

The Disposition of the Gift and Many Unhappy Returns

JOHN F. SHERRY, JR.

Associate Professor of Marketing
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

MARY ANN McGRATH

Assistant Professor of Marketing
Loyola University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

SIDNEY J. LEVY

Kellstadt Professor of Marketing
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

The symbolic exchange value of the gift is amenable to investigation via ethnographic methods and projective techniques. In this paper, the topic of gift disposition, which arose from a comparative ethnographic study of two midwestern American gift stores, is refined and elaborated through projective analysis. Attitudes and behaviors related to the disposition of the gift are difficult to elicit directly through observation or structured interview. Through the use of a modified thematic apperception test and other projective techniques a more balanced and comprehensive account of the gift disposition and gift return emerges.

Gift-exchanges are complex transactions with cultural, sociological, relational, and psychological overlays. Sherry (1983) suggests that gift-exchange is a three-stage process. Retailer involvement is portentous and pivotal in the first and third stages. Gift planning, choice, search, and wrapping take place during Gestation, the first stage. The second stage is Prestation and includes the actual presentation of the gift. The aftermath of the exchange is the last stage, Reformulation, during which the giver-receiver relationship may be altered and person-object relations may be formed or rejected.

Adequate attention has been paid to the study of the first two stages. Sherry and McGrath (1989), McGrath (1989), and Fischer and Arnold (1991) clarify the process of gift shopping. Belk (1979, 1987, 1989), Caplow (1982, 1984), Pollay (1987) and others detail the exchange event and its context. Rucker et al. (1991), Belk and Coon (1991), and McAl-

exander (1991) have touched upon the third stage. The contribution of this paper is to illuminate further the process of Reformulation and the role of the retailer in the disposition of the gift.

The aftermath of a gift-exchange may be charged with emotion and passion. A number of critiques of social scientific inquiry incite us to study responses beyond the lukewarm. Romanyshyn (1989) laments the tendency of science to focus on events and ignore fantasies, promises, hopes, and dreams. Berman (1989, 109) calls this a "failure of resonance" in our investigations, where words such as "love" and "hate" fail to appear in the analyses. Miller (1987, 3-4) regrets the building of a framework of assumptions that has allowed a "nihilistic" and "global" assault upon consumer culture that inhibits an intensive microlevel analysis of the "actual relationship between people and goods in industrial societies" from emerging. The production of consumption, the enterprise by which consumers transform foreign commodities into inherent possessions, is still imperfectly understood. Gardner and Levy (1959) initially broached this area of inquiry, and other researchers (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, Miller 1988, 1991) have recently returned to it. The efforts of scholars such as Hyde (1979) and Campbell (1987) to contextualize and animate consumer behavior make it increasingly pressing to generate theories of person-object relations that are faithful to consumers' experience, and capture some of the subtleties that normally elude our instruments. Gift-giving is a topic that permits a merging of these concerns. The topic suggests a number of ways to convert critiques to potentially enlightening research regimes.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a complement to an ethnographic investigation of gift store activities in two noncontiguous Midwestern American cities (Sherry and McGrath 1989, McGrath 1989). We used projective methods to tap the insights of members of two special populations with which we had developed appreciable familiarity. The ethnography had hinted at the significance of a number of issues that remained elusive during our initial field study. We surmised that a new methodology would yield a different perspective on our chosen population.

Among the issues identified, but unresolved in the ethnographic study, were:

Ineffability. Informants in the earlier study had difficulty articulating with much precision the dynamics of bonding with gift and with shop. Choice heuristics were felt to exist by consumers, but no calculus of

selection was forthcoming. Nor was the nature of propriety tightly specifiable. McCracken (1989, 170) reports a similar kind of indeterminacy among informants in his ethnographic probing of their concept of "homeliness." We sought to penetrate this mystery through the indirection of projective techniques.

Negativity and ambivalence. Informants in the earlier study reported mixed emotions about their gift-giving behaviors. The ritual was clearly not as overwhelmingly positive an experience as cultural convention and commercial socialization might suggest. Green and Alden (1988) also report a number of verbatims drawn from focus group participants that highlight the anxiety attending such gift-giving activities as search. We hoped to relieve informants of demand pressures and relax the standards of politesse by allowing negative associations to emerge via indirection, through projective techniques.

Interiority of the artifact. Arising in the intersection of semiotics with ethnography, and shaped by the tradition of motivation research, is a subdiscipline of consumer research concerned with object relations—literally, the psychosociality of objects, which we will call "materiality." Through the use of projective stimuli, we endeavored to elicit and analyze the various notions of animation with which consumers imbue such sacral objects as gifts.

Gender issues. Our field study reinforced and extended findings emerging in a number of crosscutting literatures (Bowlby 1985, Cheal 1988, Lederman 1988, McGrath 1991, Raheja 1988, etc.) that embed consumer behaviors in the dialectic between the social construction of gender and the reproduction of culture. We sought to probe the gendered nature of gift giving in greater depth with projective methods.

Gifts to self. Our earlier investigation revealed that considerable amounts of self-giving occur in consumer culture, and that such activity has been virtually ignored by researchers. Mick (1986, 200), for example, suspects that such giving has "important unexplored distinctions" along "social, personal and economic dimensions." Subsequent studies (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b) confirm the frequency of the behavior, but only hint at the motivational complexity and social significance of the phenomenon. Self-giving is tinged with ambivalence, and calls into play notions of self-worth, social justice, and propriety. Projective methods were viewed as an appropriate way to elicit insight into such potentially controversial behavior.

