

## Heirlooms, Nikes and Bribes: Towards a Sociology of Things

**Aafke Komter**

Department of General Science  
Utrecht University

**ABSTRACT** How do things come to embody meaning? In much anthropological and sociological writings, things have mainly been considered in two ways: either as commodities or as gifts. Correspondingly, people's relationships to things and to other people seem to fall in two broad categories, often regarded as mutually exclusive: either as impersonal, economic or market relationships with strangers, or as personal gift relationships with intimates, friends or relatives. The 'social life of things', however, is more varied. Drawing on Alan Page Fiske's theory of the four fundamental models of human relationship, four ways in which people may relate to each other and to things are distinguished; these models are applied to empirical data from a study on the giving of gifts in the Netherlands. Complications may occur when the parties to the transaction do not share the same frame of mind with respect to each other and to the things that are being transferred. Things may have conflicting social lives.

**KEYWORDS** commodities, consumption, exchange, gifts, material culture, things

Things are things, and people are people. Things are mute and inert, people are speaking and acting with each other, and are involved in the construction of shared meanings. This is a common way to conceive of the distinction between people and things in Western society. This view is often contrasted with non-Western societies, where things are supposed to possess a life of their own (cf. Appadurai 1986). In some tribal societies described by Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le don* (1923), things were considered as animated, or having a spirit ('*hau*'), communicating messages from the person originally in possession of the thing, to its recipient. The spirit of the thing would not come to rest until it was returned to the place where its giver was born. In this message Mauss's famous threefold obligation – to give, to receive, and to give in return – was succinctly symbolised.

The opposition between Western and non-Western conceptions of things is clearly too simplistic. Many people will recognise that things may have a personal, often highly idiosyncratic meaning to them. For example, it is impossible for some people to throw anything away: for them the things with which they have surrounded themselves, represent inalienable and highly cherished memories. We

may also think of lovers, who endow each other with little shells or stones found on the beach, symbolising their affection. Small children suck at pieces of cloth, taking them to their bed and cherishing them as if they were animated. They get attached to their first teddy bears, sometimes developing such strong bonds that they still take them to their bed as grown-ups. Objects may be worshipped – the grail, religious items like icons – or destroyed – burning letters, smashing pottery, throwing jewellery away – activities which show that strong emotions may be connected to objects.

It is clear, then, that things may embody different kinds of *personal* meaning, varying between attachment and aggression. In this paper, I will focus on things as depositories of *social* and *cultural* meaning. Things are a way to define who we are to ourselves and to others (Carrier 1995). Things convey symbolic messages, referring to the nature and (actual or desired) status of the relationship between human beings. Things are ‘tie-signs’: signs of social bonds (Goffman 1971). There is no meaning inherent in things themselves; the meaning of things derives from human relationships.

Social historians as well as social and economical anthropologists have pointed to the ways in which people inscribe meaning in the forms, the uses and trajectories of things. As Arjun Appadurai argues in his essay *The Social Life of Things* (1986), it is not merely things but things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. Only the analysis of the trajectories of things enables us to interpret ‘the human transactions and calculations that enliven things’ (1986:5).

The main question of this paper is how things, in particular gifts, come to embody meaning within the context of human relationships. Gifts are only one category of things; another important category is that of goods or commodities. There has been a longstanding scientific debate on the contrasts and similarities between gifts and commodities. As the supposedly different meanings of gifts and commodities are at the heart of this debate, it is also pertinent to the question how the meaning of things comes into existence. The way gifts take on meaning cannot be studied, therefore, without taking the broader category of commodities into account as well. Three related areas of scientific interest seem to be relevant here: the sociological and anthropological approaches to the giving of gifts (for example, Caplow 1982; Cheal 1988; Weiner 1992; Komter 1996a; Frow 1997), the anthropological study of material culture (for example, Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Miller 1998), and the multidisciplinary study of consumption and consumer behaviour (for example, McCracken 1990; Miller 1995a; Corrigan 1997). Far from pretending to review the relevant literature in all these areas, I will restrict myself to those contributions that highlight the way things take on social meaning. First, I will go into the nature of gifts and commodities, and focus on the type of social relationships that are supposed to belong to them. Then, I will discuss different explanations emerging from the sociological and anthropological literature of how things become

invested with meaning. In those explanations, surprisingly, an account of the way meaning derives from the nature of social relations seems to be lacking. I will present a model of the basic forms of human relations, derived from Alan Page Fiske's book *Structures of Social Life* (1991); this model may be helpful in categorising the meanings of things as well. This model will then be applied to some empirical data from a study on the giving of gifts in the Netherlands (Komter 1996a, 1996b). Finally, I will present a brief sketch of the complications that may occur when the parties to the transactions do not share the same frame of mind with respect to each other and to the things that are being transferred. The meanings that things have for different people may not harmonise: things may have different, even conflicting, social lives.

