

CHRISTMAS GIFTS AND KIN NETWORKS*

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The ritual Christmas gift giving in Middletown involves virtually the entire population and is governed by elaborate unwritten rules that are remarkably well enforced without obvious means of enforcement. Most gifts are scaled to the formal relationship between giver and receiver. It is proposed that ritualized gift giving in this society, as in others, is a way of reinforcing relationships that are highly valued but insecure.

INTRODUCTION

Christmas gift giving is a major feature of American culture that involves nearly the entire population, accounts for an appreciable fraction of all consumer spending, and engages a vast amount of human effort. An ethnographer who discovered so important a ritual in some exotic culture might be tempted to make it the centerpiece of his cultural description, and it is remarkable that social scientists have given so little attention to this conspicuous cluster of symbolic and practical acts.

From 1976 to 1979, several of us attempted to replicate the classic community study conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd in a midwestern industrial city during 1924–25 (Lynd and Lynd, 1929) which they themselves replicated for the first time in 1935 (Lynd and Lynd, 1937), in order to examine social change in that community in detail. Our study¹, like

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the original investigation more than fifty years before, relied upon participant observation as well as survey data. As participant observers, we were struck by the enormous importance that Middletown people attach to the annual celebration of Christmas and the domestic rituals associated with it, although our distinguished predecessors, like most observers of American communities, had ignored the matter. We did learn, from a long-term content analysis of local newspapers, that the celebration of Christmas had become less a civic festival and more a family festival between the 1920s and the 1970s and that the scale of Christmas gift giving had greatly increased in that same interval, but no close examination of trends was possible with the scanty information available for earlier points in time. Nevertheless, Christmas gift giving looms so large in contemporary Middletown that it seemed necessary to examine it in detail outside the framework of our replication. Early in 1979, after a pilot study in another community the previous year, we interviewed a random sample of 110 Middletown adults to find out how they and their families had celebrated Christmas in 1978. This paper reports the findings of that survey about gift giving and proposes an interpretation.

THE CHRISTMAS SURVEY

A sample of adult Middletown residents was drawn from the city directory by random num-

bers, alternating male and female respondents. Three experienced female interviewers began interviewing in February 1979 and continued for about four months. The sample of 110 respondents is smaller than we would like but as large as could be managed with limited resources and an exceptionally demanding interview. Besides a full set of background questions, the interview schedule had a separate form for each Christmas gathering attended by the respondent in 1978, which called for a list of the persons attending, the menus of meals served, the circumstances under which pictures were taken, a description of all the gifts given and received by the respondent, the relationship of givers and receivers to the respondent, and if recall permitted, a description of gifts exchanged between other persons. The interview schedule also contained a graphic form that allowed the interviewer to describe the respondent's kinship network, indicating the exact relationship of each close relative, the ages of those in the same generation, their residential distance, and their interaction with the respondent in connection with Christmas 1978.

These rather intricate procedures enabled us to code and tabulate data for four separate samples: (a) the original sample of 110 respondents; (b) a derivative sample of 366 Christmas gatherings attended by respondents; (c) a derivative sample of 3,417 kin relationships involving respondents; (d) a derivative sample of 4,347 gifts given and received by respondents.

The sample of respondents

This sample, although small, is reasonably representative; 65 percent were in the labor force, the same proportion as in the community's total population; the remainder were full-time housewives, students, or retired workers. Fifty-five percent were white-collar workers compared to 49 percent of the local labor force. The distribution of religion, ethnicity, and marital status for the sample did not differ significantly from that of the adult population. The sample, like the community, was predominantly Protestant, white, native-born. Six percent were black. Twelve percent were Catholic. Seventy-eight percent were currently married (63 percent in their first marriages); six percent divorced; eight percent widowed; and eight percent single. Their median family income in 1978 was \$14,400; the median education was 11.8 years.

The median amount our respondents spent on Christmas gifts in 1978 was just under \$300, about 3.1 percent of their individual annual incomes. The average pooled expenditure of married couples was about four percent of

family income. The average cost of the gifts our respondents gave was somewhat higher than the cost of the gifts they received, because of unreciprocated gifts to children.

