



Give them what they want: The benefits of explicitness in gift exchange

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ABSTRACT

Five studies show that gift recipients are more appreciative of gifts they explicitly request than those they do not. In contrast, gift givers assume that both solicited and unsolicited gifts will be equally appreciated. At the root of this dilemma is a difference of opinion about what purchasing an unsolicited gift signals: gift givers expect unsolicited gifts will be considered more thoughtful and considerate by their intended recipients than is actually the case (Studies 1–3). In our final two studies, we highlight two boundary conditions for this effect: identifying a specific gift and using money as a gift. When gift recipients request one specific gift, rather than providing a list of possible gifts, givers become more willing to purchase the requested gift (Study 4). Further, although givers believe that recipients do not appreciate receiving money as much as receiving a solicited gift, recipients feel the opposite about these two gift options (Study 5).

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Gifts account for more than 4% of the typical household budget (Davis, 1972; Garner & Wagner, 1991), which suggests that gift-giving is a routine activity for most people. Nevertheless, research consistently shows that many individuals are poor gift givers, often purchasing gifts that others would not choose to buy themselves (e.g., Waldfogel, 1993) or focusing on the wrong criterion when attempting to select a meaningful gift (e.g., Flynn & Adams, 2009). According to a survey by the National Retail Federation, between 40 and 50% of Americans expect to return at least one holiday gift every year, and a third of respondents in a survey conducted by American Express had “re-gifted” presents. Thus, despite the fact that people spend a significant amount of time and money on gift-giving, their purchases often are less appreciated than they might hope.

How might the gift-giving process be improved so that gift recipients get what they want? One means by which individuals attempt to facilitate gift exchange is to tell others explicitly what gifts they would like. To this end, people frequently organize registries for various occasions (e.g., baby showers and weddings) that recommend items for gift givers to purchase. Is such transparency effective, or are gift givers wary that gifts directly requested by gift recipients will be appreciated less than unsolicited gifts? In anthropological studies, gift-giving is often described as a social exchange process, rife with symbolic meaning and interpersonal subtleties (e.g., Boas, 1895; Mauss, 1925; Sherry, 1983). Accepting suggestions for gift purchases from the intended recipient could be interpreted as a sign that the giver does not know the recipient well enough to identify a meaningful gift or does not wish to spend the time and effort needed

to figure out what such a gift might look like. As a result, the gift would be perceived as impersonal, rather than as a sign of commitment to the existing relationship.

Failures in gift-giving may reflect a problem in perspective-taking that afflicts many forms of social exchange. When predicting how others will evaluate their actions, people tend to focus too heavily on their own perspective (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001), struggle to read others' minds (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004), and overestimate the extent to which others will share their point of view (Keysar, 1994; Nickerson, 1999; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Ross & Ward, 1996; Van Boven, Dunning, & Loewenstein, 2000). In gift exchange, gift givers may fail to pay close attention to what a gift recipient directly requests. Instead, they may believe that purchasing an unrequested item will signal a sincere concern for the recipient because of the effort they have made to identify a seemingly appropriate gift, thus rendering the gift more personal and thoughtful. Yet gift recipients may be frustrated when givers do not take note of their explicit suggestions. Gift recipients will likely consider gifts they requested as more thoughtful and considerate of their needs than those not requested because the former indicate that the giver is attentive and responsive.

In the present research, we investigate the role of explicitness in gift giving. In Study 1, we examine whether gift recipients appreciate the gifts they request more than the gifts they do not request and whether gift givers account for this important difference. In Study 2, we highlight an underlying psychological mechanism for this failure in perspective taking: whereas gift givers believe that requested gifts will appear less thoughtful and considerate than non-requested gifts, gift recipients maintain the opposite belief. In Study 3, we explore differences between gift givers and recipients in perceptions of how impersonal solicited and unsolicited gifts are. Our final two studies

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identify two boundary conditions for this effect. In *Study 4*, we find that when gift recipients solicit one specific gift, the perspective difference diminishes (i.e., gift givers are more likely to purchase the gift and recognize the recipient's true feelings of appreciation). In *Study 5*, we consider the case in which the unsolicited gift is money; recipients appreciate money more than a solicited gift and more than givers expect.

If supported, these predictions can make both a theoretical and practical contribution. From a theoretical standpoint, previous research on social exchange and person perception has shown how people make errors in predicting others' preferences and reactions (e.g., Flynn and Lake, 2008; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Lerouge & Warlop, 2006; Swann & Gill, 1997). However, little effort has been made to consider cases where people actually *have* such information about others' preferences and still fail to make use of it. Gift exchange represents one such case. Clearly gift givers' intentions are good, but their understanding of how gift recipients interpret the social meaning of gifts is lacking. Although it may seem surprising that gift givers, who likely have been gift recipients themselves many times in the past, continue to make such errors in judgment, we suspect their gift giving can be improved if they are given more specific direction from their intended recipients.

Study 1: wedding gifts

Our first study examines the extent to which recipients appreciate both requested gifts from a registry they created and unrequested gifts (i.e., gifts not listed on the registry), and whether givers are able to accurately predict recipients' preferences. The experiment employed two between-subjects manipulations: role (gift giver vs. gift recipient) and type of gift (requested gift vs. unrequested gift).

In exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to a major online retailer, 198 adults (28% male) completed an online survey about giving or receiving wedding presents. Participants were recruited from a nationwide pool. Because the survey focused on giving and receiving wedding presents, only married individuals could participate in the study.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Across conditions, they were asked to recall a wedding and then answer a few questions about the event. We varied the instructions participants received based on the condition to which they had been assigned. Participants in the role of gift-givers received the following instructions for the requested-gift condition; instructions for the unrequested-gift condition are reported in brackets:

Think back to a wedding you attended in the past and for which the bride and groom provided a gift registry. Think of a wedding gift that *you chose off the registry* [you chose on your own (i.e., not off the registry)], and that you gave to the bride and groom for their wedding. Picture this gift in your mind, and remember who you gave it to. What does it look like? What are its characteristics? Why did you select this gift? Once you have a picture of this gift in mind, please answer the following questions.

The instructions for participants in the role of gift recipients read:

Think back to your own wedding, the people you invited to it and the gift registry you provided to them. Think of a wedding gift that you received from someone who *chose the gift off the registry* [chose the gift on his/her own (i.e., not off the registry)]. Picture this gift in your mind, and remember who gave it to you. What does it look like? What are its characteristics? Why did you select this gift? Once you have a picture of this gift in mind, please answer the following questions.

We first asked respondents to identify the gift they recalled and to indicate its approximate price. The average price reported by

participants was \$125.60 ($SD = \423.11) and was not affected by the respondents' role or gift type, nor by their interaction (all $ps > .10$).

Next, participants answered a few questions about their feelings of appreciation for the gift that they gave or received. To capture appreciation, we used Flynn and Adams's (2009) five-item scale, which includes questions such as "To what extent did you appreciate this gift?" and "To what extent did you feel pleased about receiving this gift?" Respondents provided their ratings for each question using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "To a great extent." We rephrased the questions slightly to suit participants' roles. For example, the question "To what extent did you appreciate this gift?" was rewritten for gift givers to read "To what extent do you think the recipient appreciated this gift?" The five items had a high level of overall reliability ($\alpha = .98$ for gift-recipients and $\alpha = .95$ for gift-givers), so we averaged them together into one composite variable, which we refer to as appreciation.

Our results may vary depending on whether the focal individual feels attached to the intended recipient. To capture affective commitment, we adapted Grant et al.'s (2007) measure, which included items such as "The recipient who benefited from this gift [person who bought this gift] is very important to me" and "I felt committed to the person who benefited from my gift [bought this gift]" ($\alpha = .96$ for both gift recipients and gift givers).

Participants described a wide variety of gifts, including airline tickets, jewelry, pottery, gift cards, and home décor. In our analyses, we did not include responses from participants who bought gifts priced more than two standard deviations above the mean (any gifts above \$971.83) or who failed to respond to the question about gift price. Nine surveys were excluded, leaving 189 cases. The nature and significance of the results do not change when all surveys are considered.

Results and discussion

Appreciation

We used appreciation as the dependent variable in an ANOVA in which role (giver vs. recipient) and gift type (requested vs. unrequested gift) served as between-subjects factors. There was no main effect of role, $F(1,185) = 2.05$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .01$. The main effect of gift type was significant, $F(1,185) = 4.99$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$, suggesting that across roles, appreciation was thought to be higher for requested gifts. More importantly, consistent with our prediction, there was a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,185) = 4.17$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$ (see Fig. 1). For givers, gift type did not predict appreciation, $t(85) = .16$, $p = .87$. However, for recipients, gift type predicted appreciation, $t(100) = 2.79$, $p < .01$.

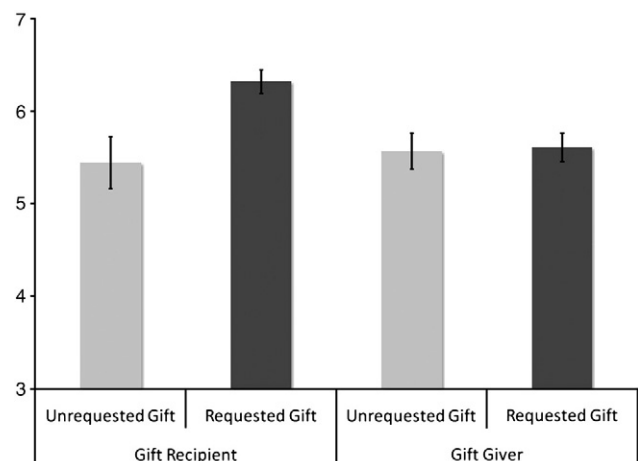


Fig. 1. Appreciation ratings by condition, *Study 1*. Error bars represent standard errors.

Controlling for gift price

To examine the influence of gift price, we regressed appreciation on role (giver = 1, recipient = -1), gift type (requested = 1, unrequested = -1), and an interaction term, and included price as an additional control variable. Although gift price significantly predicted appreciation, $B = .003$, $SE(B) = .001$, $t = 2.30$, $p < .03$, the relationship between role, gift type, and appreciation was virtually unchanged, $B = -.20$, $SE(B) = .10$, $t = -2.03$, $p < .05$, suggesting that, in this sample, gift price cannot account for why gift recipients, but not gift givers, report that gifts bought from the registry would be more appreciated.

