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THE GIFT OF SIMILARITY: HOW GOOD AND BAD GIFTS INFLUENCE RELATIONSHIPS

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We tested the hypothesis that gifts act as markers of interpersonal similarity for both acquaintances and close relationship partners. Participants were led to believe that a new opposite sex acquaintance (Experiment 1) or romantic partner (Experiment 2) had selected either a desirable or undesirable gift for them. In Experiment 1, men viewed themselves as less similar to their new acquaintance after receiving a bad versus good gift from her, whereas women's perceived similarity ratings were unaffected by gift quality. In Experiment 2, men reported decreased similarity to their romantic partner after receiving a bad gift, whereas women responded to the bad gift more positively; perceived similarity, in turn, had an impact on participants' evaluations of the relationship's future potential. This research highlights the need for more experimental work on gift-giving, which has been largely overlooked by mainstream social psychologists despite its economic and interpersonal significance.

Gift-giving is central to many social occasions, including Christmas, birthdays, and graduations. Americans spend almost $300 billion on gifts for friends and family annually, accounting for approximately 10% of the consumer retail economy in the U.S. (Unity Marketing, 2006). The amount of money spent by gift-givers far exceeds the monetary value placed on these gifts by their recipients, such that Christmas gift-giving alone produces an annual deadweight loss of up to $13 billion (Waldfogel, 1993).

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Considering its apparent economic irrationality, why is gift-giving so prevalent? Theorists have posited that gifts play an important role in the context of social relationships because gifts act as markers of similarity in tastes and interests between relationship partners, signaling partner compatibility (Belk, 1976, 1979; Belk & Coon, 1993; Larsen & Watson, 2001; Schwartz, 1967; Sherry, 1983). Consistent with this idea, Davis, Hoch, and Ragsdale (1986) found that people's predictions about which products their spouse would like were driven primarily by their own product preferences. People who were quite similar to their spouse were therefore more accurate in predicting their spouse's preferences than those who were relatively dissimilar from their spouse. Conversely, then, learning that a partner has accurately anticipated one's own preferences may increase the perception that the partner is similar to oneself. In other words, given that similarity increases the likelihood of accurately inferring others' preferences, instances in which preferences are accurately inferred may promote perceptions of interpersonal similarity. Thus, to the extent that similarity enhances interpersonal attraction (e.g., Byrne, 1971), gifts should have the capacity to advance or impede relationships via their impact on perceived similarity.

This core idea—that gifts influence relationship development through their status as markers of similarity between partners—is a basic tenet of modern gift exchange theories (e.g., Belk & Coon, 1993; Sherry, 1983; Schwartz, 1967). The emphasis placed on the role of perceived similarity within the literature on gift-giving is matched by the special status accorded to similarity in the psychological literature more broadly. Since its early inception, attraction research focused on the role of perceived similarity, and a voluminous body of research has documented the critical importance of similarity in the formation of initial acquaintanceships (e.g., Byrne, 1971, 1997; Duck & Spencer, 1972; Neimeyer & Mitchell, 1988; Sunnafrank, 1983). Interestingly, as relationships develop and become more committed, the importance of similarity grows (Amodio & Showers, 2005; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Newcomb, 1961). Within close relationships, partners tend to overestimate their similarity to one another (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Byrne & Blaylock, 1963; Morry, 2007), and perceived similarity—more than actual similarity—reliably predicts relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 1993; Murray et al., 2002). Indeed, Murray et al. (2002) argue that strong relationships are built on *inflated* perceptions of similarity between partners; such inflated perceptions of similarity seem to provide the basis for feeling understood by one's partner, with felt understanding partially mediating the effect of perceived similarity on relationship satisfaction. Thus, perceived similarity represents a core variable that shapes relational development from the first stages of acquaintanceship through the twists and turns of highly committed relationships.