### **Gifts, commodities and human relationships**

In our century the dominant way of thinking about patterns of relationships between persons has been through the opposition of the gift and the commodity. Anthropological approaches to ways of exchange have often rested upon the distinction between societies which are characterised by the 'embedded nature of economic acts, as against societies where the economy is relatively unfettered by the social consequences of exchange. In some cases the two economies are juxtaposed as a contemporary dualism ...' (Miller 1995a:272).

In some of the older anthropological and sociological writings gift exchange and commodity transactions are conceptualised as different 'modes of exchange'. The first example is Malinowski's description of the *Kula* gift exchange ceremonials in which he distinguishes a whole range of gifts, differing in the extent to which supposedly altruistic and solidary motives, or more profit-oriented drives are involved (1922). Malinowski assumes the different types of gifts to go along with different types of social relationships. The same idea is reflected in Gouldner's distinction between the norm of reciprocity, based on expectations of returns, and the norm of beneficence, a more altruistically inspired type of giving which may occur, for instance, between parents and their children (1973a and b). Also Sahlins (1972) argues that the spirit of exchange swings from disinterested concern for the other party through mutuality to self-interest. According to Sahlins the nature of social ties is related to the mode of exchange that is preferred. The key variable in the movement from one extreme to the other is kinship distance.

In terms of gifts versus commodities: gift exchange tends to be the most common among people who are relatives, whereas commodity exchange emerges as the kinship distance becomes greater, with complete strangers at the other extreme of the scale. Although these authors analyse gift exchange and commodity transactions as points on a continuum, the idea of some fundamental opposition between the two is at the root of their theories.

The opposition returns in the work of Lewis Hyde (1979:60), for example, in his

statement that ‘a commodity has value and a gift does not. A gift has worth ... You can’t put a price on it.’ Although he recognises that gifts and commodities do not exist in any pure form, he thinks (pp. 66–7) that they operate in fundamentally different ways: ‘Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom.’ The work of Gregory (1982; 1983) is another example. In his view things as commodities and things as gifts cover quite different kinds of relations between objects as well as persons (1983:104):

Commodity exchange is an exchange between alienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between the objects transacted, whereas gift exchange is an exchange of inalienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between the subjects transacting.

According to the logic that opposes gifts and commodities, people’s relationships to things and to other people seem to fall in two broad categories, regarded as mutually exclusive: either as impersonal, economic or market relationships with strangers, or as personal gift relationships with intimates, friends or relatives.

Recently, the dualistic tendency has been challenged (see, for example, Miller 1995a, 1995b; Davis 1996; Frow 1997). It has been suggested, for instance, that the distinction between gifts and commodities is predominantly a matter of degree. Inalienability is not exclusively a gift characteristic, and goods are not necessarily alienable objects, as Gregory assumes. Appadurai (1986) demonstrates that both in monetarised and in less monetarised societies goods may pass in and out of situations of alienability. Goods may acquire cultural meaning in the course of time, they may have a ‘cultural biography’. Commodities may become decommodified (a piece of jewellery taking on personal significance and value) and non-commodities may become commodified (selling one’s blood, selling information, cf. Corrigan 1997).

There are other parallels in form between gift exchange and the circulation of commodities. By being stretched out in time, gift exchange disguises the fact that, in the long run, every gift is ‘repaid’ with a counter-gift. According to Bourdieu (1990 [1980]) the subjective experience of the freedom to give can go together with the objective necessity or obligation of returning a gift. In modern societies, the exchange of gifts as well as commodities is characterised by ritual, social and symbolic aspects. Whereas this may be obvious for gift exchange (cf. Komter 1996a, 1996b), the ritual elements in the consumption of goods and in market transactions should not be underplayed. One might think of modern consumption rituals (ritual occasions of collective consumption of food and drinks; cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1979), the ritual of trying to outbid each other at auctions, forms of modern *potlatching* such as conspicuous consumption among the rich and the powerful

(Veblen 1934 [1899]), or customs of doing big business in ‘disguised settings’ such as concert halls or restaurants, where other, cultural and social aims – listening to music, having a meal together – are used to cover up economic transactions.

