

Reciprocity Principle Within Mutual Aid Relations

Evgeniy Reutov ^{1*}, Marina Reutova ¹, and Irina Shavyrina ²

¹Belgorod National Research University, Department of Social Technologies, 308015, Belgorod, Russia

²Belgorod State Technological University named after V. G. Shukhov, Department of Sociology and Management, 308012, Belgorod, Russia

Abstract. The paper considers the analysis of reciprocity principle in reproduction of social relations and functioning of mutual aid practices within local communities. The reciprocity is considered as the principle of interpersonal and social relations implying clear and latent mutual obligations among participants. The study covers the empirical diagnostics of such parameters as family, friends, neighbors, and professional networks of mutual aid as intensity and regularity of functioning and orientation of resource transfer (receiving/rendering), nature of reciprocity of obligations, motivation of resource interchange. It is shown that children characterize the resource interchange with parents and adults by the highest degree of intensity. At the same time, the majority of participants of such exchanges do not rely on the equivalent volume of reciprocal services, and these interactions are generalized and reciprocal. Towards “weak” links (with neighbors, fellow workers, acquaintances) there is a focus on balanced reciprocity: when receiving help, from 50% to 57% of respondents count on equivalent return. In motivating the mutual aid, the balanced reciprocity is most obviously expressed in professional and neighbor networks of mutual aid. In relations with friends, it is counterbalanced with emotional, valuable and existential motives, which are dominating in family relations. The regulatory importance of the reciprocity principle and its backbone character in various types of networks of mutual aid is justified. At the same time, it is confirmed that the reciprocity in family relations, first of all, has emotional, psychological and valuable background, while in other networks of mutual aid the balanced nature of resource interchange serves a condition of their stability..

1 Introduction

Various research strategies and tools are needed to get an adequate understanding about the Russian society. Taken as a whole the given methodological grounds and research procedures identify those that allow carrying out empirical recording and theoretical understanding of daily routines as aspects of objective and subjective reality. At the level of local communities, a weird logic of relations between actors may be formed and other meanings of their activity may dominate. In turn, the daily social and interpersonal relations shall be guided by alternative norms.

The implementation of social practices implies the adaptable mechanisms allowing overcoming or reducing a gap between, first, the understanding of due and real situation (sociocultural level) and, secondly, level of social demands of citizens and real efficiency of public institutes (institutional level).

2 Literature review

One of the key adaptable mechanisms are the social networks representing the combination of informal social

links and contacts ensuring communicative, informative, and distributive functions in relation to their participants. Social networks represent a form of social organization, in many respects alternative to formal institutional structure presented by public and municipal authorities, institutions, corporations and other formal institutions. Unlike the latter ones, social networks as a product of self-organization are not limited by the need to imitate public benefits of the activity or to the services to people.

According to B. Latour, unlike traditional micro-level structures (small groups and organizations) the network has a set of obligatory features, each of which shall be perceived in connection with the others: a) empirically traced interrelation between participants, b) “emptiness” between network “units” – i.e. outside direct contacts (in other words the density of communications within a network is extremely uneven), c) continuous efforts made by participants for the reproduction of social relations. At the same time, the network is only “a footprint left by the moving agent”, which represents highly variable and unsteady phenomenon [1]. The affiliation with networks for individual becomes a more qualifying feature than membership in formal structures or even a macro-group

* Corresponding author: reutovevg@mail.ru

identity. M. Castells in the concept of “network society” notes that networks represent a new stepwise model different from other institutes and groups but not reduced to a particular agent. Interactions between network participants form the basis for this structure [2]. M. Granovetter confirms that for many social tasks, such as a job search, weak links are much more efficient than strong. He called this effect the “force of weak links” [3].

At the same time, it is wrong to oppose network mechanisms of a society to an institution. I. Steinberg notes that networks of mutual aid possess some features allowing considering them as a social institute:

- need for joint activity of people to achieve their individual objectives, as well as objectives and functions of the entire association;
- sustainable system of social links between elements of the network and organizational structure integrating these elements into a certain form of relationship representing social roles and statuses;
- actors of certain material and moral resources, social capital which they exchange, traditions and behavior rituals [4].

3 Instrument

The objective of this paper is to give empirical verification of the reciprocity principle for reproduction of social networks, functioning of practices of mutual aid and, in general, stability of local communities. Mass questionnaires conducted in the Belgorod region formed the empirical base of the study in 2010 (N=996), 2015 (N=1002) and 2017 (N=1000) following the regional representative sampling balanced by gender, age and settlement status of respondents.

4 Findings and discussion

The results of the study in 2010 and 2015 demonstrate high importance of family, friends (and, to some extent, professional and neighbor) relations to compensate insufficient human capital [5]. According to 2015 survey, in a difficult life situation 68.36% of respondents count on family members and relatives, while 43.31% – on friends and acquaintances [6].

