


# Why Certain Gifts Are Great to Give but Not to Get: A Framework for Understanding Errors in Gift Giving

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## Abstract

We propose that many giver-recipient discrepancies in the gift-giving literature can be explained, at least partially, by the notion that when evaluating the quality of a gift, givers primarily focus on the moment of exchange, whereas recipients primarily focus on how valuable a gift will be once owned. In this review, we summarize the variety of errors givers make and, more critically, position these errors within our newly developed framework. We hope this framework will provide a single point of reference for those interested in gift giving and spur novel predictions about the causes and consequences of miscalibrated gift choice.

## Keywords

gift giving, self-other decision-making, prosocial behavior

A prominent finding in social psychology is that people often err in their predictions of others' preferences (e.g., Hsee & Weber, 1997). In recent years, this self-other mismatch has been well documented in the domain of gift giving. Though gifts are typically given with the best of intentions, there can be major consequences for giving ill-chosen gifts. For instance, recipients become annoyed if a gift does not match their preferences, potentially weakening the relationship between giver and recipient (Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun, & Sinclair, 2008). At best, a poorly chosen gift will irritate the recipient, and at worst, it may drive the giver and recipient apart (Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999).

That said, research in this area lacks a unifying explanation for why such errors occur. In this review, we propose that many giver-recipient discrepancies can be at least partially explained by the notion that when evaluating the quality of a gift, givers primarily focus on the moment of the exchange, whereas recipients instead mostly focus on how valuable a gift will be throughout their ownership of it. Givers and receivers have different perspectives on what makes a gift "valuable": Givers interpret that to mean that the gift will make the recipient feel delighted, impressed, surprised, and/or touched when he or she receives and opens it, whereas recipients find value in factors that allow them to better utilize and

enjoy a gift during their subsequent ownership of it. Therefore, givers will prize aspects of a gift that make it seem optimal when initially gifted (e.g., surprisingness, desirability), whereas recipients will appreciate aspects of a gift that make it better to own (e.g., usefulness, versatility; see Fig. 1). These errors can be more generally categorized as based on giver-recipient asymmetries in evaluations of particular (a) aspects of the gift, (b) aspects of the giver, or (c) aspects of the recipient.

In what follows, we review literature empirically documenting errors that gift givers make (see Table 1), suggest gift-giving rules that givers are trying to satisfy when choosing gifts, and discuss how our framework can explain many, if not all, of these errors.

