

Situational Ethnicity and Gift Giving Behavior among Immigrant Mothers

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the assimilation/acculturation of gift giving behaviors among U.S. immigrants. Through a series of in-depth interviews and group encounters, with respondents from several different countries, these gifting behaviors are examined within the context of a baby shower. This research highlights the difficulty that immigrants have in adapting to gift-giving behaviors considered sacred such as the timing of the gift giving and the presentation of the gift. Further, sacred gifts are identified as one of the main areas in which immigrants are unwilling to acculturate because of the implications for the baby's well-being. In addition, this research suggests that immigrants will assimilate the gift-giving behaviors of the majority culture when they live in areas with fewer members of their community. Thus, assimilated/acculturated behaviors are impacted by: 1) immigrant group size and 2) the sacredness of the gift giving behavior.

INTRODUCTION

In most cultures, the birth of a child is a joyous occasion. As a way of sharing the joy with the family, individuals within and outside of the family give gifts to the newborn baby and in some cultures to the new mother. However, even though gift giving is a part of most cultural mores (Hyde 1979), there are cultural differences in the types and number of gifts presented, the timing of the gifts, and the rituals and scripts followed in the presentation of the gift. If culture determines gift giving behavior, do immigrants maintain their cultural gift giving behaviors, or do they adopt the behaviors of the majority culture? Cultural differences exist with all rites of passage, including gift giving as a rite in the context of baby showers. Fischer and Gainer (1993:1) suggest "baby showers are consumption venues distinguished both by their "feminine nature" and their seeming role as a modern-day rite of passage." I draw on this idea to examine immigrant gift giving behavior within the context of a baby shower, and to explore which cultural aspects of gift giving immigrants retain in this context.

Immigrant Practices in the United States

Just as in other areas of their life, immigrants experience pressures to adjust to life in the United States. These pressures may come from the absence of needed goods and services or from the desire to maintain positive relations with American friends. Thus, immigrants hold on to some aspects of gift giving but modify others. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) suggest that individuals have items that they consider sacred and profane. They note that "sacred tangible things include icons, clothing, furnishing, artifacts, and possessions that are symbolically linked with and objectify the sacred. Ordinary as these things may appear to be, they are made sacred by myths, rituals, and signs. They are the media by which a society's 'deep knowledge' is passed to succeeding generations" (1989, p. 11). Thus, this study posits that immigrants experience a process of duality in gift giving to mothers and newborn children by maintaining some cultural aspects of gift giving and acculturating to others.

Acculturation

Gordon (1964) developed one of the first comprehensive models of immigrant assimilation. Berry (1980) improved on this model by placing the locus of choice partly with the immigrant group. Berry's model suggests that immigrants can choose to integrate, assimilate, separate, or marginalize their acculturation process on the basis of whether they see any value in maintaining either cultural identity or good relations with the dominant culture. This

model suggests that integration results in a culturally pluralistic society. Identification with both the old and the new cultures defines bicultural integration, which immigrants can achieve by synthesizing the two cultures or by maintaining separate “spheres of interaction” (Young 1983). Cross-cultural psychologists have suggested that immigrants who adopt an integration strategy exhibit the best mental health. Assimilation results in a melting-pot type of culture and occurs when the immigrant identifies with the new culture and rejects the minority culture (Hastings, Cleland, and Danielson 1982). However, the assimilation strategy may not be an option for immigrants who are dissimilar from the dominant culture (Penaloza 1994). Ethnic separation or maintenance occurs when minorities reject the majority culture and retain their ethnic affiliation. Marginality occurs when the immigrant rejects both the minority identity and the majority identity. This study uses Berry’s (1980) model to examine the acculturation of gift giving among immigrants in the United States within the context of a baby shower across immigrants from six different countries.

Gift Giving

In a seminal article, Sherry (1983) developed a processual model of gift giving in which gift giving is a continuous cycle of reciprocity between givers and recipients. More recently, Giesler (2006) extended Sherry’s dyadic model by developing the notion of the consumer gifting system, a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers. Contrary to dyadic notions of gift exchange, the baby shower is unique in that the recipient of the gift is not automatically expected to reciprocate with gifts to the giver, as gifts provided to would-be mothers are intended to help them fulfill their new roles (Fischer and Gainer 1993).

