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## Faculty Working Papers

GIFT-GIVING BEHAVIOR. PART B

Russell W. Belk

#450

**College of Commerce and Business Administration  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**



FACULTY WORKING PAPERS

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November 23, 1977

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## B. Study 2

The second study was an examination of the possession and perception of various sex-role related toys by preschool children and their parents. The study began by selecting a sample of \$6.00 to \$13.00 toys recommended for 3 to 6 year old children, from the 1975 Christmas catalogs of two major national retail chains. These toys were represented by mounted pictures, prices, and short descriptions taken from the catalogs. Care was taken to balance use of color and illustration size, and store names were masked. Approximately 50 such toys were pretested with parents of preschool children who rated the toys for familiarity, ownership, appropriateness for a boy, and appropriateness for a girl. A total of 9 of these toys were chosen for further testing; 3 toys (toy workbench, toy basketball game, and toy police car console) viewed as "boy's toys", 3 toys (toy iron, toy dish set, toy knitting machine) viewed as "girl's toys", and 3 toys ("Legos", "Viewmaster", and toy desk) for which there was no significant difference in ratings as boy's toys and girl's toys. Cooperation for the main study was obtained from 22 families having children in one of several area nursery school classes. The children were 11 boys and 11 girls between the ages of 52 months and 64 months. The father, mother, and child of each family were interviewed simultaneously in different rooms of their houses by interviewers who alternated within-household interviewing assignments. Each respondent was asked whether the child owned the toy, who gave the toy to the child, whether the



parent would buy the toy for the child, and how much the toy was (or would be) liked by the child and by the parent (children responded using "smiling face" scales rather than verbal scales). Parents also completed the Bem [1974] Psychological Androgyny scale, and children completed the Brown [1956] It S'cale, both of which measure sex role concept. In addition, children were given their choice of inexpensive toy rewards which had been shown by pretest to be perceived as either boy's toys (toy cars) or girl's toys (toy animals).

The sample obtained had a median age of 33 for both male and female adults. The median family income category was \$15,000 to \$19,999, and the majority of both males and females were college educated. While this represents an up-scale bias in the social class of respondents, the sample was not homogeneous in this regard.

#### 1. Patterns of Present Toy Ownership Via Parental and Non-Parental Givers

One reflection of the sex-appropriateness of the toys in this study is the pattern of toy ownership by boys and by girls. Table 11 shows that children own more same-sex toys than cross-sex toys, as expected. However as Table 12 indicates, this pattern is substantially weaker for toys given by the child's parents. This would suggest that parents, while still bound by tradition in choosing toys, are less prone to perpetuate sex-role stereotypes than are other relatives and friends. It might then also seem that children are less affected by the same-sex toy gifts from givers outside of the immediate family, because of the parents' closer contact and mediating influence with the child. However, comparing the child's recollection of who gave them the various toys to the parents' recollections, showed only moderate correspondence. This suggests that these 4 to 5 year old children are not yet able to clearly differentiate the sources of gifts of toys presented to them.



TABLE 11

NUMBER OF "BOY'S TOYS", "GIRL'S TOYS",  
AND "NEUTRAL TOYS" OWNED BY BOYS AND GIRLS\*

| <u>Child Gender</u> | <u>Toy Gender</u>   |                       |                      | <u>Total</u> |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
|                     | <u>"Boy's Toys"</u> | <u>"Neutral Toys"</u> | <u>"Girl's Toys"</u> |              |
| Boy                 | 13                  | 16                    | 5                    | 34           |
| Girl                | <u>5</u>            | <u>22</u>             | <u>12</u>            | <u>39</u>    |
| Total               | 18                  | 38                    | 17                   | 73           |

\*33 possible per cell

TABLE 12

NUMBER OF "BOY'S TOYS", "GIRL'S TOYS",  
AND NEUTRAL TOYS OWNED BY BOYS AND GIRLS, BY PURCHASER

| <u>Purchaser*</u> | <u>Child Gender</u> | <u>Toy Gender</u>   |                       |                      | <u>Total</u> |
|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
|                   |                     | <u>"Boy's Toys"</u> | <u>"Neutral Toys"</u> | <u>"Girl's Toys"</u> |              |
| Parent            | Boy                 | 7                   | 9                     | 5                    | 21           |
|                   | Girl                | <u>4</u>            | <u>10</u>             | <u>8</u>             | <u>22</u>    |
|                   | Total               | 11                  | 19                    | 13                   | 43           |
| Other             | Boy                 | 6                   | 7                     | 0                    | 13           |
|                   | Girl                | <u>1</u>            | <u>12</u>             | <u>4</u>             | <u>17</u>    |
|                   | Total               | 7                   | 19                    | 4                    | 30           |