Given similarity's broad relevance, we chose to focus on this variable in investigating the relational consequences of gifts. Surprisingly, there is virtually no experimental evidence directly examining either the causal role of gifts in relationship progression or the mediating role of perceived similarity. In most existing studies, participants imagine how they would respond to hypothetical gift exchange scenarios or recall gift-exchange experiences from the past, sometimes retrospectively identifying how these experiences influenced their relationships

(e.g., Areni, Kiecker, & Palan, 1998; Belk & Coon, 1993; Caplow, 1982; Huang & Yu, 2000; Pieters & Robben, 1998; Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2004). However, because people are often unable to predict or retrospect accurately about how or why they would respond in a particular situation (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), research must examine people's actual responses in gift-giving situations to identify the social-cognitive pathways by which good and bad gifts shape the course of interpersonal relationships.

Examining people's actual, concurrent responses to gifts may also reveal the operation of motivated cognitive processes. To the extent that receiving a bad gift signals dissimilarity from a partner, people who are motivated to protect the relationship might actually inflate their perception of similarity to the giver in other domains after receiving a bad gift, thereby preserving their positive perceptions of the relationship. For several reasons, we suspect women may be particularly likely to exhibit such relationship-serving responses. First, women tend to assume the role of "relationship caretaker," buttressing the relationship against threats (e.g., Morrow, Clark, & Brock, 1995; Saarni, 1984; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Second, women in dating relationships show a greater proclivity to hold positive illusions about their partners than men, thereby promoting relationship satisfaction and stability (Gagne & Lydon, 2003; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b). Third, relative to men, women are more responsive to their partner's needs (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997), motivated to seek and maintain relationships (Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), prone to smooth over disagreements (Morrow et al., 1995), and to adopt an interdependent self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997). Importantly, feeling similar to close others represents a central component of the self-concept among individuals with an interdependent self-construal (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002), suggesting that a threat to perceived similarity may spur defensive processes among women. That is, in response to the relational threat posed by receiving a bad gift from a partner, women may be more motivated than men to protect their sense of similarity to the gift-giver.

Gender differences in the likelihood of this defensive processing might begin to emerge even in minimal relationship contexts. Simply expecting to interact with a stranger provides sufficient motivation to minimize a minor transgression by this stranger (Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, & Wilson, 2004), and gender differences in such interpersonal behavior appear in the context of "mere" relationships with strangers and new acquaintances (Davis, 1995; Saarni, 1984). For example, elementary-school girls were more likely than boys to conceal negative reactions after receiving a disappointing gift from an experimenter, presumably to avoid hurting the feelings of the experimenter, who the children had met for the first time that week. Of course, the motivation to minimize another person's transgression is substantially stronger when the other person is a romantic partner (Kearns & Fincham, 2005). Therefore, we expected that gender differences would emerge in the context of gift exchange between new acquaintances, but would come into sharper relief in the context of long-term romantic relationships.

Specifically, we hypothesized that receiving an undesirable versus desirable gift would decrease men's perceptions of similarity to the gift-giver. In contrast, we expected women to neutralize the interpersonal threat posed by an undesirable gift,

leading them to report equivalent or even enhanced similarity to the giver after receiving an undesirable gift—especially when the giver was a romantic partner. To test these hypotheses, we led participants in Experiment 1 to believe that a new acquaintance had selected either a desirable or undesirable gift for them, and then participants answered questions tapping their sense of similarity to this person. In Experiment 2, we replicated this paradigm with romantic couples, further examining whether the effects of gift quality on perceived similarity had downstream consequences for individuals' expectations regarding the relationship's future.

EXPERIMENT 1

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-one female and thirty-one male students at the University of Virginia (UVA) completed the experiment in return for a 10% chance to win a $20 gift certificate to a local store. Opposite sex pairs of previously unacquainted students were invited to participate in this experiment immediately after they completed an unrelated study together that featured an unstructured four-minute social interaction. Thus, partners in this study were new acquaintances, having talked briefly in the preceding study.

