



## Opinion Science Podcast

*Hosted by Andy Luttrell*

### Giving and Getting Good Gifts

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LAURA SANDERS: The emotional memory I have is just the sheer cockiness I had when picking up another bag of marbles for her. Like, the sheer, just like-- She loves these. She's going to love them again. Thank goodness I have an opportunity—Like, I really I don't love to give holiday-based gifts, but when I find a good gift, I love that feeling of being like, “Oh, this is thoughtful. You're going to love this.” Like, “take this,” kind of feeling. And I think as a kid, that was my first experience with that, where I was like, Oh man, there they are. Like, beeline for the marbles. Get that done ahead of time. Get them the goes out of the way and then shop around.

That's my friend, Laura Sanders talking about a gift she got for her big sister when they were kids. Kids love gifts—yes, they like to get presents, but they like to give them too. So when it was time to get Christmas presents for her family, Laura's options were limited.

LAURA SANDERS: So, I don't know if your school had these. My elementary school, Whitehouse Elementary in Whitehouse, Ohio, it was “Shopping Santa” where it was like very cool with being a public school that openly celebrated Christmas. And you would like get these paper bags, like grocery bags, and they'd be decorated. And the gym would just look like a whole low-rent Etsy store where it was basically like, Hey, you don't actually want to take your kid to a mall 'cause that's a nightmare, but you want to teach them that Christmas is about gifts, so come and like, you pin like a little envelope of money to this bag, and then they wander these like little games and like little cheap things and they buy things for their family here.

And there she saw the perfect gift for her big sister, Bethany. A small plastic mesh bag filled with clear glass marbles. The working theory is that Bethany had gotten this sack of marbles for herself a year earlier, so when Laura happened upon the item at the school's gift fair...

LAURA SANDERS: I was like, she's going to love these a hundred percent, little sack of glass balls. I'm going to get them for her for sure.

But these may not be the marbles you're imagining—delicate orbs with hypnotic colors swirling throughout. I also talked to Bethany about this story and asked her to describe these marbles she got.

BETHANY SANDERS: They were not like the totally smooth... And they were not like the kind of pretty marbles that you often see that have some kind of design or color pattern or like, or like thing in the middle. They really were clear glass spheres.

Nevertheless, they seemed like a slam dunk. Laura gave the clear glass spheres to her sister and everyone had a merry Christmas.

LAURA SANDERS: At the time I was five and she was nine. And so she was just like so nice, and she's like, I love these. This was so thoughtful. This is great. So I think I like nailed my first Christmas buying gifts, just like right out the gate.

So fast forward a year and it's time to buy gifts again. And so how do you top the bag of marbles that your sister loved last year? Turns out, you don't. You buy the exact same marbles again. And the next year? Just get the same bag of marbles. Next year? Marbles.

LAURA SANDERS: Five years in a row, I'm pretty sure. Like every year for Christmas, she would just open up the present from me, and it's like, here's another sack of marbles. Just, here it is again.

BETHANY SANDERS: I don't specifically remember opening the second year bag of marbles as distinguished from the third year bag of marbles or the fourth year bag of marbles. I just very quickly just came to expect this from Laura and I was like, it's odd that she thinks this is a thing, but, okay, that's fine. I'll say thank you for the marbles. And then move on pretty quickly.

LAURA SANDERS: I remember being like stressed out about other people's gifts and being, Oh, thank goodness Bethany loves these marbles so much.

ANDY LUTTRELL: Is it the case that the whole time you genuinely thought these were good gifts for her?

LAURA SANDERS: Yes, I 100% thought she loved them.

BETHANY SANDERS: When I was like 10, which would have been about how old I was like the first year of the marbles, like solid. But then it stretched to when I was like 14. So a little, maybe less.

But when Laura finished elementary school, the reign of the marbles had to end. The gift fair, which Bethany described as...

BETHANY SANDERS: Pretty rough

Well, it wasn't available anymore so Laura had to consider other options. They grew up, and like everyone they're still stuck with questions about what to get their family for Christmas.