In this paper we have focused on the issue of "returns," with the intention of illuminating a behavior our informants found significant.

The Respondents

The respondents in this study are a specialized population of female gift shoppers associated with our two target Midwestern gift stores. They tend to be upscale in their appearance, tastes, and suburban locale. Their demographic profile is detailed in Table 1. Because the focus of our original ethnographic study was female gift-shoppers, and the interpretive propositions emerging from that study arose largely through our work with female informants, we designed the present study to reach female consumers as well. Our intention is to contribute to the growing literature (Cheal 1988, McGrath 1989, Sherry and McGrath 1989) on women and gift giving. We acknowledge the limits to generalizability such a restricted focus imposes. This study is exploratory in nature. Its contribution is expected to emanate from such qualitative richness as might emerge in an in-depth interview. There is no attempt to quantify responses.

In order to focus upon our target population of gift store customers, we chose respondents randomly from the mailing lists of the two gift stores. The listings were predominantly of females, with most names in the form of "Jane Doe" or "Mrs. John Doe." Each respondent completed a self-paced, written projective instrument and returned it to us by mail in a postage paid envelope. The study was timed to coincide with the Hanukkah-Christmas season when the ritual salience of gift-giving and receiving was high. Due to the holiday "rush," discretionary time was especially low. As a result, some respondents wrote back that they were unable to participate. Those women who did participate offered particularly detailed, thoughtful, and articulate responses. Judging from return cover letters and notes penned on the return instruments, the apparent novelty (glossed "difficulty") of the projective task may have been off-putting to some respondents, while others responded enthusiastically to the instrument, possibly viewing it as an imaginative psychic outlet.

The Utility of Projective Methods

Projective techniques arise at the conceptual and methodological intersection of psychoanalytic theory, clinical social psychology, and cultural anthropology (Rook 1988, 251). The techniques have been periodically fashionable (Paul 1989), and although somewhat controversial, they are often the preferred instrument of behavioral researchers (Guthrie and Lonner 1986). Projectives provide access to unconscious fantasy more quickly than other techniques. In this study we noted an instant candor among

TABLE 1

Demographic Summary

Characteristic	Field Site		
	Mouse House (n = 34)	Baubles (n = 49)	Combined (n = 83)
Age			
Mean	53.9	44.0	49.0
Median	60.0	47.0	
Gender			
Female	31	47	78
Male	3	1	4
Unspecified	—	1	1
Marital Status			
Married	24	24	48
Single	3	10	13
Divorced/Separated	2	10	12
Widowed	5	4	9
Unspecified	—	1	1
Education			
Some High School	1	—	1
High School Graduate	1	—	1
Some College	14	6	20
College Graduate	10	13	23
Post Graduate Work	2	7	9
Post Graduate Degree	3	22	25
Unspecified	3	1	4
Income			
Under 10,000	—	1	1
10,000–24,999	1	5	6
25,000–34,999	5	4	9
35,000–49,999	5	7	12
50,000–74,999	6	13	19
75,000–99,999	3	6	9
100,000 and over	8	8	16
Unspecified	6	5	11

TABLE 1 Cont'd

Characteristic	Field Site		
	Mouse House (n = 34)	Baubles (n = 49)	Combined (n = 83)
Religious Affiliation			
Christian (Unspecified)	2	1	3
Catholic	14	10	24
Protestant (Unspecified)	4	5	9
Episcopalian	5	4	9
Presbyterian	2	2	4
Lutheran	2	—	2
Methodist	1	1	2
United Church of Christ	1	—	1
Unitarian	—	2	2
Jewish	1	6	7
None/Agnostic	—	4	4
Pagan	—	1	1
Unspecified	2	13	15

respondents at a depth that had taken weeks or longer to develop through ethnography. The results of projective techniques can be rigorously analyzed and compared at the level of individuals or populations (Paul 1989). The responses may be regarded as enduring personality attributes or situationally influenced samples of an individual's thoughts. In either case the techniques themselves should not be regarded as tests or psychometric instruments. Rather, most projective techniques are clinical tools: supplementary, qualitative, eliciting methods whose efficacy is tied to the skill of the analyst (Anastasi 1988, 621–622). Anastasi (1988, 622) characterizes projectives as “wideband procedures” for achieving a broad range of coverage of particular phenomena.

Both Levy (1985) and Rook (1983, 1985, 1988) have demonstrated the pervasive nature of consumer fantasy, discussed the reasons for its neglect among marketing and consumer researchers, and championed the use of projective techniques as a way to explore the phenomenon in rich detail. Each of these authors has reviewed the history of the use of these techniques in the two fields with the aim of encouraging interest in and application of such methods.

Projective research is characterized by an emphasis on interpretation; what the analyst believes the data imply is critical to the enterprise (Levy 1985, 69). Analysis may be accomplished via content analysis or interpretive judgment (Rook 1988, 265). In either case, the intuition of the researcher (Murray 1943) is the principal instrument of choice. The diffusion of projective techniques into marketing and consumer research has been hampered by our lack of valuation of the researcher-as-instrument (Sherry 1990), by the lack of inventiveness on the part of researchers (Levy 1985), and by the limited operational guidance available for designing discipline-appropriate thematic stimuli (Rook 1988, 250). As a varied and flexible way to elicit information, projectives afford the analyst and subject alike greater opportunity for full, subtle, and fair representation than other techniques permit (Levy 1985, 80).

