

# Monadic Giving

## Anatomy of Gifts Given to the Self

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*Maybe all presents are presumptions.  
Giving, we test our affinity  
with hidden wishes. Yet asking changes both desire and deliverance,  
as when lovers must say touch me  
there. . . .*

—Alice Fulton, "Self-Storage" (1990, p. 11)

A confluence of traditions is prompting consumer researchers to reassess their discipline's understanding of the dynamics of gift giving. Among the most intriguing of the discoveries driving this reappraisal is the phenomenon of gifts given to the self (Mick, 1991; Mick & DeMoss, 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Sherry & McGrath, 1989). Monadic giving<sup>1</sup> challenges our fundamental notions of gift giving as a dyadic enterprise, notwithstanding conceptions of a "postmodern" (Cushman, 1990; Ogilvy, 1990) or "dividual" (DeVos, 1985)

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self. In this chapter, we seek to deepen our understanding of gifts given to the self by exploring the ambivalence by which the activity is tinged. This exploration compels us to examine the cultural ideology of the gift. What follows is a sociocultural account of monadic giving.

In the poem from which our epigraph is borrowed, Alice Fulton (1990) captures much of what we have learned about gift giving at the level of cultural ethos. Donors often seek to produce an artificial or mechanical transformation of recipients. Acquiescence or compliance is bought at a high price: a recipient will commonly shelve the authentic self and endure a kind of remaking at the hands of a donor. Although this endurance may be tested to the breaking point (i.e., the dissolution of the dyad; Sherry, 1983), it is more often merely strained, provoking dissonance between the ideology and the ritual itself (Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1992, 1993). The "otherness" of the recipient is more often suppressed than celebrated. When celebrated, it is frequently muted via the donor's use of hints, wish lists, and other order-taking devices that become gift giving by proxy at best and inefficient personal provisioning at worst. Even though recipients always get it (i.e., the literal present), donors rarely "get it" (i.e., the right present and the affect it encodes). One consequence of such an unsatisfying personal experience of an ostensibly ennobling cultural convention is the co-optation of that convention by the self. Levy (1982) suggested as much in his assessment of the gift-giving literature over a decade ago when he advocated considering personal use as a form of gift giving to the self. Both the complexities and meanings of gifts and giving are illuminated when we explore how "I as subject" transacts with "me as object" (Levy, 1982, p. 542). Monadic giving short-circuits some of the disappointment and futility that recipients often feel in their transactions with donors. As our epigraph makes clear, the abiding rightness of the "touch," the unassisted, unerring discovery of the "there" are palpably at stake.

The findings we report in this study represent renewed interest in the semiotic significance of the gift. Bird-David (1990) maintains that gift giving has not yet been conceptually or analytically distinguished from reciprocity. Implicit in her argument is the conviction that reciprocity itself has already been adequately understood. More recently, Weiner (1992) has asserted that even reciprocity, especially in its pristine form as practiced in so-called "primitive" societies, has not yet been adequately understood by social scientists. She believes that gift giving affords us a particular opportunity to analyze reciprocity properly. We will seize this opportunity momentarily. Finally, Shabad (1993a) has called attention to the "rigid split between giving and receiving in our narcissistic culture" (p. 490) in such a way as to make

it apparent that we have little understanding of the dynamics of gift *receiving*. The interplay between gender and receivership requires our consideration.

Parry's (1988) discussion of the ideologies of gift giving—the intermingled coexistence of interest and disinterest long ignored by analysts—offers still another challenge to consumer researchers. Even inadequately plumbed, the emics of gift exchange are far richer than our etic analyses have allowed. If gift giving in contemporary consumer culture, let alone the variegated local cultures that comprise this global phenomenon, has not yet been satisfactorily interpreted (Cheal, 1988), it is largely because we have failed to explore either the indigenous categories of meaning or the ideological core (Raheja, 1988) of the phenomenon itself. We attempt each of these two kinds of exploration in this chapter.

Our present account is one of a series of attempts by consumer researchers to redress these shortcomings and fundamentally redirect the nature of inquiry into giving. Sherry and McGrath (1989) reintroduced the topic of gifts given to the self in an ethnographic field study of gift shopping. Although concerned primarily with the semiosis of gift giving, the field study had strong feminist roots (Joy, 1989) and highlighted the gendered nature of gift-giving phenomena in the United States. This ethnography gave rise in turn to a series of articles (Sherry et al., 1992, 1993) exploring the contrast between cultural ideology and personal experience of women engaged in gift rituals. This research stream coincides with an increasing interest in the role of women in a host of consumption activities (Costa, 1991; Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Hirschman, 1993; Sherry, 1990; Stern, 1993; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). In another series of articles, Mick and DeMoss (1990a, 1990b, 1992) began an investigation of some of the surface features of gifts given to the self. They define such gifts as "personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context-bound" (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a, p. 328). The predominant contexts of self-gifting are those of reward and therapy; life transitions and periods of discretionary plenty also occasion these gifts (Mick & DeMoss, 1990b). The study we describe below is an attempt to braid these varied strands of semiosis, monadic giving, and feminism into a common cord.

In a sweeping reassessment of the literatures of reciprocity and gift giving, Weiner (1992) has usefully contrasted the categories of alienable and inalienable possessions. The latter objects are of particular interest to postmodern researchers concerned with such issues as sacralization (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), interiority of the artifact (Sherry et al., 1992, 1993) and the extended self (Belk, 1988). Inalienable possessions are invested with the essence of their owner. Although psychologists and anthropologists have long



been involved in the study of the interplay between materiality and fantasy (see Thomas, 1991, for a current example), consumer researchers have come somewhat lately to the game. Weiner (1992) identifies a phenomenon she calls "keeping while giving" that animates inalienable possessions. "Keeping while giving" further sacralizes the essence of what Mauss (1924) initially identified as the "spirit" of the gift. Weiner (1992) eloquently interprets the spirit of the gift as the power of females—the domestic equivalent of masculine power exercised in the political economy—sedimented in the object and motivating its circulation. This power emanates from rituals surrounding the exclusive roles of women in spheres of production and reproduction, which gives them a domain of authority in their own right. It is a tangible recognition of the efficacy of women that is otherwise muted in mundane discourse.

Briefly rehearsed, Weiner's (1992) argument takes the following form. In a heroic effort to secure their role in social life over time, individuals invest objects with a life force, which is the stored accumulation of meanings attached to objects by emergent tradition. Because these objects are authenticated by forces outside the present, they are semiotically charged with great power and value. Individuals resist placing such inalienable possessions into circulation until they are virtually compelled to do so, preferring instead to exchange less psychosocially significant possessions. Should an inalienable object be introduced into circulation, it is expected eventually to be returned to its original owner. Both this reluctance and return comprise "keeping while giving." In Weiner's (1992) view, women have a political presence insofar as they produce cosmological authentication in people and objects; that is, women create both inalienable possessions and the kin relations in which these possessions are embedded.

We argue in this chapter that "keeping while giving" is most emphatically enacted in the phenomenon of gifts given to the self. Recognizing the existence of multiple ideologies of giving, we posit an ambivalent tension between the cultural prescription of disinterested giving and the personal stake in interested giving. This tension will be especially palpable for women, who are the principal conductors of gift rituals in contemporary consumer culture. They negotiate the meanings of both the gift and the giving. This negotiation is rarely glimpsed in the literature of consumer research. If the mirroring process by which we individuate is reclaimed from the realm of developmental psychologists and recast in terms of a gift relationship between self and essential other (Shabad, 1993b), and if the capacity to receive is imagined to be impaired or impoverished during this essential period of gender socialization and reinforced over the life course, reverberations in gifting dynamics might be expected to result. In this chapter, we

examine some of the ambivalence experienced by women who give gifts to themselves.