The tendency to consider some things as commodities and others as gifts, is a historical as well as a cultural construction, as Carrier (1995) argues in his book *Gifts and Commodities*. On the one hand, the distinction between the two concepts relates to the development of industrial and commercial capitalism and the corresponding changes in forms of production over the past three centuries. On the other hand, the growing impersonal alienation of the realm of economy is also part of our Western culture, where people have come to construct a marked opposition between the sphere of personal and family relationships, and the impersonal and utilitarian domain of work.

From his review of recent anthropological contributions Frow (1997:124) concludes that ‘there is no single form of “the gift”, and no pure type either of the gift economy or of the commodity economy ... There is nothing inherent in objects that designates them as gifts; objects can almost always follow varying trajectories. Gifts are precisely not *objects* at all, but transactions and social relations.’

### **The way things acquire meaning**

Traditionally the meaning of gift exchange has been conceived in functional terms: the mutual giving of gifts serves to bring about social relationships which, in their turn, are the cement of a common culture (cf. Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1923). This view can be recognised in more recent contributions as well. For example, Titmuss (1970:81–2), in his study of blood donation, describes the meaning of giving as follows: ‘The forms and functions of giving ... may reflect, sustain, strengthen or loosen the cultural bonds of the group ...’ In the same vein Cheal (1988:40) describes the meaning of gift exchange as being a moral economy in which ‘the social significance of individuals is defined by their obligations to others, with whom they maintain continuing relationships. It is the extended reproduction of these relationships that lies at the heart of a gift economy, just as it is the extended reproduction of financial capital which lies at the heart of a market economy.’

Gifts, like the larger category of things, however, are not merely or mainly to be comprehended by their functional meaning, as this is but one of its multifarious meanings. Neither is the Marxist terminology for analysing things in terms of their use-value and exchange-value adequate when it comes to determine the complex symbolic – cultural, social, personal – character of meaning systems attached to things. As Appadurai said, it is only things-in-motion, the trajectory of things between human beings, that enable us to understand their meaning. For a better understanding of the different meanings of things it is important to know *how* things become invested with meaning: which economic, cultural, social and psychological

processes are involved and how are these substantiated in things? To what extent is the trajectory of things – their movements between human beings – determining the meaning of things?

One possible answer is that the social order prevalent in a certain society is reflected in the classification of things. Barthes (1973), for instance, argues that commodities act as a kind of ‘myths’ supporting the existing ideology which favours those who are the most powerful in society. Similarly, Baudrillard (1988 [1970]) links goods and consumption to the overall economic order. Consumption is not tied to individuals but to the larger system of objects. People’s needs are not so much located in the individual person but in the practices of marketing and advertising. Manufacturers deliberately attempt to shape consumer behaviour through advertising. The sector of production has ‘total dictatorship’ over individual needs, according to Baudrillard. Whether the sector of production alone has, in fact, such overwhelming power is doubtful; it is undeniable, however, that advertising, marketing and fashion are important instruments in assigning meaning to things. Corrigan (1997) describes how patterns and ways of consumption have changed over the centuries, how people’s taste has been moulded through the spread of advertising and marketing, and how fashion has drawn more and more goods into its sphere of influence.

Bourdieu’s work (1984 [1979]) on the links between social class and the practices of consumption is another example of explaining the meaning of things by their role in sustaining existing social and economic structures: people distinguish themselves from each other by adopting a certain lifestyle in which certain things or goods function as markers of their (aspired) status (such as paintings, books, objects d’art). Acts of consumption, in his view, reproduce social difference because the consumption of some goods is considered a sign of distinction while the consumption of others signifies a lack of distinction.