Of all the projective techniques, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) appears to be the most widely used in marketing and consumer research (Kassarjian 1974, Rook 1988). Its adaptability to particular subject/informant populations (Barnouw 1979, Holtzman 1988, Murray 1946, Spindler and Spindler 1963) and the development of standardized scoring manuals (McClelland et al. 1958) make it especially attractive. The techniques are also valued because respondent involvement is high, and rich responses are elicited with only slight encouragement (Rook 1988, 60–61). It is presumed that self-disclosure results from the creation of stories in response to ambiguous stimuli. By varying the stimuli in terms of logical representation and concreteness, the analyst is able to elicit from respondents richly elaborate data (Rook 1988, 263–264).

Modified TAT analysis is enjoying something of a revival in behavioral research. Lowered expectations and more attention to contextual interpretation of more problems contribute to this reawakening (Spindler 1978). Stories reflect the teller's emotional world, conception of the surrounding world, and efforts to relate to reality (Murray 1946, 29), and they represent an opportunity to create a holistic picture of consumer behavior. The use of projective methods in conjunction with other techniques should enhance the value of our entire methodological toolkit.

Instrument Design

Our instrument consisted of several sections: a battery of sentence stems requiring completion, a modified thematic apperception test (which we designated a thematic apperception task, and refer to as "tat" to distinguish it from Murray's original) consisting of three pictures, a dream fantasy, and a range of demographic questions. In all, fifteen different

pictures were incorporated into our tat. To minimize respondent fatigue and help ensure compliance, only three pictures were used in any one instrument. Consequently, five distinct instruments were employed. Within each instrument the pictures were rotated to balance the impact of order on respondents' associations.

As dictated by clinical convention (Murray 1943), the pictures used in the tat were drawn from a variety of sources. The fifteen pictures ultimately employed were winnowed from a pool of well over one hundred, on the basis of researchers' intuition and pretesting. The pictures embody each of the traits believed to constitute an appropriate challenge to consumers' imaginations. Each picture contained latent stimulus meaning, depiction of various interpersonal relations, varying degrees of objective reality, sufficient intensity, and cultural propriety (Rook 1983, 117-119; 1988, 261). That is, each picture was selected for its ability to engage respondents and invite narrative elaboration. An engaging picture encoded enough denotative and connotative meaning to encourage the respondent to impose a dramatic structure upon its contents. We allowed the drama to pose the question we wanted addressed, and to shape the parameters of the response.

Although we designed our projective instrument to elicit insight into several dimensions of gift-giving behavior suggested by our earlier ethnographic study, it is the specific topic of gift returns that is addressed in this paper. The actual disposition of gifts that are negatively valued is related to the ambivalence of giving and receiving. In our ethnography we observed few post-holiday gift returns. The gift shop owners themselves wondered why this was so and what fate befell the unappreciated gift, its giver, and its recipient. Rucker et al. (1991) found that 76% of their respondents had returned at least one gift to a store and that articles of clothing are the most frequent and the most socially acceptable returns. The symbolic value and the exchange value of the gift exist in a dynamic tension that may determine the ultimate disposition of a gift. This tension may be recognized, but publicly discounted. Thus disposition is thought to be the source of considerable emotional stress. It seemed appropriate to tap the dimensions of this distress indirectly, through projective stimuli.

Adaptation of Projectives in this Study

We addressed concerns about the trustworthiness of projective techniques in a number of ways. Stories, scenarios, and pictures were pre-tested, and were chosen on the basis both of their eliciting power and of researchers' judgments. Our projective instrument was used as a comple-

ment to ethnography and depth interview; it serves to illuminate post hoc some of our ethnographic imprecision, and will enable us to conduct further ethnographic inquiry more productively. The themes of interest were investigated through several types of projective techniques. Interpretations were thus triangulated in a methodological sense. The study was conducted during the Christmas and Hanukkah season, when gift issues were quite salient. Intrusive administrator bias was reduced by standardizing the instrument and by allowing respondents to self-administer and self-pace. Demand characteristics were minimized by the indirection of the task, and the susceptibility to “faking” common to self-report studies was lessened considerably by the exercise (Anastasi 1988, 613–616). Reliability issues were addressed through triangulation within a team of analysts. Individual analysts proposed, elaborated, defended, and negotiated interpretations, bringing a range of perspectives to the enterprise. This finely nuanced variant of content analysis resembles the “close reading” advocated by some consumer researchers (Sherry and Camargo 1987; Stern 1989). Both Levy (1981) and Sherry (1984) have produced interpretations of consumer narratives in this tradition. Validity was enhanced by embedding the study in an ethnographic context—that is by drawing the sample from a previously studied population and framing interpretations with the benefit of pre-existing familiarity with emic viewpoints—and by leveraging off of the degree of clinical skill (from expert to novice) brought to the project by each analyst to gain both breadth and depth of insight. Because the study uses individual responses to focus broadly on aggregate consumption themes, the methodological concerns of traditional TAT clinicians are less threatening to our thematic analyses (Rook 1988, 265).

