

The Societal Obligation of Act of Gift Exchange: A Psychological Perspective Gurmangeet Kaur Pandey*

Abstract

In this article, an attempt is made to examine the sociological and psychological underpinnings of the act of gift exchange. A well-known statement given by Marcel Mauss i.e. 'the exchange of gifts is a discontinuous succession of generous acts' in his book 'The Gift' is very useful to analyse these underpinnings. First, there is an attempt to define what is a gift. Definitions given by Mauss and Levi-Strauss are used for this purpose. The essay then talks about the factors that make gift exchange a discontinuous act. Then there is a major discussion on whether the act of gift exchange is generous or not. Multiple perspectives are used for this purpose. Illustrations are taken from Mauss's, Bourdieu's, Polanyi's, and Parry's conceptualization of gift exchange and give and take. Then there is a discussion about gifts given to paternal aunts and the practice of giving 'shagun' in Indian society to highlight the role of self-interestedness, obligation, and expectations in the gift exchange. Gift exchange within family in Western society is also discussed for the same purpose. It is concluded that although the act of gift-giving is discontinuous it is not truly generous. There are always certain self-interests whether material or immaterial which initiate and guide the act of gift exchange. It should be noted that social and psychological factors are mostly intertwined and it is not possible to compartmentalize the two in watertight compartments.

Keywords- Gift exchange, generous, self-interestedness, Psychological motives, Social Obligations

The basic definition of gift exchange as per Britannica is the 'transfer of goods and services which is considered voluntary by the people involved and is part of expected social behavior (Munro, 2024). There are two kinds of assumptions regarding the act of gift exchange. First, the act of gift exchange is full of generosity, and disinterestedness, and the giver expects nothing in return. Second, the act of gift exchange isn't generous and there are elements of self-interestedness and quid pro quo. It is important to analyse whether the first assumption holds more weight or the second, to dig deeper into psychological motives and social obligations that put into motion the act of exchange of gifts. We shall understand what are the psychological reasons which motivate a person to initiate the act of gift exchange and what are the social obligations, norms and mores that help in keeping it continued for a long period with intervals in it. To understand whether the exchange of gifts is a discontinuous succession of generous acts or not we must first try to understand the meaning of the term 'gift'. The literal meaning of the term 'gift', means something transferred from one person to another without compensation. In sociological terms, the first and foremost definition that comes to mind is of Marcel Mauss. Mauss in his seminal work 'The Gift' describes gifts as a discontinuous succession of generous acts. To understand the meaning of gifts it is also important to take Levi Strauss's conception of gifts. He described gifts as a structure of transcendent reciprocity of the acts of exchange, where the gifts result in the counter-gift (Bourdieu, 1998)

Gift exchange is a discontinuous act

Bourdieu's conceptualization of gifts helps us understand whether the act of exchanging gifts is discontinuous as he adds a temporal dimension to the exchange of gifts. Bourdieu critiques Levi-Strauss's and Mauss's analyses of gifts by stating that a major role in the exchange of gifts is played by the temporal

interval between the gift and the counter gift and this aspect was absent in both analyses. It is a tacit practice that a counter-gift is not given exactly at the time when a gift is accepted in the first place. Because giving the counter gift immediately would amount to refusal of the gift. Bourdieu then goes on to explain the function of this time interval. The time interval plays the function of creating a screen between the gift and the counter gift. This allows these symmetrical and reciprocal exchanges to appear as unique and unrelated. This interval makes the initial giver of the gift feel his/her act is generous and gratuitous. The time interval between the gift and the counter gift is marked with uncertainty and suspense for the gift giver because there is no certainty whether he/she will get the counter gift or not. Hence there is a time interval between the gift and the counter gift and Bourdieu explains the function of the time interval (Bourdieu, 1998). This confirms that the exchange of the gift is a discontinuous act. We can see this in the context of our day-to-day life also. There is a time lag between the exchange of the gifts whether it be on the occasion of birthdays, weddings, festivals, and so on.

Is the exchange of gifts a generous act?

Now to delve deeper into the question we need to understand whether gifts are generous or not. This would help in uncovering the psychological motivations and social obligations that initiate, control, and regulate the act of gift exchange. First, we need to understand the meaning of the term generous. A generous act is liberal in giving, marked by ample proportions, and is characterized by a noble and kind spirit. Now let us understand the notion of 'generosity' in the act of gift-giving. As mentioned above Bourdieu explains the function of the time lag. Time lag makes the act of gift-giving appear as generous because it is marked by suspense and uncertainty. But merely an act that appears generous

doesn't make the act generous in itself. There are certain perspectives that we need to look into to understand whether the act of gift giving is wholly generous or it is generous on the face of it only. Firstly we shall look at the psychological motivations behind gift giving and taking and then we shall look at sociological factors impacting the act of gift exchange.

