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# Gift Giving as Agapic Love: An Alternative to the Exchange Paradigm Based on Dating Experiences

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The social sciences are dominated by a paradigm that views human behavior as instrumental exchange. It is not surprising that consumer research on gift giving has also been dominated by this exchange paradigm. The present research on dating gift giving among American college students finds support for two variants of this paradigm, but it also reveals an alternative paradigm of gift giving as an expression of agapic love. It is suggested that agapic expressiveness is a needed addition to exchange instrumentalism for understanding gift giving and perhaps for understanding consumer behavior in general.

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Sometimes a bottle of perfume,  
Flowers and maybe some lace;  
The men bought Louise ten-cent trinkets.  
Their intentions were easily traced. [RAITT 1977]

Do we give only to get something in return? Anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1925) offered the now widely accepted conclusion that reciprocity motivates gift giving. Within sociology, Homans (1961) proposed social exchange as the process underlying all human interaction. In economics, Gary Becker (1991) is in the forefront of theorists who suggest that choices involving marriage, children, and family are all essentially economic decisions, understandable through exchange forces found in the marketplace. In marketing, Kotler and Levy (1969) and Bagozzi (1975) have promulgated the belief that almost any type of human or institutional intercourse is a form of market exchange. And, in consumer research, Zaltman and Sternthal (1975) have proposed the parallel idea that exchange is the essence of consumer behavior, while Sherry (1983) has made the same argument for consumer gift giving. There might be little cause for concern with such applications of the economic exchange model if exchange were regarded as only one possible paradigm for understanding consumer behavior.<sup>1</sup> But, in a consumer society with such ubiquitous and highly visible market activities as advertising, shopping, banking, and securities trading,

it is easy to lose sight of the possibility that there is more to life than exchange. These views are so pervasive that it may be difficult to imagine that gift giving could be something other than an exchange.

The qualitative work on which this article is based also initially assumed that dating gifts and expenditures could be viewed as elements in an exchange. Indeed, we found support for two exchange models of dating. However, we also found that some of our data did not fit the exchange paradigm at all. On the basis of these cases of nonexchange gift giving, we turned to the romantic love model within the agapic<sup>2</sup> love paradigm and found it to be a useful and necessary addition to exchange, furthering the interpretation of our results. Whereas both exchange models view gift giving as an instrumental act designed to accomplish a goal, agapic love valorizes expressive altruistic gifts that reveal and celebrate powerful emotions.

## GIFT AND EXCHANGE DEFINED

Economic exchange and social exchange are the major models that have dominated the study of gift giving and human interaction within the social sciences over the past 60 years. On the other hand, the romantic love perspective has been largely neglected in social science treatments of gift giving. While the terms "gift" and "exchange" take on different connotations and nuances

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<sup>1</sup>We treat "model" here as a specific theoretical representation within a broader conceptual "paradigm." Thus, economic exchange and social exchange are two models within the broader exchange paradigm.

<sup>2</sup>Unselfish love, from the Greek *agape*.

in each of these three models, they share a denotative core. A gift is defined here as a good or service (including the giver's time, activities, and ideas) voluntarily provided to another person or group (Belk 1979) through some sort of ritual prestation. The stipulation that gifts are voluntary excludes coerced or legally mandated goods and services. Prestation is expanded from its simpler roots and construed as an explicit ritual or ceremony of giving and accepting (Sherry 1983, p. 164), thereby excluding most goods and services shared within households. At a minimum, the verbal indications "Here, this is for you," and "Thanks" can mark such a prestation. At the other extreme, numerous ritual elements may be employed, including the selection of certain times, places, and assemblages of people, the removal of price tags, the addition of wrappings and cards, the taking of photographs, and the use of special clothing, decorations, fragrances, phrases, recitations, and songs (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). In order to encompass all three gift-giving models, this core definition does not require that gifts be given without expectations of compensation, as some definitions insist (Belk 1979, p. 102; Noonan 1984, p. 695).

The term "exchange" implies giving something in return for something received previously or simultaneously, or in anticipation of future returns. By specifying that something is given in return for something else, reciprocity is made the key element of exchange. While we are concerned primarily with dyadic exchange between two people, exchanges potentially include larger gift-giving networks, as when each member of a group draws another member's name and gives a gift to that person. Formal obligations need not be involved for an exchange to occur. Nevertheless, an informal obligation must be felt and a psychological debt incurred when a still-unreciprocated gift is received or else the gift is not part of an exchange relationship.

## METHODS

To examine the role of gifts and expenditures in the dating process, we conducted a qualitative investigation of such practices and their meanings among college students. We began by conducting five preliminary depth interviews with college students concerning their dating behavior, focusing on giving gifts and paying for expenses during a date. We gained other preliminary insights from the results of a dating questionnaire administered to 50 business students (45 of whom were in the classes described below) and from descriptions of first dates and memorable dating gifts obtained from 47 liberal arts students. On the basis of these data we prepared an agenda of topics (see the Appendix) that was given to 30 undergraduates taking a consumer behavior class and 25 graduate business students taking a marketing research class emphasizing qualitative methods. Both groups of students used this agenda as a guide in preparing journals describing their dating

experiences. To provide confidentiality, the students gave computer disks containing these journals to a third party who removed any identifying marks. Because of the sensitivity of disclosing intimate details of their dating lives, and because the data provided became part of the qualitative data pool used in analyses for term projects in each class, these precautions were also essential for encouraging openness in preparing the journals.

We next examined these journals and gave a refined agenda of topics to the 25 graduate students, who used it as a guide in conducting two depth interviews with other students. These graduate students were trained in depth interviewing techniques through readings, in-class exercises, audiotaped and videotaped interviews that they then critiqued, interview role playing, and lectures and discussions. Most of the interviews involved one person of the same sex and one of a different sex from the interviewer, as well as one friend and one stranger. All interviews were audiotaped; one was transcribed, and the other was summarized in field notes along with reflexive accounts assessing the informant's honesty, openness, and apparent biases. While not all interviews were equally successful, the majority of interviewers elicited more intimate details from their informants than are likely to have occurred with greater interviewer-informant demographic disparity or lesser safeguards of confidentiality. While these procedures precluded member checks, given the fallibility of such procedures (Belk 1991) this trade-off was considered well worth making. The result was over 700 pages of text from 110 informants (five preliminary depth interviews, 30 undergraduate student journals, 25 graduate student journals, and 50 interviews by the graduate students). Several journal entries and reflexive accounts revised or challenged class responses to the more superficial dating attitudes questionnaire, which helped us decide to make the deeper and more intimate journals and depth interviews the basis for the present analysis.

Informants ranged in age from 18 to 38, with a mean age of 27. Fifty-eight were men and 52 were women. Approximately one-third were currently or previously married. Approximately 10 percent of the males and 7 percent of the females reported having dated someone of the same sex. The focus in this analysis is on the heterosexual dating accounts. Prior work (e.g., Strange 1980; Walsh 1991) suggests that homosexual dating, especially among men, is sufficiently different from heterosexual dating that it would require a separate analysis. In addition, the analysis excludes 10 informants raised in non-U.S. countries where arranged marriages are the norm, dating is rare, or more formal courtship patterns exist. There were very few informants from minority ethnic groups (important given ethnic differences in U.S. dating patterns; Porter 1979), and slightly less than half the informants were at least nominally Mormon—a religion that encourages early dating, marriage, and childbearing (Mauss 1984; Smith 1985).

We began data analysis by independently exploring all material and were aided by a computer program, WordCruncher, that quickly retrieves text containing researcher-specified words (or synonyms), word combinations, and phrases (see Fielding and Lee 1991; Tesch 1990). Data retrieved were placed in separate files for each conceptual category that emerged and saved for further analysis that we undertook jointly. For class purposes the students were given access to the combined (disguised) data pool using another data retrieval program (ZyIndex). The students in the graduate class were also trained in various qualitative analysis methods. Student analyses in both classes formed a useful background for our own analyses, but their topics were relatively narrow (e.g., nonmaterial gifts; sex as a gift; cross-cultural differences; letters, notes, and cards; gift retention and divestment) and their emphasis was on thick description more than thick interpretation (Denzin 1989). In our own further analyses, the decontextualized data in coding category files were recontextualized by returning to WordCruncher, which allowed us to take the bits and pieces of coded material and place them back in the narratives from which they were drawn. In this way the linkages between concepts and ultimately the linkages between conceptual models derived were able to be established.

Our analysis employed a modified constant comparative method (Glaser 1978; Strauss and Corbin 1990), focusing on the meaning of gifts and gift giving in the dating process. Two examples of meaning categories employed in initial open coding (to open up the analysis through establishing as many conceptual categories as feasible) are gift and exchange (defined earlier) which were subsequently subdivided into smaller categories. Simultaneously, we allowed the data to direct us to the literature in a manner that Strauss and Corbin (1990, pp. 53–55) refer to as grounding reading in data. This reading was critical and deconstructive, as suggested by Denzin (1989). Such reading in turn led us back to the data, where coding categories were refined, subdivided, and extended in recoding. These iterations between text and texts are termed tacking by Geertz (1983; see also Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). We next engaged in axial coding (establishing the relationships between the emergent constructs; Strauss and Corbin 1990), which reconstructed three grounded models of gift giving: economic exchange, social exchange, and (eventually) romantic love. Thus, the resulting models are informed by both the data and prior theory. Finally, we used selective coding (developing an integrated emergent understanding; Strauss and Corbin 1990), incorporating these three models into an overall account of dating gift giving based on key events and chronologies (Patton 1990) as well as time-oriented matrices (Miles and Huberman 1984). In addition to triangulation over informants, methods (journals and interviews), and researchers, we pursued trustworthiness in our analysis by systematically exploring negative cases and revising

understandings continually to account for discrepancies. It was such exceptions that led us to go beyond the exchange models. The iterative and sequential processes of analysis continued through multiple drafts of the current article, also benefiting from editorial reviewers' comments and suggestions. Since we developed our understanding of dating and gift giving through tacking over the course of our research, next we review prior research for each model followed by the portion of our findings that support or amend that model. This presentation strategy roughly parallels the process of discovery. We conclude with a brief integration of these models based on changes in gift giving over the course of the dating relationship.

## GIFT GIVING AS ECONOMIC EXCHANGE

### The Literature

While using "social exchange" in a broader sense than we do here, Peter Ekeh (1974) draws the distinction between economic and social models of exchange clearly:

The Economic Man . . . is a cold, calculating, self-seeking individualist whose only objective is the endless acquisition of material goods with a minimum of moral inhibitions. Broadly speaking, the tenets of the Economic Man are accepted and adopted by social exchange theorists who regard economic motives as the springboard of social action, while social exchange theorists who deny that economic motives are important in social exchange tend to reject the values of the Economic Man. . . . In general, those social exchange theorists who build their conceptions of social exchange processes on economic motives see the social exchange items as economic goods and therefore amenable to the laws of supply and demand. Social exchange items are valued for their own *economic* worth—for what they fetch the man who acquires them or who gives them up. In direct opposition to this view, those who reject the economic motives as providing the incentive for social exchange action only attach *symbolic* value to the social exchange items. They are sought for, not what they are worth in themselves, but rather for what they represent between the giver and the receiver of the exchange items. [Pp. 200–201]

In the context of gifts, the things exchanged according to the economic model have a market value determined by factors outside the dyad, including scarcity, monetary price, and alternative sources of supply. On the other hand, gifts exchanged according to the social model (which we label as social exchange) have a value determinable only by the giver and recipient, thus divorcing value from external factors. Suppose two equally attractive and wealthy dates offer gifts to the same recipient. One gives a \$25 smoke alarm while the other gives a \$5 bouquet of flowers. According to the economic model, if both items are considered desirable, the recipient should clearly favor the first gift giver and

feel obligated to reciprocate with something of comparable financial worth. But the social model stipulates that the preference between these two gifts should depend on their symbolic value and the obligation is to respond with something of comparable symbolic worth, something that depends in part on the shared history unique to this dyad.