Because of reciprocity or social relationships, anxiety can arise in the gifting process. Wooten (2000) examined gifting anxiety and found that it emanates from the human urge to manage interpersonal impressions. Wooten further noted that disparities arise if givers and recipients do not establish parameters before they exchange gifts. Anxiety can also derive from differences between individual goals and group expectations (Green and Alden 1988); such differences can be even more pronounced in cross-cultural gifting behavior. A sample of cross-cultural studies of gifting behavior have compared U.S. gifting behavior with Japanese gifting behavior (Green and Alden 1988) and Hong Kong gifting behavior (see Joy 2001), but to date no studies have examined immigrant gift giving. To examine immigrant gift-giving behaviors, I draw on acculturation theories that examine immigrant adaptation processes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In line with prior consumer behavior research that used in-depth interviews to examine consumer behavior patterns and meanings of consumption (Hirschman 1992; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Penaloza 1994), this study uses in-depth interviews to examine cross-cultural gift-giving behavior in the baby shower setting. Such interviews were conducted with six women from the Dominican Republic, Gambia, India, Kenya, and the United States. The informants were primarily a nonstudent sample of people affiliated with a southern U.S. university. Informants, some of who were pregnant women, were recruited using the snowball method. Only women were recruited and interviewed for this study’s sample because baby showers are an excellent example of the gendered nature of some consumer behaviors (Fischer and Gainer 1993). Each informant was interviewed individually for approximately one hour, and every interview was audiotaped.

Drawing on prior research that has used group interviewing to explore functional differences in gift giving (Green and Alden 1988; Percy 1983), after the initial one-on-one interviews, four group interviews were arranged with at least three immigrants each from India, Kenya, Thailand, and the United States. Group interviews with the Gambian and Dominican Republic immigrants were not conducted because of the low number of informants. All together, seventeen immigrants and eight U.S. born citizens were interviewed. Two of the group interviews were conducted in the homes of the informants; the other interviews were conducted in the conference room of a local library. The group interviews were audiotaped and lasted, on average, an hour and a half.

The group interviews evolved from unstructured to semistructured over time. The structural evolution in the data collection was iterative, with semistructured questions based on the issues that emerged in the one-on-one interviews. To facilitate discussion, informants were asked to talk about the last baby shower that they had attended. When an

informant had not attended a baby shower because they are not found in the informant's culture, she was asked to talk about gift giving related to a child's birth in her culture. Informants who had had children or would have children in the United States were asked to describe their gift-giving experience. In the group interviews, native U.S. informants were asked to describe the last baby shower they had attended. The objective of interviewing U.S. informants was to compare the extent to which immigrants had assimilated U.S. gift-giving behaviors. During the course of the interviews, clarification was sought by asking probing questions. Closing questions were asked to ensure that all pertinent information was covered.

The data was transcribed and further reduced by developing interview summaries in order to facilitate comparison across informants. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glazer and Strauss 1967) by means of coding patterns and themes. This method calls for the researcher to explicitly compare each incident in the data with other incidents appearing to belong to the same category and to explore their similarities and differences. The initial data analysis resulted in some categories that subsequent interviews further explored. The analysis was subjected to member checks by presenting the findings to informants. Moreover, conducting group interviews allowed for checking the meaningfulness of the categories that had been identified in individual interviews.

FINDINGS

In discussing the findings, the data from the interviews and the group interviews are combined. The interviews revealed that there are some cross-cultural differences in gift-giving behavior, especially with regard to (1) timing of the baby shower and/or gift-giving, (2) presentation of the gift, (3) type of gift, (4) cultural taboos, and (5) materialism. The subsequent sections use illustrative excerpts to highlight the findings.

Timing of the baby shower

Informants from all countries except the United States noted that baby showers are held after the birth of the child, not before the birth. However, in the United States, baby showers are normally held between the seventh and eighth month of pregnancy.

