

6 The Conceit of the Gift

Exploring the Gift Circuits of Registry¹

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The consumer research literature recognizes three kinds of giving, broadly construed: monadic, dyadic, and systemic. A monadic gift, also called a self-gift, is a gift given to oneself. Dyadic giving occurs when a gift is given from one social unit (e.g., an individual or a corporation) to another; a reciprocal gift may or may not be given in return within the context of this transaction. Systemic giving occurs when individuals give to and receive from members of a community whose ethos demands and persistence requires the circulation of gifts in a generalized reciprocal fashion.

The registry is a fortuitous institution for the study of the interrelationship of these three forms of gift giving. Sherry (1996, 223) identified the registry as an opportunity to investigate "the ultimate commodification of the gift economy" and described it as the "institutionalization of monadic giving." The former observation still rings true, but the latter appears impoverished. Thus, we have approached the registry afresh by asking ourselves, "What kind of giving might this be?" Throughout our study, it became clear that our informants discerned several kinds of gift giving unfolding concurrently within the institution.

The American wedding, with an increasingly staggering financial cost (U.S. estimates approach \$50 billion annually), has long been a topic of cultural discourse. Ponder the box office success of such films as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick 2002), *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin 2005), *The Wedding Singer* (Coraci 2008), and *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009), or the television program *Bridezilla*s (Cappria, Woodruffe, and Reid 2005). Behold the spectacle of the annual running of the brides at Filene's Basement. The wedding has been the focus of much attention in consumer research in particular (Ornes and Pleck 2003) and sociology in general (Howard 2006). As the context in which the registry process is embedded, the wedding has symbolic overtones that rival its commercial significance and that are essential to our interpretation.

The gift registry was formalized in the late nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century was established as the essential template for wedding gift-giving practices, and in the twenty-first century, the registry has

become foundational (Bradford and Sherry 2013). Retailers now exercise significant influence over gift search, acquisition, and disposition (Howard 2006; Ornes and Pleck 2003; Penner 2004). The registry is a fascinating arena in which cultural and personal attitudes toward gift giving are negotiated.

The marketing and consumer research literature has treated three particular variants of gift giving—monadic, dyadic, and systemic—as if they were discrete enterprises with distinct antecedents and consequences. Our qualitative analysis of wedding registries explores the interaction of these ostensibly discontinuous forms within the context of a unifying commercial institution. Our investigation of this institution extends the theorizing on these previously segregated types and advances a more synthetic approach to the interpretation of gift giving.

In the present study, we discovered ways in which each of these forms manifested and interacted. We analyze category dynamics as they emerge from our data and use our findings to propose a synthetic interpretation of the registry that seeks to unify the three aspects of gift giving in a common integrative framework. We devote a bit more description to the gift-to-self practice, as it will be less familiar to audiences beyond the immediate consumer culture theory orbit, and stint a bit on the other, more well-recognized categories.

We draw on our larger ethnographic and netnographic work with stakeholders in the wedding registry (Bradford and Sherry 2013) and focus most specifically on interviews with registrants, those individuals engaged to be married or who recently married. They hail from heterosexual, first-time marriages, primarily Christian denominations, and represent a variety of occupations and socioeconomic backgrounds. We recruited informants through personal contacts, print and social media solicitation, and snowball sampling. Our engagement across informants occurred before, during, and after the actual process of registry, to encompass the practice holistically. We also include retailer interview excerpts to round out the discussion. In total, seventy-two consumers and fifteen retailers were interviewed. We employ pseudonyms for informants.

Giving Gifts to Oneself: Monadic Gift Giving

An emergent stream of inquiry momentarily shifted the spotlight from donor-recipient dyads to the solitary individual as a donor-recipient monad. Prompted by suggestions from Levy (1982) and Mick (1986) that people give gifts to themselves, researchers began to train their sights on the intrapsychic and social dynamics that might account for such interested giving. The former stream explored monadic giving motivations and construed monadic giving as indulgent self-communication both premeditated and bound by context (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b). A typology of the

self-gift—puritanic, romantic, therapeutic, and holiday—emerged from this predominantly psychological line of inquiry (Mick 1991, 1996). The latter stream explored the collision of role expectations and cultural values that often caused profound frustration and deep ambivalence to interfere with authentic satisfaction in monadic transactions (Sherry 2005; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1995). In these studies, giving gifts to self emerged as an imperfect corrective to ritual rupture, a premodern effort to mitigate postmodern alienation.