The most prominent economic exchange model theorists are Blau (1964), Gouldner (1960), Homans (1961), and Thibaut and Kelley (1959). Each of these variants of the economic model shares the following Economic Man assumptions:

1. Social behavior can be explained in terms of rewards, where rewards are goods and services, tangible or intangible, that satisfy a person's needs or goals.
2. Individuals attempt to maximize rewards and minimize losses or punishments.
3. Social interaction results from the fact that others control valuables or necessities and can therefore reward a person. In order to induce another to reward him, a person has to provide rewards to the other in return.
4. Social interaction is thus viewed as an exchange of mutually rewarding activities in which the receipt of a needed valuable (good or service) is contingent on the supply of a favor in return—usually immediate (Burns 1973, pp. 188–189).

The last assumption, that reciprocal benefits are provided as quickly as possible, suggests a form of exchange that Sahlins (1972) calls "balanced reciprocity." As with concepts of distributed justice and equity, in balanced reciprocity the exchange partners seek a state of homeostasis in which each gives and receives comparable benefits. But because, as Ekeh (1974) observes, Economic Man acts in a self-seeking manner with a minimum of moral inhibitions, another possibility exists that Service (1966) termed "negative reciprocity." Here a partner in an exchange relationship seeks more than is given. For instance, because status is a desirable resource that may be transferred from one person to another with whom a relationship is formed (Foa and Foa 1974), and because status is also a basis for attracting other resources, the higher-status person in a gift exchange is in a more powerful position according to the economic model. In the case of gift giving between men and women, feminists argue that the interaction is not as aptly characterized as exchange as it is exploitation by economically and politically more powerful men (see, e.g., Hartsock 1983, 1985).

The economic model of exchange has been common in prior treatments of heterosexual dating in twentieth-century America. In an effort to show the appropriateness of the economic exchange model in this context, Vannoy (1980, p. 217) offers the following analogy:

Lovers, of course, often devote much time and energy to pleasing their beloved. But the owner of a new Cadillac

or a fancy sports car devotes endless hours to polishing it or spends considerable money keeping it in working condition. He does these things not out of any devotion to the car but only because the thrill and ego-fulfillment of driving such a beautiful car requires that he do such things for it. And when the car begins to require sacrifices that outweigh the benefits it gives, he trades it in. He has "given" but only in order to "get."

The example of a car applies perfectly to lovers as well: They give in order to get and if they think they aren't getting as much as or, hopefully, more than they are giving, they trade the once-beloved in on a new model.

Blau (1964) suggests that the man looking for a partner engages in comparison shopping, eventually exchanging commitments of marriage for sexual gratification. Ahuvia and Adelman (forthcoming) found that participants in a dating service recognized the economic exchange aspects of dating in their references to each other as "products" with "packages" and "prices" that form part of their "offerings" and in their references to the places in which they sought partners as "meat markets." In such labels, as well as in comparing women to cars (or, in earlier analogies, to horses; More [1551] 1949, p. 58), there is an objectification and commodification of people—especially women. However, most economic exchange views of contemporary Western dating are dispassionate and gender-neutral enough that charges of dehumanization seem equally applicable to their treatments of men.

In some operationalizations of the economic exchange model of dating, for a gift exchange relationship to continue it must be mutually profitable (see, e.g., Huston and Burgess 1979). Rusbult (1980, 1983), for example, operationalizes balanced economic exchange in dating as a series of investments, and she offers the following formulas:

$$\text{SAT} = (\text{REW} - \text{CST}) - \text{CL},$$

$$\text{COM} = \text{SAT} - \text{ALT} + \text{INV}$$

$$= (\text{REW} - \text{CST}) - \text{ALT} + \text{INV} \text{ (ignoring CL)}$$

$$= \text{ST/LV},$$

where SAT is satisfaction with the relationship, REW is rewards from the relationship, CST is costs of the relationship, CL is comparison level (general expectations), COM is commitment to remain in the relationship, ALT is perceived quality of alternatives, INV is investments of intrinsic and extrinsic resources, ST is staying behaviors, and LV is leaving behaviors. According to this operationalization, long-term relationships arise because rewards continuously exceed costs, because there is a lack of better alternative partners, and/or because there is a high cumulative investment in the relationship. Information-processing variants on the investment formulas include filter theories, self-disclosure, reciprocity, and social penetration theory (see Morton and Douglas 1981).

In treatments invoking the economic exchange model of dating, the rewards sought by men (but not women, who instead seek present or future material benefits) are chiefly sexual. Despite the potential for negative reciprocity, Camerer (1988) suggests that men are unwilling to buy expensive gifts in exchange for short-term sexual favors:

Consider an earnest young suitor, expecting a lifetime of familial production with his fiancée (given her consent); he will gladly “sink” the costs of a diamond ring and expensive dinners against the expected gains of joint production, if he must, to convince her of his intentions and elicit her cooperation. The lusty bachelor whose planning extends only to dawn cannot afford such costly investments, *ceteris paribus*, since he expects less gain from a short-term relationship with his lady of that evening. [P. S182]

Nevertheless, most prior analyses of dating gifts have assumed that negative reciprocity is dominant. These treatments hypothesize a bargaining relationship between dating partners in which women attempt to place a high price on their sexual favors while men strive to attain them at the lowest possible price (Blau 1964). This prediction is supported by numerous studies of heterosexuals' personals advertising (e.g., Harrison and Saeed 1977; Hirschman 1987). These studies find that men, who traditionally have more material resources, tend to offer (and women seek) money and power, while women tend to offer (and men seek) sex and beauty. Inasmuch as men offer money they are seen as the consumers, while women are instructed to regard their charms as “assets” that they can exchange (Schur 1988; Seidman 1991) on what has been labeled “the sexual auction block” by Holland and Eisenhart (1990). A related concept is that of “hypergamy,” in which women more commonly marry men of a slightly higher social class than their own. Although this tendency is more pronounced in other cultures, such as India, it is also present within the more general class endogamy of U.S. dating and marriage (Bailey 1976; Scott 1965).

Waller ([1938] 1970) saw the potential for each dating party to exploit the other—men obtaining sexual favors from women and women obtaining money from men. He suggested a form of ingratiation in his “principle of least interest,” specifying that the partner best able to feign unfeigned affection has the greatest advantage. As with other forms of ingratiation, there must still be a pretense of sincere affection for the gift recipient, but Waller suggested that in heterosexual relationships men with money and women with beauty are able and likely to exploit their partners.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) operationalize their version of the economic exchange model through payoff matrices derived from game theory. On the basis of Waller's analyses (Waller and Hill 1951), they see courtship as a battle to retain independence until it becomes clear that dependence will be more rewarding: “Not yet ready to give up independence for the incom-

pletely sampled advantages of dependence, each partner attempts to deny or disguise or at least delay the steady increase in dependence before it overwhelms him. Thus each partner is careful to keep his indebtedness covert, to express his appreciations only in stereotyped language (‘the line’). In this manner each one gradually becomes dependent on the relationship without knowing how the other one really feels about it” (Thibaut and Kelley 1959, p. 66). Once things build to this point, the most dependent partner may be forced to endure “low outcomes” referred to as exploitation above. Like Waller and Hill (1951), Thibaut and Kelley see both partners as susceptible to such exploitation. However, others, including Murstein (1972, p. 621), see women as more likely to be exploited than men, because “the cost of abstaining from marriage is still currently greater for women, since the former tend to improve their standard of living and status more by marriage than do men. To compound the difficulty for women, the age difference between marriageable men and women, the women's shorter age range of marriageability, and their longer life-span put them in greater supply and less demand than men.” As a result, he concludes that men generally have greater power in dating relationships and take the most active role in arranging and controlling dating.

Van de Vate (1981, p. 21) provides the following illustration of how this power might be exerted and how the narrative of dating dialogue simultaneously seeks to preserve dignity by disguising the exercise of such economic power:

Prostitution is said to be morally wrong. If Marsha has sexual intercourse with John for fifty dollars, she will be thought to have violated the rules for distinguishing what is impersonal and for sale from what should be personal and not for sale at any price. Imagine, then, the following dialogue (the inner thoughts of the parties are supplied in brackets):

*John* (telephoning): “Marsha? This is John. I have two tickets to the concert—Moth Eaton and the Larvae—Saturday night. Will you come? We can go to dinner first at the Flaring Steak Pit.” [This will cost an arm and a leg, but Marsha turns me on and we will go to my place afterwards.]

*Marsha*: “Gee John . . . [He isn't going to put out that kind of money without expecting me to put out in return. But . . . Moth Eaton and the Flaring Steak Pit!] . . . I'd love to!”

If, however, John should add, “That's great, Marsha! Tell you what, I'll also give you fifty bucks,” then Marsha will be irretrievably offended and John will be left to seek companionship elsewhere. . . . Marsha feels justified in making with John what has been described as, underneath the surface appearances, really a deal for her sexual favors. She feels justified, but only so long as John assists her in sustaining the fiction that a deal is not what the relationship involves.

In this scenario, the couple employs the economic exchange model, but disguises it in terms of the social exchange model through their dialogue.

With the advent of twentieth-century recreational dating and "going out," and with the consumer spending such dating entails, economic-exchange-based models of dating gifts and expenditures have seemed increasingly appropriate (Bailey 1988; Modell 1983; Whyte 1990). Furthermore, some analyses detect a decline of courtship-focused bargaining and a rise of transient forms of dating exchange lacking attachment, commitment, and intimacy (McCall 1966; Swidler 1980). Collins (1971) suggests that, with greater economic independence for women, financial and social status are no longer resources sought only by women nor are sex and attractiveness resources sought only by men. But, in spite of changing sex roles, recent evidence suggests that there has been little change in the traditional dating roles in which the man pays for dates and the woman reciprocates with affection, including perhaps sexual favors (Korman and Leslie 1982; Rose and Frieze 1989). According to one alarming study, men regarded date rape as justified if the man had paid all of the dating expenses (Muehlenhard, Friedman, and Thomas 1985).

In summary, the key elements of the economic exchange model of dating relationships are that the partners are economically rational and seek to maximize their own net benefits subject to their resources and constraints due to the supply of available partners. They are independent transactors and avoid dependence on another who could then exploit them. Gifts are valued in terms of their economic worth, and the economic indebtedness incurred by gift receipt is erased as soon as possible via reciprocity. Dating exchange, like any other exchange, is a *quid pro quo* relationship. In the course of dating bargaining either partner can potentially exploit the other. Because men traditionally have more resources, they are generally more powerful and demand sex and beauty in exchange for money, prestige, and power. Relationships of mutual dependence may eventually develop because of general satisfaction, lack of better alternatives, or the weight of cumulative resources invested in the relationship.

### The Emergent Economic Exchange Model

*Economic Rationality.* Economic exchange was reflected in the behaviors and vocabularies of many dating partners. One woman recalled such exchanges as part of "the deal":

The deal was clearly that men (boys??) provided the dope just as in the old days the men/boys provided the transportation. And similar to the old days, the better the drugs, the better we thought of the boy. Really cool boys seemed to have both drugs and cars. Amazing. The proper exchange medium which the girls provided was sexual titillation, conversation and adoration. [F 35]

A predominantly male subset of informants described their dating expenditures and gifts not only as economically rational acts, but also as investments. This ten-

dency may be especially pronounced because many of those studied are business students.