LAURA SANDERS: Although now I have a niece who's five, and I should probably send her something...

ANDY LUTTRELL: I have an idea.

## **Introduction**

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about the science of our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And on this special holiday episode, we're talking gift-giving. Oftentimes on this show I'll spend the whole time talking to someone about their work, but today we'll shake things up by getting insights from several experts on the psychology of giving. It's that time of year when we're bombarded with ads and catalogs and sales...all because it's a season of giving gifts. But it's not just the winter holidays. Birthdays, housewarming parties, graduations...we give and receive gifts constantly. I think the number is something like we spend 30 gazillion dollars a year on gifts? Something like that.

And think back to a gift you've received that you really loved. And think back to a gift that just truly sucked. What was the difference? Since this show is all about where our likes and dislikes come from, it sounds like a job for Opinion Science.

We'll start by asking whether it's worth giving to people in the first place. Sure it's nice for them, *but what's in it for us?*

Then we'll jump into an emerging area of research in marketing and psychology that looks at the gifts people like to give, the gifts people like to get...and why those aren't always the same thing.

### **Act I: Why Spend on Others?**

So to start...why give in the first place? I mean, it's pretty obvious that it's nice to get fun things. So as the recipient of a gift, this makes sense. It's like when kids really learn that their birthday is when they get presents, they're like, "so...why don't we do this every day?"

But what's in it for the giver? I don't think it's too controversial to say that people can be pretty selfish. So, if I have \$20, why would I spend it on you when I could spend it on me? Like I guess it's bad for my reputation if I'm the one guy who doesn't bring a gift to the baby shower, but beyond that, what are we doing here?

Well, it turns out that even though we might expect that \$20 to make us happier if we can use it for ourselves, we actually get a bigger happiness jolt from spending it on others.

Lara Aknin studies *prosocial spending*, which is just when people spend money on others. And she specifically looks at whether prosocial spending can make us happier.

LARA AKNIN: When we show people dollar signs and when we give them the choice in the here and now, they quickly default to these selfish preferences whereby they think they will be happier or they choose to invest in themselves. And what I think our research has shown time and time again, over the past decade or so, is that, looking in rich and poor countries across the age spectrum and various personal histories, most people are in fact quite a bit happier when they spend on others than on themselves.

But it's one thing to claim that spending money on other people makes us happier. It's another thing to prove it.

So back when she was a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, Lara worked with Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton on some telling experiments.

For example, they went up to students on UBC's campus—students who were just walking around and minding their own business. And they asked if they'd do a quick survey. The survey was really just a way for them to ask a simple question about happy the student was at the moment. Then they gave them some money—either \$5 or \$20—but terms and conditions applied. They told the students that they had to spend the money by 5:00 PM that day. But they told half the students that they had to spend the money on themselves and half that they had to

spend the money on someone else. And it was totally random which set of instructions people got.

ANDY LUTTRELL: Do you have any idea what they were spending the money on?

LARA AKNIN: I do. So, a lot of it was food, which had to do, I think with-- You know, we recruited people in the morning and lunch passed it between. Although at a higher level, a lot of it was food and consumption, a lot of it had to do with like, there was magic in the details if you will. People who were in the personal spending condition were buying themselves a latte and heading to class. And people who were in the pro-social spending condition were treating friends for lunch, taking friends to coffee, some people went out of their way and took special bus routes home to bring home like special food for their family because they wanted to give a parent a night off.

In the evening, after all the money was spent, researchers called the students to follow up. And they just asked again, how happy are you?

LARA AKNIN: When we analyzed the data later, what we found was those people who were randomly assigned to spend on others were significantly happier, regardless of whether it was \$5 or \$20.

And you might think, sure this makes sense for well to do college students, but other people won't get the same boost from spending on others or they have real need for the money so they *will* be happier if they spend it on themselves. Well, they're on top of that. They've tested this all over...