Missing from the literature on monadic giving is a comprehensive sociopsychological examination of the phenomenon in a fixed context. Holding the context constant in the present study allows us to comprehensively examine the motives and mores driving the range of behaviors tied to self-gifts. Further, the conception of the monadic gift as an indulgence that arises from a manipulation of dyadic giving can be examined effectively in a registry context.

Our informants routinely describe their lived experience of the registry gift as phenomenologically identical to the self-gift:

It's a gift that they are giving themselves—they already know what they are going to get. They know what they want. (Dennis)

After we get all the basics taken care of, we'll talk about the splurges . . . realistic gifts . . . like gifts to myself . . . I need a Panini press. (Gloria)

The registry effectively brackets, if not expunges, the stigma of self-interest from the exchange, permitting the couple to act essentially as a surrogate for the donor on this particular plane. In fact, as our informants imply, there is little stigma attached to the monadic gift, but self-interest may occasion a qualm, as it sometimes seems to attenuate the social dimension of systemic giving.

Special indulgences that recipients might not fund themselves, or true wants (vs. those incorrectly intuited by others), appear monadic in character. The “wish list” concept is frequently volunteered by registrants, a notion echoed by retailers: “It's probably the only time in your life that you can come up with a wish list and somebody else pays for it . . . I always tell brides” (Joan; Bloomingdale's).

Sometimes couples will hedge their bets, giving themselves an incremental gift by exploiting—sometimes at the marketer's advice—registry policy:

After their wedding, whatever is left on their registry, [the couple] can take 20% off of . . . I always tell people, over-register, even if you don't really want it for your wedding. If it's something you might say, “Oh, I could give that to my sister for her anniversary,” I'll just use the 20% off. (Jackie; Quince)

Finally, donor resistance to the monadic aspect of the registry gift is apparent in the phenomenon of shopping "off registry":

People . . . have gone to the people's registry at the big box and don't like what they see and want to get something much more personal and intimate. We run into that all the time. They say, "It's just wrong, I don't want to just go get whatever's on their registry." But of course, we don't think it's wrong. (Cindy; *Beyond Plates*)

By so sacralizing their gift, off-registry donors remove their present from the commoditizing orbit of the monadic and situate it more firmly in the realm of the dyadic gift. This resistance is mirrored in many couples' ambivalence about the registry, which they ascribe in part to the presumption that seems to attach to the practice of selecting one's own gifts, an implicit violation of the dyadic norm.

Monadic gifts have a key role in "molding and sustaining self-concepts" (Mick 1996, 104). Couples jointly create and present desired possessions through the registry and thus expose the "we" they expect to become (Bradford and Sherry 2013). Given that the registry gift must abide by the constraint of occasion and the conditions of celebration and financial surplus, it can also arise from traditional self-gift motives. Of the core motives for monadic giving, romantic and puritanical motives are most evident among our informants (Mick 1996).

The romantic motivation is described as uninhibited, imaginative and self-indulgent (Mick 1996):

Just going to the store and picking out all this stuff is just kind of fun, because you're picking out cool stuff . . . 2, 3 months later, the stuff just starts showing up. So, that's kind of a cool thing . . . We registered for the same things at multiple places occasionally. (Mike)

He describes his gift selection and receipt experience as akin to magic, in that possessions appear with little if any acknowledgment of the efforts or intentions of gift givers in the process.

The romantic motives for self-gifts are further reinforced by retailers:

The registry is a great service to the wedding guests. The guests want to be a part of the event. They want to participate, and by letting people know what you want, you make it easier and more enjoyable for the guests. (Deborah; *Bed Bath & Beyond*)

The opportunity to select abundant gift choices is encouraged by retailers and justified to registrants as a selfless act. Retailers support registrants by providing specific guidelines on choosing ideal gifts, thereby removing a tremendous burden from anxious gift givers.

Self-indulgence is reflected in the ways in which couples participate in the process and is revealed in the manner in which individuals invite the ritual audience to participate in the registry: "It was a really easy way to get . . . the word out and about what we wanted" (Marie). Because the registry is tied to marriage as a milestone, there is an element of self-reward in self-selected gifts: "Our next big item on our 'To Do' list is registering . . . I knew nothing about how many, where, when, what, why, etc . . . Why? because you're special and you deserve to be showered with gifts. :)" (Bettina; online). The notion of self-indulgence also may be present and anticipated with little, if any, rationalization: "I am looking forward to going through the store with my future hubby and clicking on every single item we want our wedding guests to purchase for us! I get excited thinking about the day" (Ellen; online). Often, the rationalization accompanying self-indulgence is related to recipients' desired outcomes. For example, registrants may seek volume in presents through different donor segments:

Register for a lot of things in every price range. People who want to get you a gift will use the registry (and you can return it for cash) and people who want to give you \$ will do so regardless if you have a registry . . . People are usually gift people or \$ people—gift people give gifts (even if there isn't a registry) and \$ ppl give \$, even if there is a registry . . . Let people give the way they are comfortable giving. (Chelsea; online)

Self-indulgence is reflected and negotiated through the registry by recipients with donors. These negotiations continue through reformulation where the disposition of the gift—keep, regift, return—is determined, which is an atypical experience in traditional self-gifting.