\*based on Mother's recollection



## 2. Effects of Parental Sex Role Preferences on Evaluations of Toys for Son or Daughter

In order to more closely examine the role of parents as the primary sources of toy gifts to children, parents' evaluations of how desirable they found each of the test toys for their preschool child were averaged separately for toys which matched the child's gender and which did not match the child's gender. Each parent was then classified by the Bem Psychological Androgyny scale as either masculine, feminine, or psychologically androgynous. The instrument involves having respondents endorse various self-descriptive adjectives which are stereotypically masculine (e.g. athletic, self-reliant, analytical) or feminine (e.g. affectionate, cheerful, yielding). Masculine individuals are judged to be those who endorse significantly more masculine items, and feminine individuals are judged to be those who endorse significantly more feminine items. All those whose endorsements of masculine and feminine traits did not differ, are classed as psychologically androgynous. Bem proposed that this ability to describe oneself in terms of positive male and female traits is most healthy and provides a more diverse repertoire of skills than those of a person who is more strongly sex-typed. The present interest was in seeing how psychologically androgynous parents compared with more strongly sex-typed parents in their evaluations of the "boy's toys" and "girl's toys" in the study. It was predicted that psychologically androgynous parents would not feel as compelled to provide sex appropriate toys for their children and thus would rate "boy's toys" and "girl's toys" as equally desirable for their children, regardless of the child's biological sex.

As Table 13 shows, the predicted tendency of psychologically androgynous parents to show the least difference in their evaluations of sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate toys did not emerge. These findings





TABLE 13

## MEAN RATINGS OF TOYS BY PARENTS' SEX-ROLE PREFERENCE

| Mean Rating* Of<br>Toys for Which: | Mother    |                                | Father   |           |                                |          |
|------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------------|----------|
|                                    | Masculine | Psychologically<br>Androgenous | Feminine | Masculine | Psychologically<br>Androgenous | Feminine |
| Toy Gender = Child<br>Gender       | 2.70      | 3.65                           | 2.95     | 3.00      | 3.15                           | 3.80     |
| Toy Gender ≠ Child<br>Gender       | 2.30      | 2.45                           | 2.05     | 2.10      | 2.15                           | 2.30     |
| Difference                         | .40       | 1.20**                         | .90**    | .90**     | 1.00                           | 1.50**   |
| n                                  | 6         | 8                              | 8        | 14        | 4                              | 4        |

\* 5 point scale; higher scores = more desirable

\*\* difference significant by correlated means t-test at 2-tailed  $p < .05$



were consistent whether the child was a girl or a boy. While psychologically androgeneous fathers did not significantly differ in their evaluations of the two sets of toys, the small number of such fathers reduced the opportunity to find the difference obtained to be statistically significant. For the females, the psychologically androgeneous mother showed the most difference in evaluation of sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate toys for her preschool child. What emerges from the findings in Table 13 instead of a lack of sex bias in the toy selections of psychologically androgeneous parents, is a tendency for all parents, regardless of sex role preferences, to favor sex-appropriate toys for their children. For both mothers and fathers, the least difference between ratings of sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate toys, is found among the more masculine individuals in terms of the Bem scale. In retrospect, this may be partly due to the characteristics of a non-masculine individual on the scale. In terms of the 60 adjectives of the Bem scale, this person is more likely than a masculine person to be "yielding", "gullible", and "soft'spoken". A masculine person on the other hand, is one who describes themselves as "assertive", "forceful", and "individualistic". Thus it may paradoxically be the masculine individual who is most likely to break convention and present "boy's toys" to a daughter and "girl's toys" to a son.