Motivation

In a New York Times article titled 'Unpacking the Psychology of Gift Giving' by Kate Murphy, it is highlighted that often people give gifts that reflect their motivations and desires. And the preferences and the tastes of the recipient are not considered. The Ta-da! moment is what gives the gift-giver satisfaction even when the gift may be of no use to the recipient or even if the recipient may not have space for it. People often fall into the trap of not fully appreciating the choices of the recipient first rather they are guided by their own motivations and the psychological satisfaction they get from gift-making (Murphy, 2022). In a The Guardian article titled 'The Art and Science of Gift Giving,' some more aspects of gift giving are highlighted which help us understand how the act of gift-giving is not wholly altruistic and generous and self-serving motivations are also present. The element of jealousy is also highlighted. For example, the gift-giver's sister asks for the latest model of iPhone as a gift which gift-giver himself doesn't have. Then gift-giver's jealousy may encourage him/her not to buy the latest model and refrain him/ her from giving the best possible gift that the recipient had requested. This shows that here the act of gift giving wasn't generous. Neither it was marked by abundance nor it was kind and noble in the spirit. There is also a preoccupation with price tags. A competition goes on between the parties who exchange gifts and about who gives more expensive and branded gifts. There is an implicit tendency to outdo each other's gifts in terms of the price. In the rarest of rare cases, there would be a gift that would be altruistic (Robson, 2023).

Sociological factors: societal expectations, obligations, and norms

It is an indisputable fact that the act of giving and taking gifts are a result of expected societal behavior. Certain obligations enforce the act of giving and receiving the gift. There are certain material and immaterial interests also that underscore the act of gift exchange. We shall dive deeper into it and analyze how different sociologists have uncovered the sociological factors that underscore the give and take of gifts.

First, we need to examine whether there is something called a pure/free gift or not. Marcel Mauss gives an example of Trobriand Island where a husband compensates his wife for her sexual services by giving small gifts. And declares the notion of pure gift as nonsense. He explored a variety of gifts and tried to categorize them according to the degree of

purity of motives. He concluded that no gift is free in such a sense (Mauss, 2000, X). If there is something like a pure gift then there would be no element of mutual ties between the giver and the recipient. Mauss explains that in various societies all over the world exchanges and contracts take place in the form of gifts. Theoretically, these appear to be voluntary and in reality, they are reciprocated because of obligations. On the face of it they appear to be free and disinterested but still, they are constrained and self-interested.

An example of Polynesian Potlatch given by Mauss can be analyzed for this. He cites two essential elements in Potlatch that are honor, prestige, and mana conferred by wealth. There is an obligation to reciprocate because failing to do so would mean losing the mana (the authority) and the source of wealth (Mauss, 2000, 11). This reaffirms the fact that there is an element of self-interest involved.

An example of Maori law can also be cited. Here three people are involved in the exchange of gifts. First-person gives an article to the second and the second one further gives it to the third one. The third person in return provides a counter with a gift to the second and now the second person is obliged to return it to the first because the counter gift he received from the third person contains the soul of the first person. Failing to do so would mean that some serious harm may strike the second person (Mauss, 2000, 14). Here also we see elements of obligation and self-interestedness involved. In both Polynesian and Maorian cases we can see an element of power involved. In the Maori case, the first donor became the last recipient and gave the second and the third donor the power and authority over the first one. How can an act be generous if there is a notion of power and authority involved?

Mauss gives an example of the Northern Island of Andaman. He cites an observation made by Radcliffe Brown. Radcliffe Brown understands the goal of gift-giving as a moral one whose function is to foster friendly feelings between two parties. No one is allowed to refuse the gift. There was the existence of some kind of rivalry between the parties involved due to the presence of competitive sentiments of who gives more gifts and is of greatest value (Mauss, 2000, 25). Again the question arises that where there is an existence of competitive spirit leading to the formation of rivalry, how can the act of gift-giving be generous in that social setup? How can the act of gift-giving be noble and kind in spirit? This fulfills only partial criteria mentioned in the definition of generosity that is gift giving is marked by ample proportion but surely noble spirit is absent in such a case.

