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Preface

There is always an occasion for gifts. Christmas and the many birthdays are, of course, the most important gift-giving occasions in Christian-based cultures, but then there are Mother's Day, Father's Day and Valentine's Day, as well as gifts for friends and family celebrations such as weddings and christenings. And in each case you are faced with the questions "What should I give?" and "What is the perfect gift in this particular case?" First, important, albeit rather general, clues to an answer are provided by an influential essay of the American consumer behaviour researcher Russel W. Belk (1996) entitled "The perfect gift", in which he describes the ideal image of a successful gift and names specific characteristics. According to this, perfect gifts are characterised, among other things, by the fact that they inspire the recipients, meet their wishes and surprise them. In the concrete individual case, such references offer however by no means always sufficient assistance. How can you inspire a niece you hardly know? How can you fulfil the wishes of an uncle who always emphasises that he has no wishes? How can you surprise a partner who specifies exactly what he or she expects as a gift? Actually, one wants to give the recipient pleasure with a gift that is as perfect as possible

and thus also deepen the existing relationship emotionally. But the often unsuccessful search for the right gift initially causes the giver to be perplexed, insecure and afraid that a gift that is not only imperfect but possibly unsuccessful will have the opposite effect of what was intended, namely disappointment and anger on the part of the recipient and an emotional distancing in the relationship.

In this situation, when you think more intensively about how to find a perfect gift or at least avoid a failed one, more and more details and pitfalls come into view. The number of questions grows: Does the low price of the gift appear as evidence of low appreciation or the high price as unwanted pressure on the recipient to give an equally expensive counter-gift? What does the gift say about me, my taste and my view of the recipient? Which gifts are currently incorrect, which children can still be given chocolate, which adults can still be given books in non-gender-sensitive language? If, as at Christmas, there are several people to consider and the gift presentation is family public, how will those involved evaluate and interpret the different gifts financially and symbolically? Is money the answer or a gift certificate? And are these and other questions to be answered differently, depending on the occasion, the stage in the life cycle and the nature of the relationship between those involved?

Such recurring questions are not only the subject of individual reflection but also of research in various disciplines, with psychology playing a particularly important role. This is also obvious, since psychological factors such as motives and attitudes influence our gift-giving behaviour, and gifts trigger considerable cognitive and emotional processes in both givers and recipients, which not infrequently have a lasting impact on relationships in family and social networks. In recent years, international psychological research on gift giving has developed considerably in quantitative terms, and a large number of empirical studies have investigated gift-giving

behaviour and the accompanying psychological effects in both givers and recipients in a differentiated manner. In this way, it contributes significantly to a better understanding of the complexity of the gift-giving process. Not all questions have been answered definitively so far, nor can they be. In many cases, answers sound like "it depends", but the research findings help us to understand what does matter. The aim of this book is to contribute to this by providing an insight into the current state of research in a concise form.

The presentation of findings from psychological gift research is supplemented here by short descriptions of gift episodes in fiction literature. These are not only to be understood as illustrative additions, like a nice little card to the gift, but they serve quite substantially to understand the psychological processes. When scientific psychological studies measure enthusiasm or annoyance over a gift, or the sacrifice that gift-givers make, they do so with the help of response scales. This results not only in a methodologically necessary "displacement of the word by the number" but also in a disappearance of the experience. And it is precisely this experience that fiction literature masterfully captures in artistic form. In Thomas Mann's description of the handing over of presents on Christmas Eve in the Buddenbrook house, one can immediately relate to how it feels when a child's wishful dream comes true. In Thomas Bernhard's work, you can feel the lifelong unbridled rage that wrong gifts can cause, and in O'Henry's work, you can almost experience yourself what it means and what it does when lovers sacrifice what is most important to them for a gift. In this respect, literature helps us to comprehend and understand our feelings and behaviours as givers and receivers of gifts. It thus also makes scientific knowledge more comprehensible. That is the gift of fiction to us – and to research.

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Gift Giving: Joy, Duty and Frustration

"Yes, is it Christmas already?" asks Franz Beckenbauer at the end of the 1990s in a pre-Christmas commercial for a mobile phone company, a question that has since achieved the status of a saying in Germany (Wortbedeutung 2021). In the commercial, the famous footballer who became world champion as a player and coach is surprised because a gift box ('Free & Easy X-mas Set') from Santa Claus' heavenly sleigh falls into his hands. The commercial communicates the joy of the rich celebrity, who is called the 'Kaiser', about a gift and thus the expected joy of all those who will be lucky enough to receive this mobile phone as a gift at Christmas.