In a similar way McCracken analyses the meaning of goods in terms of the cultural categories of a certain society. Categories of class, gender, age and occupation may be represented in goods as many empirical studies have demonstrated: ‘the order of goods is modelled on the order of culture’ (McCracken 1990:75). But the process also works the other way around: goods not only substantiate cultural categories, but goods so charged ‘help make up the culturally constituted word ... In short, goods are both the creations and the creators of the culturally constituted world’ (p. 77). While cultural categories act as the source of meaning to consumer goods (often using advertising and fashion as their medium), according to McCracken there is another set of instruments that transfers meaning from the consumer good to the consumer, namely rituals or forms of symbolic action. McCracken distinguishes four different types of ritual: exchange, possession, grooming and divestment rituals. Christmas and birthdays are the most common examples of exchange rituals. Possession rituals become visible in people spending time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off or photographing their

new possessions. The purpose of grooming rituals is to insure that special and perishable properties resident in certain clothes, hair styles or looks, are made to live in the consumer; they allow the consumer to ‘freshen’ the properties he or she draws from goods (for example, expressed in people’s dressing up in their ‘going out’ rituals). Divestment rituals, finally, are used to erase goods of meaning, for example, meaning associated with the previous owner of the good, and to install personal meaning (for example, cleaning and redecorating a newly purchased home).

The explanations presented thus far refer to economic and social structures, advertising and marketing, the ideology cementing existing power hierarchies, cultural categories like class and gender, and the different types of rituals people are using when dealing with things. Interestingly, explanations in terms of the embeddedness of things in trajectories between persons, are lacking. This is striking in view of the idea explicitly adopted by many authors that it is the trajectory of things between human beings that installs their meaning (Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; Frow 1997). The context of human relations will therefore be my focus in what follows.

#### **Four different types of social relationship**

Drawing on a broad range of classical and modern work in anthropology, sociology and psychology, Alan Page Fiske (1991) develops an encompassing theory of the basic psychological motivations underlying social life. Human activities as diverse as arranging a marriage, performing religious rituals, making choices, judging what is morally good or wrong, or dealing with things, can be ordered in four fundamental models: ‘community sharing’, ‘authority ranking’, ‘equality matching’ and ‘market pricing’. Integrating ethnographic, comparative and experimental research with classical theory, Fiske demonstrates that people use different combinations and permutations of these models to shape their own identity, their motives and their norms, to structure the way they relate to their environment, and to regulate their social roles and the way they participate in groups and institutions. These models also enable people to make sense of the way others behave towards them and to interpret their motives and intentions. The four relational models not only orient people in different ways to other people, they also determine people’s relationships to nature – plants, animals – and to material objects or things. Fiske states (1991:51): ‘People can use each of the four fundamental models to organise transfers of material and nonmaterial goods and services and to provide obligatory or ideal standards for such transactions.’

According to Fiske *homo economicus* assumptions are predominant in many social science theories, from psychological learning theories, economically inspired game theories in political science, to sociological equity and anthropological exchange theories. As against this monolithic tendency, he offers illustrations from

Western and non-Western cultures as well as from everyday life, in which 'sharing', 'ranking', 'matching' and 'pricing' behaviours come to the fore. His hypothesis, supported by abundant cross-cultural, ethnographic illustrations, is that these behaviours are universal, 'being the basis for social relations among all people in all cultures and the essential foundation for cross-cultural understanding and intercultural engagement' (1991:25).

*Communal sharing* is regarded as a relationship of equivalence in which people attend to group membership, while the individuality and separate identity of persons is not very marked. Key words are identification, care, solidarity and friendship. The experience of belonging to and identification with the collectivity is primordial. The English terms of 'kind', 'kindness', and 'kin', having a common Indo-European root, capture most of the features of communal sharing: 'it is a relationship based on duties and sentiments generating kindness and generosity among people conceived to be of the same kind, especially kin' (1991:14).

In community sharing things are mainly exchanged on the basis of feelings of connectedness to other people, and of an orientation to the maintenance and quality of human relationships. What one gives is not dependent on what one has received, but springs from one's perception of other people's needs. In these cases, the things that are given will often be food, care or services. Another category of giving within this model is not so much based on need, but on identification with other people. An important characteristic of things given in these cases is their sentimental value: who wore it or used it, to whom are you connected by means of these things? One may think of heirlooms, keepsakes and any other objects which symbolise precious memories. In all these examples, things are markers of community.

In *authority ranking*, the social relationship is characterised by asymmetry and inequality. People construe each other as differing in social importance or status. The highest ranking people in a social relationship have often the prerogative of being accorded the initiative in social action, being the first who are allowed to make choices or to utter a preference. Those in high rank are more salient by getting more attention compared to their inferiors. Subordinates believe that their subordination is legitimate (although they may come to resist their subordination at some time); purely coercive power in which people are dominated by force or threat is more often the exception than the rule in authority ranking relationships.