Procedure

After signing consent forms, each participant was led to a private room and asked to rank-order how much they would like to receive $20 gift certificates to twelve different stores and restaurants; some of the merchants were appealing to most undergraduates (e.g., Barnes & Noble) and some were relatively unappealing (e.g., J.C. Penny). Next, participants were told that they would get to select a gift certificate for their partner, and that their partner would select one for them; participants would have a 10% chance of winning the selected gift certificate in the experiment lottery. Participants circled their choice of gift for their partner on a lottery ticket. After providing the gift rankings and lottery ticket to the experimenter, participants received their own lottery ticket, which ostensibly indicated what gift their partner had chosen for them. In reality, the experimenter completed all lottery tickets, randomly assigning participants to the good or bad gift condition (each member of a pair was always assigned to opposite conditions). In the good gift condition, participants received a lottery ticket with their first-choice gift circled, while in the bad gift condition participants received a lottery ticket with their eleventh-choice gift circled; the gift quality manipulation was therefore idiographic, in that we relied on individuals' own gift rankings in selecting the good or bad gift. Next, participants completed a brief survey, which the experimenter was supposedly piloting for use in a future study. This survey included our critical dependent measure of perceived similarity, as well as a manipulation check. Participants reported how similar they were to their partner overall, in terms of their interests, and in their use of free time, on scales ranging from 1 (not at all similar) to 8 (very similar). We z-scored and averaged these three

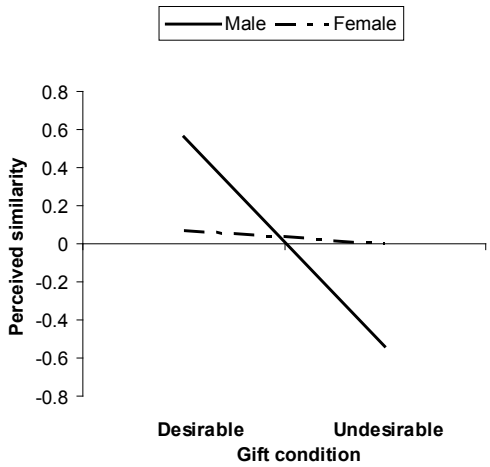

FIGURE 1. Effect of gift condition on perceived similarity, by sex (Experiment 1).

items to form a measure of participants' perceived similarity to their partner (α = .75). Finally, participants rated how much they liked the gift chosen for them on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly dislike) to 6 (like a lot). Participants then received individual debriefing.

RESULTS

Analytic Strategy

Because participants are nested within dyads, we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Campbell & Kashy, 2002) to account for nonindependence. The output for HLM analyses (e.g., slopes) is similar to regression (e.g., beta weights). We report unstandardized slopes with standard errors in parentheses. Significant interactions are followed by tests of simple slopes ($\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$; Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2003). When reporting interactions, predicted scores (Y) derived from the individual level HLM equation are provided. Gift condition (-1 = bad gift; 1 = good gift), Gender (-1 = female; 1 = male), and the interaction or product term between these two factors were entered as predictors into the individual level equation.

Manipulation Check

HLM analyses confirmed that participants in the good gift condition liked the selected gift (M = 5.97, SD = .19) more than participants in the bad gift condition (M = 2.71, SD = 1.27), b = 1.63 (.10), t (58) = 15.99, $p < .0005$; all other effects, p's > .50.

Perceived Similarity

As predicted, there was a significant interaction between gender and gift condition, b = .26 (.09), t (58) = 2.91, p = .006 (see Figure 1). Men perceived less similarity between themselves and their partner after receiving a bad gift (Y = -.54) versus a good gift (Y = .56), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = .55 (.12), t (58) = 4.46, p < .0005. In contrast, women did not report differences in similarity with their partner after receiving a bad gift (Y = .00) versus a good gift (Y = .07), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = .04 (.12), t (58) = .30, p = .77.[1]

DISCUSSION

As predicted, gift quality influenced perceptions of similarity, with gender playing a moderating role; men felt significantly less similar to their new acquaintance after receiving a bad versus good gift, whereas women were relatively unaffected by their partner's gift choice. To the extent that perceived similarity predicts interpersonal attraction and liking (e.g., Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986), gifts may therefore have the capacity to shape relationship development. We tested this hypothesis in Experiment 2. In addition, we extended our investigation beyond new acquaintances, examining couples in long-term romantic relationships.