The sample of gatherings

The gatherings were substantial, not casual. Seventy-three percent of them included a Christmas dinner; 86 percent had a Christmas tree; gifts were opened at 81 percent and pictures taken at 65 percent. At six out of seven of the gatherings that included a Christmas dinner, all of the persons who ate dinner gave and/or received gifts. The mean number of gatherings attended by the men in our sample was 3.2; by the women, 3.4. The number of gatherings attended was not significantly related to age.

Of the 366 gatherings, 119 were in the respondents' own homes; 126 in the homes of kin; 29 in the homes of nonkin; and 78 in non-residential places. Many of the nonkin were the "boyfriends" or the "girlfriends" of unmarried respondents and thus in a quasi-familial relationship. Most of the nonresidential gatherings in the sample were office or shop parties held in the week preceding Christmas. Otherwise, there was remarkably little interaction with unrelated friends and neighbors at Christmas.

The sample of relationships

For the analysis of kin networks in Middletown, we classify kin as primary, secondary, tertiary, or remote.

Primary kin are those whose relationship to Ego can be specified by a single term, i.e., mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, husband. The single term describes the relationship precisely, and implies comembership, present or past, in a nuclear family. Secondary relationships require two of the primary kinship terms for adequate description, e.g., mother's father or brother's wife. Tertiary relationships are described by three of the terms, e.g., mother's brother's daughter.² The only unconventional feature of this classification is that it gives equal weight to consanguineal and affinal relationships. The reasons will become clear later on.

² It is, of course, the American practice to use single terms for nearly all kin, but those referring to nonprimary kin do not specify the actual relationships. An *aunt*, for example, may be a father's sister, a mother's sister, a mother's brother's wife, or a father's brother's wife, and the relationships covered by a blanket term like *cousin* are almost innumerable.

A section of the interview schedule called for the listing of all of the respondent's primary kin and secondary kin, and those tertiary kin related through the respondent's spouse (e.g., wife's sister's son). Other tertiary kin, like first cousins, were not tabulated since the pilot study suggested—and the main survey confirmed—that they did not often appear on respondents' gift lists.

The population of 3,417 relationships included 761 primary relationships (6.9 per respondent); 1,811 secondary relationships (16.5 per respondent); and 845 tertiary relationships with spouse's secondary kin (9.8 per married respondent). Combining all the relatives counted, 47 percent of them lived within 50 miles of the respondents in 1979. Forty-six percent of the relationships were marked by face-to-face contact at Christmas 1978, or, to put it another way, the persons in our sample saw an average of 14.3 of their relatives during the Christmas season. With an additional 20 percent—6.2 relatives per respondent—they had indirect contact by telephone or mail. In 38 percent of the recorded relationships—11.8 per respondent—there was at least one gift given or received for Christmas 1978. These kin networks, and the gift giving within them, are extensive.

The sample of gifts

The interviewers enumerated every Christmas gift that respondents could remember giving or receiving at the previous Christmas, identified the givers or receivers in each case, and tried to obtain a sufficient description of the gift to permit an estimate of its value. The estimate of value was facilitated by the use of an implicitly logarithmic scale that sorted gifts into four ranges of value. Unlike the two other derivative samples, the sample of gifts is not complete. Although many respondents seemed to have total recall of the gifts they had given and received at the previous Christmas, there must have been some omissions.

GIFTS GIVEN AND RECEIVED

The 110 respondents in the sample gave 2,969 gifts and received 1,378 gifts, a mean of 27

given and 13 received. The respondents, all of whom were over 18, gave 801 more gifts to persons under 18 than they received in return, and 1,101 more gifts to their own children and grandchildren of all ages than they received in return.

Of all the gifts reported, 57 percent were part of multiple gifts, i.e., two or more gifts from the same giver(s) to the same receiver(s). Table 1 shows the proportion of the gifts given and received by respondents that were part of multiple gifts by the distance of the relationship. Multiple gifts decline sharply with increasing relational distance. They are further affected by age. Seventy-two percent of all the respondents' gifts to persons under 18 were multiple, compared to 54 percent of all their gifts to persons over 18.

