

Giving Voice to the Gift: The Use of Projective Techniques to Recover Lost Meanings

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The field of consumer-object relations has recently emerged as a significant area of inquiry. Renewed attention has been devoted to understanding the meanings of gift giving as a result of this emergence. In this study, we employ projective techniques to uncover meanings that are less accessible by more direct measures. We analyze these meanings, and demonstrate the utility of projective techniques as a complement to other methods of investigation.

The metamorphosis and growth of ethnography as an accepted method of consumer inquiry has brought both excitement and skepticism to the discipline. Participant observation, which views researcher-as-instrument and eschews detached lurking in research settings, encourages diversity in data collection and analysis techniques. In-depth interviews with key informants are often combined with observations to access the emic perspective of consumers. The emic perspective is the native viewpoint of the informant; its counterpart, the analyst's interpretation, is the etic perspective. Several articles have demonstrated the kinds of results that these techniques offer (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Sherry, 1990; Sherry & McGrath, 1989).

In the pages that follow, we seek to demonstrate that the careful use of projective techniques, applied in conjunction with ethnographic methods, can illuminate aspects of consumer experience that are difficult to study. In the context of studying the sensitive topic of gift exchanges, we turned to projective

methods. Our desire to extend our inquiry beyond the boundaries of both the gift shop and social politesse led us to these methods. We suggest that when used carefully and in conjunction with other methods, projective techniques can yield rich, enlightening, and novel research insights.

The investigation on which this article is based was designed to generate meaning and develop theory, not to test them or measure their distribution. Because the contribution of this study lies in its qualitative richness rather than in statistical power, we have not tried to provide any illusory sense of precision through quantification. We have tried to reveal the range and variation of interpretations among a particular population, and suggest the significance of those findings for the phenomenon of gift giving at large. What is at issue at this stage of exploration is not how many people responded in a particular way, but the very fact that there is a range of hitherto undocumented response to a phenomenon that might eventually be calibrated, once its significance is more precisely understood. Thus, we have employed in the following account the existential-phenomenological mode of hermeneutic analysis of recent popularity in consumer research, rather than conventionally positivistic content analysis.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROJECTIVE METHODS

Rook (1988) asserted that projective techniques represent a combination of psychoanalytic theory, clinical social psychology, and cultural anthropology. The development and use of the techniques have a long and illustrious history in psychology (Anastasi, 1988; Kassirjian, 1974; Murray, 1943, 1946). Perhaps the best known and most extensive use of the adapted Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) is the work of McClelland and his associates (McClelland, 1985; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953/1976), who studied the need to achieve as a motive for behavior.

Projection is generally understood to mean attributing to others characteristics individuals cannot or will not see in themselves. The theory put forth by Freud is distinguished today as *classical projection* (Rabin, 1968) and is considered to be one of the defense mechanisms used by the ego to avoid anxiety (Frey-Rohn, 1969/1974). Later, Jung incorporated the Freudian defense mechanism into his theory of personality, but claimed that these defense mechanisms are not developed as a means of defining the ego, but rather are manifestations of patterns that are already present in the unconscious (Jung, 1954/1977).

A modified, broadened, and more applicable version of classical projection is referred to as *attributive projection*. Freud (1911) initially related projection with psychosis, but later assessed that it was implicit to the human personality. He wrote that

it has a regular share assigned to it in our attitude to the external world. For when we refer to the causes of certain sensations to the external world, instead of looking for them (as we do in the case of others) inside ourselves, this normal proceeding, too, deserves to be called projection. (Freud, 1911, p. 452)

This more generalized assessment, although not altogether divorced from the original, elevates projection from the level of mere defense mechanism to one of pervasive psychodynamic process that encompasses a host of mental operations not routinely subjected to conscious evaluation. Thus Levy (1985) employed projective techniques to elicit a range of responses, both positive and negative, and conscious as well as unconscious, to elicit projection of varying degrees of visibility from varying levels of personality.

The history and utility of projective techniques in consumer research has been well documented (Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1992, in press). Levy (1985) and Rook (1983/1984, 1985, 1988) strongly encouraged consumer researchers to adopt these techniques, especially to explore the neglected topic of consumer fantasy. The use of relatively unstructured tasks to encourage consumers to project characteristic modes of response without regard for impression management is undergoing something of a renaissance (McGrath, in press; Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992). The covert material that these techniques are especially appropriate for unearthing promises to aid researchers in rethinking some of their fundamental assumptions about behavioral phenomena. When regarded as "wideband procedures" (Anastasi, 1988, p. 622) for increasing our analytic reach into issues concerning either individuals or populations (Paul, 1989)—whether those issues are personality traits or situational influences—the techniques are useful complements to the consumer research toolkit. This article focuses on the use of projection to animate an object, and contrasts these animated projections with direct responses to inquiries on the same topic.

