

# Gifts and Infant Games: Implications for Epistemology

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Giving/receiving is a basic frame for communication and cognition (Vaughan 2015). Recent research shows that we are born with active intersubjective minds and that we unconsciously or pre-consciously select pertinent perceptions from a background of many others. Researchers on salience, tell us that things seem to “pop out” from a background, calling our attention to them. Adults play games with babies, smiling, nodding, saying “boo,” playing peep-eye. They “pop out” from the background, as gifts coming forward to be perceived as relevant. These games provide practice in recognizing salient events. They are prototypes for later games like throwing and catching balls, which repeat the early schema of give-and-receive.

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For years, I have been working on a theory of communication based on unilateral giving and receiving as opposed to exchange—giving in order to receive an equivalent—as happens in the market. With this, I do not mean that there is no response to what is given, but that each communicator gives unilaterally and that the response is structured by turn taking rather than by a quid pro quo exchange of products or of products and money. The gift interaction originally comes from mothering, which is necessarily unilateral because young children cannot give back an equivalent for what has been given to them. I believe that most of the investigation into signs and language has been burdened by the unconscious influence of the mode of exchange upon our thinking, making us interpret our interactions according to the ego-oriented logic of exchange rather than the other oriented logic of the unilateral gift. By refocussing, we can see that the unilateral gift is quite commonplace. Indeed it is a hidden norm, while exchange is only one widespread variation on the theme of the gift. Proponents of the gift, beginning with Malinowski and Mauss and continuing up to the present day theorists like Louis Hyde, Alain Caillé, and Marcel Henaff, do not deal with infancy and mothering and so usually leave aside unilateral gifting. On the other hand, infancy researchers, whose discipline has undergone a paradigm shift in the last decades, do not consider gifting, which appears to be part of anthropology, economics or ethics, not of psychology. John Bowlby, who was one main initiator of the paradigm shift says: “The truth is that the least-studied phase of human development remains the phase during which the child is acquiring all that makes him (sic) most distinctively human. Here is still a continent to conquer” (A. Schore 1999). I would add that the image is well taken because the most important continents conquered recently—the Americas—are where maternal gifting economies were still present as a way of life on a wide scale. The lack of appreciation of the gifting ways of the Native peoples was one important cause of the genocide practiced upon them from

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which Western society is still reeling. Perhaps it was also a cause of the prior and contemporary genocide of the witches in the Inquisition, which Silvia Federici (2004) shows was part of capital accumulation as the appropriation of women's unpaid (I would say gift) labor. Thus, there are reasons for the blindness to motherwork and gifting that are more sinister than the division into academic silos, but I will not go into them now.

Early childhood is an area of the gift economy within the exchange economy of the market, which takes place in the "domestic sphere." In their role as housewives in the nuclear family, people, mostly women, provide free gifts and services for the family so the child not only receives nurturing free but lives in an immediate environment in which gifting by the mother is common also for others. The patterns of need-satisfying giving and receiving, not of exchange, are the first fundamental material, communicative and cognitive patterns the child encounters and learns by doing. They continue to function throughout the rest of life. They can also be projected onto his/her surroundings by the child so that he/she receives perceptual gifts from the environment and gives them to others by his/her own non verbal behavior.

I hypothesize giving and receiving as the schema that underlies the interpersonal formation of the self. From Bowlby onward, it has been clear that the mother-child relation is key to the formation of the self, which does not take place in a vacuum but in relationship. I believe this relationship is based on the mutuality of nurturing, on the free gifts (beyond the market) that the mother gives to the child and that the child creatively receives. This relationship is not the product of Marcel Mauss's three steps giving, receiving and giving back, which imposes debt and obligation, but takes place when the caregiver recognizes the need of the child and satisfies it appropriately without expecting a payment. The transmission of this mode to the child is based on imitation not obligation and is the basis of *co muni* cation (giving gifts together). I have written at length about this free giving and receiving as the structure underlying the schemas of language including aspects of grammar, reference, and signification.

As the child grows up he/she encounters many variations on the theme of gifting with which the culture is rife although they are not recognized as such. For example, the individual schemas that Lakoff and Johnson saw as important to language construction can be seen as variations on the schema of the gift. "Path to goal" and "going into and out of a container," which are two widespread individual schemas, can be seen as derivations of the gift. "Path to goal" is abstracted from the trajectory of the gift as it goes from one person to another, neutralized and seen only as movement from point to point. "Going into and out of a container" is the movement of the gift from the body or hands of one person to the hands or consumption of another. Both of these schemas are used by adults as well as children in various kinds of games and play as well as in more everyday activities such as driving a car from one city to another, the trajectory of the gift from one "container" to another.

