Gift-giving processes in at-risk couples: “Straining” the joy out of holiday giving

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Evidence for indirect influences of holidays on the course of relationships:

- Commemorative events maintain relationships. (Dindia & Baxter, 1987)
- Increased stress hinders adaptive processes. (Neff & Karney, 2004)
- Interactions with in-laws deplete. (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001)
- Scrutinization of at-risk relationships catalyzes break-ups. (Morse & Neuberg, 2004)
One useful framework for conceptualizing the influence of holidays on relationship functioning:

![Diagram](image)

The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)
Peak Break-Up Times
According to Facebook status updates

- Spring break
  "spring clean"
- Valentine's Day
- April Fool's Day
- Monday peaks
- Summer holiday
- Christmas
  "too cruel"
- 2 weeks before winter holidays

Source: informationisbeautiful.net, 2010; David McCandless
What are the micro-level, behavioral processes? And why?

I propose that gift-giving during holidays may create conditions similar to a “test” of the partner’s communal intentions.
“Strain-tests” in relationships.

Strain test: one partner is highly dependent on an actor, and the partner perceives a conflict of interest. (Kelley, 1979)

Benefiting the partner (at the actor’s expense) can be said to be diagnostic of the actor’s pro-relationship intentions.

This process repeated is the foundation of trust-building, as long as the attribution is stable and internal. (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1979; Simpson, 2007)

When satisfaction is low, attributions can be less charitable, in the sense that partner behavior can be explained by external forces. (Neff & Karney, 2003)
Do holidays create strain-tests?

\[ \text{Strain test} = \text{dependency} + \text{a perceived conflict of interest.} \]

**Condition 1 is met:** Gift-giving creates dependencies.

**Condition 2 is met:** Thoughtful gift-giving requires effortful action.

**What kinds of diagnoses might then be made?**

He’s been thoughtfully planning for this day in order to surprise me...

He’s just going through the motions like everyone else...

At-risk couples may be more prone than satisfied couples to attribute partner gift-giving to obligation motives (and *vice versa*).
Finally, do attributions of my partner’s intentions affect my experience of giving?

• The act of gift-giving per se is pleasurable (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008) and pro-relationship. (Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011)

• Givers’ motives influence this pleasure, especially when motives:
  • Reflect duty or obligation (negative)
  • Reflect thought and care (positive) (Caprariello & Reis, in prep)

• Here I examined the joy of gift-giving as a function of perceived partner intentions. (see Beck & Clark, 2010; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006)
The conceptual model visualized:

Baseline relationship satisfaction

Biased perceptions of partner’s motives: Obligation

Biased perceptions of partner’s motives: Thoughtfulness

Happiness from giving

Important note: The links in these models represent actor effects, but estimating biased perceptions requires controlling for partner effects.
**Method**

- 119 undergraduate couples at Stony Brook University
- Both members of the couple completed a series of reports.
  - Actor-Partner Interdependence Model design
- 1-3 days before Valentine’s Day (t1):
  - To what extent are you giving because you have to? (5 items)
  - To what extent is your partner giving because he/she had to?
  - To what extent are you giving because you want to make your partner happy? (5 items)
  - To what extent is your partner giving because he/she wants to make you happy?
  - How satisfied are you in your relationship right now? (3 items)
- 1-5 days after Valentine’s Day (t2):
  - When thinking about how you spent your money on your partner, how happy are you? (3 items)
Characteristics of the couples

• 302 individuals were recruited at t1 (142 M, 160 F).
• 64 individuals provided data but their partner did not (23 F, 41 M).
• The remaining 238 individuals comprised 119 full couples.
Attrition

- Of the 302 recruited at t1, 222 (73.5%) provided t2 data (100 M, 122 F).
- One attrition effect: Individuals who provided data at both time points reported being more motivated by thoughtfulness ($M = .09$) than those who dropped out ($M = -.18$), $t(300) = 2.10$, $p = .036$.