Projective Animation

The concept of animation is rooted in a variety of traditions. Poetry, religion, science, and often advertising challenge the imagination to envision real or imagined life and spirit in material forms of reality. Nida and Smalley (1959) summarized three distinct conceptualizations of animation. The hyperphysical form contends that objects have a conscious, separable spirit. The immortal soul, which is the focus of many religions, and the belief in ghosts or spirits of the dead are examples of this first format. In a second notion, objects are conscious, or semiconscious, but their consciousness is not a separate entity. The belief that HAL, the homicidal computer in the film "2001: A Space Odyssey" (Kubrick, 1968) is "alive" or the idea that a piece of technology, such as an overhead projector, may choose to undermine a presentation or the acceptance of raisins that sing, dance, and play musical instruments are all examples of this second idea. A third type of animation conceptualizes that

objects are not conscious, but that they are possessed by a separable essence, usually a soul or spirit. A person possessed by a demon, a haunted house (or a haunted overhead projector), coffee with the spirit of Mrs. Olsen, or whiskey holding the spirit of Jack Daniels exemplify this notion. These last two conceptualizations have been of particular interest to marketers. Gardner and Levy (1955) recognized these aspects of animation early on, and set an agenda for understanding and revitalizing the phenomenon of the "brand" that researchers and practitioners are just now rediscovering.

It was Boas (1940) who first explained animation as projective; he interpreted its existence as a person's recognition of power in self and in others. This conceptualization is similar to Freudian attributive projection. It refers to the process of "ascribing one's own motivations, feelings and behavior to other persons" (Rabin, 1968, p. 10). Nida and Smalley (1959) noted that people project and animate objects with spirits like themselves, apparently knowing the difference between people and spirits, but behaving as if such differences are superficial. Freud applied the conceptualization to interpersonal relationships rather than to person-object relationships, but in each case the result is both a defense mechanism available to avoid potentially painful experiences, and a vehicle of mastery for exerting some measure of control in a phenomenal universe (Frey-Rohn, 1969/1974). Piaget (1937/1954) argued that a discriminating animism is a characteristic stage in the development of a child's concept of the world.

The Application of Projective Animation to Gift Exchange

This study is an extension of an ethnographic investigation of activities in two Midwestern American gift stores (McGrath, 1989; Sherry & McGrath, 1989). In the ethnographic study, we established a degree of intimacy with members of these two populations. In certain areas of investigation, however, we found that participant observation and in-depth interviewing produced limited responses. When we specifically attempted to detail the transformation of an object into a gift and how persons bond with gift-objects, we found that informants were often either unable or unwilling to verbalize their feelings and experiences. Beyond issues of deficiency and resistance, a truly skillful interviewer is needed to facilitate the processing of such a demanding task. We surmised that projective methods might help to tap these less readily elicited insights. The ethnography had hinted at the significance of the gift, but what consumers understood to be the essence of the gift remained elusive during our initial field study. We then looked to projective animation to bring the gift to life in our follow-up study. We stood by to listen as respondents animated the gift, as if allowing it to speak for itself.

Through projective animation, our goal was to elicit understanding of what has been called the interiority of the artifact (Scarry, 1985). *Interiority* has to

do with the quickening of matter, that is, the investing of objects by people with metaphysical properties. This concept is being refined by researchers at the crossroads of semiotics and ethnography. It is shaped by the tradition of motivation research (Dichter, 1975; Murray, 1943) and is evolving into a subgenre of consumer research. Concerned with object relations, literally—the psychosociality of objects—we term it *materiality*, to contrast the condition with the negative connotations of materialism, and to avoid some of the less helpful ontological connotations of interiority. The goal of projective animation is to reveal this materiality. Through the use of projective stimuli, we aspired to typologize and appraise how consumers animate and singularize objects to the status of gifts (Belk et al., 1989). As in other marketing and consumer studies, we use projectives not as psychometric tests, but to focus generally on aggregate themes, and thereby seek to minimize methodological concerns of traditional clinicians (Rook, 1988). Again, because our subject is gift giving in a holiday context, both characterological and situational aspects of projective elicitation are intriguing.

Our approach was to begin with the ethnographic finding that gift-objects were imbued with a specialness that respondents found difficult to articulate. We wanted to enlarge and deepen this significant emergent interpretive theme with a combination of projective animation and direct questioning. The findings from projection and questioning are presented separately in order to illustrate their utility, differences, and complementarity.

