An Exploration of Social Influence on Dyadic Giving

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Most gift-giving research focuses on aspects of the giver, recipient, or their relationship, although Sherry (1983) has argued that charting gift-giving behavior over time and “as one’s social network expands and contracts” (p. 158) would illuminate the ways gifts capture the nature of social relationships. Our interpretation of the Christmas giving behavior of five informants over 12 years demonstrates how over time, givers are influenced by third parties when selecting gifts for recipients. Thus, seemingly personal, dyadic gifts perform important relational work in the social network.

Our taxonomy of 10 social influences stemmed from an exploration of these questions:

1. How do third parties in a giver’s social network influence dyadic giving?
2. What are the underlying relational processes of these social influences?

Method
We interviewed and accompanied five givers on shopping trips during four Christmas seasons from 1990 to 1997. For further details, see Lowrey, Otnes, and Ruth (2004). We began our analysis by systematically coding the text to classify and compare changes in giver/recipient relationships and other key dimensions of gift giving. While assessing the relational roles of the giver and recipient among the 70 dyads examined (five givers and their many recipients), as well as changes in their lives, we noticed how our informants adapted their giving to particular recipients in response to others in their social networks. Thus, we recorded the data to identify these social influences. Because our analysis revealed the salience of social influences, we conducted final interviews in 2001, asking informants to assess the validity of these influences. Our interpretation is centered on the five underlying relational processes associated with the 10 social influences.

Findings
The relational process underlying the first two social influences, calibrating and practicing equipollence, is that of making social comparisons. When calibrating, givers engage in social comparison across the network, categorize recipients as different from one another, and adjust their giving accordingly to symbolically express their standing vis-à-vis others. When practicing equipollence, givers signal that they regard certain recipients as similar in closeness or relational status to one another.

The next two social influences are reenacting third-party traditions and relinquishing traditions, which share the underlying relational process of adjusting to disrupted traditions. In the first, givers find themselves reenacting traditions originally created and maintained by now-absent third parties (normally family members who have died). In the second, givers may find themselves allowing a powerful third party to usurp a tradition the giver had previously enjoyed with a particular recipient.

Accessing social support underlies the two social influences of enrolling accomplices and using surrogates. Social support is emotional or instrumental assistance provided by third parties. When enrolling accomplices, givers use third parties to help accomplish gift tasks, but may also seek to bond with the third party through joint activities and shared tasks. In contrast, givers use third parties as surrogates when the gift-giving situation is associated with risk in some way (e.g., giving a gag gift that may be misinterpreted).

Gaining permission from gatekeepers and adhering to group norms are two social influences stemming from the desire to act within relational rules. When gaining permission, givers ask third parties (often parents) to approve of a gift item for a particular recipient (often children) in order to avoid damaging the relationship with the gatekeeper. Adhering to group norms includes setting restrictions on family giving (e.g., gifts for children only) or in workplace settings (e.g., Secret Santa exchanges), and helps to maintain satisfactory social relations among the giver, recipients, and third parties.

Finally, the relational processes of initiating and severing relationships leads to the social influences of integrating and disassociating. Integrating recipients occurs when a person important to the giver (e.g., her father) brings new associates into the giver’s social network (e.g., father’s new girlfriend), who are then new recipients for the giver. With disassociation, when such relationships are severed, ties with these types of recipients are severed as well.

These social influences expand Sherry’s (1983) model and Belk and Coon’s (1993) notion of agapic giving. In Sherry’s reformulation stage, the two basic motives of giving (altruistic and agonistic) are directed toward the recipient. We argue that givers often use gifts in altruistic and agonistic ways to manage relationships with others in the network as well. Similarly, Belk and Coon’s agapic giving is characterized by a sacrifice on the giver’s part and the attempt to singularize recipients. Our findings demonstrate that givers also make sacrifices to and attempt to singularize third parties.

We acknowledge three limitations of our study. First, we emphasize the giver’s perspective. Future studies should examine the perspectives of recipients and third parties within a giver’s social network. Second, our findings are based on interactions with females. Although women are the primary caregivers and maintainers of relationships and rituals in most societies, it would be interesting to investigate how men’s giving might be influenced by third parties. Finally, the context of giving at Christmas may not be the same as other giving occasions, which may produce different patterns of behavior. Nevertheless, we feel that social influence is likely to impact giving, regardless of the context.

References