The question "Is it Christmas already?" is not only to be interpreted with regard to an unexpected, actually too early giving of presents. It also refers to the strange fact that every year many people are surprised to discover that Christmas is just around the corner. This is a surprise that is surprising even in light of the fact that the holiday date is known to everyone and always has been, and Christmas

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items have been heavily promoted in all media for weeks, if not months, and are stacked on retail shelves. Here, the question doesn't trigger joy, but pressure: "Still not all the gifts together" – "Time is running out, and I still don't have an idea". So gift giving is not only associated with joy, gift giving is also a duty, and not infrequently gift giving also triggers frustration, for example when the desired smartphone is not under the Christmas tree at all or one from the 'wrong' manufacturer.

There is almost always cause for these different feelings. After all, gift giving is a ubiquitous phenomenon in all cultures and at all times. In countries with a Christian tradition, **Christmas** naturally plays a special role. It has long been the largest and most important occasion for the consumption of gifts. In Germany, retail sales in the 2020 Christmas season amount to €103.9 billion. And this is not primarily about Christmas articles such as the 100 million chocolate Santas and St. Nicholas that the German confectionery industry delivered to retailers, or the about 30 million Christmas trees (Statista 2021c, pp. 13, 26), but primarily about gifts. On average, German consumers surveyed planned to spend €281 on Christmas gifts that year (Statista 2021c, p. 43); in Switzerland (CHF 327) and Austria (€364), the figures were even higher (Statista 2021a, p. 23, b, p. 12).

Even if the Christmas season represents a commercial highlight and in some sectors – such as those for toys and books – accounts for around a quarter of annual sales in Germany (Statista 2021c, p. 2f.), the **economic significance of gift-giving** goes far beyond this. After all, gifts are not only given at Christmas time, but throughout the year: on major occasions in life, for births and baptisms, communions and confirmations, the start of school and passing exams, engagements and weddings, birthdays, especially round and half-round ones, Mother's Day and Father's Day,

anniversaries, as souvenirs for invitations and visits to the sick, or as a thank-you for a proven favour. Or just because, for no particular reason. Gift-giving thus accompanies us through the year, and throughout our lives, from the prenatal 'baby shower', an original US tradition of a special party at which it rains gifts for the expectant mother and baby, to after death, where flowers, arrangements, wreaths or money are given at the funeral to support the bereaved, or an amount is donated in the name of the deceased to explicitly named charitable institutions (Belk 1979). Despite the fact that we live in an affluent society and that many can buy almost anything, and buy it immediately, gift-giving has not lost its importance, especially since the economy has also managed to invent other gift-giving occasions such as Valentine's Day. Giving is thus a 'consumption generator' (Bögenhold 2016, p. 33), a significant economic factor whose total annual turnover was estimated years ago by the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (Society for Consumer Research) at €27 billion (Messe Frankfurt 2012, p. 6).

But what exactly is meant by a **gift**? In general terms, it is something that is voluntarily given to another without directly demanding anything in return – although it may well be associated with expectations of a future return, a social or psychological benefit or a change in the relationship (Komter and Vollebergh 1997). In principle, individuals, groups or organisations can be considered as givers and recipients; the gifts can be purchased or self-made products, money or vouchers, services, but also blood, organs or donations (Belk 1979). Depending on the type of donors, recipients and gifts, there can thus be very different forms, so that it makes sense to make a concretization and delimitation.

The following considerations are based on a narrow understanding limited to personal relationships, a definition described by Davies et al. (2010) as "**relational**". Givers

and recipients are each individual persons or, at most, small groups of private family or friends. Only purchased or self-created products and services, money and vouchers are considered as gifts. With the reference to the private character of the relationships, it is also made clear that commercially oriented gifts between business partners ('promotional gifts') are not taken into account. Although these also have a 'relational' character in that they are used, for example, within the framework of customer relationship management to maintain personal relationships, the associated objective is not private, but quite predominantly business motivated.