METHOD

The study described here extends our previous ethnography (McGrath, 1989; Sherry & McGrath, 1989) and documents part of a program of research that resulted from it. The ethnographic study suggested a number of issues relating to gift exchanges that required further clarification through an alternative methodology. Six themes emerged that were addressed in our larger study. These are specifically related to the ineffability of the gift, interiority and animation associated with the gift, negativity and ambivalence associated with gift exchanges, issues related to gift returns and disposition, gifts given to the self, and gender and age differences in gift giving and gift shopping. This article focuses on the first two of these six themes. Elsewhere, we have detailed findings and interpretations related to returns and negativity and ambivalence (Sherry et al., 1992, in press).

The Respondents

The respondents in this study comprise a population of 83 female shoppers whose names and addresses were chosen randomly from the mailing lists of two Midwestern gift stores that were the focus of our original study (McGrath, 1989; Sherry & McGrath, 1989). The mean age of the sample was 49 and the

majority of the women (58%) were married. All but one were high school graduates, 69% were college graduates, and 41% indicated some postgraduate education. The median income of the respondents fell into our predefined \$50,000 to \$74,999 category and 23% admitted to having incomes above \$100,000, annually. Thus the demographics of this group position them as upper-middle class. This ranking is reinforced both by their preferences for the focal stores and their suburban locale.

Each respondent completed a self-paced, written projective survey instrument and returned it to us in a postage-paid envelope. The study was conducted during November and December, and was purposely timed to coincide with the Hanukkah-Christmas gift exchange season. Respondents who elected to participate offered detailed, thoughtful, and articulate responses.

Instrument Design

Our instrument was a written, self-administered questionnaire consisting of the following sections: (a) a series of sentence stems requiring completion; (b) a set of direct, open-ended questions on gifts and stores; (c) a modified thematic apperception task, which we abbreviated as "tat" to distinguish it from Murray's original; (d) a dream fantasy; and (e) a number of demographic questions. Each instrument contained a total of 31 sentence stems that explored each of the six themes. These are specified in Table 1.

The six topics were also probed through the pictorial tats. Each questionnaire contained three pictures about which the respondent was to construct a story. In all, 15 different pictures were culled from a collection of over 100. Pictures were selected based on the criteria suggested by Rook (1983/1984, pp. 117-119; 1988, p. 261), that is, latent stimulus meaning, depiction of various interpersonal relations, varying degrees of objective reality, sufficient intensity, and cultural propriety. The inclusion of three different pictures in each questionnaire resulted in five different versions of the instrument. Two of the pictures related to ineffability and interiority are included in this article as Figures 2 and 3, respectively. Each respondent told a story about 3 of 15 different pictures used in the study. The pictures were rotated among respondents to balance order effects and minimize fatigue. All projective items were pretested for comprehensibility and evocativeness.

The directiveness of our projective probing varied across items, but our goal was to give respondents permission to impose their own dramatic structures on the responses. We sought to obtain a range of responses across the parameters of interest. Forced choice demographic questions were the most constraining. Sentence stems enforced concision, and demanded only a punchline or similarly pithy closure. The tats gave respondents more freedom to elaborate, within the framework of a narrative structure, on whatever the picture elicited in them. The dream fantasies posed a framing topic, but left the content and genre of the response entirely to the respondent's imagination. As Levy (1985)

TABLE 1
Stem Codes

<i>Elicited Theme</i>	<i>Sentence Stem</i>
Ineffability	Gift giving . . . The gift I hated to give away . . . The gifts I still treasure . . . Searching for exactly the right gift . . . After the holidays, a gift I have given . . .
Interiority/animation	A perfect gift . . . No gift ever . . . When people say, "It's the thought that counts," . . . What a gift really means . . . If gifts could talk . . .
Negativity/ambivalence	The wrong gift . . . The problem with gifts . . . Last minute shopping . . . To owe someone a gift . . . Most gift stores don't . . .
Returns	People who return gifts . . . When someone returns a gift from me . . . Returning a gift for something you want . . . A gift I would <i>never</i> return . . . Returning presents to a gift store . . .
Gifts to self	If I give a gift to myself . . . I hesitate to give myself . . . When people hint for gifts . . . I give myself a gift . . . I reward myself when gift shopping . . .
Gender/age	The older I get, giving . . . When men shop for presents . . . Women never give . . . Men always give . . . When I was younger, giving . . . When women shop for presents . . .

noted, all stimuli are occasions for projection. We varied our stimuli to encourage a variety of responses to a common set of concerns. In that way, we were able to capture range, as well as to triangulate across techniques (whether ethnographic or projective) and analysts.

Interpretation

As documented in our other accounts (Sherry et al., 1992, in press), individual analysts "proposed, elaborated, defended and negotiated interpretations" (Sherry et al., 1992, p. 48), and brought a variety of perspectives to the analysis.

