



# When doing good is bad in gift giving: Mis-predicting appreciation of socially responsible gifts



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## ABSTRACT

Gifts that support a worthy cause (i.e., “gifts that give twice”), such as a charitable donation in the recipient’s name, have become increasingly popular. Recipients generally enjoy the idea of these gifts, which not only benefit others in need but also make individuals feel good about themselves. But do givers accurately predict appreciation of these types of gifts? Across three studies, we show that gift givers mis-predict appreciation for socially responsible gifts, and that their mis-predictions depend on the nature of their relationship to the recipient. Drawing on research on affective forecasting and perspective taking, we propose and find that givers overestimate how much distant others appreciate socially responsible gifts because they focus more than recipients on the symbolic meaning of the gift. Critically, givers have the most to gain from distant others, in terms of strengthened relationship quality, by making better gift choices.

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## 1. Introduction

Americans’ spending on gifts and charitable donations has increased 47% since 2009 (Intuit Consumer Spending Index, 2013), and winter holiday gift expenditures exceeded \$602 billion in 2013 (Grannis, 2014). As these statistics suggest, giving is an economically important phenomenon. It is also a socially important one, as it helps individuals signal their commitment and caring in social relationships (Belk, 1976, 1979; Caplow, 1982). People face numerous occasions in which they need to choose gifts for others with whom they have either a personal (family, friends, neighbors) or professional (assistants, bosses, interns, coworkers, clients) relationship. In many cases, individuals find themselves in situations where they need to choose a gift for someone whose explicit preferences are unknown.

An increasing number of gift givers are turning to “gifts that give twice”—that is, gifts that support a worthy cause (Maciejewsky, 2008). Organizations such as Oxfam have helped popularize the practice of giving socially responsible gifts across personal and professional relationships ([oxfamgifts.com](http://oxfamgifts.com)). Numerous organizations and websites, including “Just Give” ([justgive.org](http://justgive.org)) and “Shop With Meaning” ([shopwithmeaning.org](http://shopwithmeaning.org)), encourage individuals and

businesses to give “gifts that give twice.” Such gift choices are often motivated by people’s desire to do good (as suggested by the “warm-glow” theory of charitable giving; see Andreoni, 1990) and by their desire to maintain a moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In this paper, we examine whether such gifts have the expected outcomes. Specifically, we investigate potential gaps between givers’ predicted and receivers’ actual appreciation of socially responsible gifts across close and distant relationships.

Building on prior work documenting mis-predictions in gift giving (Adams, Flynn, & Norton, 2012; Flynn & Adams, 2009; Gino & Flynn, 2011; Zhang & Epley, 2012), we argue that, under certain conditions, socially responsible gifts are substantially less appreciated by recipients than givers anticipate. We propose that reactions to socially responsible gifts and interpretation of their meaning largely depend on *relational closeness* between the gift giver and the recipient. Specifically, we propose and find that givers consistently mis-predict appreciation of socially responsible gifts when choosing for more *distant others*. In distant relationships, givers expect recipients to appreciate socially responsible gifts more than they actually do.

## 2. Gift giving and socially responsible gifts

Gift giving is commonly defined as the process of selection, transfer, and evaluation of material (tangible) and immaterial (intangible) objects in fulfillment of an obligation or in a

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spontaneous manner (Macklin & Walker, 1988). Most research on gift giving has focused on gifts that benefit the recipient directly, such as products of different values, monetary gifts, or gift certificates. Past research has examined how a variety of gift characteristics and types of gifts impact appreciation, including whether a gift is non-requested versus requested (e.g., gift registry; Bradford & Sherry, 2013; Gino & Flynn, 2011; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011); inexpensive versus expensive (Flynn & Adams, 2009); or material versus experiential (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

An important type of gift that has grown in popularity is the *socially responsible gift*, which regularly carries symbolic meaning. Socially responsible gifts, such as a charitable donation that a gift giver makes in the recipient's name, do not benefit the recipient directly; rather, they are intended to produce an indirect psychological benefit to the recipient, namely the sense of satisfaction and happiness that comes from helping a third party in need (e.g., a charity) and perhaps the recognition of an altruistic or moral identity. The practice of giving socially responsible gifts has become increasingly popular in today's society (Maciejewsky, 2008), but, to date, no prior study has examined whether and to what extent such gifts are, in fact, actually appreciated by recipients. Moreover, unlike more traditional gifts, socially responsible gifts are often intangible and have a transparent cost (e.g., "a \$50 donation in your name"). As such, socially responsible gifts provide an interesting context for understanding when symbolic meaning is most likely to impact givers' predicted and recipients' actual appreciation.