DETAILED FINDINGS

The responses associated with the Reformulation phase of gift exchange and gift returns were expressed through three distinct types of projective techniques. Incomplete sentence stems, pictures which prompted imaginative stories, and a dream sequence yielded a proliferation of qualitative data. The detailed findings are grouped by stimulus type, and the summary integrates the three overlapping sets of findings.

Gift-giving may be one of the few remaining critical incidents of true significance and sufficient periodicity that tests the social ties that consumers have formed in their relationships with others. A strong evaluative component is often projected onto the three stages of the gift-giving process (Sherry 1983). Many of our respondents express a strong pressure to “do the right thing,” from search through disposition. A sense of this

anxiety, and a semblance of the tension underlying both giving and receiving, are conveyed in the following sections.

I. Sentence Completions: A Yearn to Return

The following section details the findings of the sentence completion exercises specifically related to gift disposition and returns. The actual sentence stems used are highlighted in boldface type. The data were analyzed by ordering the responses along a relevant dimension. This frequently took the form of a positive–negative dichotomy. Figure 1 exem-

FIGURE 1

RETURNING PRESENTS TO A GIFT STORE .

WISE
IS EASY
SOMETIMES NECESSARY
OK
UNCOMFORTABLE
AWKWARD
NOT PLEASANT
SHOULDN'T BE A PROBLEM
DRAG
HASSLE
DIFFICULT
TIME CONSUMING
EMBARRASSING
BORING
PAIN
CHORE
NOT WORTH THE EFFORT
HATEFUL
ATROCIOUS
NEVER

plifies this organization and details the findings of a single sentence stem.

In general, the responses to the stem set relating to the theme of returns reflect the degree to which the practice of returning gifts displeases our respondents. In general, **people who return gifts**, when seen in a positive light, are "normal," "sensible," and "practical" people. They are "honest," and may even be "wise." In charitable terms, they are "enterprising" types who "get what they want." Seen in a negative light, people who return gifts are roundly castigated as being "difficult," "too fussy," and "self-centered." They are "perfectionist" and "inconsiderate" to an "irritating" degree. More than just "unappreciative" and "ungrateful," they are "afraid to be sentimental." "Thoughtless" and "foolish" are other characterizations. One respondent felt these recipients "should be shot."

When the respondent assumes the role of the jilted donor, the affront becomes personal. A kind of detached disavowal permeates respondents' remarks. **When someone returns a gift from me**, givers profess not to care, but hope not to know, about returns and exchanges. At one extreme, respondents can claim, "I'm happy," or "I think it's great." Less heartily endorsed, "I don't mind," "I'm not offended," "It doesn't bother me" and, quite simply, "I don't care." Moving toward the other extreme of the range, recrimination, acrimony, and self-doubt begin to surface. At a moderate level, respondents disclose that "I'll be sorry if it didn't please them," and complain that "It's sometimes annoying." Others are more forthright in their denial: "Don't tell me," "I'd rather not know," "I hope I never find out," "I pretend I did not notice." One claims that "this has never happened to me." Respondents' "feelings are often hurt," and they acknowledge being "disappointed," "puzzled," "angry," and "sad." The personal impact upon the donor is often profound: "I lose enthusiasm for . . . them [the recipient] . . . next time." Others lament, "I feel defeated," and "I have failed."

Returning a gift for something you want gets some lukewarm endorsement, but is generally repudiated. This practice is seen as "not wrong" or "OK" by some, "smart," "rational," and "practical" by others, and "right," "fun," and "great" by enthusiasts. The range of respondents' evaluations is largely negative. The practice gives some respondents "mixed feelings." It is "difficult" and "hard to do" for some, who believe "you should be careful." Where some judge the practice to be "in poor taste," others are more precise in describing their disaffection: "It makes me feel guilty," it is "selfish and unkind," it is "something I can't do." Not only does it "take the meaning away;" it is even "repulsive."

The actual experience of **returning presents to a gift store** is an interesting one. Those with little compunction find it "OK," "sometimes necessary," "easy," or "wise." More commonly, the experience is troublesome. It "shouldn't be a problem," yet, it is "uncomfortable," "awkward," and "not pleasant." As a low-level irritation, the procedure is "time consuming," a "drag," or "hassle." More personally, it is an "embarrassing" or "boring" "chore" that may "not be worth the effort." Some respondents brand the experience as "hateful" and "atrocious." Some would "never" return a present.

Responses to the stem **A gift I could never return** shed light upon aspects of gifts that are especially cherished. Respondents categorize by source, sentiment, and specifics. Echoing Belk's (1991a) findings, gifts from immediate kin are invariably retained: "children," "husband," "grandchildren," "deceased parent," and "close relative" are cited. "Someone important" and "someone who might be hurt" are spared this potential indignity. Gifts invested with "loving" and "caring," those which inspire "delight" or are "hard to find," and those designated as "my favorite" are never returned. Finally, a range of specific gifts are exempted from return. "Heirlooms," and items which are "handmade," "monogrammed," or otherwise "personalized" are retained. Expensive items ("furs," "jewelry"), personal ones ("lingerie"), and cash gifts are also retained. Some respondents claim that most or any gifts would never be returned.