Among the many variations on the theme of the gift, there are negative ones, for example hitting, where like the giver of a gift, a person reaches out and touches the receiver (but with force) and establishes a relation with him/her, though one of dominance instead of mutuality. Exchange itself is a doubled gift, one with the constraint of an equal return. This requirement totally changes the logic of the gift from other oriented to ego oriented, from qualitative to quantitative. All of my discourse on gifting takes place on the basis of a criticism of exchange. However, I am not going to elaborate much on it here. Other variations on gifting take place in turntaking in unilateral gifting, simple and generalized reciprocity, the circulation of gifts in communities,

Maussian symbolic gift exchange and the manipulative giving of loan sharks, Mafia lords, and political campaign financiers.

Although the direct receivers of gifts and services sometimes are grateful and do freely acknowledge and give value to the givers, the importance given to exchange in our society makes receiving seem inferior so that when they accept gifts, people sometimes do not feel respected. While this may be part of the market mentality, without the positive mother-child gift relation, gifting among adults would not carry the psychological charge that it does.

And in fact gifts are sometimes given to overpower others for the benefit of the “giver.” Unilateral gift giving and receiving in a context of exchange is almost always difficult and contradictory. Social mores and individual machinations regarding giving and receiving can be very complex power games. See for example the gift giving in sixteenth century France described by Natalie Zemon-Davis (2000).

*Research on Early Childhood:*

Changes in approach that took place during the 90's, the so called decade of the brain, and subsequently have shown us that there are not only interpersonal schemas, there is interpersonal neurobiology.<sup>1</sup> Neither the child nor the adult is seen as a solipsist any longer. And mothering is no longer the care of a Freudian or Piagetian solipsistic infant but the co-creation with the baby of his/her social self.

Infancy researcher Colwyn Trevarthen says:

As thinking adults depend upon years of practical experience, reasoning about facts and causes, and language to sustain their knowledge, beliefs, and memories, and to understand one another, it seems quite absurd to suggest that a newborn infant has intersubjective mental capacities. But detailed research on how neonatal selves coordinate the rhythms of their movements and senses, and how they engage in intimate and seductive precision with other persons' movements, sensing their purposes and feelings, gives evidence that it is so. The developmental and functional neuroscience of the human brain agrees. Indeed, it seems that cultural intelligence itself is motivated at every stage by the kind of powers of innate intersubjective sympathy that an alert infant can show shortly after birth. We are born to generate shifting states of self-awareness, to show them to other persons, and to provoke interest and affectionate responses from them. Thus starts a new psychology of the creativity and cooperative knowing and meaning in human communities. (2010)

Beginning with the gift to the child of the mother herself, her time, energy, and attention, giving and receiving becomes the way of life of infancy, a new stage after the giving and receiving that has taken place physiologically in the womb. Through their right brain to right brain interaction with children, mediated by physical and facial expressions, mothers share their appraisals of the important aspects of the environment.

Much has been said recently about salience on the linguistic plane where it has been used to explicate anaphora (Chiaros 2011) but it is an important factor in the non linguistic area as well. Salient elements are evident and they “pop out” from a background. In a sense other humans, especially the mother, are always salient to some degree to the child. The gift of milk is salient because the child could not live without it but also because it comes from a breast or a bottle that comes forward as a gift from a background. That is, it is evidence of a gift initiative on the part of another.

Many aspects of the environment are salient or become so for the moment. They call our attention to themselves and we receive them in their newness or importance.

All this is expressed and experienced interpersonally beginning around three months of age in protoconversation, an interactive game between mother and child in which they take turns in vocalizations, hand and facial gestures, and laughing reactions. These interactions have been found cross culturally in every

society in which they have been studied and they have also been transcribed in musical and rhythmic scores (Trevarthen 1999).

As the child grows older the attention of both interactors turns outward to aspects of the surroundings, so that the child receives the gifts of salient perceptions mediated by the mother's attention to them and by deixis, finger pointing. I would say that, in creating what is termed "joint attention" by infancy researchers, our index fingers become salient as they "pop out" to ostensibly indicate something external that itself is "coming forward," i.e., that is being given to our perception. In this way, whether we are infant or adult, we give the perceived item to the perception of our companion by directing his/her gaze. The developmental stage of "mind reading," where the child infers what is in the mind of the other is usually seen as coming later but it seems clear to me that directing the other's attention in order to give him/her a salient perception and share it with him/her also requires a certain amount of mind reading, of understanding his/her perspective.

Years ago, writing about pointing, I realized something important—that the index is extended but also that the other fingers are pulled back and that the pointing finger forms an iconic representation of the perceptual field in which something is made salient while the surroundings are backgrounded.

Such coming forward also happens in the games not only mothers but other people play with babies, smiling, saying "boo," playing peep-eye, backgrounding ourselves and coming forth as a smiling and salient part of the environment. We also try jiggling the keys or a toy in front of babies' faces in order to attract their attention and make them laugh. With this perceptual gifting, we establish at least a tenuous relationship of mutuality with them that harks back to the more fundamental gifts of food and mother care, which create the more long-term relationships. In this process, we also stimulate their expectation of their surroundings as a background from which gifts to their perception may pop out at any time.