I view money and dating as an investment. You want to get marginal return on the dollar. [M 25]

He stated that monetary gifts are quite often used as "fiscal foreplay" wherein the man expects to receive sexual favors in return for an expensive gift or after a night out. [M 30]<sup>3</sup>

Deals, investments, and returns imply reciprocity. Both men and women in the sample recognized reciprocal obligations; sex is often part of the subsurface tension felt by women who incur such obligations. Women who perceive attempts at ingratiation report rejecting the men who offer such gifts. Like John and Marsha in van de Vate's (1981) imaginary dialogue, women in the present study try to avoid the explicit recognition that sex is part of the bargain. Too lavish an expenditure by a male dating partner can threaten this polite disguise, as these accounts reveal:

Giving a gift that is too expensive early on in the relationship would just scare her and make her feel like they were trying to buy her. [F 23]

His best friend spent money on this woman like crazy and that's what she wanted. He tried to pattern our relationship after that of his friend. I felt like I was being bought. [F 26]

In general, she didn't like gifts; she saw them as bribes. She didn't relate to men that way. If a man buys a woman an expensive gift then she owes him something (sex, usually). She better not accept it unless she plans to pay up. [F 38]

The older informant here seems to echo the warnings of many social advice manuals that women who accept costly gifts are incurring sexual debts (e.g., Martin 1982, p. 526). This view is also consistent with the message in many "men's" magazines that rich old men can attract beautiful young women by buying them expensive gifts (Hall 1984).

Despite the gender-neutral assumptions of many economic exchange theorists, there were few instances in our data in which women considered sex offered by a man to be a gift, although many men and women considered sex to be a gift that women can offer. Rather than incur such a reciprocal obligation, one woman cynically suggested she would return the dinner gifts that her dates felt entitled them to sex: "She has told dates they can't come inside of her house after a date and she is very insulted that they had not told her about their intentions beforehand; and it makes her extremely mad if they appear upset when she doesn't invite them inside. She says that men who expect sex for a dinner should say it at the first of the date. She is really pleased

<sup>3</sup>Passages from interviews identify the age and sex of the informant, although the words may be those of the interviewer.

with the idea of throwing-up her dinner, all over her date, when they expect sex in return for the dinner. Her answer is to give them dinner back” (F 34).

Because the American man still normally is expected to pay dating expenses (Belk and Coon 1991; Rose and Frieze 1989), a woman may feel less pressure to “keep up” economically through balanced reciprocity. The pressure of economic reciprocity may also be lessened by the continuing tendency toward hypergamy among American women. Furthermore, women may feel less financial pressure in dating because women who are in danger of creating an obvious imbalance by receiving more expensive gifts than they can return, can reciprocate with various nonmaterial gifts, without necessarily offering sex.

Reciprocity has played a large part in my gift giving practices with men. . . . When I have received generous gifts and could not afford to reciprocate, I did other things such as cook nice meals for them or even clean their home. [F 35]

In addition, women often cite the rule that the one with the most money should pay. Given an expectation of hypergamy among women and gender discrimination in wages, it is not surprising that the one with the most money is generally the man. When invoking this rationale, the implicit principle is one of perceived gift-giving equity (within the dyad) rather than equality.

Sometimes, if I wasn't too interested in a man, I would suggest we meet, and I would be more conscious of paying my own way. However, I was poor at the time, a single mom, working as a waitress and attending the university and on welfare, so I may have been more likely to accept payment of drinks, food, etc. than other young women my age. [F 35]

She says she did pay for her own ski tickets—she skied with men a lot. . . . She would look at how much money a man had. If she and he had equal incomes she would pay for herself at least some of the time. She dated a much older man (55?) who drove a Rolls Royce and he always paid. [F 38]

Is the first of these women being economically rational when she says she tries to pay her own way if she is not too interested in a man? Although she reportedly compromised this strategy when she was poor, her avowed desire to pay if she did not plan to reciprocate with future dates and attention suggests that she is not just maximizing her own net benefits. Such balanced reciprocity still accords with the economic exchange model, though negative reciprocity is the more common assumption of prior dating theory.

*Negative and Balanced Reciprocity.* While it is most commonly assumed that men have the greatest power to exploit a dating partner, this is relatively uncommon in our data. In fact, it is more common for men to worry about women exploiting them for money.

Gift giving on a first date implies the giver will spend money. This is not ideal for someone that doesn't want

to be hurt later when he or she learns that the other was using him/her for money. The statistics in class may show it doesn't happen but I believe it does happen in reality. People should not believe the world is too kind, and persons using others for money may not admit it to themselves. [M 25]

I didn't want to drain my savings account on a girl and have her dump me the next day. That happened to a friend of mine. He bought his girlfriend a television set. When he gave it to her she said, “I don't want to see you anymore, by the way thanks for the T.V.” . . . Men have to be careful about spending money on women, you may spend hundreds of dollars on a girl in a couple of weeks and then BAM she decides she doesn't like you anymore. [M 25]

It was also more common for women than for men to admit to such manipulative tactics in dating.

[He gave me a gift of] a gold ring. The guy that gave me the ring was loaded so I wasn't worried about the expense and it was pretty. I dumped him. [F 22]

Well, there was this one guy in high school, he didn't belong to the popular crowd and you know how important it was to hang out with the popular crowd in high school. He was kind of cute but I just wasn't interested in him. And he asked me out about three times and I always said no. Then he invited me to go to the Kansas concert and I really wanted to go, so I said yes and we had a great time, but I never went out with him again. I just used him for that night. [F 29]

Less frequently, men report that women have used money and gifts to win their affections, although this was not necessarily a source of discomfort. “He laughs and says that he got a shirt from someone that he saw only a couple of times and he doesn't remember her name. He felt that she was trying to buy him, which is something that men do to women all the time” (M 23). This man also recognizes, as comments in the preceding section confirm, that men can “buy” youth, sex, and beauty in a dating partner, even if relatively few report themselves as doing so in an exploitative manner.

A second form of negative reciprocity, limited to men, was when a man's gift giving stopped after he “won” his dating partner's love. This pattern is often resented by women, who feel cheated of something they enjoyed and perhaps were implicitly promised during dating. “I have been married twice and engaged once since my last divorce. Obviously, none of them delivered to my expectations. I still don't know exactly what I want—but I sure as hell know what I don't want! In my experience, the courting and spontaneous gift giving ends when you say, ‘I do.’ That's one of the things I don't want to happen in my next marriage” (F 35). Fengler (1974) also found that men's romantic gift giving stopped with marriage.

More frequent than the negative reciprocity suggested in prior treatments of dating gift giving and expenditures was balanced reciprocity. Women in the study were sometimes acutely aware of gift balance.

We took a trip to San Francisco once and kept a list of everything that was spent and who spent it. This was the only way to avoid war. Everything had to be EQUAL. We were both making about equal salaries. [F 25]

I certainly like to be taken out on a date and to have the gentleman pay. . . . I also feel it is my responsibility to either pay the next time or make dinner or something to keep the relationship somewhat balanced with regards to the money and gift situation. [F 29]

Exchanges, in the way of gifts or whatever, cause a permanent link between giver and givee. And they also become a cycle. I give a gift to Marcus only to expect one in return. If he gave me a gift unexpectedly, I'd instantly start thinking of a way of returning the favor. [F 25]

Anxiousness to repay the gift quickly, evidenced by the last account, is quite consistent with the economic exchange model of gift giving. The perceived necessity to reciprocate in some way can lead to obligatory gift exchange without underlying feelings of love, as one man explained: "There was a girl who I had met once on a blind date, a couple days after the date she brought me cookies, balloons, and a stuffed animal. I thought that it was a kind gesture, but I hardly knew the girl and felt very uncomfortable accepting the gift. I felt obligated to reciprocate the deed" (M 25). One woman reported that such balanced gift exchange, at least in expenditures for dinner and clothing, continued after her marriage.

Dating my husband has been a process of evolution as far as money is concerned. We have always had joint accounts. We have agreed upon a monthly system of allocating an equal amount of "fun money" for each of us for our individual, personal use. A finite list of desires must be paid for from this source of money, including restaurant meals, clothing, and most other personal entertainment and recreation sorts of things. Therefore, when my husband and I go out to dinner together, we each pay for our own meal. We go "dutch treat." This is usually a source of amusement and curiosity for other people, at least until they get used to it. The system works pretty well, however. It put an end to resentments because one or the other of us was perceived to be spending too much money going out to lunch with friends or buying clothes. [F 35]

This pattern was unique in our data, however.

Both men and women reported conflicts that arose when expectations of balance in gift giving were not met. For men, the conflict sometimes reflects the preceding fears of making bad investments. "I think that women should take a larger gift-giving role in dating. I feel that we as males should have the same right to the pleasures felt through receiving gifts as females do. Presently, men tend to get the short end of the stick with regard to gift giving. It should be a little more equal" (M 26). In a few cases, men found balanced reciprocity difficult when dating someone of a higher income class than their own. "One girl used to give me gifts often, almost once a week . . . the problem was that she came from a wealthy and flashy family. The

gifts she would give me were often quite expensive. I felt uncomfortable receiving them but even more, I found it tough to keep up with her when I would give her gifts" (M 23). Consistent with the hypergamy expectation are several accounts by women in the sample about men who failed them by not maintaining financial parity in gift giving or by appearing to be too cheap.

I'll never forget my worst date. First of all I thought the guy was a dope, but I had nothing better to do with that particular Friday night, although if I had known what it was going to be like I would have rather had my stomach pumped. To begin with the guy was a half an hour late. Then we go to one of the high class restaurants in town: Arby's, where he even has the nerve to order for me without my input. Our dinners probably cost a total of \$4, including the horseradish sauce. Next we went to a movie. This, of course, was a dollar show and one that I had seen twice, but at least I didn't have to talk to him for two hours. When we arrived back at my house I thanked him and got inside as quickly as possible. . . . I do think that \$6 for a planned date is pretty cheap. . . . I would like to forget the whole evening, but it has been burned into my memory, sort of like a disgusting tattoo. [F 24]

I wanted to give a beautiful watch to one of my first boyfriends for Xmas. I thought about it for an endless amount of time and I special ordered the one I wanted him to have. He had asked me questions for at least a month about what I liked so I thought he was really thinking about it and getting as involved in the process as I was. Well, Xmas day he brings over a sack with a present in it and we decide to wait until we had time to exchange gifts. After he left, I looked in the bag and the receipt was in it. He had bought the gift the day before Xmas. The present cost about 100 dollars less than the watch. This wouldn't have really mattered except for the fact that I was always supplying the money in the relationship—and I didn't really have very much. I looked into the box and it was a black bag like the one I had carried my books in every day for the past six months. I thought he must have really not thought about the present very much if he had duplicated something I already had. Needless to say, I took the watch back and bought him a shirt. I wasn't going to be emotionally and financially robbed, both characteristic of our relationship. [F 22]

This woman's concern with being emotionally robbed also suggests a fear of being exploited because of dependence on the dating partner.

*Fear of Dependence.* The issue underlying dependency for many was one of control—self-control versus control by someone or something else. Several men feared such loss of control, seeing it as giving in to emotion rather than holding on to reason (Coon and Belk 1991). Some women also feared such a loss of self-control. "I believe that love begins with physical attraction. This attraction is not entirely based on looks but on hormones. However, if one allows their hormones to control the situation before a friendship develops, I think it makes it very difficult for love to develop" (F 30).

In general, women were less likely than men to fear abandoning self-control to emotion. But, while women

were less apt to fear giving up self-control to emotion, they were *more* likely to fear giving up self-control to their dating partner and thereby becoming susceptible to domination and exploitation. Several women saw themselves being controlled when men spent money on them, and this perceived manipulation was the source of much discomfort. A strategy occasionally chosen by women to overcome such discomfort was to resist financial control by paying half or all of the expenses of dating. "I have always chosen to 'go dutch' in dating. . . . Men are usually thrilled, but I remember one man that hated it when I wouldn't let him buy me things. We had been dating for awhile and he really wanted the relationship to go somewhere. . . . I also felt mean because he really wanted to show how he cared by buying me things. . . . I somehow perceive money and control as one in the same" (F 23). "That's how I felt with Jed and I liked it. I liked having the control. You know when he's paying and asks where I want to go to eat I have to choose a place with the price in mind. But when I was the one paying it was great because I could go where I wanted and order anything I wanted. That's what I did with Jed. It was like I was leading him around by his nose" (F 18). Like the date in the first quote here, some men felt threatened when they were not allowed to exercise control through their expenditures and gifts. In several instances this led to a cessation of the relationship.