EXPERIMENT 2

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-two heterosexual couples in dating relationships of 3 to 96 months (M = 14.9, SD = 16.7) participated in exchange for a chance to win gift certificates. Participants were recruited via advertisements on the UVA campus; 94% were undergraduates.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Experiment 1, although the opposite sex partners were romantic couples. The similarity items from Experiment 1 were z-scored and combined as before to create a composite measure of perceived similarity (α = .85). In addition, we measured participants' desire for relationship maintenance and growth, by asking participants: "How much longer do you think you will date

1. Decomposing the interaction differently, after receiving a bad gift, men perceived less similarity between themselves and their partner than did women, $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = -.27 (.14), t (58) = -2.24, p = .03. After receiving a good gift, men perceived more similarity than did women, $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = .25 (.12), t (58) = 2.01, p = .05. Although it is somewhat surprising that significant simple effects of gender emerged not only in the bad gift condition but also in the good gift condition, we speculate that men's perceptions of their partner may be more likely than women's perceptions to both rise and fall with the everyday vicissitudes of relationships. In line with our argument that women act as relationship caretakers, women may be motivated to keep the relationship on an even keel, maintaining a steady view of their partner when times are good and vigorously defending this view when times are tough. In any case, across our two studies, these simple effects of gender were not consistently significant within both conditions, and we therefore focus on the simple effects of gift condition throughout the paper.

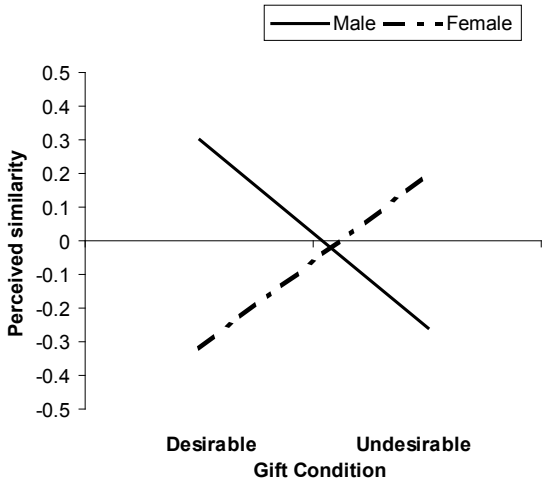

FIGURE 2a. Effect of gift on perceived similarity, by sex (Experiment 2).

your partner?" (1 = less than one month, 2 = 1 to 3 months, 3 = 4 to 6 months, 4 = 7 months to 1 year, and 5 = more than one year), and "What is the likelihood that you and your partner will get married?" (1 = extremely unlikely to 8 = extremely likely). These two items were z-scored and averaged to form a measure of participants' outlook on the future of the relationship (α = .58); higher numbers indicate a more positive outlook. Finally, participants completed the same manipulation check as in Experiment 1, and received thorough debriefing (individually and then as a couple).

RESULTS

Analytic Strategy

Because participants are nested within couples, we used HLM to account for non-independence, employing the same analysis as in Experiment 1.

Manipulation Check

HLM analyses confirmed that participants in the good gift condition liked the selected gift (M = 6.00, SD = .18) more than participants in the bad gift condition (M = 2.27, SD = .18), b = 1.87 (.13), t (60) = 14.72, $p < .0005$. There were no other effects, p's > .30.

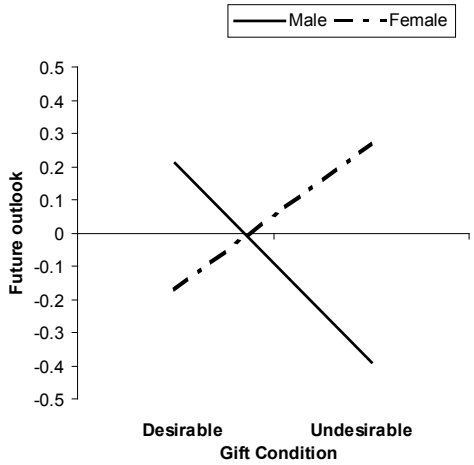

FIGURE 2b. Effect of gift offn future outlook, by sex (Experiment 2).