Puritanical motivations also are in evidence:

A lot of it is doing your own research and finding out what is right for you. I think a lot of people are ready for that step but I think you really have to know who you are and what you really need before you even cross through the threshold. (Helen)

It is not a simple or thoughtless wish list that is presented to gift givers but rather a carefully constructed compilation of what is correct or appropriate. Further rationalization in support of self-indulgence is presented in the effort required to develop the gift registry:

If people are going to buy you gifts, and if you want to get things that will be useful, or, things that you want, then, you should register. Otherwise, you can get all kinds of stuff . . . We just thought, we might as well register because that's what everyone does. That ensures that you'll get what you want. (Jason)

Gifts are mobilized as building blocks in the creation of the new family unit. Although there is the desire to preserve or experiment with an ideal "we," registrants also bow to social norms: "[Our registry is] a nice way of saying, 'Here's what to get,' that it's something we'll actually use and enjoy and you can get your money's worth" (Karen). The puritanical motivations are evident not only in rationalizations for self-indulgence but also in rationalizations reflecting concern for gift givers. Self-reflection is believed to be a prerequisite to search in preparation for creating the registry. There is a practicality and rationality underlying choice. Recipients seek to minimize risk and maximize reward.

Our informants report an ambivalent alliance of romantic and puritanical motives underlying their self-gifting: "I went to the wedding registry thinking it is so cool it's almost like spending other people's money. I love to shop for things for myself. This is not shopping for clothes, it's shopping for boring things" (Barbara). Whereas shopping is sport in some sectors of American society, registry is a new experience. There is tension between enthusiasm and boredom. There is also tension between what is desired versus what is necessary:

I mean there was a really nice pot that was \$119 and that's a lot of money for a pot. All these people are going to see what you selected, and the accompanying prices. I think it's one of those things that you don't want to ask too much . . . you don't want people to feel that they have to get you this stuff. (Helen)

Rationalization pervades the process from beginning to end, from making the initial request, through managing the disappointment when expectations are frustrated.

This hybrid motive amplifies the ambivalence often experienced in conventional monadic giving, as the recipient feels compelled to take the donors' alleged perceptions into account during cognitive and emotional acquisition. The thrill of absolutely discretionary acquisition is tempered by the mundane character of the gift. There is often a tension between want and need, luxury and necessity, excessive and reasonable. Even ostensibly win-win scenarios are colored by misgiving. There is usually a balance to be sought, which presupposes an underlying ethic of propriety that must be discerned and respected.

Exchanging Gifts with Others: Dyadic Gift Giving

The circuit of gifts between discrete donors and recipients has been the dominant focus of consumer research into gift giving. Pioneered by Belk (1976), formally modeled by Sherry (1983), and elaborated in a host of insightful ways by them and others, this stream has been most heavily influenced by sociological and anthropological theorizing. Social

network effects on gift giving have revealed the relational nature of gift giving (Lowrey, Ornes, and Ruth 2004). However, with few exceptions (Marcoux 2009; Ornes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993; Ruth, Brunel, and Ornes 2004; Ruth, Ornes, and Brunel 1999; Wooten and Wood 2004), the role of the recipient in the dyad has been virtually overlooked. The embeddedness of gift giving in social relations—the cultural grounding of the gift—has also been demonstrated (Bradford 2009; Joy 2001). Even the personal anxiety and social disruption occasioned by gift giving has been chronicled (McGrath, Sherry, and Levy 1993; Wooten 2000). The dyadic literature has assumed a posture that is largely female-, giver-, and Christmas-centric, which leaves a number of avenues open for additional inquiry.

Missing from this literature is a sense of how the phenomenon contributes to social organization. Previous studies have largely asserted the significance of gift exchange to social system maintenance and change, adducing the organic solidarity postulated by theorists of the premodern phenomenon. Further, there is a tension in the dyadic literature between conceptions of the gift that are exchange focused and oriented around reciprocity, and those that reject the view that these forces compose the nucleus of the gift. By focusing on a single ritual (the wedding) that underwrites both commercial and social institutions, we are able to establish a very clear relationship between ritual action and social reproduction. The coincidence of these conceptions in the same phenomenon is a worthy subject of investigation.