Within the authority ranking model exchange is motivated by a (conscious or unconscious) desire to emphasise one's own position of status or power within a power hierarchy. The perception of other people's relative power is an important factor in the selection of persons with whom one decides to transact. Power, fame, prestige and merit are regarded as the most relevant criteria within social relationships. Valuable things are transacted with those high in the power hierarchy, whereas sops are good enough for those in lower positions. In contrast to the community model, the authority-ranking model promotes also showing and exposing valuable

objects, in addition to transacting or giving such items to other people. Illustrations are conspicuous consumption, the showing of prestige items, or symbols of rank and status. Clothes may function to symbolise status or group membership (think of children forcing their parents to buy exclusively branded articles like Nike shoes, or Levi jeans for them). For adult men cars are often symbols of status, power, virility and sportsmanship. Women's jewellery seems to perform similar functions. In this model, things possessed (and exposed) or transferred are markers of superiority in power relations.

*Equality matching* refers to egalitarian relationships between peers. People have distinct identities, but are, in other respects, each other's equals. People share with each other, contribute to each other, and influence each other equally. In relationships of this type people have reciprocal exchange patterns, in which *quid pro quo* is the prevailing motivation. Rights, duties or actions are conceived as balancing each other. People are interchangeable in the sense that it does not matter who gets or gives which share or who takes which turn, because everyone is equal and things come out even.

The equality matching model orients exchange in such a way that nobody benefits or loses disproportionately. Considerations in exchange are neither influenced by need, nor by merit, status or power. The items exchanged can often be aligned, weighted or otherwise compared, which enables the participants to achieve equality by concrete operations of matching. Things exchanged in equality matching relationships are tokens of balance.

In *market pricing* the relationship is dominated by values derived from the market. Rational choices and utility considerations determine how and when people will interact with others. People give and get in proportion to a common standard, reflecting market-pricing values (money, time or utility). Market pricing and equality matching may be conflated or confused, when the profit-oriented element in *quid pro quo* reasoning gets too much emphasis. There is, however, a clear difference: in market pricing, unlike commodities are exchanged in proportion to their market value, whereas in equality matching, the same or equivalent things are exchanged.

People's main preoccupation in exchange within the market pricing model is: do I benefit from the transaction, do the costs involved outweigh the profits? People's relationships to others are instrumental and often characterised by competition and struggle. One gives to those from whom one may expect some direct or future benefit. Things are tokens of utility or material (monetary) value.

It is important to bear in mind that the distinction between the models is analytical in kind. Actual interpersonal relationships will in most cases be built out of a combination of these four basic psychological models. People use these models in the same way as they use grammatical rules, without necessarily being able to describe them reflectively, or even being aware of their existence. According to Fiske

(1991:25): ‘My hypothesis is that these models are *fundamental*, in the sense that they are the lowest or most basic-level “grammars” for social relations.’

Fiske emphasises that the four models are not in any intrinsic way related to specific domains, as the work of some anthropologists had suggested. Whereas both Malinowski and Sahlins presume that kinship distance is the primordial factor in determining the mode of exchange, Fiske argues that this is not necessarily the case: the same four patterns may emerge in *any* type of social relationship and in *any* domain, whether it be work, decision making, the meaning of time, social influence, the constitution of groups, the experience of self and identity, moral judgement or dealing with things. Communal sharing may be the most typical within-group form of transaction, while exchanges between groups may often take the form of equality matching. Fiske’s theory allows for other possibilities, although he does not reflect explicitly on these himself. For example, authority patterns, equality and market considerations may creep into interpersonal relationships. We might think here of sexually exploitative relationships, or of modern spouses or partners who, in the spirit of equality, share rights and duties in work and leisure, or who, like participants in market exchange, bargain meticulously about the division of household chores. Inversely, the community mode of relationship may penetrate the domain of the market and of institutional relationships, for example, when teachers or psychiatrists have love affairs with their pupils or patients, or when clients start having a personal relationship with prostitutes. That community is not necessarily restricted to the sphere of close kin and intimate friends is also exhibited in public charity behaviour, in forms of empathic involvement with strangers-in-need, in situations in which people care disinterestedly for others than their own family or intimate friends, or when people offer hospitality to refugees.