LARA AKNIN: In South Africa and in several other places.

LARA AKNIN: In rich and poor countries around the world...

LARA AKNIN: This remote village in Vanuatu

LARA AKNIN: Kids who were 22 months came into the lab with their parents.

LARA AKNIN: And also recently looking at ex-offenders.

And with all these different studies, when people got some money and they spent it on someone else, they were happier than if they spent it on themselves.

So even though you might think that you'll enjoy getting a gift yourself, that silly old adage holds true: it's better to give than to receive.

SONG: "It's better to give than to receive..."

## **Act II: What to Get?**

So when we give gifts, we feel nice and warm inside. But we're still left with the dilemma of *what* to get!

And to answer that question, we can start with a more basic one: Do we even know what we're doing in the first place?

A lot of research in psychology and marketing has shown that gift-givers have some clear biases that make it hard for them choose the gifts that receivers would like the most.

To learn more, I talked to Jeff Galak. He's an associate professor of marketing at Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business.

JEFF GALAK: The biggest difference between a giver and a receiver is what they're imagining in the case of a gift exchange. So a giver by and large—at least the evidence seems to suggest—is imagining that moment of exchange. When they're saying, "Hey, Andy. Here's this present for your birthday" or whatever it might be. And as a giver, I want to see that smile on your face. I want to see you reacting positively to this gift that I gave both for selfish reasons because I want to feel like I'm a good gift giver and I've done my duties, but also for interpersonal reasons, right? I want to make sure our relationship is solid. I want to make sure that the gift has met its purpose.

But then when you flip it over to the receiver side, that's only a small fraction of their experience with a gift. Yes, that interaction where they hand over the gift exists, but in their time course of owning this gift, that is a tiny sliver of all of that.

So these different goals—givers wanting to maximize the whizz-bang moment of giving the gift and receivers wanting something that they'll still like after the moment of getting it—can cause some friction.

Julian Givi had a good example of this. Julian's an assistant professor of marketing at West Virginia University's John Chambers College of Business. As a grad student, he worked with

Jeff Galak to understand gift-giving. And it almost seems pre-destined. I mean, his last name is “Givi” and he studies gift-giving. I asked him if anyone’s called him out on that...

JULIAN GIVI: You are the first person telling me that. However, I have noticed that because there've been times where I've, you know, controlled F looking for either my last name or for “giving,” and I come across the other one.

His PhD advisor remembers it differently...

JEFF GALAK: I’m pretty sure *I’ve* said that before.

Anyhow, Julian summed up the differences between givers and receivers by pointing to the all-American fondue pot...

JULIAN GIVI: Givers like to give really fun things, right? Like, let's say, like a chocolate fondue fountain, right? You know, the person opens it, it's like, “Oh, it was exciting.” But at the same time, that's not all that useful, right? Like, so as a giver, I might like giving it because I really, I want to make you happy and, you know, see your face, uh, you know, see the smile on your face whenever you open the gift, but as a recipient, I'm thinking like, “Okay. But like in two weeks...” you know what I mean? I'm going to be needing like a Keurig or a toaster oven or something that's actually useful. Like, I can only use this fondue fountain like once in a blue moon, but these other, you know, sort of less fun things that might not make me so excited right when I open the gift, they're going to provide me with a lot of value and usefulness whenever I actually go about my everyday life.

So it makes sense that givers and receivers come at these situations from different perspectives, but how do we actually test this scientifically? Well there are plenty of strategies, but a common one is pretty simple. In an experiment, you can show people information about a potential gift or a collection of potential gifts. Flip a coin. If it comes up heads, you ask people to approach the option as a gift *giver*—like you’re looking for a gift for a friend...do you think you’d give them *this*? Or which of these options would you choose to give?

But if the coin comes up tails, you ask the person to approach the option as a *recipient*. What if someone gave you this gift for Christmas? Or which of these gifts would you prefer to get for your birthday?