Let us emphasize that we are addressing the far end of a continuum in gifting. This continuum ranges from extreme selflessness, in which one gives a gift that is perhaps totally self-abnegating (maybe even pretending to no desire for thanks or reciprocity of indebtedness), to the utmost in egocentricity and selfishness. Because our society makes demands for and exalts sociality and self-denial, gifts to the self are looked down on; they make us anxious, ashamed, and guilty. Also, ours is an individualistic society and time, as these things go (in comparison to Asian cultures where gifting is highly prescribed and dominated by fears relating to loss of face), and giving one's self gifts is acceptable as part of our praise of individuality, self-development, and the narcissism and pride that go with achievement.

Monadic giving resonates as well with the self-orientation that goes with being self-conscious about having neuroses and requiring therapy. Given the therapeutic roots of consumer culture (Lears, 1983) and the current commoditization of therapy (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991), such resonance may be inescapable. From this orientation results the psychic rewards and compensations to which we are entitled when successful (e.g., a new car, an ice cream treat) or unsuccessful (e.g., masturbation, a new coat, an ice cream cone). Also devolving from this orientation is the anxious ambivalence we feel about asserting our hedonism in the face of being part of the *socius*. These basic ideas underlie the materials relating to women's conflicts with regard to agentic and communal expression that we present in this chapter.



## Methodology

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell the truth. (Wilde, 1969, p. 389)

Having observed consumers in retail settings engaged in the search for and selection of gifts to be given to themselves and having interviewed these consumers at length about the practice of giving to the self (Sherry & McGrath, 1989), researchers eventually discovered a limit to their ability to elicit articulate insights from informants about their own motives. To extend the inquiry beyond participant observation and depth interviews, we created a projective instrument to be administered to consumers drawn from the client base of the stores that had been studied ethnographically. We thus hoped to tap issues that individuals might be enjoined to suppress as a matter of cultural

ideology. Indirect elicitation is an especially appropriate way of assessing the semiotic intensity of such a fundamental convention as gift giving.

Other work (Sherry et al., 1992, 1993) has outlined the historical, theoretical, and methodological development of projective techniques and has demonstrated their utility in tapping information not readily accessible via traditional research procedures. Most notable is the ability of projective methods to investigate unconscious material, socially unacceptable motivations, and consumer fantasy. Researchers have also illustrated that, within the projective toolbox, each of a variety of these techniques yields responses different in focus and length and that a number of projective methodologies used collectively can provide both a broad and deep spectrum of responses to a topic that a respondent may find either too trivial or too sensitive to respond to directly (McGrath, Sherry, & Levy, 1993).

With respect to gift giving and receiving, researchers have found that direct questioning (in one case about the difference between a gift and any other purchased commodity) yielded terse, abbreviated, sometimes tongue-tied responses, in essence due to the respondent perception that the answer to the question asked of her was at the same time so obvious and yet so inexplicable, being part of the fabric of a shared cultural experience, that she could not or would not fashion a detailed response. Projective responses on the same topic appeared to be more complex, diverse, abstract, imaginative, and creative. Also, various projective formats revealed socially unacceptable and unconventional responses that appear to be difficult to articulate through other methods.

### The Respondents

The voices in this chapter belong to members of a group of 83 women who comprise a judgmental sample drawn randomly from the mailing lists of two upscale urban gift shops that were the focus of an earlier ethnographic study (Sherry & McGrath, 1989). We chose a nonprobability sampling strategy because of the ethnographic grounding and exploratory nature of our investigation; prior to hypothesis generation and selection of follow-up cases for intensive study, such a strategy is favored by ethnographers (Bernard, 1988). Because sampling errors and biases are not computable for this type of sample, the data cannot be employed in statistical testing procedures but, rather, used to suggest or indicate conclusions (Miller, 1991). By using our collective research skill and prior knowledge to select respondents (Bailey, 1978), we depart from more conventionally positivist consumer research regimes and emphasize again the discovery-oriented nature of our interpre-

tive efforts. We do not quantify responses and expect our contribution to emerge from the qualitative richness of the data rather than from statistical power.

Using the framework of the 40 PRIZM clusters (Weiss, 1989) to analyze the zip codes occurring on the stores' mailing lists indicates that the customers are a homogeneous group, hailing predominantly from older, upper-middle-class suburban communities (pools and patios) and wealthy bedroom suburbs (furs and station wagons). Their specific demographic profile and suburban locale as well as their choice of gift-shopping domains characterize our respondents as upscale individuals. The demographic specifics have been exhaustively detailed in other work (McGrath et al., 1993; Sherry et al., 1992, 1993). The majority were married (58%) and college graduates (72%), with median annual family incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000. We selected this upscale educated sample for two reasons. First, the respondents were shoppers at the stores in the field study that had originally revealed the unexplained phenomenon of monadic giving. Second, their upscale situation eliminated economic barriers to monadic giving and, we surmised, probably increased its propensity. Our goal was to explore the phenomenon among women who were arguably most familiar with it.<sup>2</sup>

The participants in this study were women who were willing to share their views on various aspects of gift exchange in a written format. Our research goal was to elicit a range of responses for analysis rather than to measure any construct or occurrence. The sheer existence of the phenomenon of monadic giving, not its distribution through a population nor its frequency of occurrence, is our preoccupation. We make no claim that our sample is representative of the population of all women gift shoppers, although we believe that the sample reflects a conservative bias in that these women have little economic reason to recoil from self-indulgence. The women were offered a small indirect incentive for participation in the form of a contribution to the local United Way. Judging from their thoughtful and elaborated responses, the women who agreed to participate in this study appeared to have adequate discretionary time as well as income.

The study allowed the respondents the flexibility to complete the self-paced but lengthy questionnaire at their leisure. As evidenced by their agreement to participate and their prolific written remarks, we surmise that these female respondents possess a higher-than-average proficiency and comfort with written communication. They wrote lengthy and detailed responses that may not be readily obtainable from less educated respondents (whose own eloquence might conceivably be captured best by audiotape). Furthermore, by using projective tasks we sought to address some of the



gender-linked difficulties associated with the formal interview that have been identified by feminist analysts. For example, Devault (1990) believes the "halting, hesitant, tentative talk" of her female respondents "signals the realm of not-quite articulated experience, where standard vocabulary is inadequate and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting" (p. 103).

Our sample may also have had an above-average interest and involvement in gift exchange. The respondents appear to comprise a group that marketers label "heavy users" and often seek as expert narrators in focus groups and depth interviews. Completed questionnaires were returned to us by mail in stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Many contained notes to the researchers; some were explanations and apologies for incompletions, and others were expressions of interest in learning our findings.

Let us emphasize once more the special nature of our sample. Because previous work has indicated the female-dominant nature of gift giving in U.S. society, we are concerned to extend our understanding of women's experience of gift giving. We have grounded our effort in ethnography among female informants. We have used ethnographic material as a staging ground for deeper analysis of women's gift worlds. We are not concerned with men's experience of gift giving in this study in any but the most oblique of fashions. We agree with Abu-Lughod (1991) that "from Simone de Beauvoir on, it has been accepted . . . in the modern West [that] women have been other to men's self," and that the "process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference" (pp. 39-40). In keeping with postfeminist inquiry that resists treating "self" and "other" as given, we have focused our attention on female voices only. Masculine perspectives of gift giving await their own detailed investigation. The mediation of gift giving by gender roles is of increasing interest to consumer researchers (Belk & Coon, 1993; Gould & Weil, 1991).