## Gift-Giving Errors

### *Aspects of the gift*

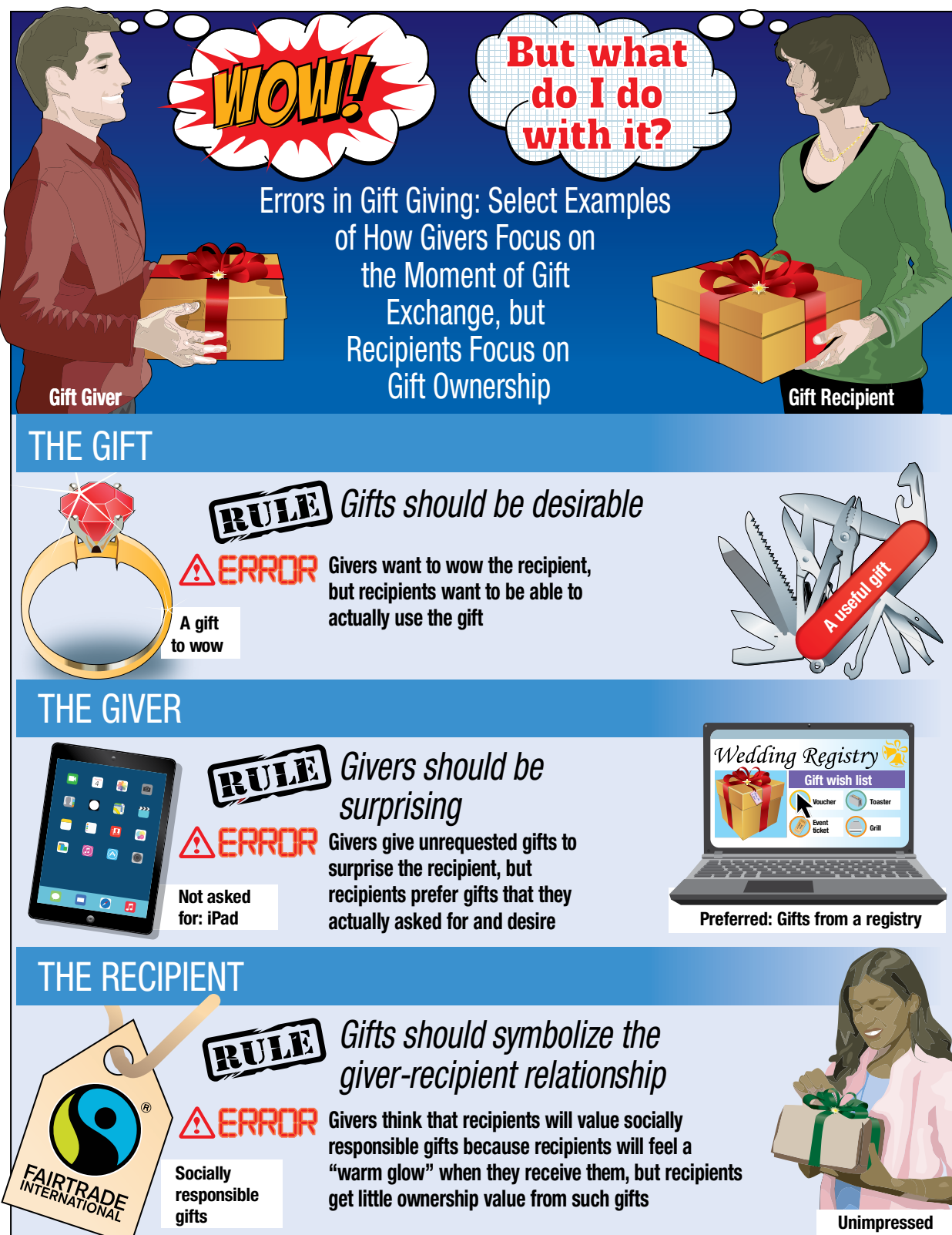
Givers often try to ensure that their gifts meet certain criteria that will make them seem like "good gifts"; these

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**Fig. 1.** Infographic illustrating errors in gift giving, with select examples showing how givers focus on the moment of gift exchange but recipients focus on gift ownership.

**Table 1.** Giver-Recipient Discrepancies in Gift Preferences

	Gift-giving rule	Preferences		Gift-exchange thought processes	
		Givers	Recipients	Givers	Recipients
Aspects of the gift	Gifts should be desirable.	Desirable gifts	Feasible gifts	Desirable gifts dazzle when opened.	Feasible gifts provide sure value.
	Gifts should be enjoyed immediately.	Lesser but complete gifts	Better-quality, even if incomplete, gifts	Lesser, complete gifts are appreciated when opened.	Better-quality, incomplete gifts will eventually provide the most value.
	Gifts should be tangible.	Material gifts	Experiential gifts	Material gifts elicit an immediate positive response.	Experiences provide more overall happiness.
Aspects of the giver	Givers should surprise their recipients.	Unrequested gifts	Requested gifts	Unrequested gifts will surprise.	Personally requested gifts are more valuable.
	Givers should be generous.	Thoughtful and expensive gifts	Thoughtfulness and price are unimportant	Thoughtful and expensive gifts signal generosity.	Value does not always correspond with thought or price.
Aspects of the recipient	Gifts should reflect their recipients.	Specific and unique gifts	General gifts and gifts that reflect most important personal interests	Gifts reflecting specific and unique interests signal knowledge of the recipient.	Versatile gifts and gifts that reflect important personal interests provide the most value.
	Gifts should symbolize the giver-recipient relationship.	Socially responsible gifts	Traditional gifts	The recipient will feel a “warm glow” when receiving a socially responsible gift.	A socially responsible gift provides little ownership value.

criteria may or may not be valued by recipients. Studies exploring these errors have investigated how certain qualities of gifts, such as desirability and tangibility, are valued by givers and recipients.