This is a nuanced version of the "close reading" content analytic procedure advocated by semiotically oriented consumer researchers (Sherry & Camargo, 1987; Stern, 1989), and a variation of the "hermeneutic circle" procedure espoused by phenomenologically oriented consumer researchers (Thompson, 1991; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989).

The hermeneutic circle in which our interpretation was forged—the same process which gave rise to our instrument—bears some description. Although each of the authors shares a common research focus in consumer behavior, each is formally trained in a different discipline. Marketing, anthropology, and psychology oriented the investigation. A range of clinical experience is brought to this interdisciplinary effort as well. Further, the bi-gender nature of the research team provided some balance and synergy to the process of interpretation. Each of the researchers analyzed the data individually; met to discuss, defend, and discard their individual analyses; and negotiated an interpretation of the data in light of each others' understandings. As the literature suggests, such hermeneutics resembles a hybrid between Delphi technique and interrater reliability measure. Context categories were neither predetermined prior to analysis nor established merely by preliminary consensus. Rather, interpretations emerged in discussion of each others' analyses. We tried less to reduce diversity in interpretation than to stimulate the additional intraceptive intuition necessary to help our orientations converge.

RESULTS

In this study, we attempted to have respondents articulate what makes an item appropriate for a gift and what imbues an object with "giftiness." This was explored through three distinct lines of questioning. In the first instance respondents were asked directly "What makes a gift different from just any item you might get in a store?" In addition, two techniques for projective animation were employed—incomplete sentences and storytelling. The result is a proliferation of qualitative data. The detailed findings are grouped by stimulus type, and the summary integrates the three overlapping sets of findings.

Direct Questioning

When asked directly about the distinction between a gift and a commodity, respondents gave fairly direct, though often superficial, answers. Perhaps the question seemed too obvious, making in-depth answers difficult to elicit. On the whole, responses to direct questioning tended to be brief, neutral, or slightly positive in their evaluation of the gift-exchange process and at a low level of abstraction. The brevity and inarticulation of these written responses

paralleled the unclear, tongue-tied reactions we encountered in our ethnographic interviews on the same topic.

Several respondents emphasized the specific roles of the giver and of the recipient. Typical donor-related responses were "gifts are given!," "the intent of the giver," and "someone bought it with you in mind." A gift "can be any item—the intention of the donor is key to the 'giftiness' of it." The receiver is also pivotal in the process, as indicated by the following verbatim responses:

"When you give a gift, you are trying to please. The only thing you get out of it is the pleasure of the recipient."

"The gift will bring pleasure to the person receiving. Every item in a store can be a gift to someone. The secret is the way the gift is presented to the receiver."

Some specific distinctions were made as to how gifts can differ from items chosen for one's self:

"Gifts tend to be less practical and often times something you would not buy for yourself. . . . A really good gift reminds me of the person that bought it and thus has more special significance than something I buy for myself."

"The gifts I try to buy are usually those things that the receiver wouldn't buy for himself, but that he really needs, or would delight in having. If I know a person wants a particular item, I'm happy to buy it."

"Sometimes it is useful, but a lot of times it is frivolous."

"A gift should be something no one needs, but it gives pleasure. A gift should have a playful element to it, even if it is very useful."

A few respondents criticized the implication in the wording of our question that gifts are to be found in a *store*. The importance of individualization and personalization emerged when respondents commented that the best gifts are handmade or homemade.

"I like to give a gift that is handmade. I'm lucky because I'm very creative that way, so this is easy for me to do. I like to receive a handmade gift. [I would] Never give that away even if I'm not 'crazy' about it. When the person who gave it to me comes to my home, I put it out or use it to please the giver."

"Another type of gift is one that a person has made, be it sewing or even a school shop project like a magazine holder or spice rack."

The following is one of the lengthier and more complex answers obtained through direct questioning. Although the response is relatively brief, it differs

from most explanations in that it incorporates several specific factors and criteria for assessing "giftworthiness."

"A gift should be a happy, thoughtful process. When the giver is happy about the gift, that makes it a special gift. A gift should come from the heart. A gift from someone who can't afford much can be any little inexpensive gift. A gift should always show some thought behind it. Or it should be what someone really wants or asked for."

Projective Responses

The following typify the responses achieved through the use of projective animation and tend to be more complex, abstract, and indirect than those just presented. In addition, the written projective responses tend to be quite imaginative and creative. The storytelling methodology elicited lengthier responses than those acquired through direct questioning. In addition, both projective formats revealed socially unacceptable and unconventional responses.