With this focus on the realm of personal relationships, a distinction is made from the broad – "**transactional**" – understanding (Davies et al. 2010), which includes institutional donors and recipients as well as a variety of other types of gifts. Here, gifts include donations to charitable, social, or political organizations or unknown third parties, patronage, foundations, volunteering, blood and organ donations, sharing on social networks, and also gifts to oneself (self-gifts). Although it is plausible that some findings on private-relational giving behaviour can be usefully applied to the study of these aforementioned facts, they are so different and specific that they each require separate consideration and can be disregarded here.

It has already been shown that giving in this private-relational understanding is of great economic importance. But it is also a fundamental **social phenomenon**, in all cultures and at all times. The respective social norm system determines the duties and the scope of action of giver and taker as well as the associated psychological consequences. In view of this importance, it is no wonder that scientific research in various disciplines is concerned with the subject: anthropology and ethnography, economics and sociology, psychology and consumer behaviour research, to name only the most important (Otnes and Beltramini 1996).

The research owes essential early impulses to ethnography and anthropology, which deal with questions of social organization and cultural characteristics of delimited societies from the perspective of their members. The French ethnographer and sociologist Marcel Mauss (1990), who is considered the founder of scientific gift research, studied gift-giving in various early societies and published his findings as early as the 1920s on the question of what functions gift-giving fulfils in these societies.

In his analysis of the gift-giving behaviour of early societies, Mauss concludes that there are **three types of obligation** that permanently maintain a system of reciprocity: The obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate.

The obligation to give says that while we give voluntarily, we already feel obligated to give because of social norms. This was true in early societies, but it is also true today. Modern American men consider it their duty to give a gift to their beloved partner on Valentine's Day (Rugimbana et al. 2003). And not bringing a gift when invited to a birthday party or Christmas Eve is a gross violation of that obligation.

Equally binding is the second obligation to **receive a gift**. In archaic societies, refusing a gift is tantamount to a declaration of war (Mauss 1990, p. 13). But in our society, too, refusing to accept a gift on a birthday or at Christmas represents a particularly unkind, even snubbing act.

Every acceptance of a gift creates a kind of tension, a feeling of dependence on the giver. This can be reduced or resolved simply by fulfilling the third obligation, namely the **obligation to reciprocate** by giving a gift in return. In the case of reciprocal gift-giving on Christmas Eve, this tension can be immediately resolved because the obligation to reciprocate is instantly fulfilled. In other gift-giving situations, such as an invitation to a dinner party, the tension

can only be resolved by a reciprocal invitation extended no later than the time of parting. However, at the 'return dinner', the first invitee also expects a guest gift if he himself brought one at the previous meeting. The tension can also only be completely resolved if the value of the gift and the counter-gift are balanced or appropriate.

This third norm, that giving and receiving should be roughly balanced, is called the **reciprocity rule**. All recipients of a gift know it. They know that in receiving it they are 'indebted', that they must 'repay', and they know that the givers know this too. That is, all parties involved know this rule, but it remains a kind of open secret because its explicit formulation is taboo (Bourdieu 1998, p. 97). This reciprocity rule will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Here, first of all, a closer look at the obligatory nature of giving and receiving is necessary.

Because the obligation to give a gift does not mean that it is fulfilled when you hand over something. Quite the opposite: if one wants to give pleasure with the gift, the 'right' gift is required. The search is often even for the **perfect gift**, which Belk (1996) describes with the help of characteristics that show that he also includes the motivation and behaviour of the giver as well as the expectations and reactions of the recipient: The perfect gift should excite, be luxurious in that it goes beyond the merely necessary, surprise or otherwise be uniquely tailored to the desires of the recipient, the occasion and the relationship, and require special effort or sacrifice on the part of the giver.

Of course, this does not always succeed, or even rarely, but the norms of a perfect or at least right gift determine the givers' considerations in producing gift ideas and their selection decision, but also the recipients' reaction in evaluating the gift actually received (Sherry et al. 1992, 1993).

This already makes it clear that gift giving is not a moment in time, but comprises a multi-stage, complex **pro-**

cess. Various authors develop **stage models of** this process with successive phases. Wooten and Wood (2004) divide the overall process into dramaturgical acts and show that both giver and receiver are obliged to play their roles correctly in each act. However, Sherry's (1983) division of the process into the phases of "gestation", "prestation", and "reformulation" proves most influential. Following this concept, a distinction is made here – more linguistically comprehensible – between the phases or acts of 'preparation', 'handover' and 'use'.