### The Instrument

Respondents in the study filled out a self-paced written instrument that consisted of unambiguously direct questions about gift giving, three types of projective devices, and demographic information. The projective portion of the questionnaire was designed to "evoke from the subject what is in various ways expressive of [her] private world" (Frank, 1948, p. 47). We capitalized on the flexibility and latitude of the techniques, inherent in Lindzey's (1961) definition: "A projective technique is an instrument that is considered especially sensitive to covert or unconscious aspects of behavior . . . permits

or encourages a wide variety of subject responses, is highly multidimensional, and . . . evokes unusually rich and profuse response data" (p. 45). He adds further that "the stimulus material presented by the projective test is ambiguous, interpreters of the test depend upon holistic analysis, the test evokes fantasy responses, and there are no correct or incorrect responses" (p. 45). Projective techniques can assume a variety of formats. Rabin (1968) suggests a classification consisting of five categories: association techniques (word associations, the Rorschach), construction techniques (the TAT [Thematic Apperception Test], storytelling), completion techniques (sentence completion), choice or ordering techniques (Picture Arrangement Test), and expressive techniques (psychodrama, painting). The projectives used in this study were completion and construction techniques in the form of sentence completion tasks, the elicitation of a dream fantasy, and storytelling in the presence of ambiguous pictorial stimuli.<sup>3</sup>

### Analysis

In the analysis of our data, responses were grouped by each projective stimulus. Each of the projective techniques yielded a particular type of data, which we report and interpret separately in the Results section. The analysis of the sentence completion tasks generally involved ordering or classifying them along emergent continua and dichotomies. For example, many of the stem responses could be sorted along a positive-neutral-negative continuum. As we sought to explore and categorize the range of responses, other classifications were added, including tangible-intangible, emotional-intellectual, goods-services, and lavish-limited. Dream fantasies were examined individually, sifted for emergent themes, and grouped by similar themes.

Several approaches were used to ensure the integrity of our analysis. Among them was triangulation. The use of varied projective stimuli allowed us to triangulate via technique. As a team of bi-gender, multidisciplinary analysts with a range of clinical and field experience, we posed, explicated, justified, and negotiated interpretations. This nuanced process of triangulating among analysts has been described by semiotically- and phenomenologically-inclined consumer researchers variously and exhaustively as "close reading" (Stern, 1989), "hermeneutics" (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), "interpretive tacking" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992) and "devil's advocacy" (McAlexander, Schouten, & Roberts, in press). Contextual concerns were addressed by embedding the projective investigation within the setting of a larger ethnographic study. By drawing the sample from a previously studied population we were able to frame our interpretations with the benefit of

preexisting familiarity with emic viewpoints. Although we designed our projective instrument to elicit insight into several dimensions of gift exchange behavior revealed in the earlier ethnographic study, we address only the topic of gifts given to the self in this chapter.



## Results

In this section, we detail the reactions of our respondents to the projective stimuli provided to them related to monadic giving. To provide structure to the presentation, we discuss each of the projective devices separately. We begin with the completion task presented by the sentence stems and conclude with the construction of dream fantasies.

### Sentence Completion: Filling a Void

Sentence completions allow a wide range of variability in their degree of structure and use of explicit personal reference (Kline, 1973). Results have correlated with those of other less structured presentations, such as the Rorschach and TAT (Murstein, 1965). Some of the stems in our study employed first-person referents, which have been found to elicit more effectively references to self than do third-person stems (Sacks, 1965). Stems were written to be less rather than more directive by omitting verbs or prepositions that might suggest categories of appropriate response. Written instructions reassured respondents that the exercise had neither correct nor incorrect answers.

The distinct themes that emerged from the sentence completion tasks are summarized in the following paragraphs. The actual sentence stems used are in boldface type, and all verbatim responses have punctuation and grammar of respondents kept intact. Although our interpretations are based on the entire corpus of data collected in this study, we include a selection of all the verbatims to give the reader the flavor of the qualitative responses.

#### *Bittersweet Affect*

The act of monadic giving carries with it both joy accompanying perfection and the dark underside of guilt, loneliness, and real or perceived isolation. Self-givers are characterized by themselves and others as prudent and practical as well as immature and shamefully self-indulgent. The "lift" that characterizes the therapeutic function of the self-gift is only temporary;

the transitory high of a quick fix may soon dissipate, leaving the participant steeped in remorse and occasionally in financial liability.

The feelings of social aberrance and personal failure connected with "solo" consumption that Rook (1986) predicted would moderate over the life course have in fact abated, if our sample is any indication, but our respondents have still not shaken their ambivalence toward the practice. Nor, it is clear, have marketers made great strides in reducing the institutional reinforcers of this ambivalence (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992). It is clear that we still need to nudge Rook's (1987) vision of a phenomenology of impulsive consumption a bit higher up on the agenda of consumer research. Our respondents suggest that monadic giving is neither mere impulsive purchasing nor enlightened personal provisioning, although it may resemble either. It is also not simply a hybrid of these options. Rather, it represents the dialectical tension between desiring and deserving, between entitlement and perquisite. Monadic giving is volitional ceremonial self-care. It is a metaphysic.

Responses to two sentence stems, *If I give a gift to myself* and *If I give myself a gift*, are varied and reveal both positive and negative affect. The therapeutic motive mentioned by Mick and DeMoss (1990b) emerges as several responses indicate that the autodonee produces "a lift" and is also reflected in verbatim completions such as "I get a kick out of it," "I love it!," "it makes me feel good," and "it's always fun!" Gifts to self are employed to "cheer me up," "when my spirits are low," or "when I'm down and out." But positive responses hint at guilt associations in the form of the unsolicited denial of such notions: "I feel fine about it (rather than guilty)" and "I feel smug—but not guilty." There is a bittersweet dimension to giving a gift to the self: "It makes me happy—but not nearly as much as if someone else had given it."

On the negative side, the gift to the self is sedimented with a number of odious feelings. Monadic giving may lead to direct admission of guilt: "I feel guilty about who I could have spent the money on otherwise" or "I sometimes feel guilty." The response that *If I give a gift to myself* "it's after everyone else's needs have been met" exhibits anger and self-pity. The monadic gift is bemoaned as "often perfect" but leaves out the relational possibilities with "someone outside myself which makes me feel known" or "it doesn't give me as much pleasure as one from someone else." The autodonee may be given in desperation; it may become a last resort—"it's because I don't expect to get it from anyone else." In addition, it may make its self-recipient feel "lonely" or "silly."

Some respondents react to the concept of monadic giving with outright denial or with an affirmation of its sporadic nature: "I don't," "it's rare," or "I seldom do." Overall, the admission of the frequency of gifts given to the



self ranged from "daily" to "never." Responses hinted that such gifts might signal victory in an intrapsychic battle—"when I can rationalize why I should have it. (Sometimes I win)." Similarly, "when I need it for some useful purpose to indulge my ego," necessity contends with luxury, instrumentality with expressiveness.

### Consequential Contents

The content of gifts to self is instructive. If I give a gift to myself "it must be something I really want," "it is something I either need or have wanted for a long time," "it is something lovely or distracting." Intensity and duration of longing coupled with seductive evocation are cited in defense of giving gifts to the self. The gift must cast a spell (in contradistinction to the pitchman's—i.e., clerk's or ardent recipient's—*spiel*) that the respondent can use to induce enchantment. Elements of premeditation and positive affect suggested by Mick and DeMoss (1992) emerge here: "It's usually something expensive and something I've always wanted," "I think about it very carefully," and "I always get just the right thing." But the content of what respondents perceive as a gift to self also includes small and sometimes serendipitous indulgences: "it is of time," such as "time to lie down and read a book" or "an hour off—a special sweet—a long hot bath." The longing for thinly veiled downtime is both a recognition and denial of being overworked. A common response included rationalization and apologetic embarrassment, indicating "it's usually something small." It is almost as if the object were stolen or siphoned from some imagined household inventory of limited goods, thereby enriching the recipient at the expense of (presumably more deserving) others. A critique of entitlement and the moral economy of domesticity is immanent in these responses.

In response to the sentence stem *I give myself a gift*, the content of such gifts focused more on inexpensive and abstract indulgences than on substantial extravagances. Frequent responses involved gifts of time (to read, relax, bathe, "a walk"), "of comfort in clothes or surroundings," and of intangible indulgences such as in "mysticism" or "encouragement." Tangible responses included "a special sweet," "fresh flowers," "clothes," "earrings," and "trips."