Perceived Similarity

As predicted, there was a significant interaction between gender and gift condition, b = .27 (.12), $t(60)$ = 2.27, p = .03, both main effects, p's > .50 (see Figure 2a). Men perceived less similarity between themselves and their partner after receiving a bad gift (Y = -.26) versus a good gift (Y = .30), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = .28 (.13), t (60) = 2.17, p = .034. In contrast, women reported significantly greater similarity with their partner after receiving a bad gift (Y = .20) versus a good gift (Y = -.32), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = -.26 (.13), $t(60)$ = -2.10, p = .04.

Outlook on the Relationship

Performing the same analyses on the relationship outlook measure revealed only the Gift X Sex interaction, b = .26 (.12), $t(60)$ = 2.12, p = .04, both main effects, p's > .35 (see Figure 2b). Men rated the future of the relationship significantly more negatively after receiving a bad gift (Y = -.39) versus a good gift (Y = .21), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = .30 (.13), $t(60)$ = 2.27, p = .02. In contrast, women perceived the relationship slightly more positively after receiving a bad gift (Y = .27) than a good gift (Y = -.17), $\tilde{\mathbf{n}}_1$ = -.22 (.12), $t(60)$ = 1.82, p = .07.

Test of Mediation

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach, we tested whether perceived similarity partially mediated the relationship between the Gift X Sex interaction and future outlook. As already demonstrated, the Gift X Sex interaction predicted both future outlook (step one) and perceived similarity (the mediator; step two). In step three, with all variables in the model, perceived similarity significantly predicted

future outlook, $b = .28$ (.14), $t(59) = 2.04$, $p = .045$, whereas the Gift X Sex interaction was no longer significant, $b = .18$ (.12), $t(59) = 1.45$, $p = .15$.[2] Finally, in step four, we conducted a Sobel test; the marginally significant result of this test suggested that perceived similarity may partially mediate the relationship between the Gift X Sex interaction and future outlook, $z = 1.56$, $p = .06$ (one-tailed).

DISCUSSION

After receiving an undesirable versus desirable gift, men viewed themselves as relatively dissimilar from their girlfriend and reported a more negative outlook on the relationship's future. Women responded to their boyfriend's poor gift choice by inflating their reports of similarity to him, leaving their relationship outlook intact. Although we suggest that this gender difference emerged because women marshaled psychological defenses in response to the threat posed by receiving a bad gift, it is possible that women were less displeased with the bad gift than were men. Gender differences appeared only in evaluations of the relationship, however, not in evaluations of the good and bad gifts themselves.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present experiments demonstrate that gifts can influence relationship perceptions, sometimes in counterintuitive ways. In Experiment 1, men reported feeling less similar to their new acquaintance after receiving an undesirable versus desirable gift from her, whereas women's perceptions of similarity were relatively unaffected by gift quality. In Experiment 2, men reported feeling less similar to their romantic partner after receiving a bad versus good gift from her, which seemed to have a negative impact on their perceptions of the relationship's future. Women's similarity reports, however, were significantly elevated after receiving a bad versus good gift from a romantic partner. Concomitantly, women's outlook on the relationship's future was impervious to receiving a bad versus good gift—even though women were just as displeased with the bad gifts as men.

We have suggested that the gender differences observed here reflect the broader tendency for women—more than men—to guard relationships against potential threats. If women's seemingly positive response to receiving bad gifts stems from active psychological defense, then gender differences should only emerge in actual but not imagined gift-giving situations; previous research demonstrates that people exhibit a singular blind spot for their own ability to engage in rationalization and other psychological defenses (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). To examine this idea, we conducted a small follow-up study in which participants ($N = 49$) were instructed to simply imagine the bad or good gift scenario experienced by participants in Experiment 2. Asked how they would respond to receiving a gift from their romantic partner, males and females both