JEFF GALAK: A lot of what I think is most interesting about those hypothetical scenarios is people are givers and recipients in the real world. And yet when you just merely ask them to put their hat on as a giver versus their hat on as a recipient, they almost forget that that other half exists and operate as if that were not the case. So they're pretty good at doing this, right?

Let's start with a simple example of how givers and receivers approach things differently. How important is the *cost* of the gift you're giving?

Let's mentally travel back to the days of 2009...when iPods were a thing people wanted and AOL Instant Messenger ruled the social media world. Researchers at Stanford gave a bunch of people a simple scenario: pick someone from your buddy list on AOL Instant Messenger...for younger listeners, think "Facebook friend," or "TikTok...companion"...someone you know reasonably well.

A random half of the people were asked to imagine that this person had just graduated from high school, and they were nice enough to get that person a gift. Sometimes the researchers said the gift was an inexpensive CD and sometimes they said it was a pricy iPod. And they just had to imagine...how much would your friend appreciate this gift you gave them? Sure enough, when they were wearing the hat of a gift-giver, they assumed the person would like the iPod more than the CD. They thought the iPod would seem like a more thoughtful gesture, and so their friend would appreciate it more.

But the other random half of participants were asked to imagine that *they* were the person who had graduated, and this person got *them* a gift. This time—with the recipient hat on—people didn't distinguish between the CD and the iPod. Both seemed pretty great!

So here we see that when we approach gifts from the giver's perspective, we put a lot of weight on the wow factor. But as gift recipients, we realize that it's not all that important.

## A) Repetitive Gifts

Okay, so as gift-givers, we think price matters more than it actually does. What else do we get wrong? One way to think about this is to ask: what would a recipient actually like and why might a gift giver deliberately avoid giving it?

In my friend Laura's case, she doubled down on a gift for her sister and gave it every year she possibly could. In retrospect, it seems like a silly thing to do—give the same gift every year. But maybe we're wrong. Maybe that's a great strategy!

Growing up, my parents would get me a box of those Ferrero Rochet chocolates every year for Christmas. And I loved them. I looked forward to them. Every Christmas was a great treat! The year there *wasn't* Ferrero Rochet in my stocking...I mean, it was a letdown.

I always think of that scene in A Christmas Story. It's Christmas morning, everyone's tearing open their presents, excited about what they got, and the dad says: "*Didn't I get a tie this year?*"



Just because we got a gift before doesn't mean we wouldn't like it again. But we don't always appreciate that when we have our gift-giving hat on.

JULIAN GIVI: Givers don't like to give things that they've given to recipients in the past. So, for example, let's say I give my friend a Starbucks gift card for their birthday at the beginning of this year. When it comes to their Christmas gift, even if I know they're really going to want a Starbucks gift card, I'm going to say, "No. I want to kind of give something thoughtful and not so boring. So even if I don't think they will like, say, a Subway gift card as much as the Starbucks one, I'll go ahead and give them a Subway gift card just to kind of like make me feel good about myself.

And he's actually studied the gift card example. He asked people to imagine they had to give their friend a gift for Christmas, and they chose between a \$25 gift card for Starbucks, Subway, AMC, or Best Buy. Then he asked them to imagine they needed to buy a birthday gift a few weeks later, only 30% of people chose the same gift card that they had chosen for that person's Christmas present.

But when he asked people to imagine they were the friend receiving a Christmas present and a birthday present, 62% of them chose the same gift card twice.

Now some of this may just be that we know our own preferences, so we know which gift we'd want the most. And givers are just shooting in the dark. But in another study, Julian made this all very clear. He said, imagine after you give the Christmas present, your friend says they really like that company and they're excited to use the gift card. When it comes to making a choice for their birthday, it seems like some givers got the hint—62% of them chose the same gift that worked out before. But that's still a lot of givers who can't help but still pick a different gift card for the second gift. Show the same scenario to receivers, though, and 76% of them say, "Well if I loved the first one, I'd like it again."