In response to the stem *I hesitate to give myself*, respondents say they shrink from autodons as extravagances, luxuries, and frivolities of which they characterize themselves as undeserving. Examples of such unmerited largesse are "anything too large and expensive," "an expensive gift that I consider unnecessary," "extravagant things," "anything too large, expensive," "power and money," and "frivolous gifts that I don't really need." By virtue of their

mention, however, they appear to be items that these women want. Alluding to the power that objects have to alter relationships, one respondent hesitated to give herself "anything that would break up the household." Specific mentions were made of "nonessentials," "expensive clothes," "expensive jewelry," "a fur coat," "sexy lingerie," and "something impractical." Although some respondents emphatically claim that "I never hesitate!," others poignantly observe that *I hesitate to give myself* "free time," "a compliment," and mundane or "practical gifts" such as "socks, bras, underwear." The hesitation and hope associated with deferred monadic giving is that it is "something I think someone else will get me for a special occasion." The autodons may come too easily, as reflected in one woman's hesitation to give herself "things that I could make if I took the time." Another woman balks at the monadic gift "because I receive so much." Others assert that they hesitate to give themselves "nothing I really want" or an associated "guilty feeling." One woman posed and emphatically answered her own rhetorical question: "At this stage in my life, if I want it and can afford it, what's wrong with getting it? Nothing."

Between the horns of self-indulgence and self-denial lies the central dilemma of our respondents. The dilemma is a material analog of the dynamics of bulimia and anorexia (Brumberg, 1989), which themselves are gender-skewed, culture-bound syndromes. The behavior is not as remarkable in either its presence or its absence so much as in its qualified, conditional, equivocally calibrated reception. Few women give unstintingly to themselves; few are complete abnegates. Those more aggressive in their gift care eschew the merely practical, as if the relative infrequency of the occurrence demanded departure from the mundane. Those more passive in their gift care hedge their guilty pleasure with practicality. Here the motivation is reactive: The violation of the cultural injunction (i.e., dyadic giving) demands an affirmation of almost pure utility. Something of the murkiness of the boundary between luxury and necessity is implicit in these responses as well.

### Self-Diagnosis and Self-Medication

In completion of the stem *I give myself a gift*, the gift to self emerged as a self-penned prescription, frequently overlaid with embarrassment and rationalization: "I used to, when I was 'down.' Like when my mother-in-law visited too long and I'd have to put up with a bunch of junk. Of course, I was a lot younger then." Although the palliative is linked to immaturity, the agonistic role of giving in kin relations is clearly identified (Sherry et al., 1992). *I give myself a gift* "to raise my spirits," "when I feel low," "when I'm depressed," "when I'm down and out," "when I need my self-esteem to be raised," or

"when I'm stressed out" are a sample of the diagnostic responses. The gift-as-antidepressant motif that recurs throughout our corpus is more than simple acknowledgment of the phenomenon of retail therapy (Cushman, 1990). It is also more than a reflection of gender-skewed susceptibility to culture-bound syndromes and propensities to seek therapeutic intervention. Our upscale female respondents, for whom money would seem to be no object, especially in gift transactions with significant others, self-medicate in the closet for complex reasons. Gift care is at once an affirmation of the object's healing potential and a lonely lamentation of the limits of dyadic giving. Gift care addresses disorders at the levels of personal aspiration and social relations.<sup>4</sup>

Compensatory eating and drinking are popular antidotes. *I give myself a gift* "by eating something fattening," "by buying chocolate," "by buying myself a cookie," "with food," "with a good lunch"/"by going to lunch." This need be "no big deal. McDonald's or Burger King is fine." Respondents report that *I reward myself while gift shopping* by "stopping for some coffee" or "a tea break" or "with a cappuccino coffee reward!" or with "a glass of wine." A shopping trip may also precipitate "going out to the nearest liquor store." That the reward is drawn from the universe of food, and more specifically, food popularly regarded as indulgent, dangerous, or sinful, is perhaps entirely predictable and, given the dynamics of eating disorders in contemporary society, could be considered appropriate in a tragically ironic key (Brumberg, 1989). A universal gift emblematic in our culture of domesticity and inclusion, food bonds communicants. Special foods mark ceremonial or ritual occasions; they represent departure from mundane convention. Furthermore, nourishing others is a cultural injunction that is heavily gender marked, as is the relative stigma attached to (over-)feeding oneself nonnutritive foods.

Other compensations take the form of intangible yet sensory indulgences such as "looking at whatever interests me for awhile," "looking at all the merchandise," "taking my time to look," and "looking at all the things I like." There was innate pleasure and perceived personal reward in "exploring everything in the store" and "letting it be fun." The psychosocial significance of the window shopping or "just looking" phenomenon in contemporary consumer culture has been explored by Sherry (1990).

#### *Autodon as Benchmark for Perfection*

In other work (Sherry et al., 1992) we have characterized the "perfect" gift as that which is successfully incorporated into the recipient's life. Information instrumental to the choice of a gift to the self may be of an intimate nature and inaccessible to others. Our respondents hope that all their gift

choices fit recipients as unerringly as autodons suit the self. Furthermore, since they sense that their own choices are consistently appropriate for themselves, they frequently project the same tastes and lifestyles onto their recipients. Donors may duplicate their personal choices for others, hoping to enjoy with their recipients not only the material objects that give them pleasure but also the recipients' pleasure in sharing the form and function of these objects as they assume comfortable and orderly patterns in daily lives.

Responses to the sentence stem *the gift I hated to give away* revealed elements of the perfect gift, frequently referenced to the self. Women regretted giving away an object that "I thought would not be appreciated as much as I did," "one I'm obligated to give," or "something I wouldn't buy for myself (too bad)." Undervaluation, ingratitude, and wistful grieving are each occasions for questioning the cultural ideology of the gift. Several women recalled specific items they reluctantly gave but whose loss they harbor and grieve. Givers lamented parting with presents they themselves "wanted" or "loved." These were frequently gifts that embodied a heavy personal investment, such as "a handmade sweater," "the hand-embroidered caftan I made for my daughter-in-law," "my own cashmere coat," "a very old but wonderful mink coat that was not appreciated by the recipient," or "when I spent \$50 on a needlepoint Christmas stocking I made for a baby nephew and I knew the parents wouldn't appreciate the effort or cost of it." There is resentment in giving an expensive gift that attempts to compensate for lack of sentiment between the giver and receiver—"when I've spent too much so I wouldn't be perceived as unloving by my family members." Rather than reinforcing strained kin relations, as ideology would have us believe, gift giving can poignantly highlight the frustrating futility involved in forging family ties.

Some respondents admit that they hate to give "any" or "all gifts," whereas others have "almost asked to have back" gifts once given. In several cases, the gift that the informant hated to give away was "duplicated" or "kept for my own enjoyment," becoming a post hoc gift to self. One woman indicated that "if I loved it, I would buy two and keep one for myself. If there was only one to buy, I would keep it and buy something else to give." Gifts may be withheld, recalled, or appropriated. Cultural convention may be derogated or arrogated.

Some respondents recalled incidents from their childhoods related to *the gift I hated to give away*. Nostalgic recollections such as "red shoes when I was 10," "a toy truck when I was 4" or "a Barbie doll" illustrate a powerful salience and the early understanding of a perceived tension between giver and recipient within the gift exchange dyad. This also relegates hesitation to give and the preference to keep to the realm of selfishness associated with childish



immaturity. Self-denial is thought to be a hallmark of maturity. These traits are also gender marked.

