

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, "Sociability" in Kurt Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 40-55.

<sup>2</sup> Erving Goffman, "Fun in Games" in *Encounters* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), p. 19.

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

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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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

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

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.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), pp. 175-76.

risks incurred through alliances and rivalry."<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

The principle of reciprocity, then, may be used as a tool in the aspiration for and protection of status and control. William F.

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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.

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

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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 258.

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament* (New York: New American Library, 1962), pp. 34–35.

"When the time came for repayment if he had not double the original gift to return as interest, he was shamed and demoted, and his rival's prestige correspondingly enhanced."<sup>14</sup>

Benedict describes the phenomenon at greater length:

The whole economic system of the Northwest Coast was bent to the service of this obsession. There were two means by which a chief could achieve the victory he sought. One was by shaming his rival by presenting him with more property than he could return with the required interest. The other was by destroying property. In both cases the offering called for return, though in the first case the giver's wealth was augmented and in the second he stripped himself of goods. The consequences of the two methods seems to us at the opposite poles. To the Kwakiutl they were merely complementary means of subduing a rival, and the highest glory of life was the act of complete destruction. It was a challenge, exactly like the selling of a copper, and it was always done in opposition to a rival who must then, in order to save himself from shame, destroy an equal amount of valuable goods.<sup>15</sup>

Marcel Mauss was rightly struck by the similarity between the potlatch and conspicuous spending in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> He neglected, however, to indicate that it was Veblen who had done the most extensive study of "conspicuous waste" in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. The goals of such waste are essentially those directing the Kwakiutl: extravagant provision of commodities is made with a view to shaming the consumers, especially those who openly compete with the host in such matters as feasts, balls, and other social events.<sup>17</sup>

One expresses unfriendliness through gift giving by breaking the rule of approximate reciprocity (returning a gift in near,

<sup>14</sup> Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Cohen & West, 1954), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Veblen, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

but not exact, value of that received). Returning "tit for tat" transforms the relation into an economic one and expresses a refusal to play the role of grateful recipient. This offense represents a desire to end the relationship or at least define it on an impersonal, non-sentimental level. An exact return, then, is essentially a refusal to *accept* a "token of regard," which is to Mauss, "the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse."<sup>18</sup>

Both gift giver and receiver evaluate presents according to some frame of reference. A giver may therefore express contempt for the recipient by purchasing for him an inferior gift (in comparison with his gifts to others). Thus unfriendliness is shown by the mere invocation of a frame of reference. This mechanism, of course, is what enables the last will and testament to become partly an instrument for the expression of hostility.

We might also mention the object-derogation ritual by means of which the gift to be presented is "cursed." This ritual is reserved especially for those occasions where a presentation of a token of regard is mandatory. Thus children, in relaying a Christmas gift from their parents to the teacher, will feign a spit upon the package—or suggest its use as toilet paper, with an indecent gesture. Such rituals have as their purpose the "contamination" of the item with unfriendly sentiment. The ritual yields its fruit when the teacher accepts the contaminated gift with pleasure and thanks. On the other hand, the recipient may be aware of the contempt of the giver and, though obliged to accept the gift, may prevent contamination by destroying it, failing to use it, forgetting about it, etc.

Gifts may reflect unfriendliness in at least two final ways. First, the gold watch presented at retirement is normally more representative of a feeling of good riddance than of recognition for achievement; it is indeed a gilded "pink slip." Lastly, psy-

<sup>18</sup> Mauss, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

choanalytic theories of symbolism suggest that death wishes may be expressed in such gift objects as electric trains, satin blankets, ships, and other vehicles which take "long journeys." Inasmuch as such theories are valid, the popularity of electric trains as Christmas gifts has enormous implications.

#### UNFRIENDLINESS IN THE RECIPIENT

What has been said about unfriendliness in gift giving should not draw attention away from hostility in the receiver. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us of this point in his essay:

The law of benefits is a difficult channel, which requires careful sailing. . . . We wish to be self sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten. We can receive anything from love, for that is a way of receiving it from ourselves; but not from *anyone* who assumes to bestow. We sometimes hate the meat which we eat, because there seems something of degrading dependence in living by it.<sup>19</sup>

Emerson here suggests that an understanding or meaningful analysis of gift exchange requires a knowledge of the relationship between giver and receiver.