The fragility of the gift as a vessel of our spirit is highlighted in the responses to the stem set for the theme of returns. Respondents reveal a kind of clandestine pragmatism in this regard. Gifts are not just exchange goods, even if we treat them as if they could be. Symbolic value is converted to exchange value in the return process. Our target population does not think highly of those who return gifts, and therefore it is not surprising that we witnessed so few returns. Returning a gift is something they have the *right* to do, but shouldn't *have* to do. In a sense it is a hardship inflicted upon the recipient, who then must act to make things right. Another view is that it is something the recipient has *no* right to do, but feels *compelled* to do. Returning is akin to violating a taboo, especially in the case of particular gifts and particular relationships. The responses hint that two wrongs (a poor gift and a return) cannot make a right.

II. Disposition Fantasies: Take This Gift and . . .

Additional information on returning gifts are stories in which respondents related their dream fantasies. When asked to describe a dream they

might have about “doing something” with a gift they didn’t like, respondents produced a number of rich narratives. The following three fantasies typify the responses in our corpus and provide alternative disposition scenarios.

The ceramic hand-made (crude-looking) man with the bird on his shoulder and holding strings from which many brightly colored birds were hanging was not my idea of a wind-chime worthy to be looked at daily from my kitchen window. I really don’t like it at all.

Perhaps I could hang it from the tree outside another kitchen window and it would look like I wanted to enjoy it there. But really the 3 little kids next door like to play in the area and hopefully they will see it and take it down and drop it—thereby breaking it and that will save me from looking at it.

However, the hanger was taken down last summer so I guess I’ll just leave it outside my kitchen window—but I’ll turn it around so I don’t have to look at the “Saint’s” poorly painted face and the badly painted birds. Perhaps the north wind will blow hard enough to make them disintegrate. I hope so!

It was the most gorgeously wrapped gift you had ever seen. Absolutely enticing with its perfect box and beautiful paper. The fabulous bow was the most wonderful mixture of colors of the season. Even the bag it came in was gold with gold silk cord. I couldn’t wait to open it. But I did wait. I saved it until last. It was so special, it came from that fancy store. I couldn’t wait to see what it was. I even cleaned up the mess I made from opening all the other presents before I began to plunge into this beautiful present. And so, through the bag and the bow and the box and the tissue and ok!!! It’s awful!!! Just like the person who gave it to me. I should have known better. I’ll wrap it all up—bag, bow, box and tissue and give it away to someone just like the person who gave it to me.

In my dream I received a vapid, ugly purse. This gift completely betrayed and contradicted every sense of who I was. I was so enraged that I damaged the purse in every way I could: I dragged it through the mud. I burned parts of it. I slashed it. I put dirty oil on it. I cracked an egg inside of it. Then I carefully wrapped it in the most delicate tissue paper and the most beautifully rich wrapping paper I could find and topped it off with fancy ribbons and bows. I then had this gift sent special delivery to the original “gift-giver!”

Our disposition stories exhibit a collective structure that shapes respon-

dents' fantasies about disliked gifts. Generally speaking, the stories echo the wrapping and unwrapping fantasies (Dichter 1975) common to our larger corpus of materials. They meticulously detail elaborate rituals which reflect irresistible anticipation and sensual engagement. They also reflect what Goffman (1959) has termed facework, a scripted performance in the giving and receiving of gifts. These rituals contain a tension and dynamic which animates kin and peer relations. During the Prestation phase (Sherry 1983), the anxiety experienced by both the donor and recipient is bitter-sweet (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1991). Getting and giving are on the cusp. The promise of the present is double-edged with the strong potential for either disappointment or delight. The gift contains the potential to bond recipients more tightly to each other or to reaffirm the other's secret suspicions of mistrust and personal inadequacy. At this point the gift carries a palpable psychosocial burden.

Once received and unwrapped, the gift precipitates a chain of responses among our informants. These responses are culturally conditioned to conform to the ideology of gift-giving; children in particular must be vigorously socialized to repress their spontaneous (authentic) judgment in the service of propriety. Initially, the recipient strives to repress all outward show of disappointment. There is the tacit recognition that the true gift originates in sacrifice. Acceptance of an inauspicious gift advises a kind of martyrdom. The recipient suffers in silence. Feelings of guilt and/or victimization (and such handmaidens as anger, sorrow, hatred, etc.) are managed internally, while obligatory debts of acknowledgment and gratitude are ritually discharged. Repression then gives way to a series of alternatives permitting the recipient to channel hostility. In more benign narratives, the gift is simply laterally cycled, to individuals or institutions more likely to benefit from having it. Again, some implicit recognition of the gift's need to circulate (Hyde 1979) and remain a gift may be operating here. Sometimes, the gift itself is ravished, as if it were a surrogate for the donor, as shown by McAlexander (1991). The gift may be banished to some distant outpost (such as a closet, attic, or the outdoors), or even destroyed. Young (1991), Young and Wallendorf (1989), and Belk (1991b) also cite such cases. This destruction may be of an active or a passive sort, depending upon the intensity of the recipient's emotions. With this destruction comes an exorcism of sorts: the recipient reasserts his/her autonomy and sense of self. A gift is sacrificed to heal a rift. In our most extreme narratives, direct revenge is enacted upon the donor by the recipient. Ironically, and appropriately, revenge comes in the form of a counter-gift. The true depth of the original recipient's emotions are revealed to the original donor in this counter-gift. In this case, the entire relationship

may be sacrificed along with the gift. Network mediation characteristic of the Reformulation phase (Sherry 1983) may begin with just these kinds of psychodramatic fantasies.

