

What exactly is the paradox of keeping-while-giving?

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Abstract, This paper attempts to provide a clearer formulation of the paradox presented by Annette B. Weiner, in terms of a requirement to keep certain objects within a social group and also a requirement to exchange them with another social group.

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Annette Weiner writes of the paradox of keeping-while-giving, but what exactly is the paradox? When I first read the section of her book *Inalienable Possessions* entitled “The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving” I was not sure. Below I offer one clarification, which should be of interest even if it does not capture exactly what Weiner has in mind.

She opens the section as follows:

Some things, like most commodities, are easy to give. But there are other possessions that are imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away. Ideally, these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group, or dynasty. (1992: 6)

She later tells us:

Gregory Bateson long ago saw the problems inherent in a functional or structural theory of reciprocity... keeping some things transcendent and out of circulation in the face of all the pressures to give them to others is a burden, a responsibility, and at best, a skillful achievement. (1992: 6-7)

So the situation is this. On the one hand, there is a requirement on an individual to keep certain objects within their family (or within a social group). On the other hand, the family is part of a system of exchange with another social group. That group invites them for dinner; they provide dinner in return, for example. But now according to the norms of exchange, the gift they have received is such that the only thing of comparable value that they can give in return is one of these objects they are supposed to keep within their family. So there is at once a requirement to keep the object within the family and a requirement to give it as a gift to others outside the family.

Three solutions occur readily enough: keep the object - that requirement takes priority; give it away - that requirement takes priority; or give it away with a plan that it should return to one's family one day.

Reference

Weiner, A.B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press.