmidt 1981), the use of anthropological field methods would facilitate this exploratory phase (Freilich 1970; Pelto and Pelto 1978). The field setting would depend upon which stage of the exchange process the re-

searcher chose to investigate. A comprehensive study would trace the entire process through a variety of settings.

A field study of the structural, motivational, and behavioral correlates of gift giving could take several directions. On the one hand, a researcher could identify a particular group with which to work on the basis of demographic or psychographic variables. One rewarding approach would be to choose a particular subculture based on ethnicity, age, religion, occupation, corporate affiliation, or geographical region. Immersion in the life of the group would sensitize the researcher to the character of socioeconomic domains important to the group. Through the observation of actual gift-giving behavior, and through the construction of open-ended instruments involving both directive and nondirective interviews, the researcher could illuminate the native constructs of gift exchange. For example, in a personal communication, Beatty has proposed the use of diaries employed by informants as a method of exhaustively recording the instances of gift giving. By interpreting gift exchange against the background of other characteristic behavior patterns of the group, a holistic perspective of gift giving would be attained.

Case studies suggest themselves immediately. The Hispanic subculture is a rapidly expanding market segment. So is the subculture of the elderly, yet we know little about gift-giving patterns in either of these groups. Pierce's (1980) study provides a wealth of raw data on corporate gift giving, but few inferences of interest to consumer researchers or anthropologists are made.

On the other hand, the researcher might begin with a particular institution presumed to be relevant to gift giving, and begin inquiries from there. For instance, a retail shop, a university administrative office of "annual giving," or a family could be chosen as the field site, and all roles, behaviors, and gift transactions occurring within that site could be examined. The researcher would then pursue these dimensions of gift exchange as they ramified beyond the site, paying attention to their articulations with other important social domains. Again, case studies suggest themselves. Researchers could begin with a particular gift shop and explore a number of issues. How do shop owners select gift merchandise? How do salespeople shape consumer conceptions of gift? Why do consumers shop in this particular store? Research subjects and informants could be drawn from the clientele of a particular shop, and their gift-giving behavior could be monitored in detail from the point of purchase.

A variation of this second kind of study could begin with a particular class of gift (e.g., hospitality, greeting cards, charitable contribution, toys) and then explore the subcultural correlates of its exchange. Either of these types of exploratory research could form the basis of more narrowly focused experimental or quasi-experimental designs. While interpretive in its own right, such ethnographic research would be extremely helpful to consumer researchers in the question-framing stage of their investigation of gift giving.

Collaborative investigation combining techniques drawn from anthropology and consumer research might take the

following shape. Budgetary constraints (both monetary and temporal) and concern for generalizable results indicate that diagnostic research—intensive, focused, short-term immersion in the social life of a group—conducted across a range of relevant groups would be an appropriate synthesis of approaches (Whyte 1978). Diagnostic research has also been described as "phenomenological" research in the consumer behavior literature on qualitative methodology (Calder 1977). A systematic program of focus group research is also feasible. Groups of key informants (whose expertise would span the culturally patterned target dimensions of gift giving) drawn from several subcultures could be convened for an initial eliciting of salient categories. Formal surveys constructed from this input data could then be administered to larger samples of the target populations.

Research centered on the dynamics of partnership is potentially invaluable to the interpretation of gift giving. Matched sets of donors and recipients are an appropriate, naturalistic focus around which studies can be designed. A case history of gift giving might first be elicited that would contrast the perspectives of donor and recipient. Retrospective data on the three stages of gift giving, with emphasis on the gift item selected, would be collected from each partner and interpreted against the natural history of the evolving relationship and against changing socioeconomic features in individual life histories.

Projections of future gift-giving behavior might be obtained in several ways. A researcher might attempt to join the partnership as an observer/participant and accompany each partner through the actual stages of the gift-giving process. Or, the researcher might refer to the collected gift exchange history and allocate an appropriate specific time and dollar amount to the donor. The donor would then be instructed to select a hypothetical gift for the recipient, using whatever search and selection techniques the donor felt were appropriate. Having recorded the donor data, the researcher would then convey the hypothetical gift to the recipient, either through a role-played exchange ritual or through more dispassionate reporting. The reactions of the recipient would then be assessed, and each partner would be queried on the presumed future direction of the relationship. The researcher could use dyads or networks as the unit of study. An opportunistic researcher conducting a study at Christmastide might capitalize on a "natural laboratory" field setting. Caplow's (1982) retrospective study of Christmas gift giving is a step in this direction.

A concluding comment on the direction of future research returns attention to the typology of donor-recipient interaction presented earlier. Extant research focuses primarily on gift exchange between individuals. While interaction between individuals and corporate groups is less clearly understood, scholars such as Titmuss (1971) and Schwartz (1970) have provided us with some initial guidance. Finally, gift giving between corporations themselves is virtually undescribed in the consumer behavior literature. The growing interest of marketers, managers, and anthropologists in symbolic organizational behavior may add impetus to consumer research efforts in interpreting gift-giving be-

havior. Interdisciplinary cooperation in this endeavor is a welcome, if belated, prospect.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed model has described the transfer of goods or services, the flow of social invisibles such as deference or affection, and some mechanics of social bonding. The use of naturalistic social contexts, unobtrusive measures, focus groups, and realistic experimental design in examining the process of gift exchange should provide us with a comprehensive understanding of gift-giving behavior, as the research scenarios presented in this paper suggest. It is apparent that interdisciplinary inquiry would prove productive.

While consumer researchers have generally adopted a micro perspective toward gift exchange, the proposed model orients that viewpoint within a larger systems framework. The result is a more comprehensive depiction of gift giving than either traditional anthropology or traditional consumer research has attempted. Although consumer researchers have been interested primarily in psychological aspects of Gestation behavior, and anthropologists have dealt largely with social aspects of Prestation behavior, complementarity of approach is evident. Simply by shifting its respective focus from one stage to the other, each discipline would make an immediate contribution to our understanding of gift exchange.

It is the Reformulation stage of the gift-giving process that seems to exert the strongest attraction among both anthropologists and consumer researchers. Not only is Reformulation an outcome of the preceding stages, it is also an impetus to succeeding levels of those stages. Reformulation provides the essential tension that sustains the gift-giving process. Consequently, an understanding of the sociopsychological dynamics of the Reformulation stage is crucial to a comprehensive conception of gift exchange.

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