#### STATUS ANXIETY

The possibility of unfriendliness in the gift exchange is recognized by most people. This is best supported by reference once again to popular slogans and proverbs which warn against being deceived by the gift. Translated sociologically, there is a general awareness that gift givers and receivers do not always believe in the role they are playing: the thought behind the gift may run anywhere from cynicism to sincerity. Insofar as persons employ one another as "social looking glasses," this variability in role sincerity gives rise to an uncertainty which may be called "status anxiety." Yet, it might also be suggested that the cynical giver (or the cynical role player, in general) is himself plagued by two sources of discomfort:

<sup>19</sup> Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

there exists both the fear of "being found out" and a degree of guilt over the insincerity itself. When ambivalence reaches a certain point, the *compulsive* gift giver emerges who protects himself from both guilt and the unmasking anxiety by ritualistic presentations. In general, then, the ritual of gift exchange is not understandable by its anxiety-reducing qualities alone; it is itself a generator of anxiety, for if it is not properly executed, the public front of sincerity is likely to be jeopardized.

#### AWARDS

Gifts as ceremonial tokens of regard may be distributed analytically into two overlapping categories: those presented in recognition of status and those presented in recognition of achievement. In the former grouping are found Christmas, birthday, and anniversary gifts, Mother's Day and Father's Day presents, and so forth. We find the purest forms of the achievement gift in prizes, trophies, etc. Mixed forms involve achievement gifts for persons of a certain (usually kinship) status, for example, graduation presents.

It is important, however, to note that status gifts are often presented *publicly* as achievement gifts. Levi-Strauss, for example, writes, "the refinement of selection [of Christmas cards], their outstanding designs, their price, the quantity sent or received, give evidence (ritually exhibited on the mantelpiece during the week of celebration), of the recipient's social bonds and the degree of his prestige."<sup>20</sup> Thus status and achievement gifts share a characteristic which provides insight into one of their more important properties: both are objectifications of past or present social relationships. The ceremonial display of such objectifications is a powerful tendency in social life: persons invariably seek to make known their social bonds in daily encounters. Veblen suggests that in advanced societies this tendency "develops into a system of rank titles, degrees and in-

<sup>20</sup> Levi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

signia, typical examples of which are heraldic devices, medals and honorary decorations."<sup>21</sup> The presentation of self, then, is often made with symbols of one's connections to others. And gifts represent the purest forms of such symbols. These may of course be displayed with such elaboration and ostentation as to bring down the displeasure of the audience. Thus, the gift diamond, automobile, or other trophies must be displayed tactfully and with a certain degree of humility.

GIFT EXCHANGE, RECIPROCITY  
AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Gift exchange is governed by the norm of reciprocity. The degree to which this norm has been fulfilled in a given exchange of gifts may be stated in terms of distributive justice, which obtains when social rewards are proportional to costs and to investments. The concept of distributive justice is important in itself for it leads to interesting and non-obvious statements about human behavior. The principle tells us, for example, that a gift giver will experience discomfort if reciprocity fails to occur; but the idea that over-reciprocation will produce disturbance in the original giver is more interesting and leads into the area of undeserved rewards, to which shame, according to Helen M. Lynd, is connected.<sup>22</sup> The use of a reward (often in the form of a gift) as a *punishment* is a device employed by many sets of contemporary "love-oriented" parents and may be subsumed under the general category of "shaming techniques," which consist of three separate operations: (1) the provision for the child of an unfavorable deroga-

tion-praise ratio, (2) the presentation of a gift, and (3) a verbal declaration of the lack of commensurability between the child's merit and the gift he has received. ("Daddy and mommy are giving you a present even though you've been a bad boy!") Shame is therefore doubly established by a statement of one's knowledge of another's sins and the giving of a reward despite them.

Distributive justice is particularly interesting in view of the rule which prohibits an equal-return "payment" in gift exchange. This suggests that every gift-exchanging dyad (or larger group) is characterized by a certain "balance of debt" which must never be brought into equilibrium, for a perfect level of distributive justice is typical of the economic rather than the social exchange relationship. It has, in fact, already been suggested that the greater the correspondence in value between gift received and gift returned, the less the sentimental component in the relationship is likely to be. But this proposition needs to be qualified by our noting that an absence or inadequate amount of reciprocity is not at all functional for the intimate relationship. There exists, then, a band—between complete and incomplete or inadequate reciprocity—within which the giver of the return gift must locate its value.

The continuing balance of debt—now in favor of one member, now in favor of the other—insures that the relationship between the two continue, for gratitude will always constitute a part of the bond linking them. Gouldner, in this connection, considered gift exchange as a "starting mechanism" for social relationships.<sup>23</sup> Simmel likened the phenomenon to "inertia" in his essay on "Faithfulness and Gratitude":

An action between men may be engendered by love or greed of gain, obedience or hatred,

<sup>23</sup> Alvin Gouldner, "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (April, 1960), 176-77.