The following is another disposition fantasy which incorporates the entire process:

It's the day after—and there sits a lovely, expensive gift from my daughter-in-law who I know hates me. She did the obligatory thing but it feels empty.

I don't want to keep it and pray for charity to flood my brain so I can offer sincere thanks. My daughter-in-law would then become warm and loving and we'd be a family again.

But I've done that. She only gloats over her own good taste.

Sooo—do I break it? Give it back to her at the next occasion? Return it? Bury it? Contribute it to her garage sale next spring?

No, next time she's here—

While she is watching—

I have an accident and feel guilty ever after.

In this verbatim, kinship relations are characterized and consumer-object relations (of the kind probed by Rochberg-Halton 1986) are illuminated. Consumer behaviors are integrated by such dynamically opposed principles as hatred and love, nobility and baseness, altruism and agonism, solidarity and atomism, and joy and guilt. Disposition options range from killing, through burying, to resurrection by means of lateral cycling.

III. Thematic Apperception Tasks: Return Rituals

The narratives of Reformulation we encountered evidenced none of the confidence echoed in MacArthur's resolute "I shall return." Rather it is with consternation and trepidation that consumers lament and approach the retail setting to return a gift. The import is reminiscent of Raheja's (1988) Indian data, which reflect tensions between in-laws but occur in a context of U.S. kith and kin relations. Some gift giving can be construed as the ritual transfer of inauspiciousness from the donor to the recipient. Our data suggest that this transfer occurs most commonly between in-laws. In particular, the flow from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, and from daughter-in-law to mother-in-law, is highlighted in our narratives. The transfer is also noteworthy among blended families. It occurs as well among prospective mates, as witnessed by Belk and Coon (1991). Vindictiveness, viciousness, and other base motives are objectified and invested in the gift.

Penance occurs in the giving. The social reproduction of intimacy is achieved in part through gift-giving rituals. This solidarity can be strategically undermined (intentionally, inadvertently, or via misattribution) by these rituals. (See Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989 for other ritual assaults on familial integrity.) A chronicle of these slights, real and imagined, is offered in the following narratives.

We have selected two stories from our corpus relating to returns to illustrate differing interactions with the retail setting. We first present the stories, and then our interpretation of their significance. Our discussion of these particular narratives is integrated with remarks drawn from other respondents reacting to the common stimulus. The stories are keyed to Figure 2, which is a facsimile of the projective stimulus that triggered these narratives.

On Thursday, the line at the returns window was 4 people long. Sharon was the fifth. The people in front of her looked

FIGURE 2



bitterly certain of their won dissatisfaction, glowering at the inconvenience of their friend's/relative's bad taste. Sharon felt more furtive. This was the first gift she'd ever returned. It was a winter coat sent by her father and his new wife to her little girl. Her little girl already had a winter coat for God's sake, it was December already—and their lives were too stingy. Their other needs were too numerous to justify having two coats. So there they were, her little girl, Hannah, hated lines and began to whine and hang on Sharon. Sharon suddenly resented her father and his new wife for putting them through this. Who buys a child a winter coat halfway through the winter? Half a season's wear when the child needs and wants a thousand other things more important. She believed her father and his new wife's ignorance of that was meaningful—indicative of how far they'd strayed from an intimate sense of Sharon and Hannah's life, of their needs. She felt alone, but without regret. Her rejection of this coat was a rejection of her father, too, along with his new wife and new house and new distance. It was her turn. She swung the coat up on the return counter. "This thing is all wrong," she said.

There is a fine art to returning a package. One should not enter this field lightly. Much skill and experience to make the skill would be lost if a person walked to the "Return" window, said "Wrong size and I want cash," looked away from the clerk until the receipt was signed and departed. To effect a return you must follow several steps.

1. Prepare yourself. Rise at your usual time. Bathe, perfume, and exercise yourself a bit. Eat a good breakfast and dress carefully.
2. Carry the wrapped package in a large bag, large enough to preserve your place in line.
3. Do not start bitching in line. Save your salvos for the window. As you reach the window.
 - A. Present your package and make an assertive claim to the clerk, such as, "This is impossible," or "I am returning shoddy workmanship," or "The least you can do is _____," etc.
 - B. If the clerk replies in kind, ask for their identification and supervisor's name. You might ask how they were hired. Then,
 - C. Ask for more than you expect, such as the damaged stock and the cash refund . . . This is the part where skill works well. A high quality customer may even achieve all that he/she wants.

4. The art of all this is to verbally assault the clerk, then at the right moment switch to expressing meager appreciation for what they are doing, as to a servant or child.
5. Thank the clerk in a manner that clearly shows you are superior to the clerk. Do not respond to those disgruntled souls who arrived later than you. Put your slips, large bag and money carefully away and then depart for the next store. This has never been explained in *Sports Illustrated* but it is a great game with a win or lose finish.

Interpretation: Turnabout is Fair Play. In the first and eloquent narrative, the gift creates an internal conflict for the recipient, quite unlike the experience of her queue-mates. The donor is a modified in-law: an estranged father and new stepmother are painted as outlaws. The return creates a physical hardship for the recipient. The emotional stress and inconvenience prompt a meditation on the nature of domestic ties, personhood, and obligation. Disposition permits the donor to vent her outrage, frustration, and grief. The gift acts as a surrogate for ignorance and misunderstanding in the relationship.