2. Previous research suggests that gift quality should influence perceived similarity, which in turn should influence relationship outlook, but the reverse causal ordering is possible. However, repeating our mediation analysis using relationship outlook as the mediator and similarity as the dependent variable provided no support for this alternative model.

predicted that receiving a bad gift would have a more negative impact on their relationship perceptions than receiving a good gift. We found no trace of gender differences in participants' predictions, suggesting that women did not foresee that receiving a worse gift could actually lead them to report elevated perceptions of their relationship with the giver. This apparent blind spot is consistent with our suggestion that women faced with an actual bad gift marshaled psychological resources to protect their perceptions of the relationship. More fundamentally, the fact that we obtained a different pattern of results when we relied on hypothetical scenarios highlights the need to experimentally examine actual gift experiences, when people are faced with the true press of the situation.

To the best of our knowledge, the present work represents the first experimental evidence that gifts act as markers of similarity, with potential consequences for expectations regarding relationship progression. Thus, our research provides important support for a critical tenet of most modern gift theories, while underscoring the need to consider relationship-serving motivation in predicting the influence of gifts on relational development. Although it cannot be determined—in the absence of a no-gift control group—whether the effect of our manipulation was driven more by the bad gift condition or by the good gift condition, the existing literature provides some insight. There is evidence that people assume substantial similarity with other individuals in general (Byrne et al., 1986) and with romantic partners in particular, even when such perceived similarity is not justified by reality (Acitelli et al.,1993; Murray et al., 2002). Therefore, receiving information that disconfirms assumed similarity reliably reduces attraction relative to a no information control, whereas information that affirms similarity does not always increase attraction (Rosenbaum, 1986). As discussed, women have been repeatedly shown to actively protect relationships against various threats (e.g., violations of assumed similarity). Taken together, these findings imply that the effects in our studies may have been driven more by the bad gift condition, which would have called partners' assumed similarity into question, leading men to downgrade and women to defend their sense of interpersonal similarity. However, it is intriguing that we also tended to see differences when people received a good gift, with men reporting greater similarity than women. Perhaps, then, women not only protect the relationship from the lows of events such as bad gifts but also from unwarranted highs from events such as good gifts (see Footnote 1). Future research should further examine the precise mechanisms by which gifts shape perceived similarity and relationship outcomes.

We chose to focus on perceived similarity because of the emphasis placed on this variable in the extant literature, which has demonstrated that perceived similarity should be relevant across relationship stages—from the initial acquaintanceships examined in Study 1 to the long-term romantic relationships examined in Study 2. Of course, gifts may also influence relationships through pathways other than similarity, depending in part on relationship type. For example, in the context of an exchange relationship (e.g., between business associates), gifts might further the relationship to the extent that the gifts display proper etiquette and can be repaid (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). By contrast, in a strongly communal relationship (e.g., between sisters), gifts might further the relationship by showing that the giver cares for and understands the recipient. Perceived similarity may help lay the groundwork for these downstream relational perceptions (Murray et al., 2002),

but such variables are certainly worthy of study in their own right and could be readily investigated using our gift-giving paradigm.

While gift-giving has received significant attention from scholars in anthropology (e.g., Mauss, 1925/1967; Yan, 1996), economics (e.g., Waldfogel, 1993), marketing (e.g., Belk, 1982;), philosophy (e.g., Emerson, 1844; Shapiro, 1991), and sociology (e.g., Caplow, 1982), this central aspect of social life has been largely overlooked by experimental psychologists. Our paradigm provides a simple experimental method for examining real-time responses to gifts. As highlighted by the fact that women in Experiment 2 responded differently than women in our hypothetical scenario study expected to respond, it is critical that researchers move beyond studies relying on participants' intuitions regarding the relational consequences of gifts.

Notably, our gift manipulation influenced important judgments, including expectations regarding relationship length and likelihood of marriage—even though gift value was low and equal across conditions and participants had only a 10% chance of receiving the gift. Thus, our findings may shed light on why people devote substantial resources to gift-giving, despite its apparent economic irrationality: Gifts have the potential to play a surprisingly powerful role in the development of interpersonal relationships.

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