Sentence completions: the gift speaks directly. This section details the findings of the sentence completion exercises specifically designed to animate the gift. The sentence stems used are underscored. The data were reduced in a number of ways. Sometimes responses could be ordered along a continuum in which dimensions were specified by emic content. For example, responses might range from positive to negative, difficult to easy, or cognitive to sensory. Sometimes emic terms clustered around particular concepts or categories, such as homemade, effortful, or authentic. Analysts looked for a way to characterize the range of respondents' meanings, while attending to emergent patterns. Thus, although it is interesting to learn, for example, that gifts must embody labor to authenticate their value, the nature of that labor is often suggested in the emic terms themselves. In the following paragraphs, we sample the range of some of our responses, and propose an etic analysis.

We begin with our desire to understand, from an emic perspective, just what a gift is, because informants were fairly imprecise in their responses to some of our awkwardly direct questions. Responses to the ineffability theme reveal an ambivalence toward gifts and giving. Respondents complete the stem gift giving along a continuum bounded by strikingly opposed visceral or sensual descriptions: "revolting" and "a turn-on." Between these poles, the process ranges from negatively charged meaning clusters ("irritating," "obligatory," "mundane," "effortful") to positively charged ones ("spontaneous," "rewarding," "fun," "pleasurable"). Gift giving is a highly cathected activity.

The search process is also described in vivid, psychosomatic detail, with respondents stressing the downside of the experience. Searching for exactly the right gift is described in terms of "sickness" and "pain"; it is "frustrating" and

"stressful" as well. Respondents are enervated by search, finding it "exhausting," "tiresome," "tedious," "time wasting," "time consuming," and "hard." Some find it alternately meaningless, and view search as "fruitless," "futile," "nonsense." At its least offensive, search is merely "necessary." Respondents may view search as "terrific" in a polyvocal sense: It inspires both terror and wonder. When search is valued, it is a "challenge," a "thrill," or an "art." It may be merely "enjoyable," actually "fun," or ultimately "fulfilling."

Few respondents had difficulty recalling the gifts I hated to give away. Gifts that are "unappreciated" or "obligated," ones the giver would not buy himself or herself or ones he or she needed, and miscellaneous specific items constitute negatively charged regrets. Givers lamented parting with presents they themselves "wanted" or "loved." Some respondents hate to give "any" or "all gifts," whereas others have "almost asked to have back" gifts once given. In some cases, the gift is "duplicated" or "kept," becoming in effect a gift to the self.

The gifts I still treasure can be characterized in terms of source, sentiment, and substance. In increasing order of importance, gifts are valued from friends, loved ones, and family. Prized are those from parents and siblings, and most esteemed are those from children. Gifts that encode love, effort, and singularity are especially cherished. If the gift serves a mnemonic function, if it is handmade, or if it is unexpected, it is valued above others.

Respondents' perceptions of the disposition of gifts were tapped through the completion of the stem after the holidays, a gift I have given. In best-case scenarios, the gift is "kept," "displayed," and "enjoyed." Occasionally the gift "keeps on giving" to the recipient, and in some cases, the respondent reports that such an experience "gives to me." A gift may literally be "consumed" on receipt, and thereby give transient or ephemeral pleasure. In worst-case scenarios, a gift "loses its flavor," gets "put away" or "forgotten." The gift may come to "represent a bill," and may be discovered to be "half price" after it is given. Worse still, a gift may be "returned" or "exchanged."

What then, are the ineffable qualities of gift giving? There is a somatized tension regarding the nature of the gift and the ritual of search that threatens to provoke more anxiety than elation among our respondents. Effort must be invested that may never be repaid, or that may be spurned entirely. The gift may be extremely difficult to give, whether due to the relationship the donor has forged with the recipient, or with the gift object itself. The gift becomes a palimpsest of sorts, once given. Its meaning can be expunged and reconfigured, if not negated entirely. Even the most treasured gift our respondents might collectively envision—a surprise present handmade by children and invested with personal significance—is alternately reflective of the issues of asymmetry and altruism hedging most gift relationships. It is literally priceless. The purity of this perfect gift resides at least in part in the rarity of its occurrence.

Responses reflecting the interiority and animation themes are similarly

ambivalent. Our respondents envision a perfect gift in terms of inspiration, investment, and impact. The gift must be "wanted" and "needed"; it should also be "deserved." It must be "appreciated" as well. Such a gift "touches both" the donor and recipient, and it is "fun" to give. A perfect gift requires considerable investment. It must be "carefully" and "thoughtfully" chosen by the donor. It is "hard to achieve" and "difficult to find." Some respondents view this gift as their "ultimate goal," whereas others believe there is "no such thing." If it is eventually secured, the gift may be a "godsend." The impact of the gift on the recipient is critical. An "unexpected" or "surprise" gift is best. The gift is "not simply materialistic," and the donor may feel it is "too extravagant" for himself or herself. For some, the gift should "fulfill a wish." It shows the donor that "I am known," because the gift encodes "a portion of thyself" within it.