Controlling for affective commitment

We also obtain similar results when controlling for affective commitment toward the person giving or receiving the gift. Although affective commitment significantly predicted appreciation, $B = .46$, $SE(B) = .08$, $t = 5.84$, $p < .001$, the relationship between role, gift type, and appreciation remained unchanged, $B = -.18$, $SE(B) = .09$, $t = -2.00$, $p < .05$, suggesting that feelings toward the “counterpart” of the gift–exchange relationship cannot account for our findings.

Study 2: birthday gifts

In our second study, we build on the results of Study 1 by gathering data about gift-giving during a more regular occasion, one’s own birthday, and limit the number of alternative explanations for our results by asking participants to imagine a hypothetical situation. In addition, in Study 2 we investigate the psychological mechanism behind the perspective difference observed in Study 1. We suggest that gift givers and gift recipients differ in their opinions regarding the meaning of purchasing an unsolicited gift, such that gift givers expect that gifts not explicitly requested will be considered more thoughtful by their intended recipients than is actually the case.

In exchange for \$5, 160 adults (44% male) from a representative U.S. sample completed an online survey about buying or receiving birthday presents. Only individuals either married or currently in a relationship could participate in the study.

Study 2 used the same 2 (role) \times 2 (gift type) design and procedure as Study 1. Across the four experimental conditions, we varied the instructions participants received based on the condition to which they had been randomly assigned. Participants in the role of gift givers received the following instructions for the requested-gift condition; instructions for the unrequested-gift condition are reported in brackets:

Imagine your significant other’s birthday was coming up in a few weeks. One night over dinner, you and your significant other are discussing what to do for this special occasion. You haven’t bought a gift yet. So, he/she tells you about a list of items you could buy for him/her, which are priced within your budget.

Now imagine you decided to buy one of the items on the list for his/her birthday [a different gift for his/her birthday].

The instructions for participants in the role of gift recipients read:

Imagine your birthday was coming up in a few weeks. One night over dinner, you and your significant other are discussing what to do for this special occasion. Your significant other hasn’t bought a gift yet. So, you tell him/her about a list of items he/she could buy for you, which are priced within your significant other’s budget.

Now imagine your significant other decided to buy one of the items on the list for your birthday [a different gift for your birthday].

Using the measures described in Study 1, participants then indicated how much they appreciated the gift ($\alpha = .92$ for gift-recipients and

$\alpha = .97$ for gift-givers). In addition, participants rated the perceived thoughtfulness of the gift. We assessed thoughtfulness by adapting Flynn and Adams’s (2009) four-item thoughtfulness scale. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they thought the gift was thoughtful, considerate, took their needs into account, and took what they really wanted into account, using a 7-point scale (1 = “Not at all”, 7 = “To a great extent”). The four items had a high level of overall reliability ($\alpha = .84$ for gift-recipients and $\alpha = .90$ for gift-givers), so we averaged them together into one composite variable, which we refer to as thoughtfulness.

Results and discussion

Appreciation

We used appreciation as the dependent variable in a 2 (role) \times 2 (gift type) between-subjects ANOVA. There was no significant main effect of role, $F(1,156) = 2.67$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$, nor of gift type, $F(1,156) = 1.12$, $p = .29$, $\eta^2 = .007$. More importantly, replicating the main finding of Study 1, there was a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,156) = 5.00$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$ (see Fig. 2). For givers, gift type did not predict appreciation, $t(79) = .73$, $p = .47$. However, for recipients, gift type predicted appreciation, $t(77) = 2.85$, $p < .01$.

Thoughtfulness as mediator

We conducted additional analyses to examine whether perceived thoughtfulness of the gift would explain the moderating effect of gift type on the relationship between role and appreciation, using the moderated path analysis procedures developed by Edwards and Lambert (2007). We expected that gift type would moderate the effect of role on perceived thoughtfulness, which would directly predict higher levels of appreciation, constituting a first-stage moderation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Regression analyses showed that when perceived thoughtfulness was entered into the equation, the interaction between gift type and role became non-significant, whereas perceived thoughtfulness was a significant, positive predictor of appreciation (see Table 1). We computed simple effects for role at two levels (giver vs. recipient) using bias-corrected confidence intervals, drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample. Moderated mediation is demonstrated when the conditional indirect effects of role on appreciation via perceived thoughtfulness differ in strength between givers and recipients. We found evidence that this was indeed the case. Specifically, gift type moderated the indirect effects of role on appreciation through perceived thoughtfulness of the gift (see Table 2).

Taken together, these results provide support for the asymmetry observed in Study 1 and evidence of an underlying psychological

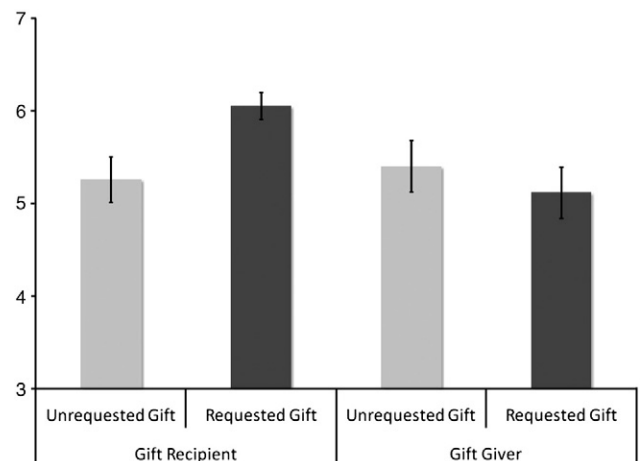


Fig. 2. Appreciation ratings by condition, Study 2. Error bars represent standard errors.

