

Is holiday giving an obligation?

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Why do we suddenly become generous during the holidays? Why do gifts often bear greater symbolic than economic value? Why do we anonymously give to strangers?

"Because giving back is a societal norm," says Marcel Fournier, a sociology professor at the Université de Montréal. "Human beings are social beings and no society can survive without mechanisms of solidarity and reciprocity. Giving becomes an obligation."

Fournier is a specialist in the works of anthropologist Marcel Mauss who studied tribal exchange rituals in the early 20th century. Mauss identified three obligations that structure any society: giving, receiving and reciprocating.

"In modern societies, this is manifested in a State's wealth redistribution policies," says Fournier. "But these obligations also exist on an individual level, for instance, when we give to charities. It is a way to give back what we have received and contribute to the sharing of wealth."

In this exchange mechanism, a receiver obviously benefits while a giver gains from social prestige. "In certain traditional societies, rituals lead to an escalation in giving until one of the parties can not give any more. The one who gave most benefits from higher social prestige," says Fournier.

Modern Christmas gift-giving has its share of reciprocity mechanisms. "We always feel obliged to someone who gives us a present," says

Fournier. "Although there is no reciprocity of gifts given by parents to young children, young ones learn very early to exchange and give back, whether it be cards or school drawings. And children give back what they received from their parents throughout life by eventually taking care of their parents when they get older."

Source: University of Montreal

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