A final word on Fiske’s models may be in order. Within and across cultures, social relations are enormously intricate and varied; how can such a general theory as Fiske’s encompass all this? Fiske takes great pains to demonstrate ‘how the set of four simple models can generate complex social relationships, roles, groups, institutions, and societies. People produce complex social relations by applying the models at a variety of levels (lower levels embedded – nested – within higher levels) and concatenating the models together in various combinations’ (1991:139). He offers theoretical as well as empirical answers to the question of how a few universal models can generate the great cultural diversity of social systems that can be seen around the world and throughout history. The bulk of his illustrations are not from Western society but from ethnographic materials on the Moose of Burkina Faso.

In the next section I will apply Fiske’s models to research data from a study on the giving of gifts in the Netherlands, originally conducted by Komter and Schuyt in 1992 (Komter and Schuyt 1993). My aim is to illuminate how a certain category of things, namely gifts, comes to be invested with meaning within the context of different types of human relationships.

## The four basic meanings of gifts

The main research question was: who gives what to whom, and why? A series of questions derived from this main question were posed for several kinds of gifts: presents, money gifts, hospitality (giving food to other persons or letting them stay in one's house), giving care or help, and giving blood or organs. A questionnaire with both precoded and open questions was sent to 3,000 households from all over the country and returned by 513 respondents. (For more details see Komter 1996b; Komter and Vollebergh 1997.) In addition to this questionnaire, ninety-nine respondents from Amsterdam or its surrounding area were interviewed extensively, using in-depth interviews. The same set of questions as in the questionnaire were posed, but more probing on subjective feelings surrounding the giving of gifts was done. An equal number of women and men participated, but there was a slight overrepresentation of the higher educated levels and incomes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis below focuses upon that part of the in-depth interviews, where open answers to the questions about motives and feelings surrounding the giving of gifts were given.

Gifts reflecting *community* are frequently mentioned. They symbolise the unique, highly valued, personal and durable character of relationships. These gifts are not intended to evoke return gifts and seem mainly to be given out of sympathy, love or the need to support another person. A single mother living on social security said:

I gave to my parents my little son's first shoe in silver as a Christmas present. It is a personal present in a double way, I think. Because I know that they have a small table with only silver objects on it, and on that table is also my own first shoe and my sister's first shoe silvered. So, I thought: I add my son's little shoe to that. Because he is their first grandchild.

A young woman mentions another example of such a precious personal gift:

I once asked my parents for my birthday to write in a booklet what had been important for them in their lives. I said that they were entirely free to decide what to write. And I asked them to return the booklet full, a year later for my birthday. And so they did. I valued this present enormously.

Within families money is sometimes given by (grand)parents to their grown-up children, just to offer some momentary relief or to make up for some more structural shortage of money; these gifts are unidirectional: no returns are expected, and even when the gift is given in the form of a loan, the expectation of return is very diffuse and not specified in time. A woman who had received £150 from her parents reported: 'They said: don't worry, we'll pay it for you. So I will return it at some time. If I happen to have some money I may return it, but if I don't for some time to come, well, okay, then I don't pay it back.'

Gifts reflecting *community* are not always material; also help offered

disinterestedly, without any felt obligation, may illustrate community. A female respondent said:

My daughter has to work many hours. Sometimes she has a day off, and then she has that enormous pile of clothes to be ironed. And then I say: come on, I will help you. [*Int.*: Do you feel it as your obligation to help her, or ...?] No. If I would feel it as an obligation, then I wouldn't do it anymore. I simply do it because it's normal.

*Authority*, power and dependency are very common aspects of relationships. However, people are not inclined to interpret gifts in these terms. Nevertheless, the interviews reflect those aspects in different ways. One way to emphasise one's superior position towards another person and the rights and privileges going with it, is to give gifts that symbolise the subordinate position of the other person in a relationship, for example by pointing to the role and tasks to be expected of this person: 'When we were a starting family, I received some aprons from my husband. I wasn't happy with them at all. I was used to something more spiritual ...' Another female respondent told us: 'My mother-in-law gave me some tea towels for my birthday, as if she were saying: your place is in the kitchen.' These answers may be interpreted as reflecting 'displaced meaning' in McCracken's terms (1990). The 'displaced meaning' of goods is that they tell us 'not who we are, but who we wish we were' (McCracken 1990: 117). In a similar way our gifts may indicate whom we wish the other person to be.