Examining this table, we become suddenly aware that this is a far more complex system of gift exchange than we had supposed. It becomes even more complex when we consider that nearly half of all the recorded gifts (45 percent) were given *by* more than one person and more than a fifth (21 percent) *to* more than one person. The single gift from one person to another which we originally visualized as the modal transaction in this system, turns out to be fairly exceptional.

TYPES OF GIFTS

Clothing was by far the most common type of gift (35 percent of all gifts); followed by toys (10 percent); money and food/beverages (9 percent each); decorations/ornaments (7 percent); cosmetics/toiletries, household equipment, and jewelry (6 percent each); appliances and sports/hobby equipment (3 percent each); and plants/flowers (2 percent).

The preference for clothing over all other categories is probably accounted for by the automatic individualization of items of clothing. In effect, they describe the receiver by age, sex, appearance, and style.

Articles of clothing were evenly divided (49–51 percent) between male and female receivers and so were gifts of money; every other type of gift was unevenly distributed by age and gender of the receiver. For example, 91 percent of the decorations and ornaments and

Table 1. Single and Multiple Gifts Given by Respondents by Relationship of Receiver

Type of Gift	Given to			
	Primary Kin	Secondary Kin	Tertiary Kin	Nonkin
Single	19.5%	37.8%	68.0%	89.6%
Multiple	80.5	62.2	32.0	10.2
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.8
N =	1443	676	178	548

87 percent of the jewelry were given to females, but 88 percent of the tools and 76 percent of the sports equipment were given to males. Children received most of the toys and musical instruments; adults received almost all of the plants and flowers and household items.

Women are much more likely than men to give ornaments, craft objects, food, plants and flowers. Men give most of the appliances and sports equipment.

Nearly all money gifts between kin were intergenerational and "downward." Of 144 gifts of money given by respondents to persons in other generations, 94 percent were to persons in descending generations. Of 73 gifts received by respondents from persons in other generations, 93 percent came from ascending generations. Nearly half of all the gifts respondents received from their grandparents were money.

Money gifts were also common from employers to employees; there was no instance in the sample of a money gift from an employee to an employer. Small money gifts are conventionally given in Middletown at Christmas to newsboys, postmen, delivery men, and other persons of relatively low status who perform routine services for the givers throughout the year. But the "grateful" gifts given at Christmas to family physicians, to school teachers, and to other persons of relatively high status never consist of money.

A gift of money in this culture seems to be an improper gift to one's parents or grandparents, even from adult children who are much more affluent than their elders and contribute to their support. We recorded a few instances of a gift certificate given to parents or grandparents as a kind of euphemism for a money gift, but there was no report of a gift certificate given to a child or grandchild.

Other gifts of intangibles, with the exception of magazine subscriptions, are rare. Most Christmas gifts are physical objects, capable of being wrapped and set under the tree. Fewer than two percent of the gifts recorded were handmade and most of those were presented by young children to their parents or grandparents. Even fewer gifts, 0.3 percent of the total, were comic items; Middletown takes its Christmas gift giving very seriously.

THE VALUE OF GIFTS

We tried to estimate the monetary value of every gift given or received by our respondents by putting it into one of the following categories: "token gifts" – less than \$5; "modest gifts" – between \$5 and \$25; "substantial gifts" – between \$25 and \$500; and "costly gifts" – over \$500. Of all the gifts reported, 30.2 percent were token, 44.5 percent modest, 15.4 percent substantial, and 0.5 percent costly. For 9.5 percent of the gifts reported, the description was insufficient to permit an estimate. Since costly gifts were so small a proportion of the total, they have been merged with substantial gifts in the tables.

Table 2 shows the value of all gifts respondents gave by the kin classification of the receivers; the proportion of token gifts increases regularly, and the proportion of substantial gifts decreases, with the distance of the relationship, except for a slightly excessive incidence of substantial gifts to nonkin (accounted for by a number of "boyfriends" and "girlfriends" who were treated as quasi-spouses).