*Commoditization of Partner.* The comparison of women to cars as suggested by Vannoy (1980) was echoed by some of our informants.

In its crudest sense, dating is very much like buying a car. You do "comparison" shopping just like you would if you were buying a new car. You take so many test drives to help determine what make and model is appropriate for your wants and needs and then finally consummate a purchase. Occasionally you get to take a spin with a Ferrari, other times you're stuck with a Yugo. Just like car manufacturers offer different incentives to get consumers to buy one brand over another men and women market themselves in different ways as THE brand to have. I knew girls who had a "Have you driven a Ford lately" style of promoting themselves in that they thought a date with them would convince you to have no other. Other, and oftentimes more popular girls, would offer "rebates" in the form of reciprocated sexual favors for every "purchase" (date) made by a guy. [M 30]

Other studies have found this same analogy employed by other men (Ahuvia and Adelman, forthcoming; Bailey 1988; Whyte 1990). While women did not objectify men as cars, they did regard them as sexual objects in some cases, as one young woman explained:

*Interviewer (M36):* "Have you ever had sex with somebody in exchange for a gift?"

*Jane (F 18):* "Yeah, kind of. Do you know what scamming is?" I didn't. She went on to tell me that scamming is an expression which refers to how a person will be horny and seek sex from a partner who they don't know or care about. She said she'd done that before. I asked

her how she considered this sex in exchange for a gift. "What was the gift?" She said, "I got sex for sex? Like an exchange?" She went on to tell me that she had had sex because of the feelings she had for guys on several occasions. She had also done it in this scamming manner. I must say I don't know yet if scamming is a noun or a verb. I must be aging.

Putting the preceding pieces of evidence together, an economic model of dating gift exchange clearly emerged and applies to at least some informants during some periods in their dating histories. There is evidence of economic rationality, dating expenditures seen as an investment (with sexual returns expected by men and financial returns expected by women), gifts evaluated according to their monetary worth (and their utility in satisfying consumer desires), negative and balanced reciprocity with simultaneous exchange as the ideal, fear of dependence, and commoditization of the dating partner. At the same time the emergent economic exchange model shows some differences from prior theory. Exploitation was found to be more likely by women, balanced rather than negative reciprocity was most common, some women did see sex as a gift from men, and nonmaterial and nonsexual gifts such as cleaning a man's apartment were able to be used by women to reciprocate material and financial gifts from men. However, this evidence of economic exchange does not exhaust the data. Other models are also needed to account fully for the data.

## GIFT GIVING AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE

### The Literature

Although prior work on the economic exchange model of gift giving occurred primarily within the disciplines of sociology and psychology, anthropologists have been the primary developers of the social exchange model. Ekeh's (1974) distinction between these two models rests on whether the thing exchanged is valued for its economic worth or its symbolic worth. The gift-giving research context in which this distinction was initially articulated was that of the *kula* circle of the Trobriand Islands off eastern Papua New Guinea. In the *kula* circle the two most important types of gifts (arm bands and necklaces) circulate in two different directions between trading partners located on different islands. Rather than keep and use these gifts, the recipients are obliged to give them away to the next trading partner within no more than a year or they will be considered misers. These *kula* objects are displayed by those who receive them and are highly regarded—especially those that have a history of belonging to important men. Nineteenth-century reports of *kula* exchange misunderstood these objects to be currency used in barter (Leach and Leach 1983). But Malinowski's (1922) analysis suggested that these exchanges are instead a way of affirming social links to prior owners and a

means of gaining prestige through these associations. Because gifts are passed along rather than retained, there is no material gain; only goodwill and prestige are accumulated. The *kula* circle seemed strange to observers used to the assumption that we attempt to maximize our material well-being, rather than social well-being. Nevertheless, something is still expected in return for these gifts. The motivations behind them are accordingly assumed to be largely individualistic and egoistic, but with the added social benefit of building a sense of community through social exchanges.

For Marcel Mauss (1925), the symbolic character of such gifts is reflected in the "inalienability" of the gift from the giver (Weiner 1992). Mauss (1925, p. 10) explains: "This bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself . . . while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence." The gift thus links the giver and receiver by remaining part of the giver's extended self (Belk 1988). Cheal (1988) offers a similar view in distinguishing between the moral economy of gifts and the political economy of monetary transactions: "By a *moral economy* I mean a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (i.e., moral), because through them social ties are recognized, and . . . social relationships are maintained. . . . gift transactions do not have as their principle purpose the redistribution of resources. They are, for the most part, redundant transactions that are used in the ritual construction of small social worlds" (pp. 15–16). An economic exchange, especially outside the dating context in which a social exchange disguise is likely to be invoked, can occur between two strangers who exchange cash, goods, sex, or other resources and then walk away without ever needing to see each other again. But a social exchange creates a bond of goodwill and social indebtedness between people. As Gregory (1982) observes, economic ("commodity") exchange establishes quantitative relations between objects, whereas social ("gift") exchange establishes qualitative relations between subjects. The objects of economic exchange are commodities, but the objects of social exchange are gifts, construed in this model in the narrower sense of symbolic objects. Furthermore, most economic transactions are simultaneous exchanges, while gift transactions are ideally staggered in time (Belk 1979; Carrier 1990; Gregory 1982). In this way gift givers, by intention, remain continually in each other's debt and thus trust that they can rely on each other for future favors (Stack 1974).

For example, if we accept a dinner at our friends' house, immediate attempts to cancel the debt by inviting these friends to our house the next day, or worse, blatant mixing of the economic and moral economies through an offer of cash at the end of the meal, would vitiate the general social indebtedness that forms the basis of community (Haas and Deseran 1981). This is

a fundamental difference between the transactions of economic exchange and those of the moral economy of gift giving. This separation of moral and economic transactions is delineated even more sharply in societies having "special monies" used to acquire essential ritual objects that cannot be purchased with general-purpose money (see, e.g., Dalton 1965). The unacceptability of money as a gift (e.g., a Mother's Day gift) in contemporary Western societies points out that we too do not rely solely on general-purpose money (see, e.g., Cheal 1987; Melitz 1970; Webley, Lea, and Portalska 1983).

The social exchange model also departs from the balanced and negative reciprocity assumptions of the economic exchange model. Economic exchange model applications that assume balanced reciprocity (e.g., Befu 1980; Gouldner 1960; Homans 1961) do not appear to be broadly tenable. For instance, Caplow (1982) found that in a Muncie, Indiana, Christmas men gave more valuable gifts than women, and parents gave more than children in the same families. Their data are cross-generational, but suggest that gifts to children are not reciprocated later in life. Other studies have found that gift giving also tends to occur in a downward direction in terms of social class, with higher classes giving more to those in lower classes (see, e.g., Lebra 1974). While the economic exchange model assumes that these are cases of negative reciprocity due to power imbalances, Sahlins (1972) suggests another interpretation by expanding on Service's (1966) concept of generalized reciprocity, which Sahlins predicts is most common in close kinship groups. Here balance is not necessary and exchange follows the principle "To each according to her or his needs." Status may be gained or affirmed in this way as part of the exchange, but there is no attempt to balance economic gift giving and little fear of exploitation, bribery, or ingratiation.

The social exchange model of gift giving, in effect, views dating partners as quasi kin. As a result, gifts are expected to be valued for their symbolic worth rather than their economic worth, generalized reciprocity replaces balanced or negative reciprocity, and the gift exchange timing is ideally staggered rather than simultaneous. Reciprocity is still necessary; however, people give gifts to gain the symbolic benefit of social security. Moreover, because gifts are seen as part of the giver's extended self, accepting a gift from a date forms a bond with that person. Hyde (1983, p. 57) describes this bond in the context of New Caledonian courtship rituals: "When boys reach puberty they seek out girls from the clan complementary to their own and exchange tokens whose value and nature are set by custom. A boy's first question to a girl whose favor he seeks is, 'Will you take my gifts or not?' The answer is sometimes 'I will take them,' and sometimes 'I have taken the gifts of another man. I don't want to exchange with you.' To accept a boy's gifts initiates a series of oscillating reciprocations which leads finally to the formal gifts of nuptial union."

These gifts are the symbolic ritual medium through which strangers are transformed into kin.

There are some similarities between the economic and social exchange models. Both models assume egoistic rather than altruistic gift-giving motivations, both assume independent transactors seeking to maximize something, and both assume quid pro quo reciprocity. There are also differences in these models, as shown in Table 1. The social exchange model does not employ notions of supply and demand, investment, power, or exploitation. Rather, it stresses the ritualistic use of gifts in bonding, where gifts are valued for their symbolic worth instead of their economic worth. Gifts are seen as inalienable from their givers. Mutual dependence is not feared; instead, social indebtedness as well as bonding through the overlapping extended selves may be welcome. Rather than viewing dating partners as commodities, the social exchange model sees them as part of the extended self. Parties do not seek to cancel any felt indebtedness immediately; instead, gift giving is ideally staggered so that it is never fully balanced. And generalized reciprocity is sought rather than either balanced or negative reciprocity.

### The Emergent Social Exchange Model

*Symbolic Gift Value.* One indicant that some informants esteem dating gifts for their symbolic value rather than their economic value is that nonmaterial gifts are often perceived as more desirable than material gifts, as one woman explained: "I believe that any relationship is an exchange of gifts in itself . . . mostly of the non-material type . . . such as time, ideas, feelings, and experiences. The money spent on a date is also a gift, but it means less to me than the other gifts given" (F 24). There is also a common perception that the expenditure of personal time and effort may be a necessary symbol of love.

A gift that appears to have been bought in a rush just because it is a birthday, is not very valued; it is more of an insult. A gift needs to be personalized or appear as though it took time to find to have its greatest possible value. One boyfriend didn't give her a gift for her birthday, so she said, "Aren't you going to give me anything?" He gave her a card the next day that said he was sorry to have forgotten her birthday. Inside was \$600 dollars, which she feels is a lot of money, that she promptly gave back and was very insulted. This former date wouldn't give her his time; he was a workaholic. When his secretary was sent to buy her gifts or flowers she was really upset. He never had the time; it would have been ok if he didn't have the money; it was the lack of time—that he wouldn't spend [time] to go find her a gift—that upset her. Get them anything, but just take the time off of work to buy them something. She quit going with this fellow after over two years because she didn't want to live that life-style. He was a very successful businessman with a lot of money. They bought two new snowmobiles and two new jet skis together and only used them once. She felt that this was the ultimate waste of a life and time. She would

**TABLE 1**  
DIFFERENCES IN ECONOMIC EXCHANGE AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE MODELS OF DATING GIFT GIVING

Economic exchange	Social exchange
Gifts are commodities with economic utilitarian value	Gifts are tokens with symbolic value
Balanced or negative reciprocity	Generalized reciprocity
Simultaneous exchange ideal	Staggered exchange ideal
Dependence feared but may occur because of gift investments	Social debt and bonding through overlapping extended selves may be welcomed
Commoditizes partner	Partner comes to be seen as part of extended self
Market economy	Moral economy

rather have nothing and spend time together fishing or camping than to have these expensive items, but only work and never enjoy them. Time was the most valuable of all of the gifts that she had received. [F 35]

While money was not an adequate substitute for the personal gift of time for this woman, the amount of money spent on gifts also can be a symbol of love. Another woman complained: "I felt unloved when my ex-fiance said he would not spend over \$1500 for my wedding set. I felt he had put a low budget limit on his love for me. On the other hand, he bought me a car when I needed one, and that made me feel . . . loved" (F 35). Although this complaint may suggest some elements of the profit-maximizing economic exchange model, money here is at least as important for its symbolic meanings as a token of love and sincere interest in the dating partner.