Another illustration of authority and power is related to the phenomenon of the *potlatch*. This ceremonial illustrates how the abundant and excessive giving of gifts serves to confer status and prestige on the giver, thereby putting the recipient in a position of almost impossible indebtedness. Marcel Mauss describes how the North-American Indians (among others) went so far as to publicly destroy their wealth instead of giving it away: wasting one's riches as a sign of one's ultimate superiority and power. Apart from the more caricatural examples in our own culture – the swimming pool filled with champagne, the bank manager lighting his cigar with a thousand dollar note – excessive giving as a sign of power is a common practice in Western society. Our interviews revealed many examples of gifts too many, too large or too expensive, putting the recipient in a position of undesired dependency. A male respondent said: 'I gave an expensive present to a woman of whom I expected somewhat more than mere friendship in return, but she didn't feel like that.'

A final example of giving causing dependency in the recipient is giving abundantly to a person who, for some reason, is not able to reciprocate at some future time. A divorced woman living on social security and being severely ill told us how difficult it was for her to accept the lack of balance between gifts given and received by her: 'I think that it is more difficult to receive than to give. It is, uh, yes, it is sometimes a bit of a burden. Then I think: gee, how can I ever make up for that, for all the help that is given to me.'

*Equality* is reflected in the expectations of reciprocity common to giving of most gifts. Although the expectation of a return gift is very often not consciously realised, research results show that the empirical pattern is that of reciprocal giving: most gifts appear to be followed by a return gift at some point in time; moreover, those who give many gifts receive many in return, and those who do not give much, are also the poorest receivers (see Komter 1996b). The underlying motivation is *quid pro quo*, tit for tat, inviting others because they invited us, helping one's neighbour because he helped us, doing odd jobs for friends because you are expected to do these things for friends. A male respondent said:

I repaired the hallstand for her. She is old and, you know, a lamp was out of order, I repaired a plug, that sort of thing. And then the old woman said: here, take this; it belonged to my husband. It's Beethoven; he loved Beethoven, and now this complete Beethoven collection is yours, because you did all those jobs for me ... I appreciated that so much, that she gave her husband's favourite music to me.

Between parents and children reciprocity is often experienced in a special way: adult children often feel obliged to give their parents attention by visiting them or inviting them to dinner, because of what their parents have done for them when they were small children. A young man said:

I regularly visit my mother, every two weeks one afternoon. Then we talk together. She needs attention, she has just left the hospital. I find that okay: she has also given attention, extra attention to me when I needed it. Now she needs it. It is quite normal that I go to visit her.

A Moroccan respondent emphasised the social and cultural necessity of the principle of reciprocity in a more general way: 'Giving and receiving. In our society people have to give and receive. That's how it is. We ourselves receive as well as give. Otherwise life cannot continue, when one is *not* giving and *not* receiving.'

*Market pricing* is shown, for example, in gifts that function as bribes. These gifts are more characteristic of the public sphere than of the sphere of personal relationships, although they are not totally absent there. Examples are gifts given to general practitioners by the pharmaceutical industry, gifts to political parties or politicians, or gifts meant as more or less subtle blackmail. But also in the interaction between friends, lovers, partners and family members instrumentality and calculation, an orientation towards personal benefit may be reflected. A female respondent said: 'My parents-in-law give us always very expensive gifts, as a kind of blackmail to visit them more often, by forcing us to be grateful.' Although an element of authority is clearly present in this quotation – the giver bringing the recipient in a dependent position by giving excessively – the market pricing aspect is revealed in the parents' attempt to 'blackmail' their children.

Professional relationships are based on a market model: services are offered in exchange for money. When an employer gives standard Christmas presents to his

employees, this is not only an expression of his gratitude for performed services but also an attempt to strengthen the employees' commitment to the company. The employer's motives to give this gift remain within the confines of the market model. However, professional relationships may take on other connotations, for instance deriving from the *community* model: university professors giving more than normal attention to their students, barristers receiving more than financial compensation for their services. A quote from a barrister illustrates the difference between 'economic' and 'personal' recompense: 'Yes, giving a present has a different connotation, because people have to pay a bill as well, so if they give something extra, then it has often a personal tinge. It has a different content. The economic value doesn't interest me at all, but it *was* special.'