#### **Rule: Gifts should be desirable**

*Existing findings.* To many givers, a “good gift” is highly desirable. Thus, givers choose gifts that are fun but less useful than recipients would like (Williams & Rosenzweig, 2016) and gifts that are desirable (i.e., high in quality) but not particularly feasible (i.e., easy to use), even though recipients prefer more feasible but less desirable gifts (Baskin, Wakslak, Trope, & Novemsky, 2014). Existing literature suggests this occurs because givers consider gifts through an abstract lens, whereas recipients construe gifts more concretely (Baskin et al., 2014).

*Current framework.* When a giver chooses a highly desirable gift, he or she is hoping that the recipient will be dazzled upon opening it. In contrast, recipients care greatly about their ability to use or enjoy the gift and prefer more feasible or useful gifts. In other words, givers choose desirable but not feasible gifts because they seem likely to be more appreciated during the gift exchange.

However, the recipient is likely to be less satisfied in the end with a gift whose value is hard to extract.

#### **Rule: Gifts should be enjoyed immediately**

*Existing findings.* Givers frequently choose gifts that can be enjoyed as soon as they are opened, choosing, for instance, a smaller bouquet of roses in bloom over a larger bouquet of buds (Yang & Urminsky, 2015) or a less expensive but fully paid blender over an equal-value deposit toward a top-of-the-line blender (Kupor, Flynn, & Norton, 2016). Recipients, however, are willing to wait for the higher-quality gift. This may occur because givers perceive complete gifts as more thoughtful, whereas recipients think better-quality gifts are more thoughtful (even when incomplete; Kupor et al., 2016).

*Current framework.* Partial but higher-quality gifts may not be greatly appreciated when initially received, but they provide more value when they are ready for consumption. In other words, givers view partial gifts negatively because of their lower ability to generate an immediate positive reaction. In contrast, recipients prefer higher-quality gifts, regardless of completeness, because they will eventually provide the most value.

**Rule: Gifts should be tangible**

*Existing finding.* Givers typically opt for material gifts, like an iPad or a sweater, but recipients derive more happiness from experiential gifts, like tickets to a basketball game or a nice dinner out. Givers may opt for material gifts because they require less knowledge of the recipient (Goodman & Lim, 2014).

*Current framework.* Experiences are usually consumed after an exchange, whereas material gifts are frequently ready for use as soon as they are opened. Further, material gifts are more likely to be something that can be given to and opened by the recipient. To that end, givers are likely to favor material gifts because of their immediate utility. In contrast, experiential gifts, though actually preferred by recipients, are avoided by givers because they seem less likely to elicit a strong positive response at the moment of exchange.

**Aspects of the giver**

Givers hold certain beliefs about how they should act when choosing and giving gifts. These inputs by the giver, such as the thought put into and price paid for a gift, are valued differently by givers and recipients.

**Rule: Givers should surprise their recipients**

*Existing finding.* One mismatch occurs when givers predict recipients' appreciation of explicitly requested (e.g., a gift on a gift registry) versus unrequested (e.g., a gift thought of by the giver) gifts. Givers think recipients appreciate both kinds of gifts equally; however, gift recipients are more appreciative of gifts they request, because they think such gifts are more thoughtful (Gino & Flynn, 2011).