We present our informant responses to dyadic giving practice roughly by Sherry's (1983) processual stages—gestation, prestatation, and reformulation. Informants describe sentiments and behaviors related to gestation in a number of ways. The occasion allows for calculation and none-too-subtle hinting: "This is a chance for people to buy us stuff . . . if you want something, put it on there" (Tom). In gestation, it is common for gift givers to obtain guidance from recipients as to what is desired (Sherry 1983). This is balanced with the desire for propriety in self-presentation: "I worried about the perception of [my registry] . . . people looking at it, being like, 'Oh she's so greedy.' . . . I just felt so awkward about the whole asking for gifts thing" (Gale). Where hints and suggestions are commonplace in dyadic gift giving, the registry formalizes this process between gift recipients and gift givers:

I mean, that seems to be the purpose that a registry really serves, which is to help people . . . feel comfortable, and obviously the people who know you better would know your tastes and would feel free to give you . . . something very personal. (Dawn)

Gifts are a means of influence (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Caplow 1984; Mauss 1967; Sherry 1983). The recipient, acting as gift

giver, chooses what should be received and may constrain what influence the recipient will entertain from the gift giver. Yet, gift givers are not without opinions as to what appropriate registry choices may be:

Put some board games or lawn games on your registry too! From the viewpoint of a guest to 5 weddings this past year, we love getting the fun things from registries and it's really hard to get excited about buying a present for a really good friend when all they're asking for are towels and plates. (Erica; online)

Although the registry is intended to guide gift giving, recipients may remain open to donors exercising agency in gift creation, if the donor is well known to the recipient:

Our close friends will probably get something that has a little more significance, something that expresses more our personality. [Because] the registry can only have so much personality, it's harder for people to get that unless they really know you. (Helen)

Requests and relationships must be carefully calibrated, so that gifts may be sacralized and sociality facilitated.

Prestation gives rise to a range of conventional practices, from acknowledging the sacred essence of the gift, to reveling in the mystery that is its immaterial heart:

I don't know that here you could say: 'No gifts please; just cash.' . . . The whole registering . . . just makes it seem consumer-oriented . . . I mean, registering at specific stores, for specific items, so that people can buy you those items . . . makes it seem very consumer-oriented. (Jason)

Jason acknowledges that an aspect of gift giving, the copresence in exchange where the affective content of the gift is revealed (Sherry 1983), is absent with registry. Though the registry may reduce the sacred essence of the gift, the symbolism of the gift may be impoverished as well:

For some people, to give money as a wedding present is traditional. For some, it's the height of rudeness . . . And there's no telling, who feels what way . . . One of our friends did write us a check and that was very generous . . . it felt a little uncomfortable. I mean, I was touched, 'cause she is a good friend. (Dawn)

Though there is ambivalence in receipt of a cash gift, recipients acknowledge there are different types of gift givers: "There are cash givers and gift givers, and both groups will give you their preference regardless of

whether you register or not. If you register, at least you have some way of suggesting items that you want" (Gwen; online). Although money has a place in gift giving (Bradford 2009), in the contemporary United States, it is acceptable in very intimate relationships, but not much beyond. As with Dawn, such a gift is accepted, but with hesitancy (Sherry 1983). Although cash may provoke discomfort, commodified cash (translated as the obligatory registry gift) does less so.

Some gifts are eagerly anticipated, even when the set of received gifts is selected and known by the recipient far in advance of receipt:

I was horrible about [checking my registry], like twice a day when it was close to, right before a shower. I don't feel like it spoiled the surprise. I know some people don't look at it at all because it's like shaking a Christmas present . . . and the surprise is in who gave it to us. (Alice)

A gift package may be probed, and traditional surprise deflected from the gift itself to the donor. The intimate knowledge of exchange partners upon which successful dyadic giving hinges is also in evidence:

Sometimes people give you a gift, and it's not something that you would have bought for yourself. But, you end up really liking it. So, it's like if someone gets a creative gift. It might not be something I would have ever picked out for us. But, you might really like it. (Jason)

Off-registry purchases are high-risk, high-reward affairs, and personal taste is discerned and revealed through social intimacy.

Reformulation dynamics are reflected in our informants' comments. In particular, they express awe in the face of the social bond the gift affirms:

Having all these people get you this stuff . . . pots and pans that you get really excited to use, still, a year later it's pretty cool . . . It's kind of humbling that there's that many people that would buy these nice gifts just because we got married. (Mike)

The network will provide. And, people are in awe of the power of social institutions. They marvel at how much effort is demanded, how much obligation is mobilized, and how much satisfaction is generated by the system.