And like Julian mentioned, this seems to have a lot to do with the pressure givers feel about giving special gifts. When he asks people to imagine giving or receiving the same gift twice, givers lamented that it wouldn't seem thoughtful. It would seem boring. Receivers didn't share their concerns.

## **B) Sentimental Gifts**

Alright, here's the part of the show where I pause to rail against the capitalist machine and lose my mind about how we've lost sight of the true meaning of Christmas. It's easy to roll eyes at that kind of commentary, but honestly it does get sort of irritating to keep buying junk and spending money just because we have this culture of doing so. But as we saw before, giving to others can bring happiness, and the amount we spend doesn't seem to matter as much as we think.

So what about sentimental gifts? The kinds of gifts that carry meaning that goes deeper than the object itself? Do people actually like getting these gifts? I mean, sure my dad *said* he liked the thoughtful artistry of an 8-year-old's watercolors, but was my rough painting of a family portrait actually a good gift?

As a starting point, let's consider a study that Jeff Galak did with his former student, Yang Yang. They asked romantic couples to participate in a personality survey—they came to the psychology lab together but were escorted to opposite sides of the room where they filled out a long personality test. But this wasn't a study about personality. That part was a sham. It was just an excuse for the real study. Because when they finished the survey, they were told that they'd receive a gift. Sometimes the experimenter would just give them each a gift as a thank you for doing the study, but sometimes the participants got a choice.

JEFF GALAK: The choice is going to be between one of two opaque boxes. And one box is labeled "For You". And the other box is labeled "for your partner." And choose whatever you want, it's up to you.

So they could decide whether to pick a box and take the gift for themselves. Or they could decide to pick a box to give to their partner.

JEFF GALAK: And I think if I recall all, but one or two couples in every case chose for the other, which is telling you something about the couples that didn't choose the other.

And in these cases, the partners would meet back up and exchange the boxes they picked for each other. And it's not like these were amazing gifts or anything, but it was the same gift regardless of whether it came from the experimenter or whether it had been chosen by their partner. One gift was a little calendar toy, and in the research paper, they describe the other gift as "a man-made grass toy." Or as Jeff describes it...

JEFF GALAK: Um, a fake chia pet head, if I remember. So it didn't actually grow when you poured water on it, but it kinda looked like it. It was cute. We pretested all these things to make sure they were well-liked.

So anyhow, what they found was that even though everybody generally liked the gift they got, when people received that gift from their partner, they attached sentimental value to it, compared to when they got the same item from an experimenter. And when they surveyed everybody again three months later, the people who got the gift from the experimenter had become less excited

about it. But when the same gift came from a romantic partner, it held its value. And when they followed up another six months later, that continued to be the case.

So if a chia pet—I mean:

JEFF GALAK: A fake chia pet head.

If that can get imbued with sentimental value, which brings people happiness for months, what about a gift that's deliberately intended to be sentimental? Like a photo album, or a family heirloom, or a keepsake from an experience we had together? Based on the study with the couples, it seems clear that people enjoy sentimental things, and when it comes to gifts...

JEFF GALAK: Recipients just overwhelmingly love sentimentally, valuable objects. And again, it's not surprising if we come back to this thoughtfulness discussion. That's meaningful, right? It's something that shows that you took the time, not just to buy a random item off the street, which anyone could have purchased, but actually took the time to do something that is somehow special for that individual and perhaps solely for that individual.

But does this mean we give sentimental gifts as often as we should? Jeff and his student at the time, Julian Givi, wanted to test it. And before doing the studies, they were assuming that

JULIAN GIVI: ...whenever people give gifts, they would give sentimental gifts too often because they sort of have like, "Oh, I want you to think about me." You know what I mean? Whenever you're using this gift. So I want to give you the sentimental ones way more than the recipients want. And we found the exact opposite and it kept happening and happening. So we're like, well, I guess that, that is in fact what the givers' and the recipients' preferences were in that context.