Not wanting to part with a gift was not always positioned negatively but, instead, was used by some women as the ultimate litmus test of appropriateness in gift choice. Several respondents indicated that they chose gifts based on their personal tastes and preferences. *The gift I hated to give away* "was a music box—in fact—three or four of them. I give them because I love them so much" and "an Apple computer to my college-bound daughter. I wanted one!" In the best case, it is the gift that "the receiver loved" and it "gave me pleasure to think about later (and I didn't have to dust them)." One generous donor described this gift as "something I admired and/or treasured but wanted to share with a loved one." As a strategy for gift choice, one respondent claims that she hates to give away "lots of them. I tend to buy what I like unless it's a special request." One respondent explained that *the gift I hated to give away* was "all of them and none of them. If they weren't special, I wouldn't get them in the first place." The donor's projected pleasure, mirrored in the actual or imaged response of the recipient, becomes a gift given to the self. The donor receives vicariously by proxy.

In all cases, *the gift I hated to give away* represents the perfect gift as it "was singular in some way, with a character of its own," carried the potential to be "very pleasurable to me," "is one which tells something about my personality" or, on the negative side, "is one that I thought would not be appreciated." Such a gift seems literally a gift of the self; the gift embodies the donor's authentic self and is a proper object of (re)incorporation. Its rejection is a threat to the integrity of the self.

Our respondents' candid remarks offer a number of insights and clarifications to the multifaceted nature of monadic giving. The autodon may preempt a potentially unbalanced gift exchange or may offer the monadic giver a moment of reprieve from a harried lifestyle and sometimes from the pressure to find and choose the perfect gift for another. Monadic giving is the potential energy to the kinetic energy of dyadic giving. Each motivates and informs search but in different orbits. Monadic giving is a source of solace to which the self suspects but cannot confirm entitlement.

The autodon appears to vary in reality and fantasy. When comparing the findings of the two types of projective methodologies employed in this study, it is clear that respondents in *reality* delight in small indulgences, but *dream* of luxurious consumer excesses. Indulgent fantasies, however, are often tempered by reality, as we illustrate below.

### Monadic Fantasies: Some Themes From the Dreams

Respondents were asked to imagine a dream in which they could envision buying a present for themselves. We have reduced their responses to a set of four interpretive themes whose significance we will explore in some detail. These themes are the intrusion of ideology into fantasy, the labor value theory of worthiness, the minimal material nucleus, and the ritual substratum of gift giving.

#### *Intrusion of Ideology Into Fantasy*

Personal narratives are often as instructive in the omission of material as they are in its inclusion (McAdams, 1993). Our respondents' dream scenarios are noteworthy for the rarity of their expression of unalloyed joy. Here is one such exceptional account:

I am in an antique store browsing. It is dusty and dingy. All of a sudden, a bright meticulously carved carousel horse sort of stands out in the gloom. I say Wow, this is it. [I] [b]uy the horse and go home feeling terrific.

The hierophany (Belk et al., 1989) depicted in this story is transformative both of the dramatic tone and of the narrator herself. Joyful accounts encoding greater pathos are somewhat bittersweet but still insist on fundamental transformation of the self. Here is a story of psychological transference and individuation, tinged with a moralizing practicality:

I had this dream that I was going to this fur store to get the furs my mother had given me out of storage. The furs did not fit on anyone. As I got to the store and saw all the beautiful fur coats inside I even decided to put some coats on. They felt so good and I felt so special in the few coats especially the white ones. I decided then and there that it was time to buy myself a present. When the girl brought out my mother's fur coats they looked so shabby and not any good looking. However, when I tried on the new fur coats they looked beautiful on me. So I ask the lady how much the coats cost and she even said today we are having a special on the fur coat you are looking at so I took out my check book and gave her a check for the coat plus the old fur coats. I felt so beautiful when I put it on and special.

Finally, an account grounded in deprivation redressed describes the transformation of the narrator:

I've dreamed this fantasy dream over and over. After all these years as a widow. I will be a bride again. Not a bride in a court house. But a real wedding. I'll buy myself a dress that is cream or ice blue. Mid-calf length—with high victorian collar. A little lace on the cuffs of the "leg-o-mutton" sleeves, and lots of covered buttons. My three granddaughters will be there—two 15 years old, [o]ne 5 and I will buy them old fashion matching dresses. We will carry baskets of daisies. It will be a morning wedding—in June with lots of sunshine and much hugging and happiness for all.

All the children will be there. His and mine. I'm going to give myself a beautiful wedding—and take a new life for both of us.

Now my imaginary dream—is going to be a reality. I'm buying myself a present tomorrow—a wedding dress that is cream or ice blue.

Without interpreting the other motifs of these stories (which will echo in our later discussion) it is clear that where joyful experience of an unmitigated giving to the self occurs, the self has been appropriately transfigured. An authentic self has been realized. In these few instances only, the self is presented as a vehicle of personal transformation (i.e., agentic) in a way that the narrator does not find problematic. Self-transformation is quickly problematized, however, even in those rare instances in which the narrator struggles to be her own deliverance. For example,

I am in a forest—dark, wet, lonely. But I am lost. As I wander through the trees, I suddenly observe a depth of shining color gleaming among the rocks in the stream that flows nearby. I am drawn to this rainbow image, and as I move towards it I realize it is a beautiful opal set in a simple gold ring. I reach in to take it, but my hand freezes just above the water. To whom does this lovely ring belong? I love to watch it; first the green, then the blue, the fire. Suddenly I know it was meant for me; it will help me find my way out of the forest. Once again I reach in to dislodge it from among the rocks. It is even more beautiful out of the water. I slip it on my finger and it fits perfectly. This is my gift—to myself, but I am never really sure from whom. I only know that wearing it makes me feel proud and humble, awed by its changing lights, gifted and stronger and clear sighted. As I wake from this dream I know that even the dream itself is a gift.

Not knowing for sure, but suspecting that perhaps transcendence can be self-induced, is the state that best characterizes the plight of our most celebratory dreamers. This conflict is literally engendered in the Arthurian

romance of the narrative just cited. In this thinly veiled masturbatory fantasy, the ideal of courtly love is transmuted into an autoerotic experience that is not merely sexual. The heroine achieves a transcendental awakening.

Healthy narcissism or benevolent egoism is rare in our respondents' fantasies. We hear repeatedly of the reluctant indulgence. Even when given "permission" to fantasize, respondents make conditional stories. Sometimes the mere frequency of dreaming is restrained:

Once in a great while I dream and this dream continues to be about clothes, clothes and more clothes!

My dream always starts with a long aisle of clothes, separated by styles according to dates. We start out with the 40s and jump to the 80s and back to the 20s. A style show takes place and each piece of clothing is modeled by a well-known person such as Jacqueline Onassis and many other celebrities.

The final phase of my dream is the best. Each beautiful piece shown in the show end up in my closet and accessories are furnished also.

Sometimes the dream is converted to a nightmare:

I screamed with delight. The person on the other end of the telephone just told me I had won a 12-hour shopping spree at Marshall Fields. It was the State Street store on a Sunday when the store was closed. I could take whatever I wanted as long as it was all put in carton boxes that were available to me in every department and stacked by the Lake & Wabash entrance at the end of the 12-hour period. Was I dreaming—I couldn't believe my eyes. A limo would pick me up at 8:30 a.m. & I would have the whole store to myself from 9 a.m.-9 p.m. What a day. I started on the 1st floor in the Chanel Boutique. I was less discriminating in my selections, but was still cautious. I only took what I really wanted and by the end of that day had amassed 82 cartons at the entrance. It lined up 3 boxes high all over the candy dept. and we had to move the luggage displays into a tight mound to fit the cartons near the door. It was so wonderful. Was I dreaming? Suddenly, I noticed on my return home a letter in my mailbox. I opened it up and read 30 pages of charges amounting to \$856,422.51 from Marshall Fields. A bad dream. . . .

In a variation of this department store fantasy, the dream is aborted by the pettiness of a spouse:

One day I'm casually walking through Old Orchard. I walk into Copper and Copper looking for a warm cut stylish coat. I come upon a beautiful



brown full length Shearling coat. Its leather exterior has the feel of butter. The salesman tells me "it looks great on you" (as they all say about anything and everything). I ask "How Much?" He says, "a mere \$1,300"; I say "charge it!" Then I walk out into the below zero weather feeling all warm inside. Then I wake up freezing because my husband has all the covers.