Table 1
Study 2: coefficient estimates for regression analyses.

	Thoughtfulness			Appreciation		
	B (SE)	β	<i>t</i>	B (SE)	β	<i>t</i>
Role (0 = recipient, 1 = giver)	.22 (.30)	.08	.72*	-.06 (.18)	-.02	-.36
Gift-type (0 = alternative, 1 = off-list)	.94 (.30)	.34	3.15**	.96 (.06)	.86	15.56***
Role \times Gift-type	-1.34 (.42)	-.43	-3.20**	-.16 (.19)	-.05	-.85
<i>r</i> ²			.10**			
Role						
Thoughtfulness				.29 (.26)	.08	1.10
Gift-type				.07 (.10)	.04	.72
Role \times Gift-type						.75***
Thoughtfulness \times Gift-type						
<i>r</i> ²						

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

mechanism. Gift givers believed recipients would equally appreciate gifts mentioned on their list of suggestions and gifts not chosen from the list, and viewed both choices as being equally thoughtful and considerate. However, gift recipients reported appreciating gifts mentioned on their list more than alternative gifts because they considered gifts from their list to be *more* thoughtful and considerate.

Study 3: Amazon.com wish lists

To provide further support for our main hypothesis, we conducted a third study in which participants actually chose and received gifts from others. Specifically, Study 3 examined whether gifts chosen from a personally generated “wish list” led to higher levels of appreciation than gifts that were not included on the list and were instead chosen spontaneously by gift givers. The study employed a 2 (role: giver vs. recipient) \times 2 (gift type: requested gift vs. unrequested gift) between-subject design. The requested gift was a gift chosen from the wish list each recipient generated, while the unrequested gift was a spontaneous gift selected by the giver that was not on the recipient’s wish list.

Ninety students and staff members at a university in the Southeast United States ($M_{age} = 25.79$, $SD = 7.25$; 41% male) participated in the study in exchange for a \$10 gift certificate and the opportunity to win a gift. Participants were told that, at the end of the study, ten of them would be randomly selected to receive a product from their wish lists.

After signing up for the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two roles: gift giver or gift recipient. The study was conducted online, and participants received instructions via e-mail directly from the experimenter, during the various stages of the study. The study included three parts, which occurred sequentially over the span of a week. In the first part, we asked participants in the role of gift recipients to create an Amazon.com “wish list” containing ten products from at least two different categories (e.g., books and electronics) within a given price range (\$20–\$30). Recipients were given 24 h to

create a wish list and send it to the experimenter. The wish list had to include the name of the product, a picture of the product, and its price.

In the second part of the study, givers received the wish list their randomly chosen recipient had created and were asked to select a gift for this person. The givers received the list via e-mail from the experimenter. In the requested-gift condition, givers were asked to choose the gift from among those included in the wish list. In the unrequested-gift condition, they were asked to generate a gift idea for the recipient. Givers in this condition were given the price range of \$20–\$30 (the same range given to recipients who had created their wish list) and were asked to peruse the Amazon.com site and identify a gift for the recipient. In both the requested and unrequested gift condition, givers were asked to write to the experimenter and let her know their gift choice.

After receiving their choice by email, the experimenter sent gift givers a link to an online questionnaire that included measures for appreciation, thoughtfulness, the extent to which the gift was signaling commitment to and knowledge of the recipient (i.e., the extent to which the gift was impersonal), and the givers’ motivation during the choice of a gift. We used the same appreciation and thoughtfulness scales employed in Studies 1–2 ($\alpha = .94$ and $\alpha = .90$ respectively). We also assessed the extent to which the gift was personal using a four-item scale ($\alpha = .82$): (1) “This was an impersonal gift” (reverse-coded), (2) “This gift expresses my knowledge of the recipient,” (3) “This gift symbolizes my commitment to the recipient,” and (4) “This gift is a token of symbolic value.” Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale. Finally, we measured givers’ motivation during the choice of a gift by asking them the following question: “When making the choice, to what extent were you primarily concerned with: (1) Maximizing your personal satisfaction; and (2) Maximizing the pleasure of the recipient.” Participants indicated their answers to each item on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent).

In the third part of the study, the experimenter sent recipients information about the gift their givers chose for them and asked them to fill out an online questionnaire with the same measures included in the questionnaire for gift givers. When appropriate, the items were reworded to suit the different role. For instance, for the measure related to givers’ motivation, gift recipients were asked: “When making the choice, to what extent do you think the gift giver was primarily concerned with: (1) Maximizing his/her personal satisfaction, and (2) Maximizing your pleasure.” If the recipient was among those randomly selected to receive a real gift, the experimenter informed the recipient that the chosen gift was on its way.

Results

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics of the main variables measured in the study.

Table 2
Study 2: analysis of simple effects.