Table 3 shows the value of gifts by the sex of the giver. Males gave twice as many substantial gifts and many fewer token gifts than females. Gifts given by males and females jointly, most of them married couples, fell into an intermediate range. There is no significant difference in the value of gifts *received* by males and females respectively, but gifts to male and female receivers jointly are much more likely to be substantial than those to individuals or groups of either sex. As might be expected from their limited resources, children gave very few substantial gifts (and no costly ones at all). Respondents gave 946 gifts to persons under 18 and received 145 in return; they gave 89 gifts of substantial value and received six in return. In about one-third of these relationships, no gift at all was returned to the adult by the child or in the child's name. Taken one-by-one, the gifts given to children were somewhat less valuable than the gifts given to adults, but since the children received about seven gifts for every gift they gave, the aggregate value of what they got was much higher

Table 2. Value of Gifts Given by Respondents by Relationship between Giver and Receiver

Value	% of Gifts Given to			
	Primary Kin	Secondary Kin	Tertiary Kin	Nonkin
Token	18.9%	28.4%	49.4%	69.0%
Modest	55.5	58.7	47.5	24.8
Substantial	25.6	12.9	3.1	6.3
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1
N =	1129	677	166	539

Table 3. Value of Gifts by Sex of Giver

Estimated Value	% of Gifts Given by		
	Males	Females	Males & Females Jointly
Token	27.4%	43.5%	24.0%
Modest	48.4	44.5	55.5
Substantial	24.3	12.0	20.5
Totals	100.1	100.0	100.0
N =	666	1582	1861

than the aggregate value of what they gave. The flow of gifts between adults and children is heavily unbalanced, and the balance does not seem to be redressed in later life, since the gifts given by adults to their parents and grandparents are not more valuable than the gifts they get in return.

THE PATTERN OF GIFT GIVING

Table 4 shows the distribution of all gifts reported by this sample by the sex of the givers and the receivers. It tells much about the overall pattern of Christmas gift giving in Middletown. Females are disproportionately active as givers. Alone or jointly, they gave 84 percent of all the gifts recorded and received only 61 percent. Male givers without female collaborators accounted for only 16 percent of the total and most of their gifts were given to females. Gifts from males to males were rare (four percent of the total) compared to gifts from females to females (17 percent). Females divided their gifts almost evenly between male and female receivers while male givers concentrated their gifts on female receivers. The other striking thing about the table is the very large number of gifts from joint male and female givers (47 percent). Most of these givers are married couples, with or without the nominal participation of their children, but other combinations like brother and sister, and unmarried lovers, are represented. Joint gift giving does not imply joint receiving. Fewer than

Table 4. Distribution of All Gifts Reported by Sex of Givers and Receivers

Givers	% of All Gifts			
	Receivers			Totals
	Male	Female	Male & Female	
Male	4.2%	11.1%	0.9%	16.2%
Female	17.0	17.4	2.2	36.6
Male & Female	18.0	23.1	6.1	47.2
Totals	39.2	51.6	9.2	100.0

10 percent of the reported gifts were received jointly by male and female, and most of these were given jointly also, from one couple or family to another.

The modal gift is from a married couple to a closely related individual. The least frequent case is a gift from a male individual to a married couple. Children do not ordinarily give gifts to their parents as a couple; separate gifts to mother and father are expected as a matter of course. But a gift to parents jointly may be given jointly by two or more children.

Table 5 shows the percentage distribution of gifts given and received by respondents by the kin classification of the other party. The two columns are very similar except that "combinations" (like a "primary" sister and her "secondary" husband) account for a larger proportion of gifts received than of gifts given, as we might anticipate from the discussion above. Primary kin, alone or in combination, account for about half of the total number of gifts. Most of the remainder is divided between secondary kin and nonkin. Tertiary kin are relatively unimportant either as givers or receivers, and remoter kin play a negligible part in Christmas gift giving.

Within the kin network gift giving is clearly directional. Nearly three times as many gifts go one generation down as go one generation up, and more than three times as many gifts go two generations down as two generations up.