Concerns about infant mortality might best explain apprehension over preparing the mother with gifts before the birth of the child and late-term baby showers in the United States. Although there was no explicit mention of infant mortality, immigrants were concerned that something would happen to the baby if they prepared and gave or received gifts before the birth. Thus, all immigrants discussed post-birth baby showers.

Nyokabi (Kenya): It is a bad omen to prepare for the baby before it is born. We even have a saying in Swahili, . . . *usikate kanzu kabla mtoto hajazaliwa* ("do not make the child an outfit before the child is born").

Mai (Thailand): We believe that we should not prepare before the baby comes because the ghost may come and take the baby. The grandparents will buy the clothes when they hear that the baby has been born.

Among Indian informants, Durga and Nalini both indicated that all gift giving for the baby occurs at the naming and cradle ceremonies, which are held, respectively, on the sixth and thirteenth day after birth. Anwasha noted that among Bengalis, people give gifts when the child is six or seven months old (i.e. when the child first eats solid food, rice). Because of concerns about the baby's health, parents-to-be and others do not shop for the baby before it is born. In addition to Indians' post-birth gift giving to the baby, Indian informants were unique among immigrants in that they also indicated pre-birth gift giving for the mother-to-be.

Kushinder (India) said that [in the Parsi community, they had *aghani*, or a "filling the lap ceremony" in the seventh or eighth month of pregnancy.]

Anwasha (India) [describing *shad*, which means "wish"]: "People come to wish you and bless you, so that you can have a healthy baby. They feed you and give you gifts. No gifts for the baby at this time. The older ladies bless you with grass that has three leaves and rice with husk.

Fischer and Gainer (1993) noted that baby showers are a form of consumption that has largely been a uniquely female domain and that appears to serve as a rite of passage for women. Therefore, it is not surprising that immigrant women must figure out how they will experience this rite of passage in a different cultural context. Because of the

differences in the timing of this rite of passage across cultures, it can be expected that immigrant women experience some anxiety about the rite before their child's birth. The immigrant informants have maintained from their cultures the timing of this rite of passage in the United States, and they consider gift giving after the baby's birth the right thing to do. This is in contrast to the informants of Fischer and Gainer's (1993) study, who, for example, commented that it was "too bad" that a shower held for a friend occurred after the child's premature birth. While infant mortality concerns may influence the absence of the baby shower or its later timing, the findings also make evident that cultural practices and taboos play a very important role in determining whether baby showers occur before or after birth.

In some cases, conflict arises with regard to the timing of the gift when immigrants are pressured to acculturate to U.S. practices while trying to maintain sacred aspects of gift giving. For example, at the time of the interview with Kushinder (India), her baby was due in a month. Kushinder's coworkers were planning to throw a baby shower before the birth of her baby, which made her uncomfortable. She did not want to have the baby shower because she wanted to be sure that the baby would be well first, yet she did not want to offend her coworkers. She expressed that she did not know how to explain her discomfort with the idea of a baby shower. In her culture, there are no baby showers, yet Kushinder entertained the idea but refused to hold the shower before the baby's birth. Research shows that Kushinder's concerns about offending her coworkers are warranted. Fischer and Gainer (1993) note that workplace baby showers can create tension for the mother-to-be. Therefore, workplace baby showers that involve participants of different cultures can clearly heighten this tension even more. Thus, Kushinder assimilated the idea of a baby shower but kept its timing sacred.

Anwasha (India) said that her friends held a *shad* for her. All the rituals associated with *shad* were performed but in a scaled-down version. Further, consistent with practices back home, the *shad* was held seven months later, and since her brother was not available to feed the child its first rice, a friend did so. Therefore, Anwasha was able to hold onto her culture but with some adaptations.

Presentation of Gifts

The rituals and scripts followed during the presentation of gifts vary by culture. Rituals have dramatic scripting and have been found to depend on ritual artifacts, ritual scripts, and ritual audience and performance roles (Rooks 1985). Interviews with informants revealed cross-cultural differences with regard specifically to the role of the audience at both pre- and post-birth baby showers. With the exception of Gambian informants, who give a group gift at a baby shower, all informants reported presenting gifts individually. The physical proximity of the gift giver and recipient also varies by culture. The following excerpts illustrate the cultural differences in the presentation of gifts.