From Mauss now let's move on to Bourdieu's description of presents in Kabylia. Present is seen as a misfortune and it must be reciprocated to be free from misfortune. As mentioned above, there is a time lag in giving and receiving gifts and this time lag is to

ensure that the gift exchange appears to be generous. That means there is a deliberate attempt to make gift exchange appear as generous. Bourdieu also mentions that the act of giving the gift is an attack on the freedom of the receiver. It is a threatening act that puts the receiver under the obligation to reciprocate and the reciprocation is also expected to be beyond the original gift. And this puts in place the never-ending cycle of obligations (Bourdieu, 1998, 94). However, according to Bourdieu, this structural truth is repressed. It is a kind of collective self-deception. Gift exchange also involves a kind of taboo of making things explicit for example we hide the price of a gift before giving it (Bourdieu, 1998, 96). Hiding the price seems to be a deliberate act to make the act of gift-giving appear generous. But there is a tacit understanding that when a person gives a gift the receiver will be obligated to reciprocate despite hiding the price tag. This means there is some expectation while giving a gift despite a degree of uncertainty and suspense present in the time interval. Bourdieu also explains the exchange of gifts as a kind of euphemism where in Bourdieu's words 'one does what one does, while seeming not to do it'. It reaffirms the fact that the act of symbolic exchange is made to appear as generous while in reality they are not. Euphemisms involved in gift exchanges are used to portray gifts as generous acts (Bourdieu, 1998, 99). Polanyi in his work 'The Great Transformation' states that man's economy is submerged in his social relationships. He does so to protect its social standing, social claims, and social assets and not to safeguard its individual interests. An example of tribal society is given wherein it is mentioned that by disregarding the accepted code of generosity individual puts himself at risk of getting cut off from society. In the longer run the social obligations are reciprocal and fulfillment of these social obligations also takes care of individual interests as well (Polanyi, 1985, 46). Here also we can see the presence of elements of obligations and self-interest. Even though Polanyi's conception portrays that an individual follows the rule of reciprocity and generosity to protect his/her social standings, not individual interest, he still seems to be self-interested as he does this to safeguard his social claims/assets. If an individual doesn't follow this, he would be cut off from society. Hence here also in Polanyi's notion of reciprocity, we do find that exchanges are not wholly generous.

Now let's move on to Jonathan Parry's analysis of the 'Indian Gift'. There he discusses 'Danadharma' which are vital feature of many rituals and festivals. Gifts given in 'Danadharma' are meant to send away inauspiciousness from the donor to the recipient. Unless the recipient takes proper ritual precautions there is always a risk of misfortune striking it. But Parry highlights that the obligation to return is not there in Danadharma. The motive is to obtain a pure asymmetry and the most important rule is that the gift

should never be returned. He also gives an example of Kanyadaan which means 'gift of a virgin'. Kanya and her dowry travel unilaterally from wife givers to wife takers. Here also there is no reciprocity and pure asymmetry is present and a dyadic exchange does not arise (Parry, 1986, 461). The principle of 'Quid Pro Quo' which means 'something for something' seems to fail here.

But if we see minutely both Danadharma and Kanyadana have elements of self-interest and social obligation. Firstly, an individual does dana-dharma because a social obligation is imposed upon him at various occasions. Secondly, a person does dana-dharma to get away from the misfortune that may strike him or has stricken him. This shows the self-interest of the individual. He wants his benefit from danadharma. We often hear people say that one should do daan-dharma because if they do it they will get 'Punya'. This implicit goal to get 'punya' itself means that the individual has some self-interest. Self-interest is also there in the practice of Kanyadaan and dowry (popularly termed as 'gifts' in today's society). People give dowry to ensure that their daughter is treated well in her marital home. It is to ensure her well-being that opulent gifts are given at the marriage. Also, there is a social and ritual obligation to do kanyadaan and give dowry. Hence after analyzing these two examples cited by Parry in depth, we find that gift may not be truly generous. In both cases, self-interest is there. But to some extent, there is also uncertainty. Merely doing Danadharma will not ensure that misfortune won't strike you and even giving opulent gifts in dowry won't ensure that the daughter would be treated well in the marital home. But still, people indulge in these acts as they think that it will ensure their well-being. Despite the uncertainty, something is expected in return. This makes the act of Danadharma and Kanyadana appear to be generous but in reality, they are not completely generous.

It is quite clear that even if the act of gift exchange is portrayed to be generous, noble and a disinterested act but there are always certain psychological and social factors with material and immaterial interest that form the basis of such acts.

Illustration: Gift Giving within the family

Now let us examine the element of generosity in the act of gift-giving through the gift exchanges that take place within the kin relations. The element of generosity becomes important when we try to examine social and psychological factors that act as forms of motivation and control behind such acts. A special focus would be on the gifts given to Bua (paternal aunt) in India occasion of her marriage and various festivals. We shall examine whether gifts made to Bua are pure or are fraught with expectations (both material and immaterial).

