

SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCE IN RESPONSE TO CHRISTMAS CARDS¹

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Summary.—In a total of 590 Christmas cards sent perception of status was important for both the sender and the receiver. High status of the sender increased the response rate significantly, especially among the “blue-collar” receivers.

The exchange of gifts is not a new custom to modern society but seems to have existed in some form throughout recorded history (Kunz & Kunz, 1987). This “giving” appears to be associated with many different types of events, both family and personal, and may extend across societies for some occasions. The givers and receivers of gifts may be individuals, families, or even corporate persons. An important occasion for gifts across various cultures, for example, among Christians, is associated with the season of Christmas. Exchange often takes place among individuals, families, and organizations.

One aspect of gift giving is the sending of greeting cards. Sending greeting cards on special social occasions has become an important part of American tradition. In fact, mottos and themes like “when you care enough to send the very best,” the popular advertising theme from Hallmark greeting cards, are common. The specific etiquette of exchange norms and rules is not well understood by the average citizen (Lindsey & Beach, 2000). For example, questions asked close to Christmas might include whether so-and-so should be included, whether “they” did or did not send a card last year, should “we” send a card to “them,” and so on. It is likely that the patterns in which people send and receive Christmas cards can also be explained in terms of certain social characteristics such as social status and mobility aspirations (Kunz, 1975).

Johnson (1971) explained her attempt to understand the norms of Christmas cards from rather informal contacts with her friends and their Christmas card practices. As expected, she reported the customary reciprocal sending relationships but also indicated that there was some “upwardly mobile” activity. “Upwardly mobile” means that more cards were sent to those individuals with whom her friends were trying to score points or be seen positively than were received from such individuals. The trend for up-

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wardly mobile activity in our society has been documented for decades (Kendall, 1998). High status (mobility) increases interpersonal attraction (Caplow, 1982).

Previous research has suggested that many people are willing to exchange Christmas cards even with those whom they do not know (Kunz, 1975). When the sender was of high status, the response rate increased significantly, especially for "blue-collar" receivers (Kunz & Wolcott, 1976).

This study was designed to examine the relationship between the social occasion of the Christmas holiday season of 1994 and various social factors. We hypothesized that high status senders would increase the response rate. The social factors focused on the characteristics of the sender, receiver, and the quality of the Christmas card. Responses from subjects were measured by whether they responded to the sender.

METHOD

Subjects were randomly selected from individuals listed in the *Polk Directories* from a large southwestern city and also individuals from a smaller rural area in the southwest. Individuals with high occupational prestige (lawyers, doctors, CEOs, CPAs, etc.) and those with obvious blue-collar occupations were included in the sample. *Polk Directories* include information such as names, addresses, and occupations of all individuals within city limits and other information not included.

The senders' status was depicted by two different social statuses, high and low. This was accomplished by using the return address of the sender. The high status sender was listed as Dr. and the low status sender was only the first name of the sender, without any title. Almost half of the Christmas cards were sent low status and little over half were sent as a high status sender.

The best or high quality card was a 5- × 7-in. commercial card with a beautiful scene of English holly containing a verse of poetry—a rather expensive card. The low quality card was also a 5- × 7-in. card, with a large handwritten "Merry Christmas" written with either a big red or green "marks-a-lot" felt tipped pen. One-half of the high quality cards were sent from a high status sender while the other half was sent from a low status sender. One-half of the low quality cards were also sent from a high status sender while the other half was sent from a low status sender. One-half of the high quality cards were sent to low status receivers and one-half of the low quality cards were sent to low status receivers. The sampling distribution is presented in Table 1.

Any type of reply from the receiver to the sender was counted as a return. The majority were in the form of Christmas cards; many ($n=20$) were long distance telephone calls. The majority of the cards just contained signa-

TABLE 1
SAMPLING DISTRIBUTION

Senders' Status	Quality of Card	Receivers' Status		N
		High	Low	
High	High	75	75	150
	Low	70	70	140
Low	High	75	75	150
	Low	70	70	140
		290	290	580

tures or printed names. Surprisingly, several others contained letters and handwritten notes telling about their families and recounting our "many years of friendship."

Thank you very much from your rather unique Christmas greeting, it came as quite a surprise. It also created a bit of confusion in this household. The only *Jen* that we are acquainted with is the daughter of Augie and Sue _____ of the United States Air Force. We are glad you are that young lady. We are even more surprised that you earned a doctorate at such a young age. We miss your family. Take care. Ron and Dorthy

Dr. _____, it was good to hear from you again. I was diagnosed with asthma in 1985 by Dr. _____ who has a medical clinic with his Dad _____ M.D. On November 7, 1983, I had a bad asthma attack at 5:00 am. I went to the V.A. Hospital. They changed my inhalers and medicine and then they took me off both. We sold the house in January in three days. I'm doing A.O.K. Please visit sometime. Thanks for the card, good luck and God bless- Jim

Some included pages about the activities of their families. Fourteen stated that they couldn't remember the sender and asked for additional information.

Thank you for the Christmas greeting. But to say the least, I'm at a total loss as to whether I know you or not. Have we ever met? Are we related? Please let me know. Reicher

Was I ever surprised to get a greeting from you. However, I can not remember you—where did we meet? And how did you obtain my address? Do we know some of the same friends? Please let me know. Helen

RESULTS

The distribution of responses are presented on Table 2. The majority of respondents were those who received cards from the higher status sender. Of respondents 78% were those who received cards from high status senders, and 22% received cards from the lower status sender. Thirty-four high status senders received cards from high status receivers. Fifty-six low status receivers sent cards to high status senders. Nineteen low status senders received cards from high status receivers while only seven low status senders received cards from low status receivers. These differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2=9.77, p<.001$). People were more likely to respond to the higher status sender, which supports the hypothesis.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES BY SENDERS' AND RECEIVERS' STATUS

Senders' Status	Receivers' Status		N	%
	High	Low		
High	34	56	90	78
Low	19	7	26	22
	53 (46%)	63 (54%)	116	100

Status was an important variable with Christmas cards for both the sender and the receiver. High status on the part of the sender increased the response rate very appreciably, especially among the "blue-collar" receivers. It is interesting that approximately 20% of all receivers responded to the sender by returning a Christmas card, letter, or a telephone call to the unknown sender. That so few of the respondents did not make inquiry about the identity of the sender is unusual and needs more study. Perhaps more response represents senders who noted the lack of identity but were unwilling to make inquiry or who assumed that they had once known the sender but must have "forgotten" chose to let the relationship so remain.

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