Bringing It All Together: Systemic Gift Giving

Giesler (2006) extended inquiry into the domain of consumer gift systems. Seeking inspiration in the realm of the premodern gift, he interpreted file-sharing behavior in the online community Napster as a "polyadic"

or "rhizomatic" network of gift transactions that creates social solidarity among exchange partners (Giesler 2006, 286–9). A gift system exhibits social distinctions, a norm of reciprocity, and a complex of ritual and symbolism. In the process of file sharing, donors and recipients participate in a primarily anonymous generalized reciprocity, giving to and taking from the collective rather than only from repeat exchange partners, and differentially honoring the ethos of the community. The solidarity thus engendered is more "nomadic" than the "organic" character of premodern communities, and the cyber gift itself is "nonsacrificial" in comparison to its premodern analog (Giesler 2006, 287, 289).

Although responsive to the need to demonstrate the ability of the postmodern gift to contribute to social cohesion in a premodern mold, Giesler's choice of the cyber gift as an exemplar is problematic. The tribal ethos of online communities notwithstanding, the binding force of file sharing as described is not persuasively demonstrated. Polyadic giving is simply monadic giving beneath a dyadic veneer. Nomadic polyads seem "systemic" in only a very limited network sense. The systems described by Giesler have more in common with the pirate utopias described by Bey (1984) than societies in either pre- or postmodern eras. Assigning the label "gift" to this activity is also problematic, given the excision of the ancient heart of the gift—sacrifice—from the exchange. The music file dwells in a murky conceptual hinterland along the theft-sharing (Belk 2010) continuum, its circulation propelled by monadic giving and potlatch-nuanced egotism more than a commitment to building social solidarity. In his magisterial history of the concept, Johns (2009, 35) notes that seminal authors such as Thucydides and Cicero regarded piracy as an irritant to "civilized order" itself, a threat we understand as distinctly opposed to the society-engendering practice of gift giving.

We offer an example of a system more firmly rooted in the gift, a more organic system than the illicit character of file sharing affords. By examining an actual gift system of considerable historical depth and vigor, we are able to investigate both the commercial and cultural influences shaping stakeholders' behavior. The interaction of social and commercial institutions to produce, maintain, and alter the system over time is an interesting phenomenon to contemplate.

In their analysis of the structural mechanics of bridging and bonding that animates intracommunity gift giving in post-Katrina Mardi Gras, Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012, 87) explore the entanglement of moral and market economies in a way that has more relevance than Giesler's (2006) for our own theorizing of systemic gifting. In their case, donors of higher social status give a token gift anonymously—and often randomly, with little attention to recipient characteristics—to recipients of lower social status, without receiving material reciprocity in return and without establishing a personal relationship with recipients. This

enhances social solidarity but preserves social inequality. In our case, donors of equivalent or superior economic means give a considered and often costly gift to a pair of recipients with whom they have a personal relationship, with the intention of inducting the pair into a new and often commensurate social status of "married couple" or new "family," without receiving direct material reciprocity but with consciousness (however grudging) of an obligation to participate in generalized reciprocity over their life course. This enhances social solidarity through a provisioning practice aimed in part at alleviating social inequality. In each case, even though the components are often strikingly different, the social system itself is reinforced organically (we would even say created) by the gift instead of mechanically by theft. Symbolic boundaries are dissolved, rather than created (Weinberger 2015), by registry gifts.

A common refrain from our informants addresses the foundational nature of the conformity that animates the registry process. Further, the commercial pressure that once originated and now orchestrates the ritual reinforces the demand to conform: "I think part of the things that we did are customs . . . it's part of the whole wedding thing. It's expected that you register for your gifts" (Jason). The institution is shot through with social expectation and sanction, which is palpable for our informants.

Although there is a commonsensical belief that couples must register, there is a tension between the social norm of registry and the experience of gifts. Whereas registrants express ambivalence about the registry process, there is not much, if any, ambivalence about the outcome of the registry: "Well, partly because I think everybody else does it. That was a big factor. And we wanted presents!" (Frank). Custom requires and desire demands participation in the system. Individual agency is subordinated to the forces of community.