*Current framework.* Givers value that an unrequested gift can potentially surprise the recipient upon being opened and demonstrate that the giver actively thought of, and searched for, a gift. That is, givers choose unrequested gifts believing that even though a requested gift clearly matches the recipient's preferences, an unrequested gift will likely result in a particularly positive gift exchange. Recipients, on the other hand, favor gifts they explicitly request, because such gifts are certain to match their preferences.

**Rule: Givers should be generous**

*Existing findings.* Givers err in predicting how much recipients value the resources expended to obtain a gift. Givers believe the amount of thought they put into a gift plays a significant part in the recipient's assessment of that gift, when the gift's absolute quality matters more. Givers know how they chose a gift, but recipients need a "trigger" to consider the giver's efforts (Zhang & Epley,

2012). Givers and recipients also differ in the importance they place on a gift's price. Givers think that more expensive gifts seem more thoughtful; recipients do not (Flynn & Adams, 2009).

*Current framework.* Thoughtfulness and price are not necessarily predictive of how much a recipient will use or enjoy a gift after it is opened, and thus will not be valued by the recipient. Nonetheless, givers are more influenced by aspects that could impress the recipient upon the gift's being opened, such as its price.

**Aspects of the recipient**

Givers often try to express something about the recipient in their gift choices, including their knowledge of the recipient and the importance of their relationship with him or her. Recipients do not always appreciate these expressions, however, which leads to mismatches in gift preferences.

**Rule: Gifts should reflect their recipients**

*Existing findings.* Givers prefer to give gifts that are tailored to reflect the recipient, like a gift card to the recipient's favorite store, whereas recipients prefer more versatile gifts, like a Visa gift card that can be used at any store. This may be because givers focus on recipients' distinctive traits, whereas recipients are perhaps more aware of their numerous, diverse wants and needs (Steffel, Williams, & LeBoeuf, 2015). Givers also sometimes pass up gifts that are best in an absolute sense to instead select gifts reflecting a recipient's unique traits. For instance, a Pittsburgh resident who loves the Pittsburgh Steelers but also likes the Buffalo Bills might receive a Bills jersey from his neighbor, who knowingly chooses it based not on the recipient's strongest preference but on his unique (relative to other Pittsburgh residents) preference for the Bills. Giving unique gifts to individual recipients feels more thoughtful to the giver (Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2014) but ultimately can provide the recipients with inferior gifts.

*Current framework.* Gifts reflecting the unique characteristics of a recipient may initially impress the recipient upon being opened because they signal that the giver knows the recipient well. Givers, therefore, tailor gifts to the recipient because they hope that the recipient will feel particularly great when he or she opens the gift. Recipients, however, are more concerned with their ability to get value out of a gift and thus appreciate more versatile and more preferred gifts.

**Rule: Gifts should symbolize the recipient's relationship with the giver**

*Existing findings.* Gift givers overestimate how much recipients, especially more distant friends, appreciate socially responsible gifts. Givers believe that gifts like

donations to charities on behalf of the recipient will be more highly appreciated than they are because givers focus too heavily on the idea that the charitable gift symbolizes commitment to their relationship, especially for friends they do not yet know well (Cavanaugh, Gino, & Fitzsimons, 2015). Though the notion of signaling commitment to a relationship certainly involves both givers and recipients, givers incorrectly believe that recipients prioritize a gift's potential to reflect or even strengthen their relationship with the giver, when they actually prefer gifts they can personally use and enjoy.

*Current framework.* Givers think about the “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1990) that they expect recipients to feel about the gift (and the giver) when they open the gift. However, socially responsible gifts provide the recipient with little ownership value, and thus recipients are less enthusiastic about them than traditional gifts.

## Discussion and Future Directions

Our framework can at least partially explain many gift-giving mismatches. Of course, empirical investigations into the predictions and assumptions we have made are necessary. There is already work in progress demonstrating that givers overly value recipients' affective reactions (Yang & Urminsky, 2015) and that the framework described here explains why givers prefer hedonic items and recipients utilitarian items (Williams & Rosenzweig, 2016), but a number of hypotheses remain to be tested. We touch on some below.