Moderator	Stage		Effect		
	First	Second	Direct	Indirect	Total
Alternative gift (0)	.22	.96*	-.06	.21	.15
Gift on the list (1)	-1.13*	1.03*	.23	-1.16*	-.94*
Differences	1.34*	.07	.29	1.37*	1.06*

Notes: Tests of differences for the first stage, second stage, and direct effect are equivalent to tests of the corresponding coefficients reported in the Table. Tests of differences for the indirect and total effect were based on 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from bootstrap estimates.

* $p < .05$.

Table 3

Study 3: descriptive statistics and correlations among the main variables measured in the study.

	M	SD	1.	2.
1. Appreciation	5.81	1.06		
2. Thoughtfulness	5.32	1.34	.77***	
3. Gift as personal	4.56	1.48	.60***	.57***

*** $p < .001$.

Appreciation

A 2 (role) \times 2 (gift type) between-subjects ANOVA using appreciation as the dependent variable revealed no significant main effect of role or gift type (both $ps > .60$), but a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,86) = 6.62$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .07$. For givers, gift type did not predict appreciation ($M_{requested} = 5.61$, $SD = 1.14$ vs. $M_{unrequested} = 6.06$, $SD = 0.78$), $t(41) = 1.50$, $p = .14$. However, for recipients, gift type predicted appreciation ($M_{requested} = 6.13$, $SD = 0.77$ vs. $M_{unrequested} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(45) = 2.14$, $p < .04$.

Thoughtfulness

A 2 (role) \times 2 (gift type) between-subjects ANOVA using appreciation as the dependent variable revealed no significant main effect of role or gift type (both $ps > .60$), but a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,86) = 6.62$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .07$. For givers, gift type did not predict thoughtfulness ($M_{requested} = 4.97$, $SD = 1.33$ vs. $M_{unrequested} = 5.56$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(41) = 1.57$, $p = .12$. However, for recipients, gift type did predict thoughtfulness ($M_{requested} = 5.77$, $SD = 1.01$ vs. $M_{unrequested} = 4.96$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(45) = 2.04$, $p < .05$.

Perception of the gift as personal

We conducted a similar analysis using perceptions of the gift as personal as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed no significant main effect of role or gift type (both $ps > .44$), but a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,86) = 6.87$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Gift recipients considered the gift more personal when it was the requested gift ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.42$) than when it was the unrequested gift ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(45) = 2.05$, $p < .05$. In contrast, gift givers' ratings of the gift as personal did not differ significantly between conditions ($M_{requested} = 4.35$, $SD = 1.36$ vs. $M_{unrequested} = 5.01$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(41) = -1.89$, $p = .10$.

Additional analyses

We conducted additional analyses to examine whether perceptions of the gift as thoughtful and personal would explain the moderating effect of gift type on the relationship between role and appreciation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Regression analyses showed that when perceptions of the gift as thoughtful and personal were entered into the equation, the interaction between gift type and role became non-significant, whereas both types of perception were a significant, positive predictor of appreciation.¹

Givers' motivation during the choice of a gift for receivers

We conducted a mixed ANOVA using the two measures as a within-subjects factor and our two manipulations of role and gift type as between-subjects factors. This analysis revealed only two significant effects. First, the ratings for maximizing recipient satisfaction were higher than those for maximizing personal satisfaction across conditions, $F(1,86) = 30.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. Second, we found a significant interaction between the within-subject factor and the role manipulation, $F(1,86) = 10.17$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Although the ratings for the two responses were not different for gift recipients ($M_{rec_sat} =$

5.30, $SD = 1.69$ vs. $M_{per_sat} = 4.74$, $SD = 1.73$, $F[1,45] = 2.44$, $p = .13$, $\eta^2 = .05$), they were for gift givers ($F[1,41] = 44.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .52$). Gift givers were more concerned with maximizing their recipients' pleasure with their gift ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.05$) than their own personal satisfaction ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.68$). These results suggest that gift givers were focused on maximizing the gift recipients' appreciation while choosing a gift.

Discussion

Despite the fact that the gifts chosen in the unrequested-gift condition were similar in price to the items the recipient had explicitly requested and that selecting such items took more effort on the part of the gift giver, gift recipients nevertheless appreciated the gifts they requested more than the gifts they did not. They also rated such gifts as more thoughtful and personal compared to those the giver chose spontaneously. However, gift givers did not accurately predict such preferences on the part of the gift recipients. Using a behavioral study in which participants actually chose and received gifts from others, this study provides more compelling evidence for the findings of Studies 1 and 2.

Study 4: being specific about a preferred gift

In our fourth study, we examine a potential boundary condition for our effect: requesting a single gift rather than asking gift givers to choose from a list. We suggest that the effect observed in Studies 1–3 might be eliminated when recipients explicitly tell givers what they want by highlighting one particular item.

Two-hundred eight adults (35% male) from a representative U.S. sample completed the study in exchange for \$5. Nine individuals incorrectly answered manipulation checks that asked about their role in the scenario (e.g., indicated being the gift giver instead of gift receiver) and were thus excluded from the analyses.

Study 4 employed three between-subjects manipulations: role (gift giver vs. gift receiver), items on the list (one vs. many), and type of gift (requested gift vs. unrequested gift). We used the same birthday scenario described in Study 2.