Personal characteristics of the participants

- Ages ranged from 17 to 32 years ($Md = 20$ years).
- Relationships ranged in duration from 3 months to 3 years.
- Gifts ranged in price from $0 to $10,000 (okay, pal).
- Missing data was substantial for both relationship length and cost of gifts (>50% for both variables) and were omitted from analyses.
The empirical model – Stage 1a: unflattering attributions

- Male’s relationship satisfaction
- Male’s actual obligation
- Male’s perceived partner obligation
- Female’s relationship satisfaction
- Female’s actual obligation
- Female’s perceived partner obligation

Diagram shows the relationship between the variables and their attributions.
The empirical model – Stage 1a: unflattering attributions

- Male’s relationship satisfaction
- Male’s actual obligation
- Male’s perceived partner obligation
- Female’s relationship satisfaction
- Female’s actual obligation
- Female’s perceived partner obligation

Correlation coefficients:
- Male’s relationship satisfaction to Male’s actual obligation: -0.45**
- Female’s relationship satisfaction to Female’s actual obligation: -0.41**
- Male’s perceived partner obligation to Male’s actual obligation: 0.40***
- Female’s perceived partner obligation to Female’s actual obligation: 0.41***
The empirical model – Stage 1b: positive illusion attributions

Male’s relationship satisfaction

Male’s actual thoughtfulness

Male’s perceived partner thoughtfulness

Female’s relationship satisfaction

Female’s actual thoughtfulness

Female’s perceived partner thoughtfulness
The empirical model – Stage 1b: positive illusion attributions

**Male’s relationship satisfaction**

**Male’s actual thoughtfulness**

**Male’s perceived partner thoughtfulness**

**Female’s relationship satisfaction**

**Female’s actual thoughtfulness**

**Female’s perceived partner thoughtfulness**

- 0.60***
- 0.49***
- 0.50**
- 0.51***
The empirical model – Stage 1c: relative attributions

- Male’s relationship satisfaction
  - Male’s actual relative motives
    - Relative motives: Perceived obligation minus thoughtfulness
- Female’s relationship satisfaction
  - Female’s actual relative motives
    - Relative motives: Perceived obligation minus thoughtfulness
Male’s relationship satisfaction

Female’s relationship satisfaction

Male’s actual relative motives

Female’s actual relative motives

Relative motives: Perceived obligation minus thoughtfulness

Relative motives: Perceived obligation minus thoughtfulness

-1.05***

.36***

.24**

-.97***
The empirical model – Stage 2: The joy of giving

- Male’s perceived relative obligation
- Male’s actual relative obligation
- Male’s happiness from giving

- Female’s perceived relative obligation
- Female’s actual relative obligation
- Female’s happiness from giving
The empirical model – Stage 2: The joy of giving

Male’s perceived relative obligation

Male’s actual relative oblig

Male’s happiness from giving

-0.28***

Female’s perceived relative obligation

Female’s actual relative oblig

Female’s happiness from giving

-0.18**

-0.03

0.15
Analytic Strategy

- All data were analyzed in SPSS Mixed, using Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling.
- Dyads were distinguished by sex.
- Missing data treatment
- What were fixed effects? etc.
- ICCs, etc?
Holidays may be an important external stressor for consumer relationships, particularly those at-risk.

The influence of holidays is felt in how they can create artificial explanations for partner gift-giving motives. Partners can “fail” the strain-test, despite their actual intentions. Over-perceiving obligation motives in partners can strain out the joy and pleasure that might otherwise arise in actors when it comes time to give.

Of course, for happy, healthy couples, these outcomes need not result, and in fact these couples appear to over-perceive thoughtfulness.

For at-risk couples, though, the holidays present an added stressor that can manifest itself in unexpected, subtle ways.
Limitations and Considerations

An important limitation: These data do not allow for comparisons of gift-giving processes during non-holiday occasions.

A mixed limitation: Valentine’s Day is not a prototypical “holiday,” mixed in its normative consideration as a cultural or religious celebration.

These models do not currently allow for projection effects (e.g., A’s perceptions of B’s motives as a function of B’s actual motives plus A’s actual motives). Projection effects would be expected.
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