### Psychological process

One important task is determining the exact psychological process leading givers to focus primarily on gift exchange rather than gift ownership. At least three possibilities are plausible:

1. Givers believe that recipients truly prefer gifts that make for a pleasant exchange over gifts that provide value throughout their ownership; thus, they think they are making good choices.
2. Givers realize that recipients prefer gifts that provide value throughout their ownership but opt to give gifts that make for a pleasant exchange to satisfy their own motives, like the desire to appear to be a “great gift giver”; thus, they intentionally choose suboptimal gifts.
3. Givers are so focused on the exchange that they fail to consider how good a gift will be throughout the recipient's ownership of it and do not realize they are making an error (a form of focalism; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000).

We do not attempt here to answer the question of which of these (or other) scenarios is most likely, but it is certainly worth addressing.

### New predictions

The present framework prompts a number of new predictions about gift-giving behavior. It suggests that context might exacerbate giver-recipient discrepancies—for example, givers may err more when selecting gifts that they know will be opened in public (e.g., birthday gifts) rather than in private (e.g., wedding gifts). The messages gifts send should matter, too: A giver and a recipient may differ in their evaluations of a gift meant to help the recipient meet personal goals, like a gym membership or a Fitbit. Givers may worry that these gifts will make for an awkward exchange and avoid them, but recipients may appreciate such gifts more than expected because of their usefulness and relevance to their goals. Givers may look for ways to expand or extend the moment of exchange, such as by opting for multiple, smaller gifts rather than a single, larger gift. The segregation of gifts may cause them to be treated as multiple “gains” and therefore increase their valuation at the exchange (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Givers may also look for other ways to make gifts impressive when they are opened, perhaps choosing risky gifts with the potential to be “home runs” (e.g., a vacation to Alaska), when recipients may instead prefer safer options that are sure to give them value (e.g., a vacation to Hawaii). Finally, recipients may become less satisfied with a gift over time. Since mismatches generally occur because givers underweight what owning the gift will be like for the recipient, the inaptness of a gift may become more apparent as the moment of exchange becomes more distant.

### Giving better gifts

Given the widespread nature of giver-recipient mismatches, how can givers choose better gifts? The obvious answer is that givers should choose gifts based on how valuable they will be to the recipient throughout his or her ownership of the gift, rather than how good a gift will seem when the recipient opens it. This recommendation is most likely to help if givers are unaware of their misplaced focus. However, if givers err because they are acting selfishly, this advice may be less helpful, and finding ways to allow them to impress the recipient in ways that are separate from the gift itself may be more effective. Finally, if focalism underlies these types of errors, then perhaps advising givers to put themselves in their recipient's shoes will help them consider how gifts might provide value to the recipient once the wrapping paper comes off. People exchange gifts to strengthen relationships and make each

other happy but do not always manage to meet those goals. We hope our review prompts researchers, and givers, to explore ways to make recipients happier with the gifts they receive.

### Recommended Reading

- Otnes, C., & Beltramini, R. F. (Eds.). (1996). *Gift giving: A research anthology*. Madison, WI: Popular Press. A collection of essays that investigate what motivates gift exchanges, how values and culture influence gift giving, and how a gift should be defined and provide suggestions for future research.
- Prinin, E. (2008). How we see ourselves and how we see others. *Science*, 320, 1177–1180. A review of the self-other literature that highlights the fact that people's view of themselves is strongly influenced by their internal emotions and cognitions, whereas their perception of others is largely influenced by what they can observe externally.
- Yang, A., & Urminsky, O. (2015). (See References). A series of studies demonstrating that gift givers derive pleasure from the affective reaction of recipients, whereas recipients value gifts that improve their overall welfare.

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The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### Author Note

Jeff Galak, Julian Givi, and Elanor F. Williams contributed equally to the writing of this manuscript and should be considered as joint first authors. Author order has been determined alphabetically.

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