We conducted a pilot study ($N = 48$) with a non-overlapping group of participants to identify gifts that are rated as eliciting equal amounts of appreciation. In this pilot study, participants were presented with a list of 20 potential gifts and were asked to rate them by indicating how much they would appreciate receiving them as a gift. Based on the pilot results, we picked five items that were not rated to be significantly different, in terms of eliciting appreciation.

Participants in the role of gift givers received the following instructions for the many-items-on-the-list/requested-gift condition; instructions for the unrequested-gift condition are reported in brackets:

Imagine your significant other's birthday was coming up in a few weeks. One night over dinner, you and your significant other are discussing what to do for this special occasion. You haven't bought a gift yet. So, he/she tells you to buy him/her one of the following items: an iPod, tickets to the game he/she would like to go to with you, a new watch, an iPhone, or the new digital camera that he/she likes. All items are priced within your budget.

Now imagine you decided to buy one of the items on the list for his/her birthday [a different gift for his/her birthday].

We modified the instructions for the conditions in which there was only one item on the list so that only one item – a digital camera – was identified: “So, he/she tells you to buy him/her the new digital camera that he/she likes, which is priced within your budget.”

The instructions were slightly rephrased for participants in the role of gift recipients. After reading the scenario, participants indicated

¹ Given the nature of our data, where gifts varied for each dyad, we conducted further analyses to test for the robustness of our results by using hierarchical lineal models. The nature and significance of the results did not change. We report ANOVA analyses in the interest of parsimony.

their appreciation for the gift ($\alpha = .91$ for gift-recipients and $\alpha = .94$ for gift-givers) and the perceived thoughtfulness of the gift ($\alpha = .79$ for gift-recipients and $\alpha = .78$ for gift-givers).

Results and discussion

Appreciation

We conducted a 2 (role) \times 2 (items on the list) \times 2 (gift type) between-subjects ANOVA with appreciation as the dependent variable. As expected, we found a significant three-way interaction, $F(1,191) = 10.50, p = .001, \eta^2 = .05$ (see Fig. 3). When the recipient highlighted one item, the effect of role ($F[1,101] = 4.09, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$) and the effect of gift type were both significant ($F[1,101] = 18.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$), while their interaction was not ($F[1,101] < 1, p = .93, \eta^2 = .00$). However, when the recipient's list contained multiple items (as in Studies 1–3), then not only were the effect of role ($F[1,90] = 5.78, p < .02, \eta^2 = .06$) and the effect of gift type both significant ($F[1,90] = 14.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$), but their interaction was as well ($F[1,90] = 19.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$). Consistent with the findings from Studies 1–3, gift type did not predict appreciation for gift givers, $t(46) = .52, p = .61$, but did for gift recipients, $t(44) = 5.44, p < .001$.

Thoughtfulness

We found similar results when conducting the same analyses using thoughtfulness as the dependent variable. And, once again, the

three-way interaction was significant, $F(1,191) = 4.98, p < .03, \eta^2 = .03$. When the recipient's list contained only one item, the effect of role ($F[1,101] = 3.44, p < .07, \eta^2 = .03$) and the effect of gift type were both significant ($F[1,101] = 17.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$), while their interaction was not ($F[1,101] < 1, p = .85, \eta^2 = .00$). Instead, when the recipient's list contained multiple items, then not only were the effect of role ($F[1,90] = 3.06, p = .08, \eta^2 = .03$) and the effect of gift type both significant ($F[1,90] = 16.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$), but their interaction was as well ($F[1,90] = 8.52, p = .004, \eta^2 = .09$). As in the case of appreciation, gift type did not predict thoughtfulness for gift givers, $t(46) = .89, p = .38$, but did for gift recipients, $t(44) = 4.69, p < .001$.²

These results identify an important boundary condition for the effect demonstrated in Studies 1–3: when recipients are explicit about one particular gift they would prefer to receive, gift givers are more accurate in predicting that recipients will appreciate that gift more than an alternative, unrequested gift.

Study 5: giving money as a gift

In our fifth and final study, we examine another potential boundary condition for our effect: requesting money instead of a gift item. We suspect that money belongs to a special category of gifts that recipients would appreciate receiving, though they may not feel comfortable asking for it. At the same time, gift givers may not consider money to be a thoughtful gift and may believe that recipients will appreciate money less than a requested item. We tested this main hypothesis using a behavioral study similar to that employed in Study 3.

One-hundred seven students and staff members at a university in the Southeast United States ($M_{age} = 22.98, SD = 7.00$; 45% male) participated in the study in exchange for a \$10 gift certificate and the opportunity to win a gift. The study employed a 2 (role: giver vs. recipient) \times 2 (gift type: requested gift vs. money) between-subject design. The requested gift was chosen from a wish list each recipient generated, and the unrequested gift was an amount of money that matched the value of the average gift included in the wish list created by recipients.

The study employed the same procedure used in Study 3 but with two main differences. First, the gifts that recipients included in their wish list were around \$15 in value (with a \$2 margin in price for the chosen items). Second, instead of a spontaneous gift, the unrequested gift was \$15. As in Study 3, participants were informed that at the end of the study 10 individuals would be randomly selected to receive either a gift or \$15 depending on the conditions to which they had been assigned.