### 3. Children's Sex Role Preferences Related to Toy Ownership and Parental Sex Role Preferences

Recognizing again that gifts of toys are not the sole means of sex role socialization, it is useful to examine the sex role preference of children owning different proportions of "boy's toys" and of children whose parents may be classified as masculine, feminine or psychologically androgeneous. These comparisons are presented in Tables 14 and 15, using both the paper and pencil measure of sex role (the modified Brown It Scale) and the behavioral measure of sex role (toy choice). As Table 14



TABLE 14

SEX ROLE PREFERENCES OF CHILDREN  
 OWNING DIFFERENT PROPORTIONS  
 OF MALE TOYS FROM TEST SET

| <u>DEPENDENT MEASURE</u>                           | <u>Child's Sex</u> | <u>Proportion Of Test Toys Owned Which are "Boy's Toys"</u> |                |
|--|--------------------|---|----------------|
|  |                    | <u>&lt;50%</u>  | <u>&gt;50%</u> |
| Mean Brown It Scale<br>score (of 8; > 4 =<br>male) | Boy                | 6.25 (n=4)  | 6.29 (n=7)     |
|  | Girl               | 3.33 (n=9)  | 4.50 (n=2)     |
| Proportion Choosing<br>"male" prize toy            | Boy                | .25 (n=4)   | .86 (n=7)      |
|  | Girl               | .67 (n=9)   | .50 (n=2)      |



indicates, ownership of "boy's toys" is related to the child's sex role preference. The Brown It Scale scores show that girls with fewer of the "boy's toys" relative to "girl's toys" had a stronger feminine sex role preference. Using the behavioral measure, boys owning relatively more of the "boy's toys" were also found to be more likely to choose the "male" prize toy. This evidence is not as strong as it might be, but it does **suggest a role** that toy ownership plays in the development of sex role preference.

In Table 15 the same dependent measures are contrasted for children whose parents have different sex-role preferences. The only feminine It Scale scores for boys occur for those with psychologically androgenous fathers. But when boys' mothers are psychologically androgeneous, It Scale scores instead appear to be more masculine for the sons. For girls, the only masculine It Scale scores occur for those with psychologically androgenous fathers and for those with masculine mothers. These findings generally parallel those involving the toy choices which are shown in the lower half of the table. These results may suggest that parents of the same sex as the child may cause their sex role preference to be reflected in the child by acting as a same-sex model. The effect of psychological androgeny however, appears opposite for mothers and fathers. Psychologically androgenous fathers tend to have more feminine boys and more masculine daughters. Psychologically androgenous mothers instead tend to have more masculine sons and more feminine daughters. This same pattern was observed in the parental toy evaluations in Table 13. The explanation again appears to be that it is the masculine mothers who are most individualistic (a "masculine" trait) in encouraging non-traditional sex roles.

While these results are based on a limited sample and may only be





TABLE 15

SEX ROLE PREFERENCES OF CHILDREN BY PARENTAL SEX ROLE PREFERENCES

| DEPENDENT MEASURE                            | Child's Sex | Mother's Sex Role Preference |                             | Father's Sex Role Preference |           |                             |           |
|--|-------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
|  |             | Masculine                    | Psychologically Androgenous | Feminine                     | Masculine | Psychologically Androgenous | Feminine  |
|  |             |                              |                             |                              |           |                             |           |
| Mean Brown It Scale Score (of 8; > 4 = male) | Boy         | 6.5 (n=4)                    | 7.3 (n=3)                   | 6.3 (n=4)                    | 6.9 (n=6) | 3.0 (n=1)                   | 5.5 (n=4) |
|  | Girl        | 4.5 (n=2)                    | 2.6 (n=5)                   | 2.3 (n=4)                    | 2.6 (n=8) | 5.0 (n=3)                   | (none)    |
| Proportion Choosing a "male" prize toy       | Boy         | .75 (n=4)                    | .33 (n=3)                   | .75 (n=4)                    | .67 (n=6) | 0.0 (n=1)                   | 1.0 (n=4) |
|  | Girl        | .50 (n=2)                    | .20 (n=5)                   | .25 (n=4)                    | .38 (n=8) | 0.0 (n=3)                   | (none)    |



taken as tentative, it is apparent that parental sex preferences are related to childrens' sex role preferences. Given this finding, together with the findings that a.) parental sex role preferences are related to parental toy preferences, and that b.) childrens' toy ownership is related to childrens' sex role preferences, it seems reasonable to conclude that parental selections of toys as gifts to children, play a direct and effective role in communicating parental expectations for their childrens' sex role preferences. A causal role for toy gifts in this process cannot of course be established with the present data.