Another effective symbol of love is when the gift is spontaneous and unexpected rather than obligatory. "I remember getting this one gift, it was a stuffed teddy bear from one of my first boyfriends and it really meant a lot to me because it was symbolic. I mean, here we had dated only for a short while and yet our relationship meant enough for him to buy me a gift. Our relationship, at that point, had not reached a level where it was necessary for him to give me a gift so it really meant a lot to me because it meant he cared about me" (F 32). "As the saying goes it is not the value of the gifts that counts but the thought behind it. Personally I appreciate small gifts or flowers on unexpected occasions more than the overdoing of gifts at Christmas and birthdays. To get a little card or something else . . . means more to me than anything else. Small gifts now and then are signs of love and caring" (F 26). Symbolically, spontaneous gifts are taken to mean that the giver was thinking about the recipient of the gift.

She really likes to give gifts, or receive them for no occasion at all. This makes them all the more special, because when you buy something you are thinking about

someone when they aren't with you. She repeated the idea of thinking about somebody when they aren't with you several times and it is very important to her. She values the idea of being with a person as a gift, but you also need to think about them when they aren't with you. . . . She values a card that comes unexpectedly. . . . Again, she says that they are thinking about you when they are away from you. [F 34].

"He is always giving me flowers that he picks from the side of the road, or something like that. These mean a lot to me because they are from his heart. They show that he is thinking about me and takes the time to show it" (F 24). Thus, spontaneous gifts are like receiving a positive response from a mutual friend who is asked, "Did she (he) mention my name?" A spontaneous gift removes the pro forma ambiguity of formal gift occasions and implies "I love you and have been thinking about you (do you love me?)" without necessarily going so far as to verbalize such a risky question. Such gifts also assure a mutual social indebtedness that the simultaneous exchange of gifts on occasions like Christmas and Valentine's Day cannot achieve. At the same time, the preference for spontaneous gifts among these informants suggests a generalized reciprocity in which neither strict balance nor exploitation is a concern. As one woman described it, "Each person is simultaneously giving and taking from the other person, and neither is keeping track" (F 24).

Also, gifts may remind us of our intimacy and shared experiences (Baxter 1987). Because of these symbolic meanings, it is not unusual for gifts from a relationship that has ended to be retained (especially by women) as souvenirs prompting warm memories of lost loves. "She went on to describe gifts from an earlier boyfriend: colorful rocks from various places and matches from around the country. She was particularly fond of these and expressed their significance now, even after the relationship was over. . . . Gifts reminded her of the good times the two had experienced since the gifts were received during those good times" (F 25). "Most of the gifts I have received as jewelry were stolen about a year ago. My apartment was burglarized and all my jewelry was taken. . . . The theft of these items made me angry. They were little things that represented meaningful moments and meaningful people" (F 26). "It gives you something tangible to link memories to. It's nice to be able to look at a gift and remember the person who gave it to you, to remember the feelings involved" (F 21). Women were also much more likely than men to keep cards, dried flowers, and other gift mementos from former dates. It is clear that such items were not kept for their economic worth, but because they were souvenirs of the relationship—ritual objects with which to call it back to memory.

*Gifts as Symbols of Commitment.* A related meaning of gifts lies in symbolizing the giver's commitment to the recipient and the relationship. Commitment involves elements of promise, dedication, and attachment

(Kelley 1983; Quinn 1982). In marketplace exchange there is an explicit or implicit contract that makes something ours and gives us some delimited set of ownership rights. But in dating only our various expressions of commitment give our partner confidence that we are becoming attached to him or her. Accepting a gift symbolically indicates a willingness and obligation to continue dating the gift giver. Gifts that are more significant by being more expensive, unusual, personal, or intimate (Tournier 1963) symbolize greater commitment by both the giver offering them and the recipient accepting them. Dramatically significant gifts can even bring about a revelatory epiphany concerning the giver's depth of commitment. "We went up to Snowbird Ski Lodge and he presented me with the first piece of jewelry he ever bought me: a gold bracelet. That bracelet meant the world to me for two reasons: 1) It showed that he was just as serious about me as I was about him and 2) It was a personal triumph over the loser he dated before me because he told me he had never given another girl jewelry in his life (so maybe I was a little insecure about the little tramp)" (F 25).

The biggest moment of revelation, the moment I knew he was "serious" about me was when he showed up with a gift for my daughter. Other men had shown the typical false affection for her in order to get on my good side, but he was only civil and polite to her, never gushy. One day, however, he showed up with a very nice skateboard for my daughter. We all played with it, mostly sitting on it and rolling down the hill to the beach, for several hours. The gift marked a turning point in our relationship. I think for him it marked the time that he decided it would be ok to get serious about a woman with a child. [F 35]

The monetary importance of a gift that is expensive in relation to the giver's means is also taken as an indicant of the giver's sincerity and the degree to which the recipient is valued by this giver. "I have had only one boyfriend who ever gave me gifts for no reason. He was a high school sweetheart and he sent me yellow roses several times. I felt special because the guy didn't have a lot of money" (F 23). "Asked if the value of a gift reflects the degree of affection that goes along with it, Sarah said if the gift was from someone who didn't have a lot of money, then yes. If the gift giver had a lot of money it was harder to tell" (F 35).

The recognition that certain gifts imply commitment also makes some gift givers ill at ease. They fear that the gifts they give may signal more commitment in a relationship than they wish to convey. "I am often worried about what the person receiving the gift is going to interpret it to mean. Although I usually give a gift with the intention of showing someone that I care about them and have thought of them, I am often worried that a different signal is being sent. I don't want the other person to perceive that I am implying something that I'm not. For instance, I don't want the person to think that I feel like there is a lot of commitment when there isn't" (F 24). Recipients also worry about gifts that seem to

offer and request more commitment than is welcome. The process is implicitly one of negotiated discovery. Sometimes the strategic intent is to obligate the recipient to further dates that perpetuate the relationship, as one woman lamented: "A couple of weeks before Valentine's Day we got in a really bad fight. He hit me several times. . . . I was on the verge of ending the whole damn thing, when he cooked this wonderful dinner and I was so amazed that I figured he must care a lot. . . . I bought it" (F 25).

Timing is also important in such instrumental negotiations via symbolic gifts. As one woman put it, "He can't be giving you rings when you are only interested in popcorn" (F 21). One reaction is to reject such a gift. "I've received one gift that I felt I had to return. It was from a great person, but I was by no means interested in anything other than a friendship and he gave me a \$400 necklace. It didn't seem right to accept it so I returned it to him. I felt like I was doing the right thing. He was very upset that I was returning it but it didn't feel right to keep it under any circumstances" (F 25). "I gave it back [a pearl necklace on a gold chain]. I thought it might have been something simple and cheap; that's fine. But when I saw that it was something relatively expensive it dawned on me that he felt a lot differently about me than I did him—yes, I gave it back. . . . That was the end of that relationship" (F 30). These informants are not maximizing economic well-being. Furthermore, when gifts implying an unwanted commitment were not refused, most recipients were very distinctly uncomfortable, as one woman remembered: "If it's someone you really care about, then it's ok." She went on to recall an incident which spanned 3 years where a guy she didn't really care for had given her flowers, perfume, [and other things]. "I hate this," she said, as if the memory of it were strong enough to be in the present. She mentioned that she tried to give the gifts back but that he wouldn't take them. She felt that if he had taken them back it would have left her free of that feeling" (F 25). Commitment is thus a primary part of the social exchange process involving dating gifts. Such commitments may lack the precision of written contracts, but they are negotiated with fully as much care.

*Gifts as Cues to Compatibility.* Besides commitment, gifts may also be read as revealing the likely compatibility of a dating partner. Sometimes the compatibility of concern is in matters of taste.

I remember a man giving me a blouse as a gift. He was an appropriate person for me to be dating, in fact he was really a very good catch, but I suspected I would likely not fall in love with him. The blouse, as he saw it, was very much "my style." It was the right color (red), but the fabric was polyester, which was a big "no no." I wore it on a date with him, received compliments on it from others, but felt uncomfortable all night. I kept it for a few months, maybe even a year, but never really liked it. Actually, because the gift was not really "right," it

helped confirm my notion that this was not a guy for me. [F 35]

"He actually gave Ann an electric frying pan for Christmas one year. That's not a gift, it's a chore! . . . I tried to control my dismay when I asked Ann how the frying pan made her feel. She said, 'I got the feeling he had visions of me barefoot and pregnant.' She quit dating him shortly after" (F 28).

Not only is similarity in tastes assessed via dating gifts, but the overall emphasis placed on money and gifts during dating is seen as a test of compatibility in material attitudes. "I need to see if the guy is gentlemanly enough, if he is selfish, practical, or generous. [His gift and dating spending] gives me an indication of what his personality is" (F 29). "Money should hold the same value system for both people when dating. If there are contradictions in the value money has, few gifts can be given or accepted without apprehension or disappointment over the estimated value of the gift. . . . If partners have extremely different value systems no level of satisfaction from sex, gifts, dating or companionship will be sufficient to hold the relationship together" (M 26). That we learn about others and assess our compatibility with them through material gifts is largely possible because we see gifts as self-extensions.

*Gifts as Extensions of Self.* In accordance with Mauss's (1925) concept of inalienability, many informants believe that the best gifts are extensions of the giver. The gift recipient who accepts such a gift is symbolically accepting the giver at the same time. Because this gift giving and gift acceptance represent a transference of self, such exchange offers an opportunity for the two who are involved to start to become one. Giving as an extension of the giver's self is a source of both joy and concern. "And then there's the gift you give someone just because you like them and . . . it's a representation of a part of yourself you're giving to them. But it's [in] the gift form" (F 25). "When I give gifts to my girlfriend, it is part of me and I hope she treats that gift the same way she treats me. Gifts are not just material objects, but gifts are objects of love" (M 28). Non-material gifts are especially likely to be seen as extensions of self. "I do tend to remember and cherish the nonmaterial gifts. They are more personal and as such, mean more to me. Anyone can buy me something, but not anyone can give me something of themselves in a relationship" (F 24). "Non-material gifts are a part of you and not just a part of a department store" (F 24). "Non-material gifts are often better to receive than material gifts because they are giving of one's self and that is the most precious gift that we have to give" (F 22). Personally crafted gifts are also readily seen as extensions of self. Creating the object is one of the clearest ways of incorporating it into the extended self (Belk 1988). "It was a really personal gift. Several of the gifts I got were homemade. One guy made me these little

wood plaques. . . . He varnished them on a little piece of wood and it was all homemade and that meant a lot to me because they were homemade" (F 32). "She described John . . . who had drawn her lots of drawings which meant a lot to her at the time because they illustrated notes he would leave for her. . . . Then she also included books that were given by Dan: he would write inscriptions in them and it was this personalized touch that she appreciated" (F 35).