Table 6 shows the proportion of relationships with relatives living within 50 miles and beyond 50 miles that were marked by gifts. As appears from the table, distance has no perceptible effect on gift giving to and from respondents' children, childrens' spouses, siblings or siblings' spouses. With these close relatives, Christmas gifts repair and reinforce the kinship ties weakened by distance and by the lack of opportunity for contact. Distance does have some depressing effect on gift giving in other relationships listed but it is not a very

Table 5. Gifts Given and Received by Respondents, by Kin Classification

Relationship	% of Gifts	
	Given by Respondents	Received by Respondents
Primary Kin	41.7%	45.4%
Secondary Kin	21.4	17.3
Tertiary Kin	5.2	2.0
Combination of These	2.5	13.1
Remoter Kin	0.8	0.7
Nonkin	26.2	21.5
Pets	2.2	0.0
Totals	100.0	100.0
N =	2969	1378

Table 6. Gift Giving by Relationship and Residential Distance*

Relationship to Respondent	% of Relationships Marked by Gifts	
	Within 50 Miles	Beyond 50 Miles
Fathers	100% (29)	85% (26)
Mothers	98 (41)	90 (29)
Children	96 (191)	95 (61)
Children's Spouses	92 (52)	94 (38)
Grandparents	96 (25)	50 (26)
Grandchildren	90 (95)	77 (63)
Siblings	32 (122)	35 (152)
Siblings' Spouses	24 (84)	24 (113)
Siblings' Children	19 (254)	15 (384)
Parents' Siblings	15 (86)	10 (200)

* N of relationships in parentheses.

strong effect, except in the case of grandparents, where "out of sight, out of mind" seems to be the working rule. Overall, gift giving at Christmas appears to be a mechanism, perhaps *the* mechanism, whereby families resist the tendency of distance to dissolve close relationships.

THE DIVISION OF CHRISTMAS LABOR

The performance of the full-scale Christmas ritual is an enormous task performed, for the most part, by women. Women, as we have found, do most of the shopping, most of the decorating, and most of the gift wrapping. They give more gifts in their own names than men do, and they purchase and wrap most of the gifts that are given jointly by couples or other male/female combinations. Christmas gift giving in nearly every household centers around a woman who is the chief performer of the ritual.

Inasmuch as some previous studies of American kinship have found a general inclination for families to associate more closely with maternal than paternal relatives (Troll and Bengston, 1979) and women might be expected to favor their own relatives in the celebration of family solidarity, we anticipated that women's relationships with their relatives might be more carefully cultivated at Christmas than men's and that married couples might pay more attention to wives' relatives than to husbands'.

We found nothing of the kind. Table 7 shows the proportion of relatives seen face-to-face at Christmas 1978 by men and by women in the sample, by the residential distance of the relatives. If women were more active in cultivating relationships on their own side of the family, they could be expected to see a larger proportion of their relatives than their husbands, and

Table 7. Face-to-Face Contact with Close Relatives* at Christmas 1978, by Sex of Respondent and Residential Distance

Residential Distance	% of Close Relatives Seen By	
	Men	Women
Within 50 Miles	63% (495)	65% (530)
Beyond 50 Miles	25 (222)	26 (239)

* Primary kin, secondary kin, spouse's secondary kin. N of relationships in parentheses.

especially of those living at a distance. But, according to the table, male and female respondents saw about the same proportion of their relatives near and far. And with respect to gift giving, men's relationships with their kin were as well marked by Christmas gifts as women's relationships with theirs, in this sample.

Bilateral symmetry is the style of Middletown's contemporary kinship system. While some families favor the maternal side and others the paternal, there is no consistent bias. The married women who organize and manage the domestic rituals of Christmas cultivate their husbands' relatives as carefully as their own. Since, as we have seen, husbands and wives are treated equivalently for Christmas purposes by the kin of each, it seems equitable to the people involved when wives arrange gatherings and select presents for their husbands' kin as if for their own.

The role of men is to bear the larger share of the cost, to admire and applaud the women's performances and to lend unskilled assistance when it is needed. This pattern seems to persist without much change in those families in the sample where both husband and wife have full-time, permanent jobs, although closer observation of these cases would probably detect some tendency toward equalization of roles.