The **first act**, '**preparation**', covers all aspects that precede the handing over and receiving of the gift. On the part of the **giver**, this involves the considerations to be made regarding the possible expectations and wishes of the recipient, the internal and external search activities and the weighing of alternatives, also taking into account the **giver's** own motives, expectations and financial resources. In addition, there is the gift decision, the purchase and the preparation of the acquired product for the gift. Of course, givers have to observe a variety of standards in the process. They must know and consider the interests and tastes of the recipients. Otherwise, their spontaneous and/or later reactions will show them that they have missed their target and violated clear social norms. Thus, the object to be given must be appropriate, but it must also have the prescribed character of a gift: The giver must remove or paste over price tags before giving, and gifts must be properly wrapped and possibly labeled with special cards or stickers (Belk and Coon 1993). Even if a bottle of wine is judged appropriate and proper as a host gift, it seems inappropriate to hand it to a host without a tote bag or other packaging. In the special case of a gift of flowers, on the other hand, a different standard applies; there, the paper wrapping must be removed before handing it over, unless it was a paper sleeve.

The **recipients** also have obligations already in the preparation phase, especially if there is frequent social contact between the parties involved. They must give signals regarding their gift expectations. This can be done by explicitly naming an unambiguous wish or by subtle hints that give the giver the chance to guess the supposedly 'secret' wishes and leave room for manoeuvre for the concrete gift alternative. At the same time, the potential recipient must reflect on the giver's expectations and resources to avoid frustration arising at this stage. If donors get the impression from the recipient's signals that they are dealing with a particularly demanding, difficult-to-satisfy or otherwise complicated recipient (Otnes et al. 1993), negative emotions will already dominate in the first act.

The **second act**, '**handover**', is about the exchange itself, giving and receiving, and the interpersonal communication dynamics that take place. Personal handover in particular always involves a minimum of ritual or ceremonial activity (Sherry 1983), and the norms of verbal and non-verbal communication must be adhered to. The **giver** has to present the gift with a personal salutation – referring to the occasion if necessary ("This is for you"; "Happy birthday"; "Thank you for inviting me"). He or she also has to follow the moment of unwrapping with attention (Belk and Coon 1993).

The **recipient** decodes the messages associated with the gift, the value and appreciation expressed in the gift itself, in the type and care of the packaging and in the style of presentation. And regardless of what positive or negative emotions these messages trigger, the recipient has a duty to respond correctly in every case. This includes first showing anticipation, and after realizing exactly what the gift is about, reacting with surprise, delight, enthusiasm and gratitude. And not just in words, but also in body language. Facial expressions must match the words. Receipt of a bot-

tle of wine must be accompanied by interested questioning and showing, and not by careless putting away. The less the recipient's actual pleasure, the better his or her acting must be in this act, because otherwise he or she is signaling to the giver that the gift is actually unwanted or disliked. Any uninvolved or disappointed reaction on the part of the recipient will be correctly deciphered by the giver and can affect the relationship just as negatively as the failed gift already does on the part of the recipient.

The **third act**, '**use**', shows how the recipient deals with the gift. If the gift disappears through consumption, as in the case of food – such as the contents of a classic gift basket – this stage is mostly unproblematic. 'Mostly' refers to the overwhelming majority of cases where the recipient's tastes are catered for, rather than, say, the vegan being given a liverwurst and the diabetic being given a box of chocolates. Unsuccessful gifts of this kind are hardly ever forgotten. The successful gifts, on the other hand, remind people of the occasion when they consume them, and the feeling of happiness when eating strengthens the relationship.

The situation is different if the gift is an accessory for the home: a picture, a vase, a porcelain figurine, a photo calendar. If there are recurring contacts, such as family contacts, the giver expects the gift to remain visible or at least to be kept and displayed in the living area. If the gift meets the taste and expectations of the recipient, the constant contact with the object is also a reminder of the giver, which strengthens the relationship. But if it does not, the object is a permanent and repetitive nuisance to the recipients who are obliged to present it. In this case, if they seek to avoid the annoyance and stow the gift on the basement shelf, regift it, or dispose of it, this triggers disappointment and anger in the giver, who misses his gift as invisible. Even if the lack of appreciation is supposedly not so noticeable because a self-knitted scarf is never worn, a book remains unread on