

Eggs

College students are notoriously bad at cooking. However, since eating out all the time wastes a lot of money, many students are forced to have to cook for themselves. Now I would like to introduce one of the easiest foods to cook- eggs.

Many times, my floor mates and I have transacted eggs in the morning. It goes like this. Anytime I want to ask for eggs, I have the option to ask my suite mate. This could be three eggs, four eggs, or however many eggs I want to eat that morning. The expectation is that I return the favor later, and when my friend doesn't have any eggs, I can give him some eggs just like how he gave me some eggs before.

There are no formal rules to these transactions. In fact, I can argue that formal rules would actually make this type of transaction inherently worth less. This is because, as we learned in class, that transactions are rarely just about the goods that are being traded. Often there are many social and ideological “trades” that happen concurrently. Thus, often odd trades, like that of the Trobriands trading Kula, do not make any sense until you put them in a cultural anthropological context, where social implications on a larger time horizon become more clear.

In the case of eggs, there is some analysis to be done about the hidden rules of egg trading and why anyone would participate. This trade is net neutral and can be compared to a loan of no interest. Thus, why would anyone participate in lending someone else their eggs? The obvious answer here is that the give and take of eggs between floor mates foster trust and relationships that manifest in other aspects of social life. This might make people more inclined to work together on problem sets, take classes together, or study together, all things that have the potential to help academic performance and social wellbeing. Thus, the trading of eggs can be seen to indirectly benefit to your academics, something pretty important considering the amount

of tuition the average student pays, as well as benefit directly with happiness, something that is “priceless”.

Egg trading is an exclusive business, only done if there is a social connection in the first place. You don't ask for eggs from a stranger since you have a higher chance of having an awkward interaction in which you make both sides feel uncomfortable. Awkward interactions are actually substantial disincentives to keep an MIT student from asking for some eggs. In a disembedded economy, trades and purchases are done semi-anonymously, as in you're cashier at the grocery store is hired to sell you your groceries and has no sentimental connection to the groceries that you bought (since he or she is only working for a wage). However, trade dynamics change drastically in embedded economies like that of MIT egg trading, where face to face trades are too intertwined with the strength of relationships. This reality makes egg trading a bit paradoxical since participating in egg trading reinforces social relations, yet the only way to start egg trading with someone is if you already have a strong enough social relation in the first place.

Why is it distasteful for someone to ask for money in exchange for the eggs? Many times, those that ask for money overcharge and in that case, there are obvious reasons why the interaction would be frowned upon. As in the case of usury in the medieval era, usury for eggs symbolizes the lack of friendship and camaraderie between two people (here, it isn't considered eternally damning though). However, even if someone asks for eggs at market price, most of the time, the person who requested the eggs will ask someone else for eggs or instead go hungry. Economically, asking for eggs at the market price is the same thing as loaning eggs with no interest, however, as characterized in the movie the *Godfather*, money often ruins the meaning of a transaction. In the *Godfather*, offering money is an insult. It takes away the social camaraderie, the concept that your friend is helping you out from the bottom of his or her heart.

I had a friend that asked for a couple cents every time I ran out of eggs. This was at the beginning of the year. At the time, we hadn't spent much time together and weren't as close as we are now. Still, I would hate that he would even consider asking me to pay a couple cents for his eggs and I would refuse his offer every time. Reflecting back, it is interesting how he changed his behavior. Now, he has conformed to the loaning out of eggs for future repayment and it makes very intuitive sense on why he would change to be an egg barterer. If everyone else in your friend group is benefitting from the social reward of egg transactions, you will be isolated in the way you trade eggs. Thus, it becomes beneficial to change your behavior!

Running out of eggs seems to be a common occurrence, yet no one ever seems to get the right amount of eggs. Partially, this is because eggs are sold by the dozen, which is not a very perfect way to exact the different number of eggs that each person eats in a week. However, since there is an understanding that you can always fall back on one of your floormates for some eggs if you need to, each and every person on the floor is provided with an egg safety net. Although, it is not especially obvious, people on the floor seem to acknowledge that they like the trading of eggs. They like how it feels to reaffirm that someone is a close friend and how it feels to reassure someone else. Like in informal post-socialist Russia, people will tend to under-order instead of over-order to participate in the trading of eggs. Grigory did not want to be recognized as an independent entrepreneur since that would isolate him from the informal economy and the identity of being a blue collar worker. Here, maybe it's better to run out of eggs sometimes, since that means you can identify as a "struggling MIT student who doesn't have his life in order."

In conclusion, although inter-floor egg trading seems to be a trivial economic activity, it actually resonates with a lot of cultural anthropological trends. It actually holds a lot of complexity in its grander implications. It's a trade that holds no net economic value, yet put into

the context of a floor's social landscape, makes complete sense in why there is high participation. As shown above, the embeddedness of egg trading results in certain untold rules, such as distaste for trading eggs with money, that are a product of what egg trading symbolizes socially for the people that are involved.

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