The roles of young children and adults are sharply differentiated in the Christmas ritual. Children receive a large share of the gifts given, and the celebration is understood to be largely for their benefit, but they have few responsibilities in connection with it except to provide a token gift for each primary relative, a task with which they usually have adult assistance.

The role of children in the gift-giving ceremony is essentially passive, and their passivity is dramatized in a number of conventional ways; for example, when they hang up empty stockings and when they are tucked into bed with special care on Christmas Eve. (Caplow and Williamson, 1980)

Although it is part of the fable of Santa Claus that he only brings presents to good children,

and it is commonplace for children's Christmas gifts to be made contingent on good behavior, we were not able to find any instance involving these respondents in which a Christmas gift was withheld from a child for disciplinary reasons. Those to whom the possibility was suggested seemed to be shocked, perhaps because such an action would be incongruent with the unqualified love of parents for children that the festival celebrates.

Among adults, there is very little differentiation of Christmas gift giving by age. Dividing our respondents into 10-year age groups, we found that the median number of gifts given and received by adult respondents remained in the range between 40 and 45 gifts until age 60, falling to 28 gifts for respondents over 60. The number and proportion of relatives seen at Christmas followed a similar pattern, being virtually level from age 20 to age 60 with a moderate decline thereafter. One result of Christmas gift giving, more or less deliberately sought by the participants, is to repair the erosion of the kinship network by time and death, substituting junior for senior relatives and distant for close kin as gaps appear.

SUMMARY

To sum up the system we have been describing:

- (1) Middletown people are expected to give a Christmas gift every year to their grandparents, parents, spouses, children, grandchildren, and to all siblings and siblings' spouses with whom they have an ongoing face-to-face relationship. This expectation is not a matter of legal or religious sanction, but it is so compelling that we were not able to find any breaches that were not accounted for by special circumstances.
- (2) Middletown people treat their spouses' relatives like their own relatives with respect to Christmas gifts. A failure to do so signifies that the couple are estranged.
- (3) Parents are expected to give multiple gifts to young children, and spouses are expected to give multiple gifts to each other. Multiple gifts may be given in other relationships also but their incidence diminishes with kinship distance. Joint gifts are very commonly given by married couples to individuals and to other couples, but any combination of close relatives may give a joint gift to an individual, a couple, or another combination. Participation in a joint gift satisfies the obligation of each giver to each receiver.

- (4) A considerable number of gifts are given to and received from parents' siblings, siblings' children, and their respective spouses, but these gifts involve only a small proportion of living relatives in these categories and need not be reciprocated. Great-grandparents and great-grandchildren seem to be treated in this way also. Cousins do not figure significantly in Christmas gift giving.
- (5) Although handmade objects are appropriate Christmas gifts, most gifts are commercially purchased. The cost of a gift is supposed to be roughly proportional to the closeness of the relationship, but men give more valuable gifts than women and adults give much more valuable gifts than children. Practically all gifts to kin are ritually displayed and distributed in family gatherings according to an almost uniform ritual.
- (6) Most Middletown people give some gifts to nonkin at Christmas but these are of lesser value than those given to kin, do not require the full ritual of presentation and, for the most part, need not be reciprocated.

This condensed summary of the system suggests some interesting questions: What accounts for the extremely effective enforcement of the Christmas gift-giving obligations in Middletown? What individual and collective purposes are served by the gift-giving system? Why is reciprocity required in some gift relationships, permitted in some, and prohibited in others?

DISCUSSION

The American cycle of religious-secular festivals was analyzed long ago by Lloyd Warner (1945), but no further work followed that masterful introduction, which described the celebration of the festival cycle by voluntary associations larger than the family. His research team discovered and described 5,800 events in Yankee City during a two-year period involving the celebration of festivals by voluntary associations, but they had little to say about the domestic celebration of the same festivals. Warner's exhaustive summary of Christian symbolism relies principally upon liturgical documents and gives little attention to the secular aspects of these festivals. There is not even a passing reference in *The Living and The Dead* to Christmas gift giving although Warner did record 291 associational events in Yankee City at which gifts were given and received within or between *associations* and remarked that:

The gifts between two associations may have little value, yet they are visible emblems of social solidarity, and the act of giving evokes latent feelings of solidarity, unity, and interdependence. This cohesiveness is further related to the interconnections established by the interlocking memberships of related associations. This intricate web, when first viewed, is almost overwhelming. (p. 242)

Substitute "persons" or "families" for "associations" in the foregoing remarks and they would take on added significance, but that was a connection the author never made.