That gift giving is motivated by agonism as well as altruism is recognized by our respondents. Some believe no gift ever can be "too grand," whereas others assert that no gift ever is "really a gift." Ideally, no gift "didn't give pleasure," "harms," "lets you down," "is unappreciated," or is "meaningless." Practically, no gift "should be rejected" or "go unacknowledged." Realistically, no gift "completely satisfied," or "completely represents feelings." Some respondents admit that no gift ever "pleased me tremendously," "matches the anticipation," "is as good as either the getting or unwrapping or giving," or even "is enough." Respondents note, somewhat more cynically, that no gift ever "was uncomplicated" or "went without an underlying statement."

Respondents assume a defensive posture when interpreting what is meant when people say, "It's the thought that counts." Recourse to this adage is tantamount to "lying," or at best mouthing something that is "not true." It is spoken in the service of reducing "guilt," or of rationalizing a "bad gift." Some respondents regard the speaker as "being philosophical," or feel the words are "true." Respondents do not appear to regard gift giving as merely the discharging of an obligation. The quality and quantity of thought invested in the gift is crucial: It should not be "fleeting."

The tension between the labor value or sacrificial ethic, and the affective load borne by the gift, is pronounced among respondents. For some, what a gift really means resides in how much "expense," "imagination," "taste," "talent," or "time" is invested in the effort. Others believe such meaning is "not always apparent." Others still view the gift as a repository for this meaning: It is a "token of remembrance" which may encode "caring," "sharing," "thoughtfulness," "private" sentiments, "pleasing," and "love."

An especially instructive set of responses was elicited by speculating if gifts could talk. Gifts assume four postures in respondents' characterizations which are summarized in Figure 1. Some gifts are humble, and beg "Don't return me," "Please like me," and "Don't leave me in a corner." Others are haughty, and say and act differently. "Hah! We have the upper hand. Admit it!" They

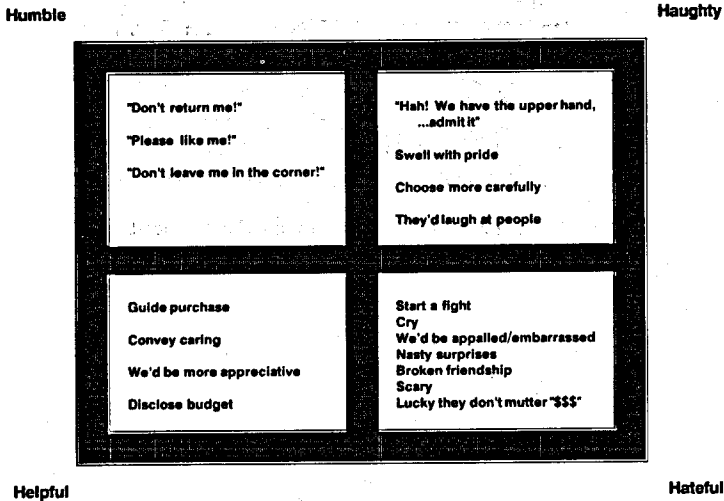


FIGURE 1 Sentence stem: If gifts could talk.

"swell with pride" and tell people to "choose more carefully." Some even "laugh at people." Still other gifts are helpful, because they "guide purchase" and "convey caring." These kinds of gifts would make us "more appreciative," and some would even disclose the time budgets on which they were purchased. Finally, one group of gifts seems clearly hateful. These gifts would "start a fight," or "cry." They are "scary," contain "nasty surprises," and prompt "broken friendship." Respondents feel we're "lucky they don't [speak]," because "We'd be appalled and embarrassed." Some of these gifts would "mutter, 'money, money, money.'"

The projective sentence completion exercise indicates that the interiority of the gift is multifaceted. Its meaning is susceptible to misreading, but meaning must always take precedence over appearance. The gift must be earned both by the donor and by the recipient. It must be more than bought; it must be built or birthed. The gift must be invested with effort, yet represent the immaterial self of the giver, whose essence must paradoxically be inferred from the gift. It must be a surprise even when expected. It must confound obligation. It encodes opportunity and danger, and invites the recipient to pluck the strings attached. It ingratiates and insults, hurts and heals. It speaks out of both sides of its mouth.

Projective stories: the gift materializes. The following are several stories that animate the gift and reveal its pivotal role in relationships. Figures 2 and 3 are reasonable facsimiles of visual stimuli that produced these responses.

The figures and texts have been chosen to illustrate the interiority or inexplicability of the gift. For expository convenience, we first present the story (or

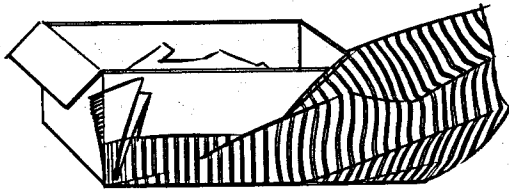


FIGURE 2 First pictorial stimulus for Interiority.