### III. ISSUES FOR GIFT-GIVING RESEARCH

The two studies presented have explored the communication and socialization functions of gift-giving more thoroughly than the other functions noted. This research suggests that gift selections depend upon the giver's ideal self concept, the nature of the occasion, and the giver's relationship to the recipient. The inclusion of considerations of occasion and relationship characteristics, makes gift-selection a more complex choice act than the selection of comparable products for personal consumption. It is also clear however that there are a number of relevant theoretical perspectives which may be applied to understanding gift-giving behavior. Viewing gift-giving as a means of interpersonal communication suggests the application of theories of social judgement, ingratiation, balance, self concept, and power. In focusing on the communication involved in gifts to children, theories of socialization as well as general theories of learning also become relevant. While the theoretical perspectives just noted focus on the symbolic functions of gift-giving, the process of gift exchange may also be considered using the less symbolic theories of reciprocity and distributive justice in a gift-giving context. Based on both the inherent interest of the subject area and the availability of relevant theoretical



perspectives, gift-giving appears to be an area of consumer behavior which is ripe for research.

In researching consumer gift-giving behavior some of the more interesting questions which we might hope to answer outside of the theoretical framework just noted include these:

1. Are giver perceptions of recipient needs and tastes accurate (veridical perceptions)?
2. Under what situational conditions, and for what types of givers, recipients, and giver-recipient relationships are these perceptions most accurate?
3. Is gift-giving autonomy among children related to feelings of self-worth?
4. Are differences in risk reducing strategies apparent between one-sided and mutual gift exchange occasions?
5. Does more giver satisfaction occur when the giver selects a gift without the aid of hints or suggestions?
6. Are children who receive more gifts than others learning to be more or less generous?
7. Do givers with more positive self-concepts tend to be more generous givers?
8. If gift-giving is generally pleasureable, is gift receiving necessarily unpleasureable, as reciprocity theory would imply?
9. Does expending more effort on gift selection or creation necessarily lead to greater giver satisfaction, or does this merely heighten the effect of recipient feedback about the gift?
10. Is the selection of gifts which require recipient commitment through wearing or displaying the gift, related to the giver's desire to change the recipient?

While these are only a few examples of the issues of interest in consumer gift-giving behavior, they are indicative of the scope of the relevant considerations and the importance of gift-giving behavior in many facets of communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. Furthermore, these issues are specific to the subset of gift-giving to which this report has restricted itself. By also considering gifts to and



from organizations, medical donations, and gifts not directly conveyed to the recipient, the scope of gift-giving research issues is multiplied. Obviously therefore, the opportunities for gift-giving research are abundant.





## FOOTNOTES

\*The author wishes to thank the staff, parents, and children of the Institute for Child Development Preschool at the University of Illinois for their cooperation in "study two" reported in this paper. The preschool is supported by a training grant in child psychology, Public Health Service Grant No. HD0244, from the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development. The author also wishes to thank Steven M. Warshaw who aided in carrying out this project.

<sup>2</sup>As Howard and Sheth (1969) point out, verbal communication is itself "symbolic" and subject to multiple interpretations. However, compared to gift-giving, verbal messages are much more overt in having communication as their primary rationale and their content and structure also benefit from the consensus of accepted usage which allows dictionaries and language manuals. While selected stereotypical gifts may sometimes acquire such formalized meanings (see Hitchings, 1976), most potential gifts suffer substantial communicational ambiguity.

<sup>3</sup>Since religion may affect gift-giving occasions, it is useful to note that approximately 15 percent of the sample claimed Judaism as their primary religious belief and between 6 and 7 percent claimed to be agnostic or atheistic. Based on previous studies in the communities involved, both figures seem to be reasonable approximations of the population.

<sup>4</sup>For expositions of three-mode factor analysis, see Tucker (1964) and Vavra (1972).



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