

Case 9: "Hot" Gifts

Rose Stone moved into an urban ghetto in order to study strategies for survival used by low-income residents. During the first six months of research, Stone was gradually integrated into the community through invitations (which she accepted) to attend dances, parties, church functions, and family outings, and by "hanging out" at local service facilities (laundromats, health centers, recreation centers, and so on). She was able to discern that there were two important survival tactics used by the community residents which she could not engage in: the first was a system of reciprocity in the exchange of goods and services (neither of which she felt she had to offer), and the second was outright theft of easily pawned or sold goods (clothing, jewelry, radios, TVs, and so on).

One night, a friend from the community stopped by "for a cup of coffee" and conversation. After they had been talking for about two hours, Stone's friend told her that she had some things she wanted to give her. The friend went out to her car and returned with a box of clothing (Stone's size) and a record player. Stone was a bit overwhelmed by the generosity of the gift and protested her right to accept such costly items. Her friend laughed and said, "Don't you worry, it's not out of my pocket," but then she became more serious and said, "Either you are one of us or you aren't one of us. You can't have it both ways."

Stone's Dilemma: Suspecting that the items she was being offered were probably "hot" (e.g., stolen), she was afraid that if she wore the clothes in public, or had the record player in her apartment, she would be arrested for "accepting stolen goods." At the same time, she knew that "hot" items were often given to close friends when it was observed that they could use them. Still, this implied that there would be reciprocal giving (not necessarily in kind) at a later date. So, should she accept or refuse the proffered gifts?