FIGURE 3 Second pictorial stimulus for Interiority.

set of stories) and follow it with our interpretation of its meaning.

Figure 2 stories:

"I looked at the box lying on the floor, tossed aside after the contents had been lovingly removed. In my hands I held a small terra cotta cottage, unadorned, open at the back to allow for a small candle to shine through its open windows. To those around, it appeared to be a lovely gift, something everyone who knew me would understand my delight with it. But as my fingers clasped the cool clay house, I knew that only one person truly understood the significance of the gift. Only the woman sitting on the floor close to the warmth of the fire looked at me with loving question, her eyes shining in the firelight. I answered her unspoken query with smiling assurance. The gift was a risk, a reaching out towards a new relationship, a symbolic gesture, taken from a story I had written about a journey. The path of the journey was blocked with obstacles which this woman had helped me overcome. But somewhere in the depth of struggle, our paths had separated. I had needed to build my own house, and the study ended when I greeted the woman as she came to my house as friend and colleague. And now she was truly 'at my house,' reaching out with friendship with her gift of the lovely terra cotta cottage. I set the cabin on the mantle, lit the votive candle inside, and smiled with a deep secret happiness. Leaning over, I picked up the empty box, carefully folded the tissue within, and replaced the cover. As I set it out of the way, the woman smiled too, and I know that this gift was precious indeed!"

"There were two items on my Christmas 'wish list,' one large and one small. Either one would have strained our meager resources. As a starry-eyed newlywed, I assumed love would conquer all—even financial limitations.

On Christmas morning, I scanned the gifts under the tree, looking for an unusually large or small box. To my delight I saw a large one that couldn't be anything but the elegant roasting pan I wanted so badly. My husband seemed as anxious as I to have the package opened first. Disappointment crept up on me as I tore open the box and found it stuffed with crumpled paper. I was close to tears before I found the one crumpled paper that contained a tiny box.

Love did conquer all. The ring I had wished for was in the tiny box."

Interpretation: telepathic bonding. In these stories prompted by the simple picture of an opened package, several ideas about the bond between the giver and the receiver emerge. The receiver assumes that the giver has access to her "wish list" to discern among objects that will delight or disappoint. The

recipient articulates a shared meaning in the chosen object that is intense, complex, and impactful upon the relationship between donor and recipient. The gift assumes the joint role as touchstone to the past and as beacon to the future of the relationship. McCracken (1989) found similar meanings attached to objects on fireplace mantels. In addition, these stories capture an anxiety about the process that is not articulated elsewhere. The recipient is hopeful that the symbolic communication and telepathy will work, but she approaches the exchange with shaky confidence. The relief and joy that accompany the aftermath of a successful exchange allow for the construction of an elaborate post hoc explanation that transforms the fitting into the flawless.

Figure 3 stories:

"The pretty young woman, fresh out of modeling school, is given her first assignment. She approaches the job with great enthusiasm. But what is this? A whole new way to shop sounds ok, but by computer? Don't they know she's unmechanical? She tries, but her bright smile fades when she just can't get the thing to work. Frantically, she calls the service number but they say no one can come until Friday and this is Sunday. Desperate, she tries again to make the machine work. Then totally frustrated and angry, she kicks the machine and immediately it begins to operate. But it won't stop and now she is inundated with gifts to such an extent that she piles some on top of the machine. She manages one more smile and then, the alarm goes off, she opens her eyes and decides maybe being a secretary isn't so bad after all."

"Ellen spotted this new machine in the subway. At first it seemed the answer to her dreams—easy gift giving that handled everything in five minutes. But the actual choices were disappointing, somewhat limited and overpriced. After browsing through the selections, she felt guilty about her waste and vowed to spend more time on her siblings' gifts."

Interpretation: deus ex machina. The heroine of the first narrative embodies a vocational struggle between the forces of beauty and utility that seems to reflect the tension between the symbolic value and exchange value of the gift. Mechanical giving sounds good in theory, but it is inherently suspect. The machine must be forced to give (machine abuse touches an appropriately neoluddite chord in gift culture), then literally swamps the donor with gifts. The mechanical process buries, rather than liberates, the donor. The machine's revenge is over giving; it honors the letter but not the spirit of the custom. As in most of our narratives, the hypocrisy is observed, but then rationalized or papered over with facework.

The second story recognizes the growing conflict between time pressure and

kinship obligations in contemporary society. Once again, a labor value theory of gift giving is espoused. If effort is spared, the donor must suffer guilt. Effortless gifts are contradictions, intrinsically unrewarding. In the story, guilt prompts a social resolution, and a return to tradition. Search and shopping must be appropriate to the occasion they serve.