Rational calculation in the service of self-indulgence is punished. Impulsive behavior or spontaneity in the service of self-indulgence is similarly punished. Neither practicality nor frugality introduced (as a defense mechanism) into fantasy in service of cultural ideology is sufficient to protect the consumer from disappointment:

I have been looking at the fur coat ads since early Fall, checking prices and styles. Now that Christmas is over, the real sales will start. I am looking for a 3/4 length shadow fox coat. The first place I go is Dion Furs. These coats are skimpy and look cheap. Next I try Evans. Their coats are full and the prices are really good, but I want to be sure and get the best price. Next I try Field's and there is a fabulous full length coat at a very good price, but it's \$700 more than I want to spend. But, I really want it, so I look at other coats, but I don't like them, so I don't buy anything.

The hard work of producing consumption yields bitter fruit in this account. Echoes of Tantalus's predicament or that of Aesop's fox are audible in this fantasy.

Desire contends with decorum in most of our stories. "Reality" in the form of the cultural ideology of disinterested giving intrudes on the fantasies of our respondents. This reality is punitive. Practicality recurs as a theme because self-indulgence must be rationalized. Guilt must be mitigated. Conditions must be placed on purchases. If others can be implicated in the web of consequences (as auxiliary beneficiaries of a gift to self or as critics of the self-gifting enterprise), so much the better.

#### *Labor Value Theory of Worthiness*

Earlier work on gift shopping (Cheal, 1988; Sherry et al., 1992) has described the labor value theory that consumers employ to infer the merit of and invest meaning into gifts. Simply put, the symbolic value of a gift is often linked (by donor and recipient) to the amount of mental, emotional, or physical effort believed to have been expended in the process of search. This theory shows up in our database as well: "I dreamt I was going to buy myself a full length mink coat! Expensive, beautiful, luxurious—why not? I deserve

it." Our respondents' fantasies also suggest an analogous theory applied to the perceived worthiness of the self. Their accounts indicate a belief that a gift must be earned or deserved; effort must be invested in meriting. For example, one respondent muses,

I was walking up and down the aisles of our antique show. I was particularly interested in the jewelry. I'd lost a lovely watch a few years ago and I kept hoping I'd find it at a show. The watch originally belonged to my mother-in-law. It was made of white gold or platinum. It had a rectangular face that was surrounded by diamonds. After a long time, perhaps an hour or more, I saw the watch in a display case. I was delighted. I asked to see the watch and asked the price of it. The woman told me the watch had been sold. I offered more money than the price. I told her I had a police report of the loss. I asked her to describe the purchaser and what she was wearing. I started to run up and down the aisles as I looked for the purchaser. After what seemed like an eternity, I wake up.

Despite the frustration ultimately involved, she has labored mightily to reacquire the gift. Another respondent confounds reality and fantasy in her account of the heroic earning of the gift:

I don't have to imagine. I'll tell you a true story. A few years ago, two to be exact, I went to Water Tower and got a job at Lord and Taylor department store. I was assigned to the fine jewelry section. I worked three evenings a week and all day Saturday and Sunday. On the weekends, I was assigned to the special watch display section. It featured Seiko, Jaz, etc. . . . And, they had a sales promotion, whereas every time we sold a Jaz watch we would write the style # and amount on a card, given by them, and after the promotion ended December 31, we would send the card in and for every \$100 total, we would be entitled to \$10 toward a Jaz watch. . . . One day while tagging, a beautiful Jaz watch came to my attention. It was gold and silver. The design was elegant. It could be worn during the day or night. Its price \$150.00. To have the watch I had to sell \$1500.00 in value of Jaz watches. I had to push all the watches and pray many of the people wanted a Jaz. Two weeks before the promotion ended I dreamed I came into the store, went to the display case as a customer and someone brought me my watch. I couldn't see who made the gift purchase, nor who sold it, but it was mine. The weekend came and my first Jaz sell was to a woman . . . and she purchased my watch for herself. My heart stopped. It was our last. We had other styles, but not this one. My thoughts raced . . . how could someone get it for me when she just got the last one? Never mind, I thought, just keep selling Jaz. I sold \$1000.00 in value (selling price) of Jaz. I looked at the styles costing \$100.00, none were for me. The only one costing

exactly \$100.00 was ugly to me. It had a gold trim face, small numbers and black straps. Nothing like mine. Mine, it had a silver and gold face, the numbers were small gold dots for each hour. The band was a bracelet of silver rope with gold notches. The band it was trim and elegant. And, there were no more and even if there were I didn't have enough sales. I turned in my card. And, even though there were no more, I wrote my watch down as my first choice. I didn't give a second or third choice. A month passed, then a call from Jaz headquarters came. My watch, I could have [it] . . . there was one left located in New York. A week later it was mine. A dream comes true.

Despite apparent setbacks as fate takes its course, the narrator recounts a happy ending. Worthiness triumphs, aided enormously by heroic diligence. These gifts are clearly expensive, both monetarily and emotionally. In the stories presented above or considered below, the gift must allow the narrator to be more or do more than she could unaided. The gift becomes a vehicle of mastery as much as anything else. It may also be emblematic of the gendered nature of entitlement. The gift is earned, paid for in fact, with a bonus, making it a literal gift exchange with sacrificial overtones. Self-indulgence is funded with explicitly discretionary income.

#### *Minimal Material Nucleus*

Given the unlimited possibilities for inflaming and satisfying desire that fantasy would promise to enfranchise, the tightly circumscribed range of gifts our respondents imagine giving themselves is quite remarkable. As narratives already reported suggest, clothing is the most frequently fantasized gift to the self. Furthermore, clothing often resolves to a single (albeit luxurious) garment: a coat. That consumers most desire this particular item is curious. Perhaps the coat best represents the new or discardable persona. It attracts, disguises, and enhances. It may be regarded as parasomatic packaging, a literal second skin. It can be shed or changed, offering the wearer a set of chameleonic options (Bouchet, 1991) in an overdetermined social routine. She may flout political correctness or flaunt naturalness.

The vacation is the next most commonly envisioned gift to the self. The vacation is awarded as a blessed relief to unbearable sameness and repetitive routine. It may be guiltily enjoyed or shared with others:

If I could buy myself a dream gift—I'd have a hard time but I guess make arrangement to go on a trip to Gunda—it's a beautiful island in the Caribbean and would like to get and stay for a week with my husband and our two grown children with their husbands.

Would be costly but really would like to go there someday down the road when we can see our way clear.

It may be doubly institutionalized, affording the narrator both time and place away from care:

I would buy a cleaning lady and never think about cleaning again. I would need her 2 or 3 times a week. What a relief. Then I would travel around the world.

A trifecta of sorts is described by one respondent. Escape is not embodied merely in relief from mundane drudgery and nonreciprocal caretaking as much as it is in the abiding rightness of the selection:

My dream would be of a truly wonderful gift—a super vacation trip, a dramatic new dress, perhaps a vacation house. I would select and inspect the gift—it would be perfect in every detail. The stumbling block would be its price, but I would buy it anyway.

That propriety is absolutely critical resounds through the narratives. One account reinforces the effort generally needed to achieve perfection:

I would have a dream house to furnish. I would decorate each room. Money is not a problem. Finding the right piece is.

Many of the narratives recounted above describe the search for the unique or the antique. The quintessential gift (Belk et al., 1989) embodies the "right stuff"; its rightness is often revealed in hierophany.