In most of the Indian Hindu families, we can see daughters are given opulent amounts of dowry at the time of marriage. This dowry is now popularly called

a 'gift' after dowry has become illegal in India. As mentioned above the act of giving dowry is not completely generous. It comes with both material and immaterial expectations. Immaterial expectations can ensure good treatment of the daughter in a marital home where she is safe from domestic violence and is treated with respect. There is an expectation of something in return. But a new dynamic has been added in this context after the recognition of the right to ancestral property of daughters after an amendment in the Hindu Succession Act in 2005. A lot of dowry is given to the daughter at her wedding because it in a way prevents the *bua* (father's sister/ paternal aunt) from claiming her legal right in ancestral property. These gifts (dowry) are given with a huge material expectation in return i.e. giving up of claim in the ancestral property by the daughter of the family. This reinforces that here the act of gift-giving is not truly altruistic and generous. Here both the criteria in the definition of generous are not met. Neither it is an act of liberal giving marked by abundance nor it is noble and kind in spirit. If we examine minutely. Gifts (dowry) are movable property as opposed to immovable property (which daughters are expected to give up). Here the act of gift-giving does not have abundant proportion because one is movable and the other is immovable. It is a tactic to emotionally persuade the daughters to give up their legal rights in ancestral property. Hence it is not noble and kind in spirit and ultimately not generous.

In addition to ancestral property the paternal aunts are regularly given at various festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Bhai Dooj, Teej, etc. These regular gifts ensure that she doesn't claim her share in the property. Also, these gifts are looked at as a mark of respect for the daughter in her natal family. There is the notion that if the daughters are respected in her natal family and are given considerable gifts at various occasions she would also be respected in her marital family. We can see daughters-in-law being looked down upon by marital families when they don't receive gifts on such occasions or receive so-called 'cheap gifts'. Here also there is an element of *quid pro quo*. There is always something expected in return whether material or immaterial.

Now let's move on to another form of gift exchange within the family which is quite prevalent in India. We often see when we meet relatives, the elder ones tend to give 'shagun' (a monetary gift egRs 1100, 2100, and so on). What does that entail, is it a form of pure gift or it is also fraught with expectations and social obligations? Surely it is fraught with social obligations. For example, a girl's maternal aunt gives her a shagun of 1100 when she visits her. Then there would be a social obligation on the girl's mother to give 1100 or more to her sister's daughter because giving less than that would not 'look good'. There is a sense of competitiveness no matter whether it is intentional or unintentional. We can also see a superficial degree of resistance by the recipient or

their parents when shagun is being given. This resistance should be examined deeply. The resistance may be because this may put the recipient in an inferior position and also puts an obligation to return the gift next time. This may be the implicit reason for resistance.

Analyzing both acts (giving gifts to the paternal aunt and giving shagun) helps in understanding that act of gift-giving is not truly generous. There is always some expectation in return. Also, there is a self-interest. This self-interest is generally implicit. Even in the most noble form of gift giving which is *dana-dharma*, there is a degree of self-interest. There is a notion deeply ingrained in people's minds. This is if I do good, do *dana*, do sacrifice; good things will happen to me in return.

This is not only true in Indian Society. In Western societies also this is true. AafkeKomter and Wilma Vollebergh write in their article titled ' Gift Giving and the Emotional Significance of Family and Friends' that the act of gift-giving is a cement of social relationships. But in modern society, the authors note that the act of gift given to Kin springs from moral obligation and is not merely based on feelings of affection. The respondents in the research conducted by the authors stated that they felt more affection while giving gifts to friends rather than family (Komter&Vollebergh, 1997, 757). Gift exchange within the family took place to maintain social relations and was done more due to the pressure to fulfill moral obligations. In the article, the authors critiqued Malinowski's and Sahlin's theories stating them to be of another era. According to Sahlin's and Malinowski's theories, the nearer the social relationships more the feeling of purity and the less it resembles the economic *quid pro quo*. The authors say that this is not true for Western societies in today's era (Komter &Vollebergh, 1997, 755).

Conclusion

It can be seen that the act of exchanging gifts has elements of self-interests, constraints, and social and moral obligations within it. Attempts are made to make it appear as a generous and disinterested act. The time lag between the gift and the counter gift also plays an important role in making it appear as a generous act. Now if we examine the statement 'The exchange of gifts is a discontinuous succession of generous acts' then we can conclude that yes it is a discontinuous act due to the presence of a time gap between the exchange of two gifts. But if we examine whether it is a generous act or not then it appears that the act of gift-giving is not purely generous. There is a sense of self-interestedness, competition, and obligation while giving and receiving gifts. The act can be generous to some degree for the person who initiates the process of gift-giving and as Simmel also says although there is a constraint on the person who receives it the act of the initial gift-giver has a voluntary and spontaneous character and no subsequent gift can fully reciprocate it. But deep

down there are certain expectations that hinder the act of gift-giving to become a purely generous act. The lack of an element of generosity highlights certain emotions like jealousy and pleasure one feels while initiating a gift exchange. Also, material interests, obligations, and social honor highlight how social factors control and regulate the act of gift exchange.

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