Analyzing the education and functioning of social networks and comparing participation with affiliation to formal institutes (from the state to corporations), it is necessary to pay attention to the following. Somewhat stable network interactions cannot be carried out beyond the principle of expediency and subjective benefit of inclusiveness shared by actors.

Almost all followers of the network theory consider reciprocity as a key mechanism of formation and reproduction of relatively strong and stable networks of mutual aid. S.Yu. Barsukova analyzes reciprocity as the movement of material benefits between households in the form of gifts and the main redistributive mechanism of community [7]. At the same time, reciprocity cannot be an analog of equivalence of resources, which are subject to interchange. Strive of participants towards

elimination of “market” motives is typical for a considerable number of interactions (between friends and relatives). Thus, I.E. Steinberg notes that the nonequivalence can exist only in the specific system of relations implying “a different rationality”, including, strive to support and maintain confidential relations [8]. Nevertheless, the concept of “different rationality” indicates mutual expectations, which are bound to the stability of network relations.

Within this study, the reciprocity is understood as the principle of interpersonal and social relations implying obvious and latent mutual obligations of their participants. The majority of scientific sources treat reciprocity as an attribute of “horizontal” relations, i.e. not related to domination and submission of the parties (political and corporate power, etc.). In the conditions of imbalance of resources and opportunities the reciprocity fades into the background though is not “cancelled” completely. However, the higher the potential interest of the parties, the bigger the reciprocity, which instead of an abstract principle becomes a standard.

Depending on the volume of mutual obligations, there exist three forms of reciprocity: generalized, balanced and negative. The generalized reciprocity is possible in close relations when one actor, giving something to another, does not wait for obligatory reciprocal actions. However, in this case the “donor” expects some response in the form of psychoemotional return under obvious or hidden to confirm the strength of relations. The balanced reciprocity is based on the interchange of resources of approximately equal value. The negative reciprocity is typical for relations aimed to get any benefits without the intention of reciprocal actions, i.e. it is some borderline of relations going beyond reciprocity in a strict sense [9].

In classification of reciprocity based on the nature of contractor expectations there are four forms of reciprocity: direct (“clean”) reciprocity – relations based on the principle of equivalent exchange; generalized reciprocity – service rendered without hope for direct compensation; reciprocity of status-role relations when everyone takes and gives depending on the social role (for example: doctor – patient); reciprocity of social expectations – people know what to expect from others depending on their status [10].

The analysis of the data obtained in 2017 showed that within a regional community (with certain reservations this thesis can be extrapolated to the entire Russian society) family and private mechanisms of social adaptation steadily prevail over public and institutional ones. Mutual aid within “strong” links is a social norm or, at least, is declared as such: 80.6% of respondents consider the need to help relatives and acquaintances as a “standard of human relations”, 16% admit help if asked for, and only 2.1% consider that everyone has to solve his own problems, since “such help only weakens and encourages dependence”.

For comparison, the initiative help to strangers is recognized as a standard by only 26.8% of respondents, another 51.7% consider it possible in case of the corresponding request, and 13.8% oppose such help.

Family, relatives and friends are a key source of resources (except salary and social benefits) necessary for economic and social stability. The distribution of responses regarding the question “If you find yourself in a difficult situation who would you ask for help first?” (not more than three answers were possible) demonstrates rather narrow circle of people whom the respondents can count on: on yourself (83.3%), family members, relatives (79.4%), friends and acquaintances (50.4%). On the contrary, only 4.4% of respondents count on help of their co-workers, 2.2% – on neighbors and 3.7% – on public authorities (institutions).

The study was focused on parents, adult children, other relatives (family and relatives), friends, neighbors, fellow workers (co-students), and acquaintances as main sources and addressees of adaptive resources. There were two leading parameters of mutual aid practices – involvement and intensity. Involvement characterizes respondents being the participants of corresponding practices, while intensity – frequency of resource interchange. It should be noted that the involvement within mutual aid practices was also detailed according to direction of resources – receiving / rendering.

Mutual aid practices based on friendly relations cover the majority of respondents: 87.7% of respondents specified that for the recent one or two years or they helped their friends, and 81.8% noted that they received help from friends. Two groups of mutual aid practices are in the second place regarding the level of involvement: 1) when parents act as a source and the addressee of help, and 2) formed on the basis of other family relations. Thus, 82.5% of respondents for the recent one or two years helped their parents, and 77.1% received some help from them. In the relations with relatives the corresponding figures made 81.5% and 78.1%.

The involvement level within the mutual aid practices with fellow workers (co-students) regarding rendering help made 75.2% and receiving help – 67.0%.

Then follow mutual aid practices with acquaintances: 70.3% of respondents helped their acquaintances, 59.8% – received help from them.

Mutual aid practices within neighbor relations regarding rendering help made 61.3% and receiving help – 52.3%.

Mutual aid practices with adult children take the lowest position mainly due to insignificant number of the corresponding group of respondents.