For example, they ran a study where they asked people to imagine that they were going to their friend's Going Away Party. And they had two options for a gift: (A) buying a big, framed high-quality photo of their friend's favorite musician or (B) printing and framing an 8 x 10 photo from their phone of the two of them having fun together. They found that only 76% of people chose the sentimental photo option. Now, that's still most people opting for the sentimental gift, but it also means that about a quarter of the participants thought the musician photo was the way to go.

And this all gets more striking when we look at what people say if it's *their* Going Away Party. In this case—when they're receiving the gift—96% of people choose the sentimental gift.

Granted, the Going Away Party was a hypothetical scenario, so Jeff and Julian also wanted to see what happens when a real gift is on the line. And when are gifts more of a minefield than...once again, in romantic relationships.

They had couples complete a survey in pairs. They randomly picked one person to be the gift-giver, and that person took the first part of the survey alone. He or she identified their partner's favorite store and picked a sentimental gift they thought their partner would like. The options for the sentimental gift were things like monogrammed drink coasters or personalized coffee mugs.

Let's say you're the gift-giver. You say your partner loves Macys and they'd like a personalized coffee mug. In that case, you're given a simple choice: give your partner a \$25 Macys gift card or give the sentimental coffee mug? Whatever you chose, Jeff and Julian would see to it that your partner actually gets this gift! So this is a real decision.

You make your call. Then it's time for a switcheroo. You leave the room and your partner comes in to complete the survey. And the survey simply presents them with same choice. Would they prefer to *receive* a \$25 Macys gift card or would they prefer the sentimental coffee mug?

Now in general for this study, the recipients were overall less excited about the sentimental gifts. I don't know, maybe people have enough coffee mugs or they just love gift cards, but 34% of the gift recipients chose a sentimental gift.

But even still, givers missed the mark. Less than *twenty-four* percent of them chose the sentimental gift. So even when it's real gifts and real couples, givers hesitate to give sentimental gifts as often as receivers would enjoy them.

In fact, when I asked Julian how his own gift giving has changed since he started researching the topic, he had this to say...

JULIAN GIVI: There's a few different things that I keep in mind. Probably a big one that I've been doing lately—or actually, in fact, since I started—was just going with more sentimental gifts because our studies show that people don't give them nearly as often as recipients prefer. And in fact, when I was starting with that project, I was thinking to myself, when was the last time I ever gave one? And really like since then, I've been giving them much more often and it's like, every time you give one, they're a hit, you know what I mean? They really are. Um, so that's another thing I do myself, and I try to encourage people. I say, you know, if you have the opportunity, go for it because they're almost always, always a good hit.

### **C) Requested Gifts**

You know, I get the idea this research is revealing—repeated gifts, sentimental gifts...these are things that receivers don't mind or even like but when we're the giver, they seem underwhelming. So sure, I can feel comfortable giving repeated gifts or sentimental gifts. But it still doesn't necessarily answer the question, "what should I get this person in the first place?"

And the thing is...we already know the answer. There's a very simple way to knock this one out of the park, but you may not like it.

Just ask people what they want.

Jeff Galak again:

JEFF GALAK: It really is this weird social norm that we have in our culture—and I don't know that this is true in other cultures, I'm not a cross-cultural researcher—but in our culture, it is taboo to ask somebody what they want for their birthday or for Christmas or whatever it is. And I think that's insane. I think that is a disservice to all of society. And I am not mincing my words here. If we would take the moment to ask somebody else what they want and deliver on that thing, assuming it's financially and practically feasible, everyone would be better off. The giver would spend less time worrying about what gift to give, would spend less time having to, you know, search for that particular gift. And the recipient will get what they want. I mean, it is a win on every dimension and we, as a culture have decided that it's inappropriate. I think that's dumb.

He's referring to a set of studies done by Francesca Gino and Francis Flynn. In one of their studies, for example, they asked people to imagine it was their birthday or their significant other's birthday.