### 3. Appreciation of socially responsible gifts: givers, receivers and relationship closeness

Past researchers have noted asymmetries between givers' and recipients' appreciation of traditional gifts (Adams et al., 2012; Teigen, Olsen, & Solås, 2005). Such mis-calibrations may occur due to differences in perspective. People tend to overestimate the extent to which others share their own feelings and attitudes (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) and focus excessively on their own experience when predicting how others will evaluate them (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001).

When evaluating a potential gift, givers are likely to emphasize different characteristics about the gift or the selection process (e.g., cost or uniqueness) than receivers (Flynn & Adams, 2009; Gino & Flynn, 2011; Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2014). Prior research on affective forecasting has found that the affective intensity of an outcome is lower when making an affective forecast for that outcome versus when a person is actually experiencing it (Buechel, Zhang, Morewedge, & Vosgerau, 2014). Because of such differences, experiencers (i.e., gift recipients) may pay relatively more attention to the outcome of a gift exchange (e.g., the type of gift they received) and less to factors that determined the gift (e.g., who the gift giver is, and what this person wanted to communicate with the gift). That is, recipients tend to focus on the hedonic experience of the gift. By contrast, affective forecasters (i.e., gift givers) are less likely to focus on and be sensitive to the hedonic experience of the gift itself than experiencers. That is, givers are more likely to focus on non-hedonic elements such as the communicative intent of their gift and the symbolic meaning of the exchange, assuming that "it's the thought that counts" (Webley & Wilson, 1989; Zhang & Epley, 2012). This is likely to be especially true for socially responsible gifts, which carry such symbolic meaning.

This difference in sensitivity to non-hedonic factors of the gift exchange, we suggest, contributes to mis-predictions regarding the extent to which recipients appreciate socially responsible gifts. Notably, considering others' (i.e., recipients') thoughts requires attention, effort, motivation (Lin, Keysar, & Epley, 2010), and

inferences about their mental state (Zhang & Epley, 2012)—processes that are not automatic or typical for givers (or for anyone).

One non-hedonic element of the gift exchange that may be particularly salient to givers is the type of relationship they have with the recipient (e.g., how close they are to that person). Prior work suggests that relationship closeness may impact gift choices (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). We suggest that, when choosing gifts for *close others*, givers have greater ability and motivation to take the receiver's perspective due to familiarity with their preferences (e.g., a history of gift exchanges and feedback). Individuals are more likely to take the perspective of close others, and such perspective-taking increases perceived psychological closeness (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Moreover, givers may assume that close others will prefer tangible, material items rather than items that help others, mirroring the predictions individuals typically make regarding which purchases will make themselves most happy (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014). Thus, we predict that gift givers will place less weight on the symbolic value of a socially responsible gift for a close other.

Due to their lack of social and psychological closeness with *distant others*, gift givers are unlikely to be privy to the same preference information had for close others and more likely to be left to their own thoughts and devices when choosing a gift. If givers believe that their own thought processes count in a receiver's evaluations (Zhang & Epley, 2012), then they are likely to attend to the symbolic meaning of a gift, particularly when giving to distant others. Defined by their intangible attribute of prosociality, socially responsible gifts are imbued with symbolic meaning. By definition, socially responsible gifts benefit others and carry associations of caring, selflessness, and altruism—traits valued in relationships. If motivated to make a good impression and demonstrate thoughtfulness, givers may gravitate toward socially responsible gifts and value them more highly than other gifts. Thus, we predict that givers will weight the thought and symbolic value associated with a socially responsible gift more heavily when choosing gifts for distant others—i.e., those with whom social bonds are more tenuous and perspective taking less likely. This tendency also seems particularly likely when the interpersonal stakes of choices are high and anxiety-ridden (Wooten, 2000), as would be the case when choosing gifts for distant others.

Gift characteristics serve as a powerful statement of how a giver perceives the recipient (Schwartz, 1967). When giving to *distant others*, givers are often motivated to elicit desired reactions (Wooten, 2000). Because gifts are seen as symbols of commitment (Belk & Coon, 1993), a giver may be more likely to choose a socially responsible gift for a distant other and to predict that the distant other will appreciate such a gift more. We predict that when choosing gifts for distant others, givers' reliance on and assumptions about the importance of symbolic meaning will lead them to overestimate these recipients' appreciation of socially responsible gifts. With more distant relationships, givers may be more prone to overvaluing gift characteristics they believe will create a more positive impression of the gift and of themselves.

In sum, we predict that givers mis-predict recipients' appreciation of socially responsible gifts and that relationship closeness moderates their mis-prediction. Specifically, we expect givers to overestimate how much distant others appreciate socially responsible gifts because they focus more than recipients on the symbolic meaning of the gift.

### 4. Overview of the present research

We test our main hypotheses in three studies. In Study 1, we examine how givers anticipate and receivers experience appreciation in response to socially responsible gifts and test for the role of

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