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The Dark Side of Gifts: Feeling Indebted May Drive People to the Marketplace

You need to move out of your apartment. Do you call in your friends and family to haul boxes and furniture or contact a moving company? A new study in the [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#) shows that sometimes the emotions connected with asking for favors can actually drive people to the market.

According to the study's author, Jean-Sébastien Marcoux (HEC Montréal), many researchers romanticize gift-giving. "They praise it for humanizing market relationships, for making the market meaningful, and for providing an escape from the commodifying logic of capitalist exchanges," Marcoux writes. Other researchers have examined the dark side of gift giving: the troublesome feelings that arise from social indebtedness. But Marcoux's research examines how feelings of perpetual obligation affect people's attitudes toward the market.

Marcoux conducted a ten-year (1997-2007) ethnographic study in Montréal on moving. His methods involved interviews, observations, photography, and even moving furniture. He chose to study moving because it's an act that can involve the market, the "gift economy," or both. "Moving is a social event particularly favorable to the emergence of reciprocal relations," writes Marcoux. "Moreover, many people who move use both the gift economy and the market to do so."

By studying moving, Marcoux got an in-depth look at people who were often in the midst of traumatic life events, such as divorce, job loss, separation, or death of a loved one. Marcoux found that the guilt and obligation connected with asking for help from family and friends often drove people to seek the simpler transactions of the marketplace.

"It is important to recognize that withholding requests for gifts, services, and favors from significant others can be a driving force for using the market," writes Marcoux. "People use the market to free themselves from the straitjacket of social expectations—from the sense of indebtedness and emotional oppression—which constrains them in their reciprocity relations inside the gift economy," Marcoux concludes.

Jean-Sébastien Marcoux. "Escaping the Gift Economy." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2009 (published online May 20, 2009).

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