Exchanging gifts that are seen as extensions of the giver's self is a way of symbolically forming and demonstrating attachment to another. A prominent example is exchanging wedding rings, but such gifts are also given before and after marriage. "Sarah said the kind of gift to give a man was something personal for him: a ring, wallet, watch—something to put on and look at. When Ed had moved to L.A. Sarah said she gave him a watch: 'It was a conscious decision to give him something he would see every day'" (F 35). "He especially likes giving gifts to his wife, and especially gifts that he has invested some of himself in. He said that he had made the foot stool he was sitting on and had given it to Jessica for Christmas. He likes giving gifts because it lets her know he cares . . . more so if he has invested some of himself in it" (M 29). Over the course of a dating relationship, giving and receiving self-extending gifts becomes a way that two individuals' lives begin to merge and become one. As Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1992, p. 58) observe, the gift, representing the giver, is incorporated into the recipient's life. In this process the gift given as an extension of the giver also becomes an extension of the recipient, and in this way the partners effectively begin to become mutual self-extensions. "When I say involved I mean buying them gifts . . . basically becoming a part of each others lives" (M 25). "She said getting a gift involved receiving attachment and interest, not just a physical item. What she thought was fun about giving gifts was to be able to give this attachment and interest, a gift of the self" (F 35). The overlap of shared identities that is at stake reflects what Berman (1989) termed our greatest longing and our greatest horror—to merge selves with another. And in those instances in which this process of merging extended selves goes awry, the process of disentangling can be more complex because of such gifts. "That's why I don't want to give serious presents to a girl. It's a lot harder to break up when [such] gifts have been given" (M 22).

Her birthday was approaching and I really wanted to get her something special. I put a lot of thought into it and decided . . . the main gift would be a photograph that I had taken a few years before. This photograph was one of my favorites and meant a lot to me. So I matted and framed this picture and . . . gave it to her on her birthday. I explained to her about the photo and that it was special to me. She really seemed to like it. I had lost the negative to this picture so I didn't have a copy of it. In the next few months we decided to end our romantic relationship, although we are still good friends. I have

considered asking her for the picture back a number of times but I haven't been able to. This kind of sounds like a problem for Dear Abbey. The photo doesn't have any monetary value but it does have a lot of sentimental value to me, which I don't think it has to her. I am not sure what to do. I probably won't ask her for it. Now I wish I had never given it to her but its too late. I think the moral that I learned was that when you are giving someone a gift that has more sentimental value to you than it will ever have to them you should be very cautious. [M 25]

The potential here for losing a part of extended self through gifts to a lost love is without meaning in the economic exchange model in which partners give and get commodities with few entanglements. In that case, the only risks are those of bad economic investments and unwanted reciprocal obligations.

Just as the data necessitate an economic exchange model of dating gift giving, they also require a social exchange model. Social exchange is evident in the symbolic value placed on many gifts, the use of gifts to signal and seek commitment, the preference for spontaneous gifts, the perception that gifts are extensions of the giver, and the merging of identities that this facilitates. The major aspect of social exchange suggested by the literature that is not always found in the emergent model of dating gift giving as social exchange is willing bonding of partners to each other. Such commitment is sometimes sought, but whether such a bond is welcome depends on the stage of the relationship as perceived by both parties. Nuances added to the social exchange model by the present findings include the negotiation of such commitment and the exploration of compatibility through gifts. While the social exchange of this emergent model is more personal than economic exchange, it is still a reciprocal process based on egoistic motives and, as such, still leaves a portion of the data unaccounted for.

## AGAPIC LOVE

### The Literature

The particular model within the agapic love paradigm that was found to apply to the present data is that of romantic love (other models within this paradigm include brotherly love, spiritual love, and parental or familial love). Unlike many cultures and historic eras, contemporary America clearly endorses dating and marriage for love. Romantic love is an idealistic conception that stands in stark contrast to the realist conceptions of the exchange paradigm (Singer 1984). It is a nineteenth-century adaptation of the ideal now described as courtly love, which first flourished in twelfth-century Provence. At the time of the ascendance of the courtly love ideal, most court marriages in Europe were undertaken as strategic alliances to improve financial, political, or social position. Courtly love injected emotion into this logical exchange nexus and was most often

expressed through the passionate, but often chaste, devotion of a knight or troubadour to a woman married to another. C. S. Lewis ([1936] 1975) refers to this devotion in courtly love as the “feudalization of love,” because it appears to be modeled after the vassalage relationship between the knight and his lord. While some troubadours and poets were women who celebrated similar passion toward specific men (Kelly 1984; Westphal-Wihl 1989), courtly love was primarily an idealization of women by men.

Romanticism, also central to the rise of consumer culture (Campbell 1987), differs from earlier forms of idealism, such as Descartes’ rationalism, by the central place it assigns feelings over reason. It synthesizes courtly love ideals of passion, fusion of identities, and idealization of the beloved with the Christian ideal of agapic rather than erotic love. Agape is sacrificial where eros is acquisitive; agape is unselfish where eros is ego-centric; and agape gives freely where eros is possessive (Nygren 1989). Whereas social exchange may symbolize erotic love, in the romantic model love is agapic. However, unlike brotherly love of humankind, spiritual love of God, and parental love of one’s children, romantic love is often sexual rather than asexual.

Weber (1958) argued that rationality is equally opposed by the otherworldly sphere of religion and by the inner-worldly sphere of love, which itself becomes a religion: “The boundless giving of oneself is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality. . . . It is so overpowering that it is interpreted . . . as a sacrament. The lover realizes himself to be rooted in the kernel of the truly living, which is eternally inaccessible to any rational endeavor. He knows himself to be freed from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine” (p. 347). The irrationality of the romantic love model also has consequences for the process of choosing mates, as Greenfield (1965) explains: “One falls in love not by design and conscious choice, but according to some accident of fate over which the victim has no control. . . . Whether or not the pattern is learned . . . the individuals come to believe that love can and does strike at almost any time and in any place, and that when it does, the parties involved are helpless victims: they lose control, so to speak, over themselves, their actions and their reason, and they tend to behave emotionally and irrationally” (pp. 363–364). Horton (1973) adds to this model the romantic fixation on and desire to become one with the beloved that derive from the courtly model of love. Thoughts of the loved one dominate all thought as the lover becomes obsessed with the beloved. Conscious control over emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are abandoned to this singular focus. This emotional loss of control is often held to be an impediment to rational courtship. For instance, Scanzoni (1982) complains: “[The] realities of courtship and marriage tend to be clouded (especially for the never-married) by the ro-

matic love complex, which dictates that prospective partners are not supposed to weigh *reward* elements, at least consciously. Nonrational, romantic, person-centered considerations are supposed to be paramount—lesser elements are too crass to be included. Romantic love thus obscures the premarital bargaining process and places some persons in a situation which may eventually work to their detriment” (p. 54). Passionate romantic love is thus experienced as an uncontrollable emotion from which one “suffers,” as an external force that swoops out of nowhere and dominates one’s life (Heimer and Stinchcombe 1980). Perceived as a magical transcendence, it creates an “aching of the heart” and an “infection of the brain” (Tennov 1979). As with the exchange models, romantic love is a socially constructed metaphor (Jagger 1989), but this does not imply that it is an intentional decision for the individual, as some would have it (e.g., Solomon 1990).

The romantic love model holds money and love as incompatible resources that cannot be traded (Brinberg and Wood 1983; Foa and Foa 1974). If these resources *are* exchanged, those involved are thought to offer only insincere love and they may be labeled prostitutes, mistresses, gold-diggers, gigolos, hustlers, or cads (Belk and Coon 1991; Hirschman 1991b). When this happens, it profanes the sacred human relationship into an anonymous relationship between strangers who are less involved with each other than they are with the money, gifts, and personal resources being exchanged (Belk and Wallendorf 1990; Zelizer 1989). In other words, the economic exchange model supplants the romantic love model in such cases.

The romantic love model also influences the gifts given to a beloved, since material evidences are one of the key ways in which we judge whether or not someone loves us (Katz 1976; Swensen 1972). Such gifts of love should be given with little thought to cost. To focus on a gift’s cost is to suggest that the economic exchange model of gift giving is operative (Mills and Clark 1982). This is something Rucker et al. (1991) found men more likely to do than women. The alternate noncalculating, nonrational mode is key to modern notions of romantic love (Bourdieu [1960] 1979; Poe 1977). Hence, the romantic love model and the economic exchange model lie at opposite ends of the continuum Malinowski (1922) outlined from “pure gifts” to “real barter.” Pure gifts are unselfish and are given with no expectation of return (Parry 1986). Carrier (1991) expands on this notion in describing the ideology of the perfect gift: “One element is that the perfect gift is immaterial. Its material form, and especially its monetary worth, themselves are beside the point because they are transcended in the sentiment the gift contains. . . . The second element is that the perfect gift is unconstrained and unconstraining, that it is a pure expression from the heart that does not bind giver and recipient” (pp. 20–21). It seems likely that symbolic gifts given within the social exchange model lie somewhere between economic ex-

change commodities and the unbinding pure gifts given within the agapic love paradigm. They are emotional, but are not as deeply expressive as agapic gifts of love. They involve reciprocity, but without the strict accounting and immediacy of gifts within economic exchange. And their monetary worth is important, but primarily for symbolic reasons.

Just as romantic love itself is regarded as an emotional response, so is the choice of gifts within the romantic love model. The ideal gift is spontaneously acquired when something that might please the beloved presents itself. Rather than an instrumental act leading toward a goal, as with the exchange models, the gift in romantic love is purely expressive, as Luhmann (1986) explains: "Love motivates one to act, not for concrete effect, but because such action has, or is assumed to have, a symbolically expressive, love-exhibiting meaning and is judged to complete the uniqueness of the world in which the lover knows himself to be in harmony with the beloved (and with no one else). . . . One acts thus not owing to some intention to profit from the actions in question, but because . . . love revolves around 'giving' " (pp. 25–26).

Expressiveness has been defined as action celebrating the relationship itself, whereas instrumentalism is directed to goals external to the relationship (Gill et al. 1987; Johnson et al. 1975). Within the romantic love model, expressive gifts celebrate the giver's feelings for the beloved—a person idealized as totally unique and a preordained match with the giver. Such uniqueness is referred to as singularity. Appadurai (1986, p. 16) describes singularity with respect to objects: "It . . . seems worthwhile to distinguish 'singular' from 'homogeneous' commodities in order to discriminate between commodities whose candidacy for the commodity state is precisely a matter of their class characteristics (a perfectly standardized steel bar, indistinguishable in practical terms from any other steel bar) and those whose candidacy is precisely their uniqueness *within* some class (a Manet rather than a Picasso; one Manet rather than another)." Kopytoff (1986) illustrates the difference between a commodified person and a singular person by comparing a slave to a free person. The ultimate in commoditization is when the slave is able to be bought and sold on the marketplace and is interchangeable or fungible with any other slave of the same value. A free person is not only unable to be bought with money but is also regarded as absolutely unique and not interchangeable with any other. The difference is that between being valued in completely quantitative and monetary terms versus being valued only in unique qualitative terms without monetary equivalent. Whereas gift-giving rituals generally transform the object given into a singularized noncommodity (Belk et al. 1989; Kopytoff 1986), in the romantic love model the gift recipient is also singularized. In dating, such singularity is the opposite of the commoditization found in the economic exchange model, and implies that the

person is not just a warm body or a large bankbook, but a person who is valued as a whole, having been singled out from all others in the world. Accordingly, in the romantic love model, gifts and verbal dialogues convey the symbolic message that the recipient is loved because he or she is unique—something especially important in an individualistic society like the United States. As Soble (1990, p. 67) concludes, "We want to be loved because we stand out from the crowd and are considered uniquely lovable." Consequently, we desire gifts that show that our partner understands our uniqueness and is attentive to our desires without having to be told (Berg and McQuinn 1986; Ehman 1989; Katz 1976). This helps assure us we are not regarded as a fungible sex object (Person 1988).

One evidence of the gift recipient's uniqueness is the giver's willingness to do anything for this person, as indicated by making a sacrifice. A sacrifice is a "true" gift, as illustrated in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" (1922). The true gift seeks to make the recipient happy without any benefit to the giver (Katz 1976; Tournier 1963). Such sacrifices also contradict the instrumental exchange models of gift giving and imply that expressive considerations are foremost.