Games have to do with socialization according to this perceptual and communicative foundation and many of them can be seen as exploring the gift interactions. Let me repropose a discussion from my book *The Gift in the Heart of Language* (2015):

Much of material culture can be seen as variations on a theme of mothering-gifting. A little girls' (or boys') tea party game is pretty obviously gift giving but the children are also playing with gift objects. The cup and its handle are two gifts, satisfying two needs, one for containing a liquid, the other for a way of holding the container, giving the (meta) gift of the gift. Similarly, there is the handle of the pitcher that contains (a communal gift) liquid that is given, poured into various cups. The knife is a pointing index that cuts, the fork is a little hand, the spoon is a pointing index and a cup. A pair or a group throwing and catching a ball is pretty clearly a variation on giving and receiving and giving again. If hitting is a high transitive variation on giving, hitting the baseball that is thrown is an intervention of one kind of altered giving onto the trajectory of another. Then there is a path-to-goal trajectory of runners around the bases. Football is an attempt of one team to give the football to the container of the goal by kicking, carrying and throwing it in spite of opposition—kicking, throwing, catching, and grabbing (a kind of overactive or "high transitive" receiving)—by the other team. Basketball uses a different kind of team effort to give or prevent the gift of the ball to the basket/receiver by bouncing and throwing. Even chess is a complex combination of gift trajectories, paths to goals of "eating" or capturing/"receiving" the other pieces by force. In golf, the index club sends the ball-gift to the hole-receiver. Shooting at a target is somewhere between hitting and projecting from a source along a gift trajectory to a target. Shooting at animals ("game") or at other people gives them the "gift" of death! To puzzles and conundrums (as needs), we try to give the gift of solutions.

Tennis is unilateral giving-by-hitting and turn-taking receiving and giving back. It starts with a “service” (a word that recalls the nurturing gift) and expects a “return.” These terms are now used instead of “taking turns giving and receiving” by child development researchers because in spite of its ubiquity and importance, the gift interaction has not been recognized as such in our patriarchal exchange-based society. Quoting from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child website (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu>):

Serve and return interactions shape brain architecture. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child’s brain that support the development of communication and social skills. Much like a lively game of tennis, volleyball, or Ping-Pong, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity-building. When caregivers are sensitive and responsive to a young child’s signals and needs, they provide an environment rich in serve and return experiences.

In spite of great strides forward in understanding how the brain works, in understanding infancy and in emphasizing the importance of child care, the aspect of material nurturing—what I call the maternal gift economy—is not usually broached even though it is the *sine qua non* for all the other interactions. Perhaps this is because living in a society in which there is widespread well being at least among the classes who attend prestigious universities, the material nurturing of the children is considered a given. For the child him/herself however the processes of nurturing must be especially important because they are the ones upon which his/her survival depends. Thus, they would be psychologically significant for her as well as for the mother who does the nurturing. They are the underlying material structure of the psychological interaction, the theme upon which the joyful protoconversational communication is the variation. The games of tennis or ping pong are adult variations on the same theme or perhaps variations on the variation of protoconversation. Tennis might be called “nurturing one another with raquets and balls” rather than framing the mother-child interaction as a kind of tennis (which the baby is much too young to play).

The concept of games may be based on family resemblance as Wittgenstein believed, but it mainly ignores the prototype of the gift giving mother and leaves any resemblance to her out of the family picture. And the same thing happens with his idea of language games. In fact, if language is based on the image schema of the gift as I believe, language games would also be extensions of mother-child gifting interactions.

Even Wittgenstein’s famous description of a language game from the *Philosophical Investigations* has to do with giving and receiving though couched in terms of command. “Bringing” is another variation on the theme of giving. Constructions, like games, are largely gift-based, and the constituents themselves are given (attached) to the other constituents by the builders who bring them. For example we use the hammer to give the nail to the wall, the wall gives support to the roof, the house gives shelter to the human, etc. In the following quote, there are different kinds of gift stones that satisfy different kinds of needs in the construction of the wall. The gift is the hidden element underlying this scenario.

Let us imagine a language... The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” “beam.” A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. Conceive of this as a complete primitive language. (PI 1.2)

In the same way that the fundamental importance of mother-child giving and receiving has been ignored by academia, the gift economy has been ignored by mainstream economics or has been considered only an externality. For planetary survival, it is now necessary to recognize gifting, to understand humanity as a

maternal species, to move away from the market and to act according to the model of the gift that is presented by human mothers and children and by Mother Earth.

## Notes

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1. And the much maligned “conduit metaphor” no longer seems negative when individuals are seen as the product of social interaction based on gifting.

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