Results and discussion

Appreciation

We used appreciation ($\alpha = .89$) as the dependent variable in an ANOVA in which role (giver vs. recipient) and gift type (requested gift vs. money) served as between-subjects factors. There was no main effect of gift type, $F(1,103) = 0.92, p = .34, \eta^2 = .01$. The main effect of role was significant, $F(1,103) = 24.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$, suggesting that across gifts, recipients gave higher ratings for appreciation compared to givers. More importantly, there was a significant interaction between gift type and role, $F(1,103) = 29.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$. Givers believed recipients would appreciate requested gifts ($M = 5.67, SD = 0.79$) more than money ($M = 4.66, SD = 1.11$), $t(54) = 3.97, p = .001$. Contrary to their predictions, however, recipients reported appreciating money ($M = 6.30, SD = 0.59$) more than their requested gift ($M = 5.60, SD = 0.72$), $t(49) = 3.83, p < .001$.

² Additional analyses showed that in the many-items-on-the-list conditions, perceived thoughtfulness mediated the moderating effect of gift type on the relationship between role (gift-giver vs. gift-recipient) and appreciation. These results replicate the findings of Study 2.

(a) Many items on the list



(b) Only one items on the list

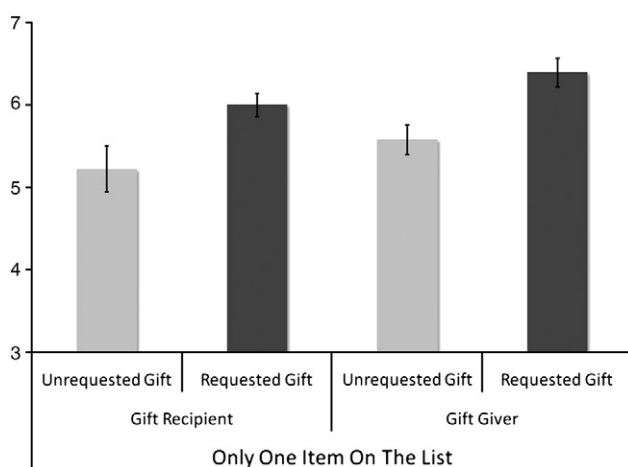


Fig. 3. Appreciation ratings by condition, Study 4. Error bars represent standard errors.

Thoughtfulness

A similar 2×2 ANOVA with thoughtfulness ($\alpha = .81$) as the dependent variable revealed the same pattern of results: a non-significant main effect of gift type, $F(1,103) = 0.68$, $p = .41$, $\eta^2 = .01$, a significant main effect of role, $F(1,103) = 10.81$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, and, more importantly, a significant gift type × role interaction effect, $F(1,103) = 52.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$. Gift givers believed recipients would consider the requested gift as more thoughtful ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 0.81$) than money ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(54) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. However, recipients actually reported considering money to be a more thoughtful gift ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.98$) than what they requested ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.50$), $t(49) = 5.00$, $p < .001$.

Taken together, these results highlight another important boundary condition for the effect demonstrated in Studies 1–3. Although gift givers believe that money would not be appreciated by recipients as much as a gift from a wish list, recipients appreciate money more than an item they initially requested.

General discussion and conclusion

The ability of one party to predict how another will react to what the former says and does is critical to predicting the success of many relationships. For example, salespeople need to understand the responses of their customers to sales promotions in order to generate sales (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). Negotiators need to predict how their counterparts will react to concessions in order to achieve satisfactory outcomes (Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999). And anyone interested in strengthening a social bond by purchasing a gift for another person must acknowledge the intended recipient's preferences and desires (Flynn & Adams, 2009). Given the prevalence of situations in which we stand to gain from making accurate social predictions, one might ask whether we are any good at it.

Empirical evidence casts doubt on the notion that we are effective in predicting others' reactions, suggesting instead that our social predictions are often biased. Both adults and children frequently fail to take others' perspectives into account and struggle to read others' minds (Epley et al., 2004). Further, people tend to believe that their internal states and intentions are more transparent to others than they actually are (Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998); they overestimate the extent to which others attend to those states (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000) and they exaggerate the extent to which others will share their own feelings, thoughts, and attitudes (Keysar, 1994; Nickerson, 1999; Ross et al., 1977; Ross & Ward, 1996; Van Boven et al., 2000).

In this paper, we focused on gift exchange as a unique social context and suggested that gift givers cannot accurately predict how recipients will react to their gifts, even when recipients give them explicit information about what they want (i.e., registries, wish lists, etc.). We demonstrated that gift recipients are more appreciative of gifts chosen from a set of desired items than they are of alternative gift choices, but that gift givers believe both types of gifts will be equally appreciated (Studies 1–3). While gift givers often go the extra mile to be more thoughtful (e.g., they choose a gift not included on a pre-established list), they do not realize that sticking to the list would actually come across as more thoughtful and therefore elicit stronger feelings of appreciation. We also identified two important boundary conditions: identifying a specific gift and using money as a gift. When the recipient explicitly highlights his or her preferred gift, givers are relatively more receptive to such a specific suggestion (Study 4). In addition, although givers believe that recipients do not appreciate money as much as receiving a solicited gift, recipients feel the opposite about these two gift options (Study 5).