The retail mirroring of the social structure that drives the registry process is a powerful sustainer of the ritual and supports the social network: "Some of our guests will want to see and touch. They are not comfortable making an online purchase. So with Williams-Sonoma, you know all of the stuff is going to be in the store" (Bill). Because most gifts are purchased (Cheal 1988), retailers act as important partners in the execution of the registry process with other stakeholders. Donors and recipients reward retailer partnership with patronage:

[We] also [registered at] national stores, which helps, because I am from the East Coast . . . And we're inviting a lot of my friends and family from there to our wedding. So we thought it would be easiest for friends and family. (Dawn)

Degrees of convenience are tailored to network members' technological sophistication. Social mobility and geographic dispersion of the gift system and social network must constantly be evaluated.

Finally, the system that enables the ritual must be adjusted by the principal actors:

Someone in my family said it's good to register for a couple of big-ticket items cause people will go in on it together . . . I think both of us felt a little uncomfortable putting a \$200 item on the registry. But there were certain people who were going in on it or a certain person who wanted to spend that much money . . . It was real relief, there is an option. (Karen)

Hinting is used to shape behavior within the gift system. Recipients signal not only which items are desired but also which gift might be suitable from which donor. Recipients may thoughtfully consider the socioeconomic means of those who participate in the registry process:

A lot of our friends . . . make a really good living. I almost anticipate them to spend more than a lot of my relatives, who are older and on fixed incomes. I wouldn't expect [my relatives] to buy expensive gifts for us . . . I'm just thinking that our friends would spend more because of their current economic status than a lot of my older relatives. (Jason)

Calibrating expectations to the social network and using knowledgeable brokers are important recipient activities. Ensuring that everyone in the network can participate, and thus forging social solidarity, is a principal concern. Tinkering with social and retail arrangements is among the greatest challenges faced by our informants. Paradoxically, the greatest threat to these intertwined systems is the possibility of a donor buying off registry. Doing so exercises creative personal choice in the service of acknowledging a deeper understanding of and conveying a more intimate relationship with the recipient while resisting market forces in an effort to transform an obligatory gift into a true one.

Synthetic Interpretation of Gift Giving

The registry simultaneously comprises several types of gift giving. Recipients give gifts to themselves through others, effectively hybridizing the monadic and dyadic gift; polyadic giving may be invoked as well. Recipients receive the provisions that will help them forge a life together, invested both with the good will of and strengthened ties to others. Donors give to recipients in conventional dyadic fashion, save for the conversion of the practice of hinting to formal order placing. Society provides the social networks, sanctioned institution, rite of passage, and obligatory gift occasion and receives a total institution, a commodified ritual, additional integration, and resistance in the form of off-registry

The registry is a ternary gift system that binds two interpenetrating social spheres: the network of kith and kin created by any particular marital union, and the collective networks of all the unions served by the channel offering. The former is centered on the solitary household, the latter on the aggregate of households comprising the social category of marrieds, a fundamental unit of social organization. Thus, social cohesion, the sharing of affect and infusion of self-concept in relationships, fuels the gift economy. As a commercial institution with awesome ritual efficacy, the registry is a powerful public sanctioning of newly achieved social status and continuing legitimacy of social form. Participation in a registry represents in significant measure the social consummation of a marriage.

The market economy may be embraced, and is often co-opted, to convey affect and support the creation and extension of kith and kin. To sacralize a gift emerging from such a commercially rationalized social nexus, stakeholders undertake a number of practices. Merchants offer customized services and amenities. Donors invest preselected options with personal meaning, gather personalized assortments, and pool resources for greater impact. Recipients tangibilize cognitive and emotional acquisition with elaborate search rituals, conducting copious research, role-playing the situations of their prospective donors, and publicly displaying the taste that helps define their union. Absolute commodification of gift giving is accommodated by some resource-challenged donors but is often resisted by those seeking to temper convenience with sentiment. Occasionally, the registry is rejected by a donor unwilling to break with the spirit of the gift who exercises creativity in their gift selection. Such extreme behavior is characteristic of more intimate relationships.

In registry, the cycle begins with monadic giving driven by romantic and puritanical motives. The self-indulgent aspects of both motives are attenuated through rationalizations of scale, achievement, and even concern for gift givers. The overt hinting represented in the formal registry initiates dyadic giving, where donors identify their gift of choice, present it at the designated time, and obtain recipient responses. In the case of registry, the dyadic exchange partners are more likely to be family units, where the cycle of gift giving is continued within larger groups of individuals within a social system over long periods of time. This extended gift giving represents a continual cycle of systemic gift giving, where members of social networks continually provide gifts to recipients in response to wedding registry. The registry comprises each of the three types of giving and is driven both by the desire for and necessity of social cohesion and is dependent upon channel partners in the marketplace to sustain the cycle.