<sup>21</sup> Veblen, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Helen M. Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), p. 34. For a discussion of this topic in terms of balance theory, see C. Norman Alexander, Jr., and Richard L. Simpson, "Balance Theory and Distributive Justice," *Sociological Inquiry*, XXXIV (Spring, 1964), 182-92. Homans' rule of distributive justice is stated in his *Social Behavior* (n. 10 above), p. 75.

sociability or lust for domination alone, but this action usually does not exhaust the creative mood which, on the contrary, somehow lives on in the sociological situation it has produced. Gratitude is definitely such a continuance. . . . If every grateful action, which lingers on from good turns received in the past, were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart.<sup>24</sup>

It must be noted that gratitude binds not only the living, but connects the living and the dead as well. The will is an institutionalization of such a connection. Inherited benefits, insofar as they cannot be reciprocated, generate eternal indebtedness and thereby link together present and past. Thus the absence of a sense of family tradition among the poor is due not only to familial instability, for example, "serial monogamy," but to a lack of willable commodities, that is, gratitude imperatives.

Simmel makes another important observation which implies that every gift-exchanging dyad is characterized by a moral dominance of one member over another. This has to do with the initiation of benefit exchange:

Once we have received something good from another person, once he has preceded us with his action, we no longer can make up for it completely, no matter how much our return gift or service may objectively or legally surpass his own. The reason is that his gift, because it was first, has a voluntary character which no return gift can have. For, to return the benefit we are obliged ethically; we operate under a coercion which, though neither social nor legal but moral, is still a coercion. The first gift is given in full spontaneity; it has a freedom without any duty, even without the duty of gratitude.<sup>25</sup>

Following the same line of thought leads us to observe the tendency for initial aggression to be opposed with a disproportional amount of hostility, for the original aggressive act contains the decisive element of freedom. The object of the initial

<sup>24</sup> Georg Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude," *op. cit.*, p. 389.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

attack justifies his own retaliation, no matter how superior or devastating it may be, by simply noting the voluntary character of the original hostility. It is perhaps for this reason that vengeance is restrained in ancient (*lex talionis*) and modern law—and in moral interdictions as well. ("Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.")

In order to draw our discussion on obligation balance to its logical completion, we are required to note that, while a gift exchange of items of nearly equal value generates gratitude, which binds the relation long after the exchange has actually taken place, an absence of reciprocity will inject into the bond an element of hostility that will be equally persistent. Simmel, then, failed to recognize the negative consequences of the norm of reciprocity, which prescribe vengeance, or at least grudge, for harm done, just as their counterparts call for reimbursement and gratitude for benefits received. It is, in this regard, worth noting that man could not altogether cease to show vengeance without ceasing to show gratitude as well, for both reflect and depend upon the internalized imperative of reciprocity.

#### SUSPENSE AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE

We have just completed a discussion of that quality of gift exchange which provides a social relationship with inertia, in the form of gratitude or grudge. It remains to point out that the gift has a binding effect upon the relation before it is actually given and received. The growing cohesion of two potential exchangers, for example, obviously results from mutual expectation of a gift. Now, mutual expectation is reflective of an important fact about social life; that is, its easy predictability: the institutionalization of social action provides for this. But the substance of social life is as unpredictable as its form is certain—and this property of social exchange saves us from the tedium of perfect knowledge.

Without suspense, the entire tone of the gift exchange is altered—and with it, the

relationship, which is correspondingly deprived of its mystery and surprise. Gifts are hidden or kept secret for the sake of the giver as well as the receiver for, as noted, the recipient's reaction to the present is crucial to the giver.

Suspense is most prevalent in childhood, since gifts differ greatly from year to year as a result of maturation. In contrast, the adult's status is more stable, and the types of gifts he receives will normally follow a set pattern.

#### SUSPENSE AND INSULATION

Although suspense develops gradually, it ends abruptly when the unknown gift is revealed. Therefore, if suspense were the only constituent of the impending gift exchange, its consummation would immediately plunge the exchange partners into boredom. To some degree, this is general throughout society, as the "after-Christmas letdown" testifies. However, gift exchange is insulated by other less suspense-producing events, for example, the feast and church services, family get-togethers, leisure-time activities, etc., which immediately follow the exchange. Through such insulating devices the post-exchange "let-down" is cushioned. It is implied here, of course, that persons participating in the feasts, reunions, and whatnot be *outside* the circle of gift exchangers.

The foregoing account of insulation is a specific instance of the more general principle that a certain degree of group incohesion is functional for its preservation as far as the non-integration of its parts prevents an externally imposed shock from permeating its entire system.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while each exchange circle experiences the "after-Christmas letdown" individually, the shock is irrelevant to their coming together for feasting and sociability; thereby the distant circles provide for one another the

support which the constituents of a single system would fail to give by force of their integration.