If it was their birthday, they were asked to consider that they'd given their significant other some suggestions for what they wanted and then imagined either that they actually received something on their wish list or that their partner had come up with something on their own.

If they were imagining their partner's birthday, they were asked to consider that their partner provided a wish list and then imagine either that they chose something from the list or came up with a gift on their own.

When people put on their gift-giving hat, they didn't distinguish between the scenarios—they thought the gift would be thoughtful and appreciated regardless of whether it was on the wish list.

But when people put on their gift-*receiving* hat, it was clear they would appreciate the gift more if it was something they had actually asked for.

In another study, they interviewed people who had been to weddings and who had had weddings of their own. Just like the hypothetical birthday scenario, wedding guests who gave a gift on the official registry and wedding guests who came up with their own gift weren't any different in how much they thought the couple would appreciate their present.

But when you talk to the couples who *received* wedding gifts, as they thought back on those gifts, they appreciated the ones plucked from their registries much more than ones they never asked for.

So it's pretty simple. Just ask what they want. Because getting people what they want doesn't have to be a sign of thoughtlessness or that you don't care. It's oftene just the opposite. Benefits for communication, relationships, happiness...and it's not hard.

JEFF GALAK: My wife and I have been doing for years now, is we have a Google Doc that we share and it's our gift doc. And whenever we think that there's this item that we might want for ourselves, but maybe it's too expensive or just too silly to purchase, we throw it on that list and the other person has access to it. And whenever it's time to give a gift for whatever occasion, there is no guesswork. And you'd think it takes like the romance out of gift giving or something like that. But, no! When I get the gift that I requested, I'm really fricking happy, and that gift will always remind me of the person who gave it to me: my wife.

#### **D) Giver-Focused vs. Receiver-Focused**

Speaking of relationships, the last stop on our journey through the minds of givers and receivers has to do less with knowing what gifts will be appreciated and more to do with what strengthens our connections with others.

Some of the research on this question has looked at a simple distinction between the gifts we can give. On the one hand, there are *giver*-centric gifts. These are things that reflect the giver's interests and passions. So like, if you read a book you loved and got a copy for your friend, that's giver-centric. You're sharing something of yourself.

On the other hand, there are *recipient*-centric gifts. These are things that reflect the recipient's interests and passions. So maybe I don't love hockey, but I get you a book about *your* favorite hockey team, that's recipient-centric.

And which of these types of gifts is better? Lara Aknin, who we heard from earlier, wanted to find out. She started by just asking people what they *thought* was better.

LARA AKNIN: There just seemed to be an overwhelming preference. Like, "overwhelming" I don't even think captures it. It was just a whopping lean towards the majority of the sample thinking that, of course when you give gifts, you give gifts that reflect the recipient. This is what you do. Like, in every way we could ask the question, people hands down said, No gifts should be given that reflective recipient.

I mean it makes sense. Isn't it a little narcissistic to ignore the other person and just give away things that show off how cool I am? How bold of me to assume that you'll like exactly the things I like.

But maybe we need to shift our priorities. This whole episode has been about givers agonizing over what recipients will be impressed by and trying to recalibrate ourselves to recipients' true preferences. But exchanging gifts isn't just about getting stuff we like. It's about the exchange—the people in our lives that we feel close to. When a kid gets his mom a trashy beaded necklace or gets her sister a bag of marbles, those gifts might not be great on the surface, but they reflect important relationships.

So we have a new question: when it comes to building relationships, do giver-centric or recipient-centric gifts do the job better?

LARA AKNIN: I remember this study quite clearly. We recruited people at the mall around Mother's Day, and we told them that we were going to buy their card in the local Hallmark or card shop or whatever it was. And we said, You could go in, pick whichever one it is, but we randomly assigned them to either buy a card that reflected them as the giver or the recipient, their mother or mother figure.

So these unsuspecting shoppers head off into the store and either choose a Mother's Day card that reveals their true preferences, interests, or passions, or they pick a card that reveals their knowledge of their mom's preferences, interests, or passions.