General Discussion

The construal of the gift registry requires a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of its stakeholders. Within this institution, recipients

do they calculate the monetary value of a portfolio of goods, announce that amount to kith and kin, and request that the goal be met by their social network. Rather, they employ the conceit of the gift, grafting consumer-culture ethos to traditional wedding practice. This conceit demands both a tighter scripting of gift-giving ritual and a more liberal interpretation of its charter.

For example, Visser (2008, 119) notes that, in Western societies, life's necessities are "nearly always supplied by means other than gift giving," leaving the gift sphere free to focus solely on personal relationships and sentiment; further, gifts are most often given by individuals to individuals, which requires insight and empathy on the part of the donor. The gift registry is exceptional, if only nominally, in each of these regards. Donors often do supply staples, and principally to couples rather than individuals. Preordained presents must be sacralized, even if independently, by donors and recipients.

Further, convenience-driven institutions such as registry violate "two important elements of modern Western gift giving: the receiver's surprise and the giver's own decision-making" (Visser 2008, 81–2). The breach is partially redressed through wrapping and other means of personalization (Visser 2008, 82). The transformation of the gift into an "intimate offering" invested with the donor's spirit from a simple commercial transfer of an object to a recipient's domestic inventory poses a challenge for some donors and recipients; for others, convenience and practicality remove the issue from the realm of moral dilemma (Purbrick 2007, 141–2).

Finally, despite the forced, prescribed, and nonreciprocal nature of "gifts" better characterized as "tribute" offered to power (Visser 2008, 124), registry items manage to retain the aura of the gift. Registry gifts compose a benediction that society confers upon itself, through the couple, consecrating the new union as indispensable social reinforcement. These gifts are materializations of social approval, even if they are given by donors participating in a cultural practice that they also wish to oppose (Purbrick 2007, 33, 124).

Cultural production accounts stress the role of the bridal media—and institutions such as the registry in particular—in framing engagement as a rite of passage both mediated and memorialized by acquisition. Gifts become a material witness of status transition, in which an individual becomes a new kind of consumer, a new kind of self, and a member of a new kind of social unit (Mead 2007). Gifts symbolize the hope for a qualitatively different "domestic engagement" but are fraught with ambivalence because the registry is essentially a "form of licensed covetousness" that invites the couple to test the limits of acquisitiveness (Mead 2007, 112, 114). Such accounts frame the registry as the prospective bride's opportunity both to restock and to provision for married adulthood, an entitlement (Mead 2007, 110, 113) that is acknowledged even as it may be resented by donors.

Tellingly, cultural production accounts focus on the "registry" component to the near exclusion of the "gift" component composing the phenomenon. It is as if opportunism conflicts with ritual propriety, freighting the gift with such a measure of self-interest as to render the giving a mere commodity exchange. We find this ritual opportunism at work among most, if not all, of the registry's stakeholders and view it as one of the reasons for understanding the registry as a form of self-gift. Recipients grant themselves fulfillment of their precise wishes. Donors grant themselves convenience and exemption from embarrassment. Retailers grant themselves patronage and extended loyalty. This confluence of selfish motives conspires to reveal an aura of egoism that the dyadic ideal of gift giving is at pains to conceal, if not deny outright. The obligatory nature of the occasion combines with the near-obligatory character of the gift to create a context of self-indulgence in which the conceit of "giving" can be only tenuously maintained.

Imposing a strict economic view on the registry, Waldfogel (2009, 140) likens the practice to the sale of naming rights employed by university development offices, such that "the bride and groom list the items they need, and wedding participants pay for the right to claim, say, the fourth place setting as their gift." With perfect knowledge of the recipients' desires, donors can effectively select a gift that will suffice, if not delight. But this exercise is not provisioning *per se*, as donors do not select what the new couple needs to launch a new life from a culturally determined set of starter items, a standard set of commodities (and services) every household requires to establish itself. Rather, donors select from a "wish list" of items ranging from staple to luxury that recipients have fabricated not only to meet their own selfish needs and wants but also to match the means of prospective donors that custom demands participate in the gift-giving ritual.