It therefore becomes meaningless to speak, as Gouldner does, of need satisfaction being related to the degree of dependence of one object upon another,<sup>27</sup> for our discussion has shown this notion to be too static for social analysis. It is clear that members of a social circle may be resourceful to one another up to a certain point in time, after which they must turn from each other to other circles for support or gratification. This has been shown to be the case in Christmas gift exchange, and, if space permitted, other examples could be cited. Our time, however, would be more profitably employed by noting that the process we have just described is subsumable under the property of "autonomy toleration," which provides for the system's periodic setting free of its members to find "rescue persons" outside its own boundaries and thus to remind its members of its own mortality and replaceability.<sup>28</sup> The check on a group's encompassing tendencies is institutionalized in conventional society by such mechanisms as the wife's and husband's "night out" for cards or bowling, or the more extended "trips home" and "camping expeditions." Gift exchange with persons outside of the immediate social circle is an especially important instance of this use and maintenance of outsiders as resource persons.

#### GROUP BOUNDARIES, DEVIANCE AND GUILT

Those to whom we give gifts are in some way different from those to whom no token of regard is given. The gift exchange, then, is a way of dramatizing group boundaries. As Arensberg and Kimball point out, it is also a mode in which a child learns to adopt requisite behavior and sentiments toward

<sup>26</sup> Alvin Gouldner, "Reciprocity and Autonomy in Functional Theory," in Llewellyn Gross (ed.), *Symposium on Sociological Theory* (Evanston: Row, Peterson & Co., 1959), p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>28</sup> I owe the idea of "autonomy tolerance" to Dr. Otto Pollack, who presented the concept in his lectures.

those with whom others in his family are bound:

Thus the Irish child very early meets his mother's and father's brothers and sisters; he runs errands and receives small gifts from them; as soon as he is able he carries presents. . . . At various times of crisis in his career, such as First Communion, Confirmation, and marriage, he receives gifts from them which signalize the intimacy between him and them.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, when a single present is offered to a plurality, for example, a married or engaged couple, or a family, there is a heightening of awareness (on both sides) of their existence as a team.

Before going on it should be noted that the boundary-maintaining functions which have just been noted are opposed by the property of autonomy tolerance. There is a constant tension between these poles—which underlies the fact that every social circle is characterized by a certain (quantifiable) ratio of intragroup-extragroup benefit exchanges. Put differently, gift exchange influences group boundaries by clarifying them; and the more group boundaries are defined, the greater the favorability of intragroup over extragroup exchange. This effect, however, is limited by the property of autonomy tolerance. Out of this tension, perhaps, emerges an exchange ratio equilibrium.

Social rankings are also reflected in and maintained by the gift, for the allocation of presents, in terms of quantity or quality, is normally co-ordinate with the social rank of the considered recipients. The obligation to present gifts, then, brings people into comparison who would ordinarily not be contrasted with one another.

Importantly, the gift-giving ritual helps to maintain social stability insofar as it enables members to cope with their own consciences. If the group provided no means of atonement for sins, it would surely disintegrate, for the shame that its

<sup>29</sup> Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 81.

very existence would call forth within each member would make that existence intolerable. The gift, then, is an important tool for the mending of deviations. Norman Brown, for example, has suggested that "giving is self-sacrificial; self-sacrifice is self-punishment."<sup>30</sup> Thus, man "gives because he wants to lose."<sup>31</sup> In this sense, asserts Brown, reciprocity in gift exchange implies that "social organization is a structure of shared guilt . . . a symbolic mutual confession of guilt."<sup>32</sup> And one of the functions of God is to structure the human need for self-sacrifice.<sup>33</sup>

Although we may disagree with Brown in his implication that gift exchange is "nothing but" an expression of guilt, we must agree that guilt may be an important component of many exchanges, and add that the strengthening of the social bond is a consequence of the *sacrificial gift*. Mauss and Hubert, in this connection write:

At the same time they find in sacrifice the means of redressing equilibriums that have been upset: by expiation they redeem themselves from social obloquy, the consequence, and re-enter the community. . . . The social norm is thus maintained without danger to themselves, without diminution for the group.<sup>34</sup>

The authors might have noted that most deviations are undetected by the group—and this ignorance, if not carried to an extreme, is functional for its continuation.<sup>35</sup> From this point of view an important latent function of sacrifice is the provision of atonement for *unseen* deviations.

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<sup>30</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>34</sup> Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 102-3.

<sup>35</sup> See W. E. Moore and M. M. Tumin, "Some Social Functions of Ignorance," *American Sociological Review*, XIV (December, 1949), 787-95.