Maria (Dominican Republic): You hug the new mother and give the gift. The mother opens the gift and says thank you.

Tamika (U.S. African American): All of the gifts go in one area. The mother opens the gift and the gifts are passed around for everybody to touch and feel. Another person writes the name of the gift giver in a book in order for the mother to send them thank you notes.

Helen (U.S. European American): The woman opens the gifts. Once the woman opens the gift, everybody says things like: How cute! How sweet! Look, that is so unique! It is so pretty! Everyone is basically oohing and ahing.

Vanida (Thailand): You give the gift to the mother. We don't open the gift in front of the friend. You hold the baby and if the baby is so cute, we say it is ugly. . . . We believe that if we say that the baby is so cute, the ghost will take the baby.

Kushinder (India) [describing the pre-birth ceremony]: People will usually garland the mother, put a vermilion dot on the mother's forehead and some rice, and then give an envelope. (All of the items given are for the mother-to-be).

Types of Gifts

The types of gifts given to the new mothers can be classified as either general or sacred. Most of the gifts identified by informants from the Dominican Republic, Gambia, India, and Kenya were mainly utilitarian gifts, whereas U.S. informants cited some non-utilitarian gifts. Except for the United States, informants from all other countries mentioned that they give new mothers sacred gifts. According to Hofstede's (1991) index of individualism and collectivism, the United States is an individualist culture. Thus, in the context of newborns and baby showers,

Americans may consider the child's safety the parent's responsibility and present general gifts. In contrast, all other cultures represented in the informant sample are collectivist cultures according to Hofstede's index. Thus, informants from those cultures may consider the child's safety a community's responsibility and present sacred gifts intended to protect the child. Moreover, in the United States, notions of child safety may be different from those in other cultures. For example, many informants stated that sacred gifts were intended to protect the child from evil (e.g., ward off the evil eye).

Mai (Thailand): Usually the *pra* ["monk"] will give the new parent *kumlai*, which is a rope made out of thread or yarn. Also, the parents of the child give the newborn a necklace that has Buddha on it.

Nalini (India): We have a waist band and a leather string with black beads that goes on the wrist and the ankles.

It is noteworthy that all of the Indian informants in the group interview discussed this gift.

Adhiambo (Kenya): The baby gets a string to go on its leg and on the wrist a string with beads.

Dang (Thailand) said that they usually give "gifts" as opposed to cash, almost implying that cash was not a gift. This sentiment is consistent with the work of Douglas and Isherwood (1979), who note that in many situations people draw a careful line between cash and gift.

Immigrant informants most often maintained their cultural practice of giving sacred gifts and did not acculturate in this sense. Fanta (Gambia) said that she put the leather string on both of her children. She also mentioned that, as is customary in Gambia, she bathed the children in water from the Koran to protect them from evil (this ritual is very similar to acts of ablutions). Maria (Dominican Republic), pregnant at the time of the interview, indicated that her mother would send her the bracelet to protect the baby. She also mentioned that she would not tell her American-born husband the meaning of the bracelet, because she felt that he would not understand. Mai (Thailand) said that when both of her children were born, her mother brought the sacred gifts (i.e., the necklace with Buddha, the strings to go on the child's wrist and ankle).

When immigrants did not conform to their own cultural notions of protecting the baby, they attributed subsequent illnesses to the integration of U.S. practices (i.e., the lack of sacred gifts). For example, Akinyi (Kenya) regretted that she had not put a sacred bracelet on her son when he was born; as a result, he was constantly ill as a child. She attributed the illness to the fact that the child did not have the required protection. Akinyi, pregnant at the time of the interview, fully intended on protecting her second child with a bracelet.

From all these examples, it is quite evident that immigrants hold on to gift giving behavior they consider sacred.

Cultural Taboos

Informants from the United States mentioned no cultural taboos in gifting at baby showers, in contrast to all other informants, who mentioned several cultural taboos. Taboos most prominently were connected to advance preparation for the baby's arrival. In almost all cases, informants noted that such preparation might affect the unborn child. For example, Thai informants reported that while they do not prepare in advance, it is acceptable to talk about the unborn child. In contrast, Kenyan informants reported that they do not prepare in advance or talk about the unborn child.

Mai said that when she had her first child, her friends had given her a baby shower and she was thankful.

Mai (Thailand): I didn't worry about [the ghost] because here, we have to prepare. Here we don't have grandparents to buy the clothes for us, so we have to prepare. Some of my Thai friends gave me the crib and the clothes.

Likewise, Thai informants in the group interviews stated that the unavailability of relatives drove them to conform to U.S. cultural practices. In this instance, the Thai friends who gift clothes and a crib support the immigrant in adapting her behavior. Thus, the integration of U.S. gift-giving behavior is necessitated by the fact that the immigrants do not have the support system in the United States that they would otherwise have in their original culture.

The clothes that the baby first wears also present an issue of taboo. For many U.S. mothers, an outfit purchased for a baby to wear home from the hospital is very important. This is also the case in the Dominican Republic, but it is considered taboo to purchase that outfit.

Maria (Dominican Republic): The baby's first clothes are very important, very special. You cannot buy these clothes. The grandmother sews the clothes.

Materialism

In U.S. culture, mothers-to-be often register for gifts at stores. In group interviews, U.S. informants expressed their thoughts on materialism in this context and in gifting to new mothers. Informants stated that today there is too much of a focus on gifts. They also mentioned that many times mothers-to-be might try to ratchet up their status and consumption by registering at places where they would not normally shop.

Beth (United States): People normally register at stores and normally if someone shops at Family Dollar, they will register at JC Penny.

Such materialism is in contrast to the sentiments that the immigrant groups expressed.

Richins and Scott (1992), relying on the work of Belk (1988) and Rassuli and Hollander (1986), noted that “when a large portion of a society avidly desires to consume goods for reasons that economists have traditionally defined non-utilitarian (e.g. status seeking, novelty) a ‘consumer culture’ is said to exist.” This desire for novelty is seen in mothers registering at stores where they normally do not shop.

DISCUSSION

Some measure of conflict characterizes the acculturation of the immigrant informants in this study. Foremost, immigrants hold on to things that are sacred to their culture yet are forced to acculturate dominant culture practices. The findings suggest that the immigrants in this study have adopted an integration strategy in their gift-giving practices: they retain some cultural aspects of gift giving (e.g., the sacred) and assimilate others (e.g., the profane). The immigrants exhibit behaviors that indicate their identification with both old and new cultures (i.e., bicultural integration), such as when they accept the idea of having a baby shower but have it after the baby is born. Further, the informants maintain separate spheres of interaction (Young 1983), evidenced by differences in the immigrant’s behavior with people from her culture of origin and people from the dominant culture.

Due to cultural and environmental differences, immigrants indicated that some of their deeply held cultural taboos had been challenged and they had felt the need to change. For example:

Fanta (Gambia): When my baby was born, the doctors kept insisting that I had to tell them my son’s name because of the birth certificate, and I kept telling them that I could not say his name before seven days were over. By the time I had my second son, I had his name before the seven days. I had changed my ways.

In this instance, the immigrant was forced to assimilate the behavior of the majority culture. This is consistent with Wong-Rieger and Quintana’s (1987) finding that the acceptance of a new culture increases over time but ethnic identification does not, which results in additive biculturalism. Using role theory to examine acculturation levels, O’Guinn and Faber (1985) posit that an individual’s role may bring into play a different level of acculturation or ethnicity. For example, in the context of a baby shower, an immigrant woman may behave in accordance with her ethnic norms when at home with other family members but adopt the cultural norms of the majority culture at work or school. Further, Stayman and Deshpandé (1989) have demonstrated that immigrants may exhibit situational ethnicity.

