

Secret Santas: Anonymous generosity increases due to time of year, various motivations

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A family gets a surprise phone call informing them that their holiday gifts on layaway have been paid for by a stranger. A passerby discreetly slips \$1,000 into a donation bucket among the \$1 bills. Instances of anonymous generosity such as these seem to be more common each year.

Laura Brannon, professor of psychology at Kansas State University, said increases in anonymous [generosity](#) might be due to more publicity of these instances.

"It's an interesting phenomenon," Brannon said. "This type of giving has been on news reports and [television shows](#) like 'Oprah.' Before, we didn't hear about it as much, so it may not have occurred to as many people."

Brannon said the fact that the giving is anonymous indicates that it isn't being done for attention, and is instead genuine altruism. She added that research has shown that while individuals are more willing to engage in negative activities when they're not identifiable, it also has shown that they are more willing to be altruistic when remaining anonymous is an option.

"People may feel a little self-conscious or awkward giving someone money," Brannon said. "That pressure is gone when the person makes an anonymous donation. People tend to do what the situation calls for when

they're not identified. When they're hearing about anonymous [altruism](#), that primes them to behave accordingly."

The importance of helping those who are less fortunate is an idea that permeates society year-round, but has an added emphasis during the [holiday season](#) as well as during rough [economic times](#). Brannon said the more salient a norm is considered to be, the more generous society is apt to be.

"Certainly all the talk about the economy and [unemployment rate](#) gets people thinking about the fact that there are a lot of others who are less fortunate," she said. "That could motivate [altruistic behavior](#)."

Donations of money, time or goods certainly help those in need, but those who give benefit as well—and not only from feelings of goodwill and satisfaction. Brannon said generous people are better liked and more likely to receive help when needed than those perceived as less generous.

"There's a very strong relationship between selfishness and unhappiness," she said. "Selfish people spend their time focusing on themselves and what they want to make them happy. But research shows they're the most unhappy people."

Generous individuals fall into two categories—high self-monitors and low self-monitors. Brannon said high self-monitors are those who pay attention to situational pressures and what others think of them. These are the people who are more likely to be generous when people are watching and who want to appear a certain way in the eyes of others. Conversely, low self-monitors are those who do what their own values tell them to do.

"They may or may not be generous, but their decisions are based upon themselves, not what others think," Brannon said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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