CONCLUSION

The research process which we began in earlier work (Sherry & McGrath, 1989) investigated the dynamics of consumer-object relations at an ethnographic level. We recognize that the study of the nature of the bond between consumers and objects is still unfinished. This article has explored one more avenue into this topic by examining the gift exchange both directly, through observation and questioning, and indirectly, through projective animation.

The progression of our efforts has run roughly as follows. The results of direct question-based inquiries initially compelled us into the field setting of retail sites to explore the impact of context on gift-giving behaviors. Participant observation gave us insight into issues that are typically unreported by consumers, and allowed us to pose questions directly to consumers in a fashion that less phenomenologically driven investigators might not envision. Directive and nondirective interviewing proved both productive and frustrating. The more deeply we delved into apparent meanings, the more we discovered the need for greater subtlety in eliciting meanings otherwise lost to researchers and informants alike. Our need to sanction the kind of creative introspection that would allow already articulate informants to elaborate and disclose further their insight into problematic issues led to our employment of projective techniques. We centered these techniques around focal concerns, and structured the tasks from fairly directive to fairly nondirective, in order to elicit as broad and deep a range of insights into phenomena as the patience of our respondents would permit.

An observation on the efficacy of techniques is warranted, at both macro and micro levels of study design. Our tenure in the field setting, our acuity as observers, and our skill and sensitivity as interviewers each acted as a constraint in the original ethnographic study (Sherry et al., 1992, in press), and inspired our subsequent use of projective techniques. Further, the greater utility of projectives in tapping subtle or repressed motives could conceivably be an order effect, because any inquiry beyond our initial questions could prompt more elaborate introspection. Although we rotated items in our instrument to diminish order effects internally, the mere fact of our earlier ethnographic presence could have encouraged some respondents to think more richly. Given the negotiated nature of an ethnographic interview and the obtrusive nature of participant observation, order effects are both inevitable

and desirable. Our goal was to provide informants and respondents with enough opportunities (and tools) to overcome any frustrations they might experience in describing to us conditions they felt to be significant. Indirection proves quite useful in this regard because it moved respondents beyond conversational norms and underdetermined rejoinders. Projectives provided one more persuasive argument to consumers that their thoughts and motives were genuinely opaque to researchers (and perhaps to themselves) until revealed in their responses.

The several methodologies used revealed distinctly different views of the gift. Direct questioning most often characterized the gift and the exchange in its ideal form. Respondents related how the act of giving should be: selfless, magnanimous, and heartfelt. The reception of the gift should be pleasurable and surprising, yet the object should be something desired by its receiver. Projective animation revealed the gift in the harsh light of reality. Its presentation and reception are tinged with anxiety, cynicism, hostility, anger, and power. These are aspects more comfortably hidden behind the mask of impression management. Consider, for example, the disposition fantasy reported by one of our respondents:

"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.

Soooo, 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."

Fantasy is culturally patterned, subjectively compelling and behaviorally impactful; it may be revelatory of social problems as well (Caughy, 1984). Fantasy that is repressed or suppressed because of its inherently threatening nature may well be unavailable to directive elicitation. Projectives provide access by backgrounding the question frame. In this verbatim, kinship relations are characterized, object relations are illuminated, and 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 (via lateral cycling). It is to the nature and significance of such ambivalent forces that we believe future research attention must be turned.

Our projective study points us in several new research directions. Clearly, it is time to return to the field. The responses and our interpretations can now be recontextualized, by reseating them in the retail settings that initially gave rise to them. These materials can be used to begin the process of autodiving (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Rook, 1989) on-site, which will initiate another round of inquiry into the nature of ambivalence attached to gift giving. Such hermeneutic alternation between methods and between stakeholders should deepen and balance our understanding of gift giving. It may even suggest further methodological refinements—experiments seem indicated—in the investigation. Tandem, real-time studies are also warranted by our results. For example, the emerging interest in the phenomena of gifts to the self might usefully be mobilized by a multimethod study that employed participant observation, interview, projective tasks, survey, and experiment as part of the original design. Our groundedness in the sites and rapport with informants makes such an ambitious undertaking feasible. Finally, the issue of consumer-object relations, which has long been the unexamined ritual substrata of marketing and consumer behavior, has been elevated to a focal concern. It is approachable by a range of methods, once its salience is made apparent to researchers. Gifts constitute a rich example of the “stuff” that people use to produce consumption. The approach we have advocated in this article needs to be extended to the world of goods beyond gifts—items both remarkable and mundane—to unlock more of the principles by which people make themselves. It is the combination of methodologies that presents a wide range of responses and weaves a composite image of gift exchange that is multifaceted, richly complex, and painfully paradoxical. It allows us to recover those meanings that might otherwise be lost to consumer research.

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