And even though people generally think that recipient-centric gifts are the way to go...

LARA AKNIN: People who were randomly assigned to give a gift or a card that reflected who they were made them feel closer.

In other words, when they interviewed people after they chose a card and asked how close they felt to the person who would receive the card, the people who had picked out a card that reflected themselves actually felt closer to their moms than the people who picked out a card that reflected the recipient.

And they've done other studies showing the when people *get* giver-centric gifts, they also feel closer to the giver.

LARA AKNIN: We recruited pairs of individuals to come into the lab. They were randomly assigned to either the giver or recipient role, and the giver was randomly assigned to either give a giver-centric gift or a recipient-centric gift. And so they went on iTunes and bought a song that either reflected who they were or who the recipient was primarily. And then they sent it via email

to the other participant in the other room. And the recipients this time reported that they felt closer when they were given a giver-focused gift than a recipient-focused gift.

So in the end, even though we *think* we're supposed to focus on the recipient's likes and preferences when we're choosing a gift, there are advantages to giving something about *you* in the gifts you give to people who are close to you.

### **Act III: Lessons**

To sum up, givers often go wrong because they approach gift-giving with biases that are just misguided. They think price matters, but recipients disagree. They're wary of repeating themselves, but recipients don't care. They avoid being sentimental when that's what recipients prefer. They try so hard to be unique when recipients just want what they asked for. And in the grand scheme of things, givers can get so caught up in picking the right gift for the recipient that they lose out on opportunities to make the *relationship* stronger.

Like any social behavior, gift-giving is complicated. And just when I think we should shut it all down and stop the madness, I remember the times when I got give someone a great gift or I got a surprise gift from a loved one that I still hang onto. So, it's not all bad, but the research in psychology is reassuring to me. Let's take the pressure off getting the perfect, most amazing, most impressive gifts, and let's maybe consider that at the end of the day, gifts are really a symbol that you care about someone, a sign that you're willing to pitch in and help them get something they need.

And...if all else fails...maybe we *can* quietly retire old traditions...

LAURA SANDERS: Now our preferred thing is my family doesn't even do gifts for Christmas anymore. And it's incredible. It feels great. And so like, I feel like looking back, I'm like, Oh, I remember the, like, which this is like very corny, but I'm like, I remember the being together, hanging out memories much more than I remember any individual gift that I-- especially from a sibling. I don't remember a single thing from that time.

ANDY LUTTRELL: I think there might be a reason that your family canceled gift-giving. They thought, Well, the grand experiment has failed.

LAURA SANDERS: I would love it if they canceled it after the fifth bag of marbles. They're like, "we don't care at all."



## Outro

Okeedoke, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. And with this special episode, we close out the year! Adios to 2020, which for all its misery was the year this podcast started. Twenty-seven episodes and a few bonus episodes along the way. I can barely believe it.

Many thanks to my friends Laura and Bethany Sanders for sharing their story of Christmas marbles. I'll go ahead and mention that Laura is a standup comedian, which is an excuse to plug her comedy albums—check out the show notes for info.

And thanks to my social science experts, including Lara Aknin, Jeff Galak, and Julian Givi. By the way, when he's not studying gifts, Jeff Galak runs the YouTube channel *Data Demystified*, where he does a nice job introducing the world to the ins and outs of what we can learn through data.

If you enjoy the show, be sure to subscribe to Opinion Science on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, Stitcher... wherever you get this stuff. And if you want to do me a favor, you can quickly post about the episode on social media. Twitter, Facebook, Reddit—wherever things get shared. The audience for the show keeps growing, and I have you to thank for spreading the word.

Alright, Happy All-the-Holidays. Hope you're able to rest and connect with loved ones safely during this bizarre holiday season. And after a couple months of putting this episode together, you'd think I'd have my Christmas gifts all figured out, but I uh... still have some work to do. So, I'll see you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Buh bye...