#### *Ritual Substratum*

Thomas (1991) has spoken of the "optical illusion" that we are offered by material culture:

We take the "concrete and palpable" presence of a thing to attest to the reality of that which we have made it signify; our fantasies find confirmation in the materiality of things that are composed more of objectified fantasy than physical stuff. Not that this mystification is a veneer of falsehood; the dialectic of reification and consumption is as necessary and fundamental as anything else constitutive of human sociality, but the truths are truths of seduction rather than presence. (p. 176)



If we demystify the dreamworks and sound the seductiveness our respondents have portrayed for us, we gain some insight into the ways in which guilt and obligation can stifle authentic desire. Our female respondents have apparently muted their agentic impulse and amplified their communal voice. Many of our respondents' fantasies emphasize domesticity, communality, and family over and above self. Given permission and encouragement to dwell on and indulge the self, our respondents have learned to prefer to defer. And demur. Their capitulation to the ideologies of both disinterested giving and hegemonic political economy verges on complete; the resulting repression of even the range of choice that might contribute to self-indulgence as a viable option is quite thoroughgoing. These women are the producers and makers of gift ritual primarily. They are relegated to the secondary role of consumer and beneficiary of gift ritual. In the social reproduction of culture in this particular sphere, the ritual subject has great difficulty becoming—or even approximating—the ritual object.

Believing that political power lies at the heart of the sacred, Weiner (1992) reads through Bataille to revise Mauss in her assertion that reciprocity is motivated by a "desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take" (p. 43). She identifies this something as a "possession that speaks to and for an individual's or group's social identity" (p. 43); the difference between persons or groups is thereby affirmed. Weiner assesses the absolute value of an inalienable possession as the authenticity of its symbolic representation of an individual's or group's "distinctiveness" (p. 51). For the reproducer of domestic culture to present herself with the embodiment of cultural generativity, to arrogate to herself the reproductive principle is an apparently threatening prospect. It may even be construed as dangerous. It clearly jeopardizes the existing division of power and disrupts the role repertoires in contemporary social relations. Such a presentation to self is perhaps so evocative of the female donor's distinctiveness that its foregrounding challenges the androcentric myth privileging political economy over domestic. It invites us to consider whether it truly is a man's world or whether such a world is worth having; it offers principles of resistance, if not integration. Yet the degree to which monadic giving is a ritual in transition from a hyperextension to a reversal of commodity feminism (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991)—the depoliticization of social critique that occurs when marketers fetishize feminism—is a fundamental question that future research must address. Surely, our women respondents do not give themselves the same gift care they give kith and kin. Perhaps they cannot, or will not, accord themselves equivalent gift care. They may actually become so entrapped in the "circular compulsivity of mandated giving and entitled

needfulness" that, feeling bereft of "spontaneous desire or sense of genuine caring" (Shabad, 1993a, p. 488), the autodonee becomes a palliative. The degree to which they are unaware of their penchant to slight self-care remains a provocative empirical question.

## Conclusion

Oh bright box ripping in its own good time. (Fulton, 1990, p. 11)

Is it conceivable that the only "pure" gift, if such a thing can be said to exist at all in contemporary consumer culture, is a gift to one's self from one's self? This may in fact be the only situation wherein the ideologies of interest and disinterest coincide perfectly. Nor does this coincidence imply balance, harmony, or cancellation. Rather, it appears to generate a tension that results in a reassessment of the nature of gift giving itself. If, as Alice Fulton (1990) implies, the self is an emergent gift, it may explain why those "inflammatory abstracts," such as "love, forgiveness, [and] faith," are among the most preferred gifts that our ritual makers would give to themselves.

Beidelman (1989), in particular, has taken great pains to reintroduce students of the gift to the original writings of Mauss (1924) and Simmel (1971, 1978) and to stress the polysemic nature of the gift. He notes that Mauss, having outlined the process of agonistic exchange (involving formal pretense and social duplicity), neglected the concept in favor of a theory that featured exchange as a conflict reduction mechanism. Simmel, on the other hand, envisioned exchange as a process of tension and struggle, sacrifice and resistance, that served to heighten divisiveness. Whereas Mauss believed that gifts and the self encoded therein eventually returned to the donor and that this knowledge of eventual return created value, Simmel maintained that both gift and encoded self were often lost and that this risk of loss created value (Beidelman, 1989). Although the role of ambiguity and ambivalence is weighted differently by each of these theorists, the centrality of agonistic exchange to the creation of a social self seems apparent. The discrepancies between the private self and its persona(e) are negotiated, if not always resolved, through agonistic exchange. Gifts enable the individual to gauge the commensurability of her appraisal of self with that of others (Beidelman, 1989). Among our respondents, the recognition of a need to augment or offset deficient appraisals that is implicit in monadic giving represents both a critique and a supersession of kith and kin relations. Monadic giving is at once a source of personal autonomy and existential doubt.

Let us begin to integrate some of the larger themes emerging from our study. Recent consumer research (e.g., McCracken, 1988) in contemporary Western society has confirmed what anthropologists working in indigenous non-Western societies have long asserted: Objects are animated by invested meaning. Whether charisma (Tambiah, 1984), pathos (Beidelman, 1989), or other behavioral components (Richardson, 1987) are sedimented in the object, the object can become singularized (Kopytoff, 1986) until it acquires the status of an inalienable possession (Weiner, 1992). The "radiating power" of withholding such possessions from circulation generates the "thrust" of exchange and endows their owners with "hegemonic dominance" over others (Weiner, 1992, p. 180). Thomas (1991) clarifies the distinction between alienable and inalienable objects in a useful way. Noting that the issue is "the way in which an object is socially consequential" (which in turn determines whether it "can, must, or cannot be circulated"), he designates the singularity of the object as a matter of "context and narrative" (p. 100). When the ideologies of interested and disinterested giving collide, as they do in our consumer narratives, the ambivalence created by "keeping while giving" is palpable.

The result of this disharmony of ideologies is the creation of a metanarrative or metasocial commentary on the nature of gendered exchange. This commentary is both ironic and oblique. It is ultimately critical as well. It reveals that the burden of ritual responsibility is borne with reverence and resentment. It suggests that our ritual makers must be incentivized beyond obligation and altruism if the ritual is to have a binding force that will resist alienation. It prompts us to wonder if broadened or more diversified participation in social worlds can be achieved without a corresponding compromise or diminution of personal integrity based on authority. Finally it may signal the demise of gift giving itself as a mechanism of sociocultural integration in the late 20th century and herald a more atomistic era. The metanarrative repackages the adage "What goes around comes around." For our female respondents, monadic giving represents the short-term possibility of shifting from entrapment to empowerment. In the long run, a generalized mastery of the autodon could produce a reenchantment of dyadic giving. One could imagine redrafting the metanarrative as a postmodern cautionary tale that combined the moral economies of *Lysistrata* and *The Little Red Hen*.

The women in our study are rewiring the totemic circuitry of gift exchange (Plath, 1987; Sherry & McGrath, 1989). In nonmarket society, where a presumption ethic (Toffler, 1980) obtains, the gift circulates through networks to return to the donor. Others mediate the gift given to the self. In market society where a production ethic obtains, the gift literally becomes a

commodity exchanged with others. Whether it is sacralized or not, the gift is usually retired from circulation; its disposition affects the nature of dyadic ties. In hypermarket or postmodern society, the ethic of "presumption" is revived on an ad hoc basis. The actively producing consumer (whose production is now largely symbolic and focused on the creation of experience) may circulate or retire gifts; she may pursue both of these routes. A third option is now apparent. Consumers may appropriate gifts directly to themselves. Respondents in our study are the obverse of Toffler's (1980) "prosumer." Collectively, they might be termed the "conducer," insofar as their goal is to reconcile interest and disinterest, to balance or integrate agenetic and communal orientations. Conducers literally "lead" by "bringing together"; community is both a cause and a consequence of their agency. Whereas gift giving in market society has always served as a cultural vehicle of conduction, it becomes a personal vehicle in postmodern society. The autodon is given to a protean self engaged in multiple life projects. It is an autoerotic activity entirely appropriate to the era (Brooks, 1993). It is a manifestation of the cultural poetics of desire (Halperin, Winkler, & Zeitlen, 1990; Sherry et al., 1993) and a reminder that erotica is a larger realm than mere sexuality.