The second narrative is a programmatic and explicit recognition of the agonistic (Sherry 1983) motive underlying much giving. Gift-giving here is regarded most fundamentally as a contest. Disposition is an opportunity to win a larger victory, or wring an extra measure of meaning, from the gift-giving process. On the one hand, the respondent approaches the posture of Urry's (1990, 149–151) "post-shopper," playing the game of consumption in "complex, self-conscious mockery," without affecting the *flânerie* that is characteristic of the voyeuristic stroller. On the other hand, she employs a satiric voice to ritualize hostility (Apte 1985, Douglas 1968, Freud 1960), creating a kind of anti-rite that lampoons the process of gift-giving. Returning a gift is highly ritualized; it requires rites of preparation and dismissal. The recipient premeditates packaging for an appropriate presentation of self. Not only self, but the original gift is wrapped, making the return an elaborate counter-gift in which the recipient becomes the donor. An overt identification with the aggressor ensues. During the return, the donor first attacks the gift, then the recipient. A stronger form of reparation is exacted, beyond compensation or restitution. The donor seeks damages. Facework (Goffman 1959) entails a shift from ingratiation to haughtiness. The return concludes with the donor's ostentatious departure. The narrative is essentially a ritually reversed reenactment of bad or inappropriate giving. It becomes a commentary on the ambivalence of the practice of gift-exchange.

SOME INTERPRETIVE PROPOSITIONS

An overview of the responses to our projectives on gift disposition and returns reinforces that notion that the gift is a locus of semiosis. It precipitates fantasies as well as overt action. These fantasies often are as ambivalent as pleasant. The gift threatens social ties as much as strengthens them. Gifts create internal stress by requiring an examination of the canons of propriety and a negotiation of identity: imputation and resistance of unauthentic versions of the self are critical elements of this stress. Prestation demands facework, and often a certain amount of insincerity. Further, the gift often concretizes previously amorphous and fluid social ties, opening them to more intense and anxious scrutiny (and perhaps ultimately more misinterpretation) than ever. Reformulation may attempt to even the score.

A number of general themes relating to gift disposition emerge from the corpus of data. These themes may be viewed as propositions that deserve more systematic investigation or as interpretive findings detailing alternative disposition strategies of consumers. In either case, each has managerial implications for retailers that relate to initial gift purchases and the return of unsatisfactory gifts.

Disposition by Incorporation

When a gift-exchange is perceived as successful, the recipient receives a number of positive messages about the giver and their relationship. There is a sense that the giver both "knows" and "cares" about the receiver as evidenced by his or her ability to meet unarticulated expectations. The giver, who may have fretted through the process of *choosing* the gift and *giving* the gift, actually *becomes* the gift. The object is incorporated into the recipient's life and the relationship between the two people is bolstered. This state is temporary and may be subject to alteration on the occasion of the next gift-exchange between the parties.

The satisfactory gift carries its retail source to the heart of its grateful recipient. Cues such as labeling, packaging, branding, and wrapping inform the receiver of the source of the gift and the retailer becomes part of the heady, emotional halo that surrounds the happy exchange. Thus the retailer has a vested interest in helping the gift shopper construct the right fit between person, object, and relationship. Good gifts become mobile retail advertisements.

Disposition by Lateral Cycling

Continued movement of the gift is a disposition strategy that takes two forms. Lateral cycling, by which goods pass from one person to another of

equal status through an informal economy, may be a common disposition strategy. Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf (1988) note this in the context of a swap meet. Our story tellers matter-of-factly project the recipient of a gift becoming its donor in another exchange. Once sacralized as a gift, even if the object disappoints the recipient, that object retains its status as "gift" and can be passed to another. When the emotion sedimented in the gift (Tambiah 1984) is negatively valanced by the recipient, its sacral nature may combine with its mnemonic aspect to help insure that the gift remains in circulation.

In our society it is the unappreciated gift that must continue to move. The gift cyclers choose new victims rather than grateful recipients. They appear to base their choice upon the characteristics of the original donor. The implicit assumption is that the initial donor had chosen a gift which he or she would have liked to possess. The charge of the disappointed recipient is to remove it from his or her life. To find the correct person and occasion stimulates the secondary economy.

In an alternative and more common version of lateral cycling, the distasteful gift takes the form of a discounted hand-me-down. The once-used gift takes on an implied degradation. It is no longer "new," having been "used" once as a gift. It is disposed of by being laterally cycled to someone of lower status, such as a poorer or younger person or a domestic employee. This gift-exchange is not expected to be symmetrical, so there is no anxiety on the part of the donor that a similarly disliked object of equal value will be returned.

Neither of the two lateral cycling options has a beneficial effect upon mainstream retailing. The rejected gift may continue to communicate its retail origins and flaws as it passes through a secondary economy. Lateral cycling of former gifts may not only displace current sales of new and perhaps more appropriate gift objects, but a stream of subsequent owners presents further possibilities for negative associations with the store of its origin.