There is some evidence that perceptions of a partner's expressiveness are positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Siavelis and Lamke 1992), while instrumental exchange orientation is negatively related to such satisfaction (Murstein and MacDonald 1983). There is also evidence that heterosexual gift giving is the one context where men feel comfortable being expressive (Gould and Weil 1991). While there are women who believe in the instrumental models of dating gifts as exchange and there are men who believe in an alternative expressive romantic love model of gift giving, expressiveness is a trait most aligned with traditional female gender roles. This is supported by findings that women treasure possessions more for expressive reasons and men treasure them more for utilitarian reasons (Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Dittmar 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and that the responsibility for maintaining relationships through gift giving falls disproportionately on women (see, e.g., Cheal 1988; Fisher and Arnold 1990). Although some feminists see romantic love as a male tool of dominance (e.g., Firestone 1989), Cancian (1986, 1987) persuasively argues that romantic love involves an essentially feminine set of traits in the minds of most Westerners: the person in love is willingly emotional, dependent, submissive, altruistic, tender, and eager to please the other. These traits contrast sharply with the more utilitarian traits thought to typify market exchange, which include being rational, in control, dominant, egoistic, impersonal, and eager to please the self (Beigel 1951). Parallel differences are found between the agapic love of the romantic love model and the eros-based love of the symbolic exchange model (Soble 1990). Thus, it appears that the well-entrenched models of gift giving

as exchange may suffer from a traditional masculine gender bias, as appears to be true of social science generally (see, e.g., Hirschman 1991a; Keller 1982; Westcott 1979).

While this review has concentrated on the romantic love model because it is most germane to the present study of dating gift giving, much of what has been said also applies to brotherly love, spiritual love, and familial love models. The basic differences between the exchange paradigm and the agapic love paradigm are summarized in Table 2. Compared to the exchange paradigm, the agapic love paradigm emphasizes idealization and singularization of the beloved, the irrelevance of gift cost, the giver's passion, altruism, and submissiveness, the gift's expressive significance, and the lack of reciprocal obligation. The romantic love model adds to this an obsessive concentration on the beloved, a desire to fuse with the beloved, and a sense of being swept away by feelings of love.

Just as there are certain similarities between economic exchange and social exchange, there are also certain similarities between social exchange and romantic love. Both involve concepts of love, both involve a willing transformation of two into one, and both eschew the market-like calculation of the economic exchange model. But, while there is some overlap at the boundaries between these three models, each is conceptually distinct. To take a single example, sex acts have clearly different meanings in the three models. In economic exchange, sex between dating partners is a commodity that, especially for women, is offered in order to reciprocate for material gifts. In social exchange, sex is a deeply significant social ritual bonding the partners, demonstrating their commitment, and testing their compatibility. And, in romantic love, sex is a means to express feelings for the other, to attempt to please him or her through attention to the partner's desires, and to celebrate their oneness. Thus, while there may be some blurring at the boundaries as well as confusion sometimes as to the model from which a partner is operating, there remain clear conceptual differences between the three models.

### The Emergent Romantic Love Model

*Emotion.* In the romantic love model gifts given in love are seen to be based on ecstatic, passionate, and self-transcending emotions. The resulting feeling of intense emotions is welcomed by some more than others. "Love is the pain in the back side. Even it is good, it is still painful. . . . Of course, love can make you happy, too. But love is more emotional and less rational" (M 25). "Love can make you forget everything that's wrong with the world. It can make you the happiest person alive. And it can hurt you with such a passion that you think you're going to die! Love is consuming: it lives off of a person's energy and desires and it can consume you if you let it. But at the same time, that consum-

**TABLE 2**  
DIFFERENCES IN EXCHANGE AND AGAPIC LOVE PARADIGMS

Exchange paradigm	Agapic love paradigm
Instrumental (designed and purposive)	Expressive (spontaneous and celebratory)
Rational (dispassionate)	Emotional (passionate)
Pragmatic	Idealistic
Masculine	Feminine
Reciprocal gifts	Nonbinding gifts
Egoistic	Altruistic
Giver dominant (seeks control)	Giver submissive (abandons control)
Money is relevant (economically or symbolically)	Money is irrelevant
Gifts singularize objects	Gifts singularize recipient

mation can give your life meaning" (F 25). "She thinks that some see love as weakness. She pities those who do, for they might not understand the courage it takes to feel love. They might fear that lack of control of the situation that falling in love or feeling love offers at first" (F 33). Among many informants who shared the romantic view of gift giving, love was most often seen as a passionate feeling that is all encompassing and cannot be denied. "Tresa explains love by saying that 'love is unconditional. It isn't something you look for. All of a sudden you notice it's there. It just kind of dawns on you. It doesn't build up, it's either there or it's not'" (F 21). "It is emotionally embracing. It is unconditional. I mean it has no barriers. . . . love is like a butterfly; if you put it in your hand and close it, you'll kill it. You need to leave your hand open. Love has to be free to do what it has to do" (M 24). The passion evident in these comments derives from feelings described by informants as magical, mystical, or ecstatic. Romantic love is seen by such people as being the key to well-being. Moreover, this is a well-being shared with the loved one, due to a feeling of oneness. Such mystical unity parallels religious feelings of unity with God, or Aristophanes' description in Plato's *Symposium* of our longing for our "missing half" after Zeus's angry sword split apart the once unified man and woman. "My idea of love is basically the feeling that you want to be with that person more than anyone else. The feeling that you don't feel whole if you're apart" (F 29). "Love employs all the senses, and is almost a physical, tangible thing. . . . a person can really ache over lost love. Likewise, when a person is loved or feels love, they have a heightened sense of well-being, and may actually be healthier" (F 31). The emotional aspect of the romantic love model of gift giving is inexorably opposed to the more calculating and rational approach assumed by the exchange models of love and dating. In accordance with this expectation, many informants expressed lack of concern with the monetary value of the gift. "I had an overwhelming desire to shower the girl with gifts. I bought

her all kinds of things such as stuffed animals, clothing, and jewelry. Unlike before when I viewed dates and gift giving as an investment, I was now making decisions about buying from my heart instead of my head. I spent so much money on the girl that I had to quit school for a quarter and work full time. I guess that's what true love is" (M 25). This is a case of emotions driving behavior and making reasoned considerations of cost superfluous. One man described the lack of control of these emotions as "an explosion." This description captures both the nonrational emotional nature of romantic love and the feeling of submitting to an overwhelming force.

*Expressiveness.* A number of informants characterize dating gift giving as an expressive rather than instrumental act. As three informants put it: "[The] reason for gift giving is to express feelings. I feel gifts are used to say things for us that we feel uncomfortable about communicating in person" (M 24). "Gifts are important because they are expressions of your self and your very personal feelings" (F 22). "I was not bribing them to stay. I was just finding it necessary to express emotions through gifts rather than words" (M 26). Gifts may be inarticulate in conveying cognitive arguments (imagine holding a conversation only with gifts), but they are a highly effective way to represent what we cannot say or fear we must not risk saying in words: our deepest emotions. Chief among the emotions expressed in romantic dating gifts are feelings of agapic love for the dating partner. The partner's well-being is paramount and the giver is not giving with the expectation of getting a reciprocal gift. Mills and Clark (1982) label such situations "communal relationships" as opposed to "exchange relationships." To such givers, dating gifts are first and foremost a means to express feelings and in so doing to define relationships by building trust that, because the giver wants only to please the partner, this must be true love.

As emotional expressions, gifts to a loved one are seen as irrelevant or incidental. "In my opinion, money and gifts are an extrinsic aspect of love and dating. I consider them to be an external facet that should not intervene into the true meaning of what a relationship is all about" (M 24). When emotions reign in romantic love, gifts and monetary expenditures reflect wanting to do anything possible to please the beloved. Reciprocity is not an issue in such giving, but expressiveness is. In fact, reciprocal obligations may oppose or preclude expressive giving: "When it comes to gift giving, I feel there are two underlying reasons for its occurrence. One is due to a feeling of obligation. This could be because you received a gift from your partner and there is a feeling of reciprocation to give them something in return. . . . The other reason for gift giving is to express feelings" (M 24). "I usually give someone I am really in love with flowers and/or cards even though there is no occasion. . . . [It] really shows the other person how you actually feel. . . . I think simply loving

someone and letting that person know how much you actually love them is the major part. I could care less if my girlfriend never gave me a gift" (M 20). For in the romantic love model, expressiveness replaces the instrumentalism of the exchange models in which obligations are imposed and canceled or shifted by reciprocal gifts. The emotional expressiveness of romantic gift giving is like that of dance. It also reminds us of Isadora Duncan's supposed response to an inappropriate question about what her dance meant: "If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it." We are similarly compelled to express ourselves through gifts in the romantic love model.

*Singularization of the Recipient.* A key romantic meaning of gifts is that the recipient is special and unique. In this regard, informants report that unique and special gifts imply unique and special recipients. "They [unexpected gifts] also give importance to the relationship. The items say 'Hey, look, I spent my own free time doing this for you. You're special to me'" (F 25). "I really love to get flowers. . . . He had them delivered. . . . It was just neat. . . . It makes you feel special, that he would go to the trouble of sending them to me. I don't know, there's just something about flowers that's wonderful" (F 23). Another evidence of such specialness and singularity is when the gift uniquely suits the recipient and shows evidence of attention to his or her desires. A giver shows particular understanding of a partner's desires by almost magically fulfilling them without having to ask or be told. "When you have dated someone for a long period of time the gifts they give you really mean something. You understand the person you are dating very well and you know what kinds of gifts will be special to that person" (F 25). "I do not like to receive a gift that seems to be the token gift that was purchased with anyone, even Aunt Mae, in mind. I think it is not the amount of money spent but the thought put into the gift. Does this gift have a special meaning for me or for our relationship, or does it look like it was purchased with me in mind?" (F 22). This singularizing expectation also makes impersonal gifts inappropriate and romantically worthless even if they have a high economic or symbolic value. We want to believe that we are loved for those characteristics that make us uniquely valuable. We also want to believe that we are, to those who love us, nonfungible with any other. And we want to feel that we are the focus of our lover's devotion, that someone finds us extraordinary. From the giver's perspective, singularizing gifts are given in order to give the beloved these special feelings and to express our desire to please him or her.

*Selfless Sacrifice.* In romantic love, the gift giver is not only willing, but anxious to bring happiness to the lover. The best gift that can be given is one that involves the sacrifice of personal pleasure in favor of the pleasure of the dating partner. This is perhaps the ultimate in submissiveness, even if the first informant quoted below

denies that she is bowing to her boyfriend's will. "I would do or give anything just because he asked it of me. This would not be the type of giving to get gain or to manipulate the relationship or to bow down to his will all the time. It would be a purely charitable service because I loved him so much" (F 22). "My idea of the definition of love is that of caring for someone more than caring for oneself. Putting the goals of the other person before one's own goals" (M 25). In sacrificial giving, the obsession with the beloved is transformed into actions that demonstrate the giver's obsession and that strive to make the recipient happy. "I even remember being his personal alarm clock every single morning. I'd leave my house 15 minutes early just to stop off at his house and wake him up. But that's what made him happy so that's the way I gave of myself to him. (Especially since, I hated waking up early in the morning.)" (F 25). "When it comes to love my ideas are pretty clear. When I love someone, I would die for them. I care for, worry about, want to make happy and want to help the people I love so much that I would risk everything I have for them" (F 22). This is not giving in order to get, as in the economic exchange model. Nor is such giving an exchange of symbolic tokens, as in the social exchange model. Rather, such romantic sacrifice is an altruistic expression of the giver's love for his or her partner.