Akinyi (Kenya) showed situational ethnicity when she noted that in the United States, she was forced to talk about her unborn child because everybody kept asking her about the baby, and at first she was quite uncomfortable. By the time her baby was born, she had become much more comfortable speaking about the unborn child. She noted, however, that if she were still in Kenya, she would not talk about her unborn child to strangers. Mai (Thailand) expressed similar sentiments and situational ethnicity, stating that in the United States, she had learned to accept that people meant no harm when they said that her baby was cute. However, she said that she would not tell another Thai woman that her baby was cute.

CONCLUSION

Although the context studied is that of the baby shower, the arrival of a newborn is a life-defining moment, and as such has its attendant rites of passage and rituals. This research has shown that with regards to important rites of passage rituals that immigrants will acculturate some aspects of these behaviors and maintain others. This article used

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry's (1989) framework of sacred and profane to suggest that immigrants acculturate the profane and hold sacred some gift-giving practices in the context of baby showers. As in other areas of immigrant life, forces from the immigrant's culture of origin and from the dominant culture affect gift giving. Informants displayed situational ethnicity when they engaged in certain behaviors in different spheres of interaction. This article emphasizes the difficulty that immigrants have in adapting to gift-giving behaviors considered sacred such as the timing of the gift giving and the presentation of the gift. Immigrants acculturated profane behaviors and continued sacred ones.

We identified sacred gifts as one of the main areas in which immigrants are unwilling to acculturate because of the implications for the baby's well-being. Further, this research suggests that immigrants will assimilate the gift-giving behaviors of the majority culture when they live in areas with fewer members of their community, as evidenced by the differences in behaviors assimilated by Thai and Indian informants.

There are several marketing implications of sacred gift-giving practices. In many regions around the world, immigrants have higher birthrates than the local population. By understanding the sacredness of certain gift-giving practices marketers can develop services and products that enable immigrants to acculturate some gift-giving practices while maintaining others as sacred. Examples of these types of products and services might include stores that allow immigrants to register for items and hold them until the birth of the child is announced or bringing sacred gifts to the United States.

This research has identified the bicultural nature of immigrant gift-giving behavior within the baby shower context. Situational gift giving has been recognized as a ripe area of future research (Sherry 1983). This research furthers our understanding of immigrant gift-giving behaviors within the baby shower context.

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Table 1. Demographic Information on Informants

| One on One interviews | | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|
| Name ** | Country | Community | Age | Length of Time Living in U.S. |
| Maria | Dominican Republic | Dominican Republican | 30 | 8 months |
| Fanta | Gambia | Mandinga | 40 | 10 years |
| Akinyi | Kenya | Luo | 22 | 4 years |
| Kushinder | India | Parsi | 25 | 7 years |
| Mary | United States | European American | 42 | 42 years |
| Tamika | United States | African American | 21 | 21 years |
| Group Interviews | | | | |
| Nalini | India | Gujarat/Gujarati | 38 | 2.5 years |
| Durga | India | Andra Pradesh/Telugu | 24 | 1.5 years |
| Anwasha | India | Bengal/Bengali | 28 | 5 years |
| Adhiambo | Kenya | Luo | 35 | 3 years |
| Atieno | Kenya | Luo | 23 | 4 years |
| Kawira | Kenya | Kikuyu | 25 | 3 months |
| Nasambu | Kenya | Luhya | 27 | 6 years |
| Nyokabi | Kenya | Kikuyu | 19 | 1 month |
| Helen | United States | European American | 45 | 45 years |
| Beth | United States | European American | 39 | 39 years |
| Barbara | United States | European American | 29 | 29 years |
| Catherine | United States | European American | 42 | 42 years |
| Charleen | United States | African American | 48 | 48 years |
| Maureen | United States | African American | 50 | 50 years |
| Mai | Thailand | Thai | 38 | 7 years |
| Kao | Thailand | Thai | 25 | 2 years |
| Vanida | Thailand | Thai | 25 | 1.5 years |
| Dang | Thailand | Thai | 25 | 1 year |

** This is a pseudo-name