Limitations and directions future research

Our findings are marked by a few limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, we focused on a small slice of

the gift exchange process: situations in which recipients prepare wish lists or registries to list their desired gifts for a specific occasion. We do not examine situations in which gift-giving is more spontaneous and unplanned. Further, we restricted our investigation to cases in which unrequested gifts are clearly worth about the same amount as requested gifts. Future research might build on the current findings by looking at alternative forms of gift-giving and non-equivalent gifts.

Future work could explore other boundary conditions for the effect observed in our studies. For instance, gift givers may be more likely to listen to the recipients' explicit suggestions when they are less familiar with the recipient. In such cases, givers may be disinclined to assume that they know the recipient well enough to make a good gift choice. One way to test this idea would be to survey wedding guests and examine whether attendees who are less familiar with the bride and groom are more likely to rely on the registry. Another possible direction for future research is to investigate this effect in other contexts. For example, a similar perspective difference may occur in the presence of other types of lists, such as 'to-do' lists for one's spouse or colleague. While spouses or colleagues might believe that their efforts and actions will be more appreciated when doing a helpful chore other than what they were explicitly asked to perform, recipients are likely to have a clear preference for the task they requested.

Future research could also explore whether time influences some of the effects highlighted in this paper. For example, Gilovich and Medvec (1995) found that people tend to regret actions more than inactions in the short term, but the opposite is true in the long term. Similarly, in the case of gift-giving, there may be a tendency to regret a poor gift choice immediately after the exchange takes place, but in the long-term the most salient regret is failing to give any gift at all. Further work addressing the role of temporal perspective may deepen our understanding of gift-exchange.

Another interesting direction for future research is the study of simple interventions that may reduce or eliminate the perspective taking discrepancy observed here. For instance, one might ask givers to recall past situations in which they received a gift that they explicitly requested before asking the same person to choose a gift for someone else. Asking participants to recall their own experience receiving a gift they explicitly requested may help them recognize the benefit of listening to another person's direct request.

Our studies focused on the role of explicitness in gift exchange. However, people often give gifts to others for no particular occasion but just as a surprise or to be thoughtful. Future research could examine how much givers appreciate these types of gifts and whether they are able to make accurate predictions about the recipients' feelings of appreciation. For instance, one could compare the recipients' appreciation for solicited and unsolicited gifts that were expected (e.g., for some occasion) to the appreciation of the same gifts that were unexpected. Unexpected gifts may be likely to elicit stronger feelings of appreciation than expected gifts, regardless of whether the expected gifts were solicited or not.

On the surface, it might seem that our results contradict those of previous research demonstrating that people frequently express a desire for things they believe will make them happier but these things often fall short of expectations. Specifically, Gilbert and Wilson (2000) describe *miswanting* as a lack of coordination between what we want and what actually makes us happy. Such miswanting can include wanting things that do not actually make us as happy as we predict they will, or wanting to avoid situations that, in the end, are not as bad as we expected them to be. The present research suggests that people are happier with the gifts they request than with gifts others would choose for them instead. This finding does not eliminate the possible presence of miswanting. Future research is needed to test whether the participants in our studies who received requested items are as happy as they anticipated being when they suggested the gift in the first place.

Finally, the main purpose of this paper was to investigate disparities between gift givers' expectations and recipients' actual

feelings of appreciation for gifts that are either solicited or unsolicited. Future research could examine the factors that motivate givers to choose solicited versus unsolicited gifts and whether certain motives may lead givers to make different choices. For instance, givers may be particularly interested in maximizing recipients' pleasure and enjoyment when the recipients are friends or close others. But for more distant recipients, givers may be more interested in a "satisficing" strategy – choosing the first available option that meets the desired criteria – than in maximizing the recipient's happiness with the gift. Identifying what motivates givers to choose an unsolicited gift rather than a requested one may help us identify ways to reverse this trend in the future.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our findings contribute generally to the literature on egocentric biases and perspective taking in social judgment. Prior work has found that people often fail to take others' perspectives into account and struggle to read their minds (Epley et al., 2004). We go beyond this point to investigate the impact of explicitness in one pervasive perspective-taking context: gift exchange. We find that even when gift recipients provide a list of what they would like, gift givers think it would be better to ignore the recipients' explicit requests. It remains unclear whether gift givers eventually learn to respond to gift recipients' explicit cues and thereby become better at eliciting appreciation. Gift recipients tend to be reluctant to reveal their true feelings of disappointment with the gifts they receive (Mauss, 1925). As a result, gift givers may believe their purchases are more effective in eliciting appreciation than is actually the case.

According to Webley, Lea, and Portalska (1983), "Gift-giving clearly fulfills an important social function and it is the act of giving...which is of prime importance, not the actual gift itself" (p. 237). Our results offer a different point of view: that whether the act of gift-giving counts may depend largely on whether or not the giver is attentive and responsive to the recipient's explicit suggestions when they are made available. Gift givers would be wise to pay attention to gift registries, wish lists, and explicit requests from friends or significant others. Conversely, gift recipients can help facilitate the gift-giving process by not only being more direct about making suggestions for gifts, but being more specific as well. Rather than putting together one big "wish list," they should instead list one big wish.

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