Most of the elements of romantic love identified in prior literature are found in our data. Emotions dominate such passionate giving and money is irrelevant to ideal immaterial gifts. Such gift giving is expressive and neither binds the recipient nor seeks a reciprocal gift. These are altruistic, unselfish, sacrificial, and submissive acts of giving. But even though singularization of the recipient suggests some idealization, and passion involves losing control of emotions, some informants who subscribe to the preceding characterizations of romantic love reject an overly idealized view of their loved one and the idea of being swept off their feet as being unrealistic. They instead see love developing slowly from earlier stages of the relationship. Two women saw the notions of being swept off their feet by Mr. Right as characterizing an earlier, more naive stage in their personal development:

I always thought that when I fell in love it would be complete with fireworks and violins and I would be completely starry-eyed. I was waiting to be swept off my feet because that's how it happened to my friend Jenny. Jenny began dating her husband in November and knew immediately that he was the one. The way they acted when they were together was almost disgusting. Everytime Joe walked into the room Jenny would gasp. Jenny saw fireworks and the whole bit. They were married within six months of their first date. I always thought it would happen to me like that, but it didn't. Love and realizing that I was in love was very confusing because I hadn't heard the violins or seen the little cupids floating around my head. . . . Love wasn't the hot fiery romance that I expected,

but rather a calm peaceful feeling and a reassurance that I had found the right one. [F 24]

I guess it was because I had this fairy tale idea, you know. You're going to meet this guy, this one guy, and you're going to fall in love, get married, have kids and live happily every after. And about that time I figured out it was all shot to hell. I don't believe now that there is only one guy, one certain person. I believe now that you can be happy with a lot of different people. . . . I used to think "Oh my god, I hope it's not that person." And finally, like slap me upside the head, I realized that there were a lot of guys that I would be perfectly happy with out there. [F 29]

The less idealized view of love held by these women is still squarely within the romantic love model, however. The evolution of their views also suggests that the particular model of dating gift giving may change—either with age and experience or over different stages of a relationship that runs from first meeting through cohabitation or marriage. While it was not always possible to separate these influences, the interpretation that drew on the stages of relationships emerged most clearly.

## STAGES OF DATING

Both cross-sectional analysis of informants in different stages of relationships and retrospective accounts of longitudinal changes in gift giving over the course of relationships suggest that dating gift giving tends to evolve in one general direction: from economic exchange to social exchange to romantic love. Some informants were very cognizant of the evolutionary changes in their dating gifts.

I see the relationship . . . as evolutionary. By this I mean that as a couple begins to date, that mainly money is exchanged. Not that actual cash exchanges hands, but the gifts are basically little more than gifts of cash. For example, if a gift of flowers is given it is usually done at this stage in the dating in the context of I need to give you something. (Usually very little thought is put into the content of the gift). As the dating relationship develops I have noticed that the exchange resembles more of what I consider gift giving. By this I mean the gift giver puts more thought into the gift, the gifts are more personal, have more meaning etc. The third stage of gift giving (over the course of dating) develops as the couple gets to know one another better. This is when the gifts are non-material in nature. These gifts include helping the other person when one is stressed for time, lending a good ear, etc. [F 30]

At first I think that the guy just wants to make a good impression; then after a longer time I think that a guy gives to convey that they like me and are interested in me. That is when I think they want to obligate me to continue dating. . . . When a relationship has been building for quite some time and the value of the gift rises I don't think that the obligatory pressure is there anymore. . . . Because there is a relationship already established you don't consider manipulating someone

into staying in a relationship. You just expect that it will continue. . . . I don't give to persuade someone to stay or make them feel obligated to stay. [F 22]

This evolution of relationships from economic exchange toward romantic love has also been suggested by others (e.g., Ahuvia and Adelman, forthcoming; Huston and Cate 1979; Rubin 1973). It is reasonable that the economic exchange model is most applicable early in relationships, at which time the participants are not much closer than strangers who meet in the marketplace as buyers and sellers. As more of their lives are spent together, gifts become more symbolic and social exchange dominates as the couple explores compatibility and negotiates commitment. And after both members of the couple become sufficiently committed to and enamored with each other, reason gives way to passion and the romantic love model held out as ideal in our society (Hendrick and Hendrick 1992) is embraced. Much of the anxiety of dating gift giving appears to be due to uncertainty as to whether a dating partner is still operating within the economic exchange model or is operating within the social exchange model or romantic expressiveness model. Once the social exchange level is reached there is less concern with being exploited, and commitment is cautiously built together. And, once romantic love emerges, caution is thrown to the wind and partners abandon themselves to emotions and give unselfishly and without concern for reciprocity.

Since our study is with primarily young students, it is possible that romantic love may later decline and that one of the earlier exchange stages may redevelop. Several men suggested that a reversion from romantic love toward economic exchange may take place after marriage: "I am amazed at the parallel in my dating/gift giving and the traditional concept that, 'once they're yours, you don't need to be romantic, because they already know that you love them'" (M 26). "I have heard that romantic gifts are not given often a few years after marriage because you share the same budget and the gift costs her too. The wife may feel that it could have been spent better on something practical. It probably wouldn't be normal for a couple that has been married for many years to give flowers and date in a courtship manner so I believe married people wouldn't find gift giving fits into their role as a spouse for many gifts a single couple may" (M 25). In one form of relationship dissolution discovered in divorce, exchange is recast such that requests for formerly jointly owned material goods are used to inflict and reciprocate pain rather than pleasure—a pattern termed "the battle for chattel" (McAlexander 1991). Thus, there may sometimes be further stages or recycling into earlier stages. It also seems plausible that earlier stages may sometimes be skipped. However, our data show that the movement from instrumental economic exchange toward expressive romantic love is the primary pattern in dating gift giving among both men and women.

## DISCUSSION

Whereas the dominant view in the social sciences is that gift giving and many other human interactions are based on exchange, our data show that this model is eventually rejected by most dating partners. Although in many instances people see their dating gifts and expenditures as part of an exchange process, often they do not, especially after they pass through the early period of dating a particular partner. The majority of our informants reject the exchange models of gift giving as being inapplicable to at least some of their dating experiences.

Given the geographic and demographic characteristics of those in the present study, further research on dating gifts should explore the limits of the present findings. As noted above, gift giving among an older set of informants may reveal reversals of the move from economic exchange toward romantic love or may even find exchanges intended to produce pain rather than pleasure as partners attempt to deconstruct and negate their love and life together. Further work is also called for in attempting to understand the way in which overlapping extended selves affect gift giving in established relationships. For instance, does the gift recipient's pleasure also bring the giver pleasure, as some theorists suggest (e.g., Becker 1991)? Does giving jointly usable gifts such as furniture enhance the relationship by reinforcing the joint definition of self, or does it weaken the relationship by denying the singularity attributed to the partner within the romantic love model? How do dating partners define what constitutes a gift and construe dating entertainment expenditures? And what of differences by gender, age, first versus subsequent marriage, culture, and subculture? Many questions remain to be answered, and the love relationship is a critical context in which to examine these questions. For in the love relationship (romantic love and other agapic love) we are likely to find the most appropriate high-involvement (or sacred) testing ground for the feasibility and permanence of altruism, self-sacrifice, and the replacement of instrumentalism with expressiveness—all critical issues to the human predicament.

If prior treatments of dating gift giving have emphasized instrumental exchange over expressiveness, it may be that other realms of human interaction may also be inappropriately modeled by the instrumental exchange paradigm. Despite some opposition (e.g., Leeds 1963), the reciprocal model of exchange clearly remains dominant in social and behavioral science. As Mills and Clark (1982) observe, in gift giving it is common for outside observers to assume that things given solely to please another person are really a part of an exchange. It is apparently all too easy to interpret mutual gifts purchased for money in the marketplace as necessarily obligating some form of exchange. Similarly, it is apparently too easy to assume that the marketplace is the wholly impersonal realm of exchange assumed by Adam

Smith (Nord 1973), despite evidence to the contrary (e.g., Carrier 1990, 1992b; Granovetter 1985; Silver 1990). Edward Said (1978) noted Western scholars' tendency to exoticize the East by seeing it as totally "other"—a bias he termed "orientalism." Carrier (1992b) notes that an opposite bias, which he terms "occidentalism," may have blinded us to the presence of moral or gift economies and romantic love phenomena in the contemporary West: "Scholars tend not to see things that resemble gift transactions in the West, just as they tend not to see things that resemble commodity transactions in gift societies" (p. 204). We hope that the present findings will urge a reexamination of the assumption that the marketplace and interpersonal consumption are purely and simply about exchange.

As noted earlier, the agapic love paradigm includes not only romantic love, but also brotherly love, spiritual love, and parental or familial love. Each is as ripe for investigations that go beyond the exchange paradigm. For instance, future research outside a dating context might address the phenomenon of hospitality. Hospitality rituals appear to be among the oldest and most universal of human behavior patterns. Are these instrumental exchanges in which we barter material and symbolic benefits for personal gain within close kinship groups, or is hospitality a more general expressive action through which we display our desire to make others feel welcome with no thought of benefit to ourselves? When we share money and other resources within our households out of love, this sharing is expressive rather than instrumental exchange. The sacrifices often made for our children's education and weddings and our parents' funerals are also clearly expressive acts within the agapic love paradigm. Such expressive agapic love is also heroized via Ebenezer Scrooge's posttransformation giving in Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (Belk 1989). Furthermore, the process of academic research is very differently understood within the three models revealed by the present research. In one type of research, characterized by consulting for money, this work becomes an item of economic exchange (Holbrook 1985; Jacoby 1985). On the other hand, when researchers share their findings both to build academic community and to build their own reputations in what John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1991) called the free market of ideas, the social exchange model is more applicable. And when our research becomes a passionate and selfless gift given with little thought of personal benefit, the agapic love paradigm applies (Hyde 1983).

It also seems likely that many of the nongift consumer behaviors that we commonly take to be instrumental (e.g., choices of clothing, furnishings, cars, and food) might really be expressive. We exhibit expressive behavior in decorating our houses for holidays, singing in the shower, and driving for pleasure rather than to reach a destination. Much recreation, play, and art is purely or primarily expressive. And in the intense love that we appear to feel toward certain goods (Ahuvia 1992; Belk

et al. 1991; Shimp and Madden 1988) we exhibit a selfless passion that may transcend materialism. To regard consumer behavior as only instrumental is to preclude any real understanding of the preference of a gourmet for slowly consuming an elaborate dinner within an elegant setting in the company of fellow gourmets (Carrier 1992a) over a "solitary feeding where the person wolfs or bolts his food, probably standing by his refrigerator in his overcoat" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, pp. 66–67). Campbell (1987) effectively argues that the development of modern consumer desire was based on romanticism rather than utilitarianism. If these expressive forces were critical to the origin of consumer desire, it is difficult to imagine that they have disappeared from consumption and been replaced by the instrumental forces found in most consumer behavior models. It is more likely that the mystery and romanticism of agapic expressiveness underlie a great many consumer behaviors (Belk 1990). In order to expand our conceptual possibilities beyond those of exchange instrumentalism, agapic love offers a rich and promising alternative.

## APPENDIX

### Illustrative Outline of Dating Journal Topics

- I. History
  - A. Description of self and current dating status
  - B. Dating history
  - C. Gift-giving history in adult dating contexts
- II. Dating attitudes and experiences
  - A. My idea of dating
  - B. Other forms of going out
  - C. My idea of love
  - D. My thoughts about engagement and marriage
- III. The role of money and gifts in a dating context
  - A. Love, dating, and money over the course of dating
  - B. Love, dating, and gifts over the course of dating
  - C. Love, dating, and nonmaterial gifts over the course of dating
  - D. Other thoughts about the role of exchange in dating
  - E. Other thoughts about dating as marketing myself
- IV. Some stories from my life
  - A. Dates
  - B. Dating gifts
  - C. Romance
  - D. Holidays with dates

This is only a suggestive outline; use a format and coverage that is appropriate for you.

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