As to Christmas gift giving in American culture, I have not been able to find any previous empirical study of the phenomenon in the sociological literature and only one brief paper (Moschetti, 1979) that proposes a theoretical interpretation, based on a suggestion by Lévi-Strauss (1969) that Christmas gift giving might be viewed as a gigantic potlatch. The literature is equally sparse for other countries that practice Christmas gift giving. A paper by Davis (1972) presents an ingenious attempt to estimate the size of the "gift economy" in the United Kingdom by combining information from consumer surveys with data on the production and retailing of various types of consumer commodities, excluding gifts to charity and business gifts. He concludes that gifts

are bought by donors for £ 1, 140.8M, which is 4.3 percent of all consumer expenditure . . . Even though these figures are underestimated, and cover only part of the total supply of gifts, they are considerable: the value of manufacturer's sales of gifts is greater than sales by the shipbuilding and marine engine industry, and approaches the total sale from coal mining. In this sense gifts are five times more important in the economy than all nuts and bolts and screws; 45 times more than cement; 86 times more than glue. In short, the apparently small percentages conceal really quite important magnitudes. Reciprocity, too, occupies a significant place in our allocation of personal income; a fifth of what we spend on food; a third of what we spend on housing; a half of what we spend on clothes. (p. 142)

Davis's estimates include all gifts, although he takes for granted that Christmas is the principal gift-giving occasion in Britain, as it surely is in the United States. Respondents in the Middletown survey reported expenditures on Christmas gifts that averaged 3.1 percent of their annual incomes, and, if we assume that Christmas gifts represented about three-fourths of their annual gift giving, the scale of

private gift giving in Middletown could not be too far from Davis's estimate of 4.3 percent of total consumer expenditures in Britain.

There is a large and impressive literature about gift giving in exotic societies, of which the best known work is Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (1925), which attempted to show how ritualized gift exchange maintained social solidarity in premodern societies that lacked impersonal markets. Although Mauss established gift giving as a field of scholarly investigation, he may also be said to have retarded its intellectual development: first, by his insistence that it is characteristic of archaic or tribal societies; second, by his concentration on the *kula ring* and the *potlatch*, two institutions that have fascinated ethnographers because they are unique.³

In both the *kula ring* and the *potlatch*, gifts of a specified type are given to visiting chiefs by their chiefly hosts at a ceremonial occasion in the expectation that they will be reciprocated at a later occasion when the roles of host and guest are reversed. Both systems are fascinating but they are not very good models for the gift giving between relatives and friends that takes place in Middletown and in nearly all other human societies at rites of passage and at seasonal festivals. The point has been cogently made by Anthony Heath in his critique of exchange theory:

The parallel between Christmas and the *potlatch* seems to me farfetched in the extreme. In our own societies, status is largely determined by one's role in the occupational system or by one's birth. There is simply no room for competitive gift giving to determine status as it may (or may not) have done among the Kwakiutl Indians. (1976:148)

³ The *kula ring*, the "circulating exchange of valuables in the archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea," was first described by Malinowski (1920, 1922) just before Mauss wrote his essay. Its existence has since been confirmed by a multitude of other ethnographers (Fortune, 1932; Ekeh, 1974; Damon, 1980; among others), but the mystery of how it got started seems to deepen with each accretion of information about it.

The *potlatch*, first described by Franz Boas (1897) and later by others (Curtis, 1915; Piddocke, 1965) is a type of ceremonial gift giving found only among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest. Unlike the *kula ring*, which is still active, the *potlatch* is extinct and there is considerable uncertainty about some of its key features, in particular whether the recipient of a *potlatch* gift was obliged to make a greater return gift and, if so, whether the increment was precisely specified and, if so, how much it was.