The split between domestic and political economies in postmodern consumer culture is in many ways less pronounced than in the past. Women may exercise or reject the option of participating in the political economy. This "mere" option can be quite stressful. If the option is exercised, women often face the prospect of limited advance and retain responsibility (de facto) for material and ritual reproduction of domestic economy. If the option is rejected, women often come to feel "less than" more multiply engaged counterparts and suffer qualms over being responsible for only the material and ritual reproduction of domestic economy. Living in an era when the inherent dignity of all work goes largely unrecognized or unacknowledged is a source of much contemporary malaise. This malaise returns us to the inexplicably neglected theme of sacrifice (Cheal, 1988; Mauss, 1924; Sherry et al., 1993; Tambiah, 1984; Weiner, 1992) as a blueprint for gift giving.

Market culture has enforced a norm of self-sacrifice among women. This norm has had dysfunctional as well as functional consequences. It has resulted in deprivation as well as liberation. Women are expected to sacrifice self in the service of domestic and political economy. This expectation is often simultaneously joyfully embraced and bitterly resented; it is rarely the object of conscious reflection in consumer research investigations. Where embraced, the expectation produces a view of gift as an investment of life that animates objects and others. Where resented, the expectation produces



a view of gift as a loss of life, either to no avail or to the parasitic benefit of a vilified other. Either way, the gift is a sacrifice on the cosmological level on the order of the theft of fire or on the mundane level on the order of provision of starter dough. Some *élan vital* is rekindled or extinguished through the gift. Whether we invoke the labor theory of value, the theory of extended self, the theory of sacralization, or any other folk model of understanding, the female self is incorporated into rituals reproducing domestic culture.

The limitations of the present study must be reemphasized and the opportunities for future inquiry briefly sketched. Our interpretation is based on an intimate familiarity with a particular population, and although it is certainly suggestive, it is not generalizable to other populations at this time. We are aware of the pitfalls inherent in theorizing female subjectivities—totalizing, privileging gender as a unit of analysis, applying preconceived theories of female experience to women's texts, privileging select texts, and considering women's texts apart from those of men, to name a few (Costello, 1991, p. 125)—and stress both the exploratory nature of this investigation and the holistic character of our larger enterprise. A pluralistic research regime is essential to the unpacking of gift-giving dynamics in contemporary U.S. society.

Detailed investigation of monadic giving across a range of female populations of varied socioeconomic status, age, household composition, and ethnicity is clearly indicated. Exploration of male gift worlds in comparable depth is also warranted. These worlds are incompletely described in the consumer research literature. Cross-cultural investigation of monadic giving, especially in regions affected differently by the diffusion of late capitalism, would be a productive undertaking. India, for example, where gender roles and relationships between the individual and the collective differ from those in the United States, might prove to be a productive comparative field site. A cultural account of the ongoing transformation of gift economies might be one result of such a study. Finally, a return to the ethnographic roots of our study is appropriate. Our present projective analysis can now be introduced into our original field sites, where informants can be engaged in refining the understanding of the phenomena we have probed in this chapter. The sociocultural account we have provided here incorporates elements of a critique of everyday life. It may serve as a foundation for the truly critical postfeminist account of consumption practices that we have not attempted to develop here.

Changes over time in mating rituals and patterns, family and household structures, and conceptions of the self conspire to produce the phenomenon of gifts given to the self. Gift care can be understood in part as an adaptive

response to a repressive patriarchal social structure that proves stressful to the individual female respondent in the short run. Monadic giving is then a market correction that helps the domestic economy to persist over time as well as an individual strategy of personal regeneration. It is one way of observing the metaphysical injunction (stemming from indifference and true ignorance) our culture places on its ritual makers: heal thyself. It is also a material manifestation of the painstaking selectivity of women coping with an "empty" self. Restricting the domain of those from whom she will receive gifts may reveal the unconscious directedness of her experience of need (Shabad, 1993a, p. 486).

A gift to self produces both satisfaction and guilt. Given an uncertain, unknowable, undervalued, multiple self,<sup>5</sup> I get what no one else can or will give me with no apparent strings attached (i.e., a pure or altruistic gift) but at a cost to "them" and at a cost to my traditional sense of self. By relaxing my other-serving vigilance and recentering that vigilance on my self, through ritual self-care I (re)make myself. Both the gift and its giving are presents. By relinquishing the vigilance required by cultural convention, by diverting time, effort, and money from others to the self and by suspending the essence of self as extrinsically determined, the collective "I" of our female respondents sacrifices the collective "you" of the generalized other that comprises a conventional recipient pool. Although neither a scapegrace nor a scapegoat, the woman engaged in monadic giving dreads such designation and its imagined consequences. The autodon is at once a guilty secret, a sheepish self-indulgence, a hegemonic artifact, and an emancipatory opportunity. It should serve as well as a warning to the passive recipients of received wisdom, whether they are social scientists or jaded donors.

## Notes

1. We are the heirs of an unfortunately turned label. The term "self-gift" has been employed in the consumer research literature. Most gifts are self-gifts in that donors project, invest, and otherwise impute personal meaning into their offerings. Donors give of self and shape self. If a neologism must be used to denote the object given and received, we favor the term "autodon," which connotes both anachronism and tenacious cultural survival (continuity from pre- to postconsumer society). Self-gift is too ambiguous in its apparent simplicity. We prefer to use "monadic giving" as the cover term for the ritual process itself. The term self-gift is used in this chapter as a bridge to existing literature only.

2. In fact, a reviewer of this chapter suggested that we point out that the upscale bias of our sample is an advantage for examining this phenomenon rather than a limitation. The upscale sample provides a conservative bias, as upscale women should be better able to justify giving to themselves, thus pointing out that our findings of hesitation cannot be accounted for

with economic explanations. The reviewer further added, "Just imagine what the results would be if a middle class or downscale sample had been used."

3. In our larger study, respondents performed a thematic apperception task, writing stories to 3 of 15 different pictures. One of these pictures was designed specifically to elicit the concept of monadic giving and had, in fact, been used by one of our focal gift stores in an advertisement that suggested that the gift buyer will want to keep gift purchases made at this store for herself. Unfortunately, in none of the stories did respondents specifically connect this picture to a gift to the self. Respondents interpreted the visual cues with stories of a sexy, sophisticated woman (often themselves) who may be giving or receiving a gift. One respondent identified the figure as "me kidding my husband that he actually went shopping." Thus our attempt to capture visually the stimuli related to monadic giving was not successful, although Mick, DeMoss, and Faber (1992) accomplished this by combining a picture with a verbal prompt. Rather, we approximated an interesting advertising concept test, one that might inform retailers trying to convey this idea. We determined that although the visual portion of a store's advertisement did not communicate the retailer's intended message to its clientele the advertisement served to communicate by virtue of showing a wrapped present a number of other notions associated with gift exchanges.

4. The ritual of gift search may provide a synergistic boost to gift care, as this response suggests: "Sometimes I buy things for myself when I am actually looking for gifts for another." Search may prompt the seeker to apply her diagnostic acumen to her own unrequited situation. It invites serendipity and fosters the illusion of dyadic exchange, mitigating guilt in the bargain. That this ritual and synergy need not be seasonal is revealed in our discovery of the phenomenon of "gift closets" maintained by some of our respondents. For example, one woman observes, "I'm a very organized person—make a lot of lists—most of the time I know what I'm looking for and if I see a gift for even 6 months away I purchase it and put it in my 'gift' closet. Find that this closet has been a life saver many times." As symbolic medicine chests, these closets store gifts for specific and generalized others and occasions. They also function as projectible, dispensable hope chests, permitting owners to engage in provisioning fantasies prior to literal disposition.

5.

*Do I contradict myself?*

*Very well then, I contradict myself,*

*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

(1959/1977, p. 27)



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