Frequently, donors must compete with one another for the privilege of selecting a given item or of assembling a more lavish gift from among the items on the list. Sometimes, they retreat from the intensity of the competition and go "off-registry" to compensate:

I'm the type who [doesn't] get on the gift register until the last ten percent of the people get on. The type of stuff which is left there to buy, I'm just not interested. So I usually do not follow the gift registry. (Emma)

Nor is money offered as a way of offsetting the cost of acquiring a common portfolio of starter goods; even an off-registry cash "gift" is treated by analysts as a wealth transfer (Cheal 1988). For example, in their investigation of ethnic wedding gift practices in the United States, McGrath and Englis (1996, 130, 134) found that donors and recipients, largely disdainful of and uninformed about registry and committed both

to relieving the giver of the burden of choice and enabling the receiver to select the "actual" gift, literally preferred cash gifts. Because the registry gift is a handsel, given to inaugurate a union auspiciously, the metaphorical naming rights described by Waldfogel (2009) exist alternately as the spirit of the donor recovered in use and contemplation of the gift and as a speculative reverie of what a donor might have given had the binding force of registry not been in play.

The open-source ethos in consumer culture that has revived interest in prosomption (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1995; Toffler 1980; Visconti et al. 2010) assuredly encompasses the registry gift. An item listed on and chosen from a registry is a collaborative gift in several senses. First, the item is chosen by the couple to be given to itself. Donors comply and find ways to invest meaning in the item, choosing from among preselections. This initial, foundational collaboration gives rise to a second. Donors collaborate among themselves by not duplicating one another's gifts, by "going in on" a gift in partnerships that permit selection of a more expensive gift, by bundling preselected items into more lavish assortments, and simply by agreeing to buy from the registry in the first place. Finally, the retail host of the registry collaborates with donors and recipients from search through disposition, enabling the gift of service to emerge.

All parties to the registry ritual ultimately recognize in this collaboration an underlying monadic aspect to the gift. Two striking illustrations highlight this recognition. First, there is universal acknowledgment that the recipients are free to return any gift they themselves have chosen for a different one they currently desire more ardently. Second, a donor may refuse to comply with the registry ritual by going "off registry" to purchase a gift that may be more readily sacralized in traditional fashion.

Just as the Burning Man gift economy has been likened to a postmodern hybrid of the potlatch and the cargo cult (Sherry and Kozinets 2007, 114), so also can the gift registry be construed, partially and perhaps more simply, as a potlatch reconfigured or repurposed for consumer culture. To mix metaphors, this potlatch operates according to the principle of a barn raising (McGrath and Englis 1996, 134) and its many cross-cultural cousins. As a form of mutual aid, the registry witnesses a community contributing its resources to benefit a deserving household, essentially redistributing wealth in an effort to raise the status of this household. Viewed in the context of the wedding process within which the registry is embedded, a feast (or series of feasts) is hosted for (or by) the bride and groom during which concelebrants affirm the status transition the couple is undergoing. The couple acts as a gift chimney through which presents flow, their new hearth being stoked by the generosity of kith and kin who participate in the solemnizing of the union. Gifts are neither destroyed nor given away, as in traditional potlatch, but rather symbolically transmuted into status. Donors divest themselves of wealth in honor of the new couple, whose

material accumulation proclaims the social esteem with which it is now invested. This redistribution of wealth represents an investment in the new couple (McGrath and Englis 1996, 134).

This process is the opposite of the coercive tribute paid by social inferiors to social superiors. Wealth is sacrificed by the community to create community; economic capital is translated into social capital. Wealth flows to the socially needy as the status transition is marked. In traditional potlatch, the donor may be financially impoverished as social status is enriched through redistribution; in the gift registry, the donor's financial burden can be calibrated to means, and the recipients' social status is enriched through redistribution. The new couple begins its next stage of the life course with the material and symbolic blessing of the community, a blessing most likely to be reaffirmed, again through registry, upon the impending birth of children.

Conclusion

The registry is at once a reaction to and manifestation of the romantic, celebratory view of the gift economy as an escape from a morally inferior market economy (Marcoux 2009). The semiotic freighting of the gift with social obligation ensures the possibility of frustrating stakeholders' expectations. The market mitigates this possibility but also offers an illusive alternative to itself. By submitting to the registry, efficiencies of provisioning and facework are realized by the participants. By resisting the registry, participants (re)sacralize the gift, ironically by purchasing it elsewhere in the market. In the former instance, participants are perceptually emancipated from the tyranny of the gift economy. In the latter, they achieve a perceptual countering of market hegemony, even as they return to the market (paradoxically) for their alternative. Either way, the conceit "It's the thought that counts" is preserved.

As people seek to reconcile premodern propensities with such postmodern tensions as the accommodation to, and resistance of, the commodification of life, the significance of portal institutions will loom larger in consumer research agendas. The registry suggests an uneasy alliance between the spirit of the gift and the net present value of social capital, a relationship consumer culture theorists are predisposed to understand and manipulate. We hope our exploratory effort stimulates additional inquiry into such portal institutions.

Note

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