### Conflicting social lives of things

The potential use of Fiske's typology may be further demonstrated by an attempt to explain the conflicts that may occur in the social life of things. In interpersonal relationships people's interpretations and valuations of things may not correspond with each other. Things may lead conflicting social lives, in that the meanings people attach to them, may not harmonise with each other. Differences between people's attitudes towards things may be the source of disagreeable misunderstandings and serious disputes between them. Conflicts may arise between people when things represent a different value to them or embody differing sets of expectations and different courses of action to be undertaken.

For example, things experienced by one party as markers of *community*, may be considered by another party as mainly interesting because of their *market* value. Examples may be found in (often fierce and long-lasting) family disputes about legacies. We may think of a heirloom which is cherished by one inheritor because of the inalienable and unique memories it embodies for him or her, while another relative emphasises its monetary value and wants to sell it on the market. In fact, what the surviving relatives are quarrelling about, is the symbolic value of the object as experienced by each of them. The inheritor who succeeds in imposing his will to sell the object, is in fact denying and even annihilating the special and personal value the object had for the other relative.

Many other examples present themselves. A thing given out of love or *community* sharing, may be received with indifference and in the long run be reciprocated with a return gift in the spirit of *equality* matching. Humiliating gifts may degrade the recipient and destroy his or her expectations of *community* or *equality*. Our respondents offered abundant examples of such gifts ('aftershave, while I have [had] a beard for twenty-five years', 'a bottle of wine, but I don't drink', 'a dress that was too small', 'perished flowers', 'sour wine', all sorts of monstrous objects, gifts received and passed on, etc.). Gifts given to mark the *authority* of the giver over the recipient, for

example gifts consciously or unconsciously meant to make the recipient somehow dependent upon the giver – a money gift to someone who is less wealthy, or a learned book to someone with only rudimentary education – may be misjudged as signs of love and real personal interest: *community* in Fiske's terms. Even merely *market*-inspired attempts to manipulate or bribe someone, or to induce him or her to do a return favour or service by means of giving a gift, may be misinterpreted as a token of *community*: a sign of personal attention and love. Behind the cheerfully coloured wrapping of the gift, various types of intentions of the giver may be hidden. These may not in the least correspond with the recipient's relational wishes and desires and his or her frame of mind towards the giver.

## Conclusion

The transfer of things may be regarded, in the terms of Appadurai (1986:21), as *tournaments of value*: complex social processes in which the value of things is determined by developing 'a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable "exchange of sacrifices" comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances' (1986:57). These tournaments not only determine the economic value of things, but form also the context in which other symbolic and social meanings of things are developed. The (economic) scarcity of things is only one of the relevant dimensions within exchange relationships. Things may come to embody the values of community, be used to emphasise authority, underscore equality between exchange partners, or express economic or market values. Things do not represent these values in any inherent way. Neither is it merely the form or ceremony of the transaction that renders meaning to a thing. As Carrier states, it is, instead, 'the relationship that exists between the transactors and the relationship between them and what is transacted' (1995:19).

Things, then, far from being static, inert and mute, may be compared with other more current vehicles of meaning such as words. Like words, things are part of an informational system, the meaning of which is created within the context of social interaction and mutual communication between people. Due to the various emotions they invoke in people, and to the contest of values to which these emotions are exposed, things come to embody differential meaning. Like words, things play a dynamic and active role in creating, maintaining, disturbing or destroying human relationships (think of the fatal, poisoned chalice).

As Douglas and Isherwood have observed in their anthropological theory of the consumption of goods (1979:74), things work as markers or classifiers: 'Treat the goods then as markers, the visible bit of the iceberg, which is the whole social process. Goods are used for marking in the sense of classifying categories.' But goods are not only 'used for marking', the coin has another side as well. In McCracken's view goods are both the creators and the creations of the culturally constituted world. Similarly,

one might argue that relationships not only get meaning by means of the trajectory of things, but, inversely, that things derive their meaning from their place and role within relationships. Things are markers as well as marks of relationship.

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*Biographical note:* AAFKE E. KOMTER is Associate Professor, Department of General Social Science, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. In 1986 she was an Associate Member of Balliol College, Oxford. During 1991–92 she was a Visiting Professor at the Graduate School of Social Science, University of Amsterdam. She has published books and articles on power, morality and gender, informal giving, reciprocity and solidarity.

*Address:* Department of General Science, Utrecht University, PO Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands.