Toward a Theoretical Framework for Social Work—Reciprocity: The Symbolic Justification for Existence

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Abstract

A theoretical understanding of reciprocity is connected to well-being, which is shaped through economic, social, cultural, and health resources. These resources influence an individual's well-being and people's well-being in general. Reciprocity is expressed through shared action and trust between individuals and communities. While the aim of social work is to promote people's well-being, this action-and-resource view is only one possible theoretical framework for defining the interconnection of human action and structures. The existence of each individual can be recognized collectively, and individuals' own interpretations of their well-being are the starting point for social work. This paper focuses on social resources, which have the capacity to support or compensate for other resources. Reciprocity provides an understanding of the ontological basis for human beings and societal structures that maintain order and power. In this paper, this is analyzed in terms of the symbolic justification of existence, which includes three elements: "belonging, legitimation, and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1984). Crucial factors to human well-being are an individual's sense of participation and the opportunity to participate in activities or groups that are important to them. Continuously experiencing exclusion will cause an individual to disapprove of others and seek the company of those who do not exclude him or her and offer approval.

Keywords: reciprocity, social capital, belonging, legitimation, recognition, resources, well-being, theoretical framework, social work

1.   Introduction

Reciprocity can be seen as "universal dependence on the judgment of others" (see Bourdieu, 2000, 100; ref. Gabriel, 2011, 1). Human beings constantly interact with others, and benevolent and malevolent human behavior is in continuous interplay. Gabriel (2011) highlighted a crucial idea in Bourdieu's thinking: In *existence humaine*, collective recognition appears as a fundamental existential goal in people's quest to find meaning for their lives. It is also a source of symbolic competition that keeps society in endless motion.

"Sharing his kill with others is…a form of insurance against future hard times" (Kabunda, 1987, 34). This quote is an example of reciprocity in the old days. People assumed that such a gesture would result in a reciprocal gesture at a time when their own catch would not be sufficient for survival. Giving and getting is reciprocity in its simplest form, but when we look at the concept more closely, we can discern multiple layers and tones.

Reciprocity is dependent upon the power relations that exist between people and within communities, which places it in the context of the social sciences. Reciprocity is an integral part of power relations between individuals, among local and global communities, and within society.

Hence, the concept is much wider than "interaction between people." Reciprocity is made visible through human activity and human relations that are based on trust (Törrönen, 2012b).

The ascent of individualism, which entails detachment from other individuals or disconnection from the activities of others, is considered to be a consequence of industrialization and the related urbanization and current rise of neoliberalism. Instead of focusing attention on changes in the character of community bonding, we concentrate on individuals who operate autonomously. However, even though current times emphasize individual choice, the social bonds between people have not disappeared (see Haavio-Mannila et al., 2009; Törrönen, 2012a, 2014), but they do not attract much attention because the forms of social bonding and relations are more varied and more difficult to define and access if using conventional concepts. People maintain social contacts with people who might be able to help them in difficult situations in the future (see Haavio-Mannila et al., 2009; Törrönen, 2001; 2007; 2010; 2012a, 2014). Historically, reciprocity has existed in all societies, and it is crucial in times of rapid social transformation.

The neoliberal discussion on the new governance brings out the frightening aspects of social change—people are obligated to take care of each other without public support. The approach focuses on the individual, not the community. The neoliberal analysis of problems centers on the individual; it emphasizes personal responsibility on the part of the individual and those close to him or her. The social goal is financial gain, which is believed to bring well-being for everybody. This change also includes the rationalization of the public sector and the promotion of growth in the private sector.

A counterargument for the neoliberal development arises from research results that show how countries with an extensive public contribution to well-being produce a wider range of well-being for their citizens than societies with the opposite approach (e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

However, we can see some good aspects in the debate on the new control model. One of them is the aim to increase individual expertise. This may be seen as a threat to specialists' authority to define human needs, which may raise objections among professionals and undermine the conventional concept of expertise. However, this debate may get specialists, such as social workers, to consider even more carefully how they can interact with people so that they feel they have been heard.

This article theoretically discusses reciprocity and how it can be understood as one possible theoretical framework of social work, the reciprocity approach, for defining the interconnection of human action and of structures in the early 21st century. The text is critical of the discourse that emphasizes individualism. In terms of social science, and especially from the perspective of social work, reciprocity is not limited to interaction between individuals but is recognized as being collective and connected to power relations between individuals, communities, societies, and continents. My main argument is that most of the issues currently labeled as individual problems should be examined in the community setting rather than in an individual context. For example, we can define loneliness as seclusion from the community, harassment as exclusion of a person from a community, or poverty as the unjust distribution of social resources, at the same time as we acknowledge that all three have strong individual dimensions. It is also interesting that even though our time is said to be in constant change, some matters relating to humanity and well-being feel unending, although the cultural context in a certain time affects how these matters are interpreted. These ideas work as criticism for the current global trends demanding that individuals be totally self-sufficient, not dependent upon others, and that they focus only on their own economic prosperity (see Nussbaum, 2011, 10, 29). In social work, the notion that people's problems are reciprocal and community based may help us to understand people in difficulty and to reform the social and health care services and the professional practice of social work by

introducing working methods that support community bonding even more than before.

2.   The Concept of Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a widely used concept in economics and social sciences—especially anthropology—as well as psychology and psychiatry. In economics, reciprocity is associated with trading, selling, and buying, and the theoretical approach is often based on economic or game theory. Trading may include human elements, but typically it seeks profit and gain. In psychology, reciprocity is often linked to interpersonal relationships, especially the mother–child relationship, and thus to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1997). Hazel (2007; cf. Brazelton et al., 1974) points out that in developmental psychology, the mother–child relationship can be described as a dance that has certain steps. Reciprocity shows in the rhythm of the dance and in the smiles that communicate acceptance and benevolence toward each other. This can also be seen as a game with predictable rules and two participants whose actions relate to the behavior of the other participant (Hazel, 2007).

Even though in this article the understanding of reciprocity is based on social sciences, the concept itself is multidisciplinary or even interdisciplinary. To understand the true character of reciprocity, we need to examine human behavior on different levels. In this paper, I do not deduce social relationships from structures, nor do I deduce structures from human activities; instead, I see social relationships as being in a dialectical relation to the activities of human beings and human communities (see Gabriel, 2011; Bourdieu, 1990). Research into reciprocity can be seen as a contribution to international social well-being research, where attention is focused on well-being and the communities that hold people together (see Becker, 1986; Ostrom & Walker, 2003). Because there are also experiences of disempowering and even devastating interaction between people, it is also necessary to explore the area of non-reciprocity or anti-reciprocity.

In terms of a definition, reciprocity is closely associated with such concepts as "sociability, social networks, trust, community and civic engagement" (Morrow, 1999). At the same time, reciprocity is linked to the concept of social support, which describes interaction as a form of intervention and activity. The interaction may be continuous, sporadic, or repetitive, and it always influences the person's relationship with others. Beside this, an inherent element of reciprocal action is time, which consists of the past, present, and future. The concept of social support is closely linked to reciprocity, because it makes reciprocal acts and behavior visible. Reciprocity is also close to the ideas of helping and solidarity (e.g., Lindenberg et al., 2010).

In the social sciences, as in social work, reciprocity refers to interpersonal relations as well as relations between or within societies. Kabunda (1987), for example, has defined reciprocity as interdependency. Reciprocity refers both to interpersonal and social relations but also to the power relations of people and communities and to people's interpretations of their personal well-being. Hence, the concept is not only interaction between people; it includes emotional and evaluative functions (Törrönen, 2015).

The nature of interdependency, and the nature of reciprocity, is highly ethical: How do we respect other people's human rights? How do we approach other people? Social workers' ethical responsibility is to respect their colleagues and clients and to try to protect their clients from any form of discrimination, such as on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, marital status, religion, or mental or physical disability (Code of Ethics, 2015). If they follow the ethical codes of social work, they might also get work satisfaction, which supports their well-being as humans. For their part, clients evaluate how they have been met and know when there has been a sense of mutual sharing with a social worker or if they have a feeling of reciprocal action, which has elements of the

sensation of being heard and affected. Between societies or continents, reciprocity is based on trust that helps cooperation on social, economic, and cultural levels and supports peaceful relationships between parties.

In this article, the concept of reciprocity is placed in the context of people's day-to-day, holistic, and temporally changing well-being (cf. Törrönen, 2012b). Reciprocity is an integral part of a temporally linked understanding of well-being, which includes economic, cultural, and social resources (Bourdieu, 1984). If we base our understanding of well-being on Bourdieu (1984), we should complement it with one more element: health (Törrönen & Vauhkonen, 2012). Even though economic resources create the foundation of an individual's livelihood, employment, housing, and health, there are also other resources that need to be considered. Cultural resources are linked to education and family background (Bourdieu, 1984). Physical and mental health are essential indicators of well-being objectively as well as subjectively (see Karisto, 1984). Well-being and its resources create a visible representation of institutional and tradition-bound social areas of human relationships such as gender, generation, work, and family as well as the charged relations between them (cf. Giddens, 1996).

Economic, cultural, social, and health resources of well-being may even be regarded as *real goods*, to use Aristotle's expression (Franklin, 2010); they are easily identifiable and important for the development of our higher human faculties. As social beings, we need other people's love and support (Franklin, 2010). Aristotle contrasted *real goods* with *apparent goods*, which give pleasure but are not necessities of human life. *Real goods* are things we need, whereas *apparent goods* are the things we want (Franklin, 2010). Even when we accept that social relationships are *real goods*, we do not get an explanation for why some relationships are more satisfactory than others. So, Aristotle's distinction needs some clarification and a closer look at social relationships and their social nature.

Personal experience of social and societal reciprocity has profound ontological significance for the individual, and it is one of the most important factors in creating well-being. The experiences shape the way humans perceive their own social place at any given time. Social places are created in a dialectic relationship between resources of well-being and institutional societal areas. The understanding of the social place is not static—it is in constant flux. Here, *social place* refers to a subjective interpretation of the individual's social status that is created in reflexive and reciprocal interaction with others. It refers to the emotional bonds created in interaction with other people over time (see Törrönen, 1999). Even though reciprocity depicts the power relations in societies in the form of different kinds of resources that create well-being, it is good to examine it in relation to social actions and discuss the subjective experience of creating reciprocity.

This theoretical framework of reciprocity, the reciprocity approach, is based on the action and resource theoretical idea of an individual as an active and intentional agent. The action and resource theoretical view has been derived from Bourdieu's (1984) classification of different types of capital, which is used to analyze trust relationships between individuals. A concept that unites the different viewpoints is freedom of action: an individual is understood as an active agent who has, within the limits of his or her economic, social, cultural, and health resources, some freedom of choice in a certain life situation. The idea of certain life situation encompasses—within societies and communities attached to a certain time period—nature, climate and built environment, infrastructure, administrative and political distribution of power, and the social policies and social work shaped through their history (e.g., their social and health care service system and their social security).

The social dimension of the concept of "reciprocity" is here defined according to Bourdieu's (1984) idea of social capital as a threefold concept that demands the following: 1) sense of

belonging to a community; 2) *legitimation* of one's existence and actions by society; 3) *recognition* from other people.

As human beings, we need other people's recognition in order to create a sense of belonging. Recognition and belonging create bonds between people. Interpersonal interaction strengthens and legitimizes these bonds. Dialectic and reflexive reciprocity creates "*social places*," which can be understood as close to Bourdieu's understanding of "field" (1990). They move social sciences from a relational mode of thinking to social formations that show them as a structured space of positions (Bourdieu, 1990; ref. Gabriel, 2011) and possessions. Social relations and the societal place constructed through them are important components of creating well-being. The understanding of social place contains the experience of belonging, recognition from others, and the legitimation of one's existence and actions by society. Individual understanding of the social place is created in reciprocal interaction and it is the foundation of individual holistic well-being.

I will now discuss the social dimension of the concept of "reciprocity" through three elements of social capital: *belonging*, *legitimation*, and *recognition*.

3.   Belonging

Reciprocity is linked to the solid research tradition of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Becker, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam et al., 1994) that studies changes in communities. Reciprocity contains interpersonal as well as social dialectics in connection to social capital (Coleman, 1990; Morrow, 1999). Social capital refers to the community bonding between people and changes in connecting with others. Social capital reflects interpersonal, societal, and even global relations and helps the society to function better (Coleman, 1990; Putnam et al., 1994). People's mutual relationships are built on trust, norms, and social networks (Putnam et al., 1994). Experiences of well-being are understood to be an aspect of social capital, which

can reflect dyadic, societal, or even global concerns (Coleman, 1990); they consolidate solidarity between people and the affluence of the society at large, human health, and happiness (Putnam et al., 1994; Putnam, 2000; Laitinen & Pessi, 2010; Kouvo, 2010). In their definition of social capital, Putnam et al. (1994) claim that trust, norms, and social networks can improve the functioning of the society by strengthening the internal solidarity and prosperity of the entire society (cf. Putnam, 2000; cf. Törrönen et al., 2013). The concept of social capital has been closely linked to the social scientific debate, but over the past ten years it has also been used in reference to many practical aspects of everyday life. Even though social capital has been widely studied, reciprocity still remains an unchartered territory, at least in the context of Finnish society (see Törrönen, 2012a, 2014).

When we define reciprocity in terms of social capital, we can see that it includes an individual as well as a collective aspect (Putnam, 2000). From an individual perspective, social capital is connected to social networks and to the people we know. Networks, which can be several at the same time, contain mutual obligations: "I'll do this for you now in the expectation that you will return the favor." It is not exclusively interpersonal interaction; it can also be a sense of solidarity or emotional togetherness with a wider community based on, for instance, neighborhood, nation, wealth, disability, sexual orientation, or gender. Like-minded people more easily find mutual accepting, including the acceptance of common rules, practices, and institutions; they are keen to cope with the expectations of others and share their experiences with others (Törrönen, 2015). From the collective aspect, social capital affects the wider community. This means that a well-connected individual in a well-connected society is likely to be better connected to the society than, for instance, a well-connected individual in a loosely connected society (Putnam, 2000).

Social capital is a form of action that includes a certain social structure that allows or

enables a certain kind of activity for people who belong to it. Thanks to social capital, people can set goals that they could not reach without social capital. Instead of manifesting individual characteristics, it is tied to bilateral and interpersonal social relationships (Coleman, 1990). Social capital ties together citizens who approve of the same rules, practices, and institutions that form the foundation of their behavior. It creates a sense of belonging, as a feeling of mutual understanding, among people; they are willing to commit to a joint course of action. If social capital is weak, it is difficult to reach unanimity within the group (cf. Harisalo & Miettinen, 2010). Social capital produces social ties, through which life becomes rewarding (Putnam, 2000).

Reciprocity operates on the principles of mutual understanding and expectations. The relationship lasts as long as all partners uphold these principles with regard to their interaction with each other. The relationship will cease to be meaningful if there is no interaction between the individuals. In order for social relationships to last, they require some kind of mutually experienced meaning, such as shared expectations, and they must be reciprocal. They involve several interactive processes that work together to connect people to one another. The things that bind people together include, for example, mutually shared opinions, control of others, conciliations, negotiations, individual rights, and respect for one another (Azarian, 2010; Seikkula, 1994; Ahokas, 2010; Widmer et al., 2008). The degree to which individuals are committed to their own community is in direct relation to the role of social support in their life and how they experience this support (Newcomb, 1990).

Social capital helps to strengthen the interaction that individual members of society have with each other, including the acceptance of common rules, practices, and institutions. People find mutual understanding among those whose opinions are similar to their own; they are more likely to feel a commitment to them. If social capital is weak, group cohesiveness is lost and it is difficult for the members of a society to reach common goals (Harisalo & Miettinen, 2010). Social capital

is correlated with several factors such as individual wealth, work satisfaction, health, and an individual's ability to participate in a well-functioning democratic system (Kouvo, 2010). Social relationships can be analyzed according to their durability and connectivity.

4.   Legitimation

Reciprocity is generated through the relations between an active individual and social structures, for example family and working life, and it is consolidated through their interaction. Functional relationships require a certain degree of acceptance, communal justification, and societal legitimation. Legitimation is a collective bargain to feel justified in existing as a person but also an agreement with the actions taken by that person. These both need to be accepted by the common rules, practices, institutions, and institutional frames; they customize the base of the person's behavior (Törrönen, 2015). So, reciprocity is closely linked to legitimized power relationships such as gender and generational perspectives (see Sennett, 2003) between individuals, communities, and societies. As a concept, it is broader than interaction between people; it is a societal concept. Martin Heidegger's understanding (2000; cf. Niskanen, 2006) of human existence is a great illustration of the character of reciprocity. He claims that the existence of every human being is a combination of things that are selected independently of the individual and the things that the individual can influence. Human existence is tied to a temporal experience of reality and to how humans relate to their existence (Heidegger, 2000). Temporal experiences are shaped into different forms in different societies. They are experienced by different individuals and depend on whether these individuals approve of the behavior of other people and the actions of a society and vice versa.

Since the human nature is bipartite—it includes benevolent and malevolent aspects—interpersonal interaction and acceptance of others is not always an empowering experience; it may be disempowering and devastating. Therefore, it is important to examine people's experiences of

non-reciprocity that appear in the form of indignation, harassment, or exclusion from a community; this means that a person's actions, opinions, or his or her habitus are not accepted, excluding him or her from the community and the pleasures it may offer. This kind of excluding can be based, for instance, on racism or homophobia or on prejudices between generations, the employed and unemployed, or people of working age and not of working age. If the person's actions are not legitimized, the experience reduces personal resources and well-being. At best, human relations (e.g., mutual sharing of opinions and life experiences) strengthen the individual's place in the world and make life more meaningful and enjoyable. The concept of reciprocity can be understood as positive and empowering and as a concept of mutual sharing; non-reciprocity is negative, excluding, and contains hostility and distrust. Non-reciprocity leaves human beings outside the social community and thus also contains elements of exclusion, in its extreme forms as long-term unemployment, financial difficulties, substance abuse, and poor mental health, etc. (Törrönen, 2012b). For example, the fact that society legitimizes unemployment means that it also legitimizes the social exclusion of certain people.

Positive reciprocity is usually seen as an empowering element of interaction, which gives people happiness. Today's society is usually described as relational, pluralistic, fragmented, and coincidental, instead of universal, whole, uniform, stable, or ordered (see Bauman, 1996). This kind of discussion seems to describe people as egoistic and individualistic, leaving behind the elements that hold people together and create bonds between them (Törrönen, 2012b). The discussion is not always supported by the research, as the social relationships between people, even in a knowledge society, are present in people's lives in many ways (e.g., Keizer et al., 2008; Lindenberg et al., 2006; 2007; Fetchenhauer et al., 2010; Rönkä & Törrönen, 2010). We must acknowledge, however, that there is also a lot of social research (if not even more) that points out the non-reciprocity in human relationships.

5.   Recognition

Recognition is not only a question of individual choices; it means being valued and accepted by others as one is. First, parents' acceptance is necessary for children (see Hautamäki, 2003). As adults, humans seek a sense of belonging and acknowledgment from others. When people are valued as individuals, they have healthy self-esteem; usually, it is easier for them to reciprocate this with others. However, this is not always possible with every community or person. The main question may be: Which community accepts individuals and which does not? People may keep in touch with those who are meaningful for them in certain situations and for some purpose or benefit (cf. Haavio-Mannila et al., 2009; Törrönen, 2001; 2007; 2010; 2012a; 2014). Furthermore, immediate and extended family and other intimate relationships are meaningful in the shaping of experiences of well-being and reciprocity (cf. Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Widmer et al., 2008; Törrönen, 2012a; 2014). Communities are not necessarily formed through personal relationships, as they may be based on another kind of collectivism, such as web communities.

Joint activities are not always unambiguously reciprocal or ideal (cf. Yesilova, 2009; Veenstra et al., 2010), which is why it is also important to understand painful, discriminating, or distressful experiences (cf. McCormic, 2009; Lindenberg et al., 2010). Non-reciprocity is a manifestation of disrespectful attitudes toward those who do not get along with the symbolic competition, for instance, in lifestyles that keep society continuously moving. With non-reciprocity, people lose their desire to help and support each other and begin to relate to each other cautiously (see Harisalo & Miettinen, 2010; Kouvo, 2010). If an individual is not recognized in the community, it deteriorates his or her mental health. Most evidently, this is one of the key observations in understanding contemporary mental health problems. For instance, there have been cases where people died in their homes and were there for many months before their bodies were discovered, perhaps because nobody missed them. Reciprocity

may also entail some negative aspects, as when the communities are secluded and the prevalent feature is mutual solidarity (Allardt, 1976). Such a hermetic community supports or favors its own members but isolates itself from the rest of the community or society. For example, membership in a religious sect, ethnic intolerance, and corruption may have a negative influence on those involved and the wider community (Allardt, 1976).

If we understand reciprocity as a form of social capital, we can see it as an individualistic as well as a collective concept (Putnam, 2000). In an individualistic interpretation, reciprocity is linked to social networks and people we know. From the collective point of view, reciprocity concerns the wider community and we cannot locate it within human relations. Thus, recognition and rejection may be targeted at an individual or a wider community. When an individual or community receives approval from others, social support is more likely.

Social support affects the individual experience of social inclusion and exclusion and is connected to how committed (or tied) individuals are to their own community (cf. Newcomb, 1990). Negative experiences such as long-term unemployment, financial difficulties, substance abuse, and mental health issues may increase the feeling of social exclusion—of not being valued or accepted. Also, the social support of the community may gradually die away if the problematic situation continues. The long-term experiences of exclusion pose a risk for human well-being, whereas social support, which is linked to positive reciprocity, seems to maintain good mental health (cf. Hyyppä, 1993).

Bourdieu (1984) has divided social capital into belonging to a group or social network and mutual recognition and legitimation. Thus, social capital can be divided into community-based and personal social capital (Kouvo, 2010). A wide network will be beneficial for the individual when they need help, and recognition in a community means that the person must become visible "in the eyes of others" (Pulkkinen, 2002). Community-based social capital is an expression of trust in institutions, unknown people, and far-reaching

networks, whereas personal networks represent personal social capital (Kouvo, 2010). Social belonging and recognition are symbolic by nature. Bourdieu (2000) uses the concept of symbolic capital, showing Bourdieu's philosophical and anthropological thinking in which collective recognition appears as the fundamental existential goal to find the meaning of life and the symbolic competition that keeps society on the move (Gabriel, 2011; Bourdieu, 2000). Gabriel (2011, 65) quoted Bourdieu's ideas on this existential dilemma very well:

> …the unequally distributed and fiercely disputed power to endow one's life with a collectively avowed justification, a social verdict on 'the legitimacy of an existence,' which is inseparably tied to any individual's personal feelings of being 'justified in existing as he or she exists.' (Bourdieu, 2000, 237)

Reciprocal relationships and the construction of well-being are comprised of belonging, legitimation, and recognition. Human well-being is based on real, apparent, and symbolic goods. Together, they create the individual's reciprocal social place, which includes belonging, legitimation, and recognition. The reciprocal social place is individually determined and experienced, but at the same time it is in defined through relationships with other people in the society. Real goods can be understood as objective or external indicators, apparent goods as subjectively interpreted experiences, and symbolic goods as socially valued indicators that justify the existence of the individual.

So, understanding of the social place is not only individualistic; it is a socially constructed understanding of the self—others recognize and legitimize that position. The specific societal responsibility of social work is to improve the basic human rights, and especially the social equality and ethical treatment, of people who live in damaging conditions or who need support to survive difficult life situations. The status of an individual is not only dependent upon the individualistic

characteristics of the human being but also upon the resources, the so-called possessions based on the symbolic competition, and their social legitimation. The fewer gaps or contradictions among these three forms of action, the better the individual's well-being.

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