Disposition by Destruction

A disposition option filled with violence and anger involves the overt destruction of the gift. It is likely that our sample of up-scale respondents fantasize about, rather than indulge in, this option when confronted with unappreciated gifts. Its presence as a disposition alternative reveals the ability of projective techniques to reveal feelings normally held intact by impression management. Overt damage to valued possessions as a means of communicating the termination of a relationship was mentioned by

McAlexander's (1991) informants and witnessed in the film *War of the Roses*. This destructive bent parallels the ritual behavior at a potlatch (Boas 1966, Drucker and Heizer 1967) in another culture, but the motivation behind the two acts is quite different. Our disappointed recipients want to rid their lives of the cursed object and in the same stroke symbolically kill, or at least hurt, the donor of the gift. The recipient strikes out against the object and the donor because the gift is not "right." Other societies use the ritual destruction of goods to reinforce the importance of relationship over tangible possessions and to acquire rank and gain distinction. Our respondents, on the other hand, reinforce the materialistic notion that "stuff" is momentous and carries with it the power not only to alter, but to ruin a relationship.

This covert violence and inner hate articulated by recipients toward an unwanted gift may present some unique retailing opportunities. Presenting opportunities for post-holiday trade-ins or contests of absurd gifts or actual public destruction of unwanted objects may generate publicity, store traffic, and possible consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Knowing that some consumers fantasize about destroying some objects, retailers might appeal to this need, only half tongue-in-cheek. With the realization that recipients want to eliminate inept gifts from their lives and closets, charitable institutions should plan their collections of clothing and household goods after major holidays, rather than before them. Such collections might take place at central retail locations, such as shopping malls, and be staffed by persons who can commiserate with the unhappy recipient.

Disposition by Return

As detailed in the earlier sections of this paper, the act of returning a gift was characterized as an unpleasant extension of the gift-exchange ritual. An expectation of a countergift was expressed as recompense for the effort expended. Someone owed the unhappy receiver something. Most often it was the retailer who was expected to set the record straight.

Returning a gift was detailed as a multi-step ritual. Ritual behavior generally serves a positive function as an automatic decision maker, to make life less stressful and less fraught with decisions. Traditional ritual helps give meaning to contemporary personal and social life and most rituals are neutral at worst and enjoyable at best. In our projectives, however, we found participants in return scenarios articulating resentment about their involvement. Waiting in line for service breeds initial negativity toward the retailer. The returning consumer's mindset, which is colored by unattained expectations of the rejected gift (themselves influenced in

part by the store image), appears to project additional negativity related to inappropriate gift choice onto the retailer.

In earlier studies, we reinforced the findings of Caplow (1982, 1984), Cheal (1988), Fischer and Arnold (1991) and others by stating that gift-giving is the work of women. In this study our specialized female sample projected a unanimously negative view of the scenario of returning a gift to a store. Gift returning is the reluctant work of women. The return policies of retail settings vary widely. Some stores take an aggressively liberal stance (Nordstrom or Daytons accept anything, even damaged merchandise, or items from another store), while others take no returns or exchanges ("All sales final!"). The gift stores of focus in our ethnography offered merchandise exchanges and no cash refunds, although our respondents were given no hint of affiliation with these stores and were free to project their retail experiences in general. We included projective stimuli showing pictures of men returning gifts, but no projective stories, dreams, or sentence completions contained any action or involvement by males in the return process. This is understandable given our female sample. In any case, women predominate the business of gift choice in the Gestation Stage and they appear to follow it through reluctantly in the Reformulation Stage.

Retailers who are aware of the negative associations and expectations customers have when they arrive to return a gift can take steps to facilitate and accelerate the process. A liberal return policy should avert some aggression, but waiting per se, even without an ensuing dispute, appears to breed acrimony. Retailers are also advised to educate employees to their role in the gift-exchange process and to monitor employee morale. Employees who understand that returners are disappointed recipients dramatizing aggression, anger, frustration, or guilt toward the giver of the unsatisfactory gift are better prepared to confront this negativity and deflect it from their sense of personal well-being.

CONCLUSION

Ethnographers are reasserting the value of the fieldwork enterprise of clinical methods of apprehending natives' feelings and fantasies. The goal of this renewed interest is to capture and interpret the "interplay between inner experience and public behavior" all too often overlooked by researchers (Herdt and Stoller 1990, 372). This paper has used projective techniques to investigate gift disposition. The resulting thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences shared by respondents enlighten us as to alternative consumer disposition strategies and present opportunities for retailers of gift items. By combining techniques of field and clinic, we

have shown that gift-giving is an integral part of the contemporary “cultural poetics of desire” (Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin 1990).

In earlier work (Sherry and McGrath 1989), we called attention to the need to distinguish between “materialism” and “thingism,” in an effort to stimulate investigation into the dynamics of consumer-object relations. The nature of the bond between consumers and objects (whether “goods” or “bads”) is still incompletely understood. This paper has attempted to cast some light on this topic by looking beyond the gift-exchange toward disposition alternatives.

There is a growing recognition among scholars (Cheal 1988, Howell 1989, Raheja 1988, Tambiah 1984) of the need to revisit and revise some of the seminal work of theorists like Mauss and Weber if our understanding of gift-giving is to be advanced. Both the nature of the objects exchanged, and the dynamics of exchange itself, require investigation. Our respondents provide complex folk models of gift-giving that incorporate objects not only with persons, but with relationships. Projective fantasy has been proven useful to tapping that insight, and demonstrating it.

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