The social consequences of Christmas gift giving

What the ethnographic literature on gift giving does suggest is that ritualized gift giving, in any society, is a method of dealing with relationships that are important but insecure. Gifts are typically offered to persons or collectivities whose goodwill is needed but cannot be taken for granted. If the need is felt by only one of the parties, the gift giving will be unilateral; if by both, there will be gift exchange.

Most of Middletown's gift giving occurs between close kin. We know from other evidence (Caplow et al., 1982) that for most contemporary Middletown people, as for many other Americans (Uzoka, 1979; Bane, 1976), kin relationships are more important than relationships with friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Within kin networks, gift giving is anything but haphazard and the pattern it displays shows up the two principal points of stress in the contemporary American family.

The first point of stress is the insecurity of the spousal relationship. Viewed cross-culturally, the contemporary American family is unusual in exhibiting a very high level of interaction between spouses while permitting easy, almost penalty-free divorce at the initiative of either spouse at any point in the life cycle. One Middletown couple were divorced in 1979 soon after celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary; the incident was locally regarded as interesting but not extraordinary. At the same time, Middletown's kinship structure is completely bilateral; children are equally related to their maternal and paternal relatives. Divorce erases the relationship between an individual and all of his or her affinal relatives but leaves intact the relationship of his or her children to those same persons. Since divorce is always more than a remote possibility in a Middletown marriage, the relationship with affinal relatives is always a little uneasy. Their goodwill is useful, and often essential, for maintaining the marriage, but like the goodwill of the spouse, it cannot be taken for granted. These considerations help to explain why Middletown people acknowledge such extensive gift-giving obligations towards their affinal kin, both the relatives of a spouse, and the spouses of relatives.

The other conspicuous point of stress in this institution is the extremely unbalanced relationship between generations. Parents in contemporary Middletown have heavy obligations toward their children, whom they are required by law and public opinion to support into adulthood and to treat with consistent tendencies. They are supposed to devote a large

part of their total resources to educating, caring for, and entertaining their children. The reciprocal duties of children towards parents are light. They are not expected or required to make any material contribution to their parents at any time in their lives, and they are not answerable to law or public opinion if they show no permanent attachment to them.

The expenditure of goods and services on children by parents is not balanced in this society by any subsequent return of goods and services from adult children to aged parents, as occurs in many other societies. What recompense there is from children takes the form of affection, deference, and willingness to communicate, in short, their goodwill. This is particularly important in adolescence when the exchange of goods and services between parents and children is most conspicuously unequal, and when various cultural models encourage children to assume attitudes of defiance, and even hostility, toward their parents. In this perspective, the massive flow of unreciprocated gifts from Middletown parents to their children under 18 falls instantly into the familiar pattern. They are addressed to persons whose goodwill is wanted and cannot be taken for granted.

In most Middletown families this mechanism seems to work fairly well. Parents are sufficiently reassured by Christmas gift giving and other rituals to continue their unequal exchanges with the next generation, and most adult children do maintain a close and affectionate relationship with their parents (Bahr, 1980).

The use of Christmas gifts for marking other kin relationships in contemporary Middletown is explicable in similar terms. As we remarked in a summary of Middletown III surveys dealing with various aspects of family life:

The single most important fact about the nuclear family in contemporary Middletown is that it is not isolated. Most people have relatives in other households nearby with whom they sustain close, continuous, and easy interaction. Indeed it is the presence of those relatives that accounts for their own presence in the community, and keeps them from moving away. (Caplow et al., 1982)

The kin network seems, in the last half century, to have largely displaced the community, the neighborhood, the work group, and the lodge, as the locus of emotional solidarity in Middletown. The emotional investment of most Middletown people in their kin networks is greater, by their own report, than their investments in occupational, political, and civic groups, in friendships, neighborhoods, or vol-

untary associations. Relationships with kin being more valued than other affiliations, it is not surprising that so much effort goes into reinforcing them by ritual gift giving.

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