The provided data show an interesting subjective perception of resource interchange. In all these cases the respondents highlight that they give more than receive. This is not the first time the authors of this study encounter such opinion. In the study conducted in 2011 the situation was absolutely the same [5]. Thus, the majority of participants of network interchanges consider it necessary to emphasize their own significance (or even indispensability) regarding mutual aid they are involved in. This may be easily explained by a simple human aspiration to self-positioning, to giving more importance to personal social existence.

At the same time the weaker the relations the bigger the difference. If in relations with adult children 53.9%

of respondents note that they help their adult children and 52.1% (almost parity) say that they receive help from them, then in relations with acquaintances these numbers make 70.3% and 59.8% respectively. At first sight, the relations to which respondents give higher priority (both due to objective significance of their resource potential and to sociocultural directives) are marked with higher compliance with the reciprocity principle.

However, the exception from the analysis of respondents without parents or adult children, as well as the use of the intensity parameter ensures another hierarchy of social relations regarding mutual aid. While concentrating on features of resource interchange it becomes clear that their reciprocity is far from market rationality.

It turns out that the most intensive resource interchange is typical for relations with adult children. 61.5% of respondents having adult children noted that they render them help once a week and more, while 35.3% stated that they receive help from them. Regarding the intensity of resource exchanges, parents took the second place: 57.2% helped them once a week and more, 37.3% – received help from them. All remaining vectors of sources and addressees of resource interchange significantly concede on the intensity to specified values. Thus, help to friends was rendered by 27.2% of respondents, and 18.2% received help from them; fellow workers (co-students) – 26.2% and 18.2% respectively; relatives – 17.6% and 9.5%; acquaintances – 10.7% and 6.4%; neighbors – 8.3% and 4.9%.

Only regarding adult children and parents, help was rendered “more than once a week”: 40.0% concerning adult children and 37.6% concerning parents. Concerning all remaining addressees, the frequency rate of rendering help was “several times a year”: 41.8% of respondents helped other relatives several times a year, neighbors – 40.7%, acquaintances – 40.2%, friends – 34.6%, colleagues – 30.7%.

The frequency of receiving help “more than once a week” was not recorded by either type of counteragents. Even concerning parents and adult children the domineering frequency values were “once a month” (25.6% and 26.9%, respectively) and “several times a year” (26.9% and 24.9%).

The dispersion of respondents – donors and recipients of high-frequency help (once a week and more often) varies from 3.4 (concerning neighbors) to 26.2 (concerning adult children). Thus, the gap between respondents rendering and receiving help regularly and with high frequency is defined or serves the indicator of relation strength – the greatest subjective non-uniformity is observed regarding the intensity of rendering and receiving help to adult children and parents.

In other words, if to apply rational categories, this help is either rendered as an advance or is some kind of deferred payment. However, further data analysis showed that subjectively the practices of mutual aid within family and relatives are mostly built without explicit accounting of mutual obligations (according to K. Steinbauer – within generalized reciprocity): when helping parents or adult children, the respondents

generally do not think (or do not admit it) about a possibility of receiving something in return in the near or long-term future – 70.3% and 71.0% of respondents, respectively. There are less supporters of the balanced reciprocity – among those who help parents 14.9% expect the same volume of help, who help adult children – 8.6%. It should also be noted that the considerable number of respondents (14.9%) making resource transfers to adult children hope for response, but in a smaller volume. Thus, the relations with adult children are characterized by the highest level of the specified altruism.

To a larger extent, but also rather moderately, the balanced (direct) reciprocity is typical for situations when help is rendered to other relatives – and here 59.3% of respondents do not expect return transfers (and 23.9% hope to receive the equivalent volume).

In all remaining cases reciprocity expectations are higher, but not considerably. It cannot be admitted that the balanced reciprocity characterizes only expectations within strong relations. Thus, they are mostly expressed in relation to fellow workers (co-students): 37.0% of respondents expect help in return in the same volume and 3.5% hope to receive more. However, within relations between friends 36.2% want to receive an equivalent given, and 3.0% expect bigger.

However, the situation changes dramatically when it comes to standards of respondents in case of receiving help. Here, mutual obligations gain the nature of modal propositions. Moreover, concerning parents and adult children such obligations get higher, concerning all other counteragents they become direct reciprocity. Lack of obligations for rendering reciprocal services is shown by only a small part of respondents – from 4.6% concerning parents to 11.8% concerning acquaintances. At the same time, in parallel to the increase in the “power” of relations the number of those who consider it necessary to render reciprocal service in bigger volume (from 8.3% concerning acquaintances to 76.9% concerning parents).

Thus, if when rendering help there was no rigid and linearly expressed dependence between the “power” of relations and the reciprocity approach, then when receiving help such dependence was obvious. First, obligations grow with stronger relations. Thus, rendering the reciprocal help to parents is obligatory according to 91.4% of respondents, to adult children – 88.5%, to other relatives – 83.7%, to friends – 81.6%, to neighbors – 70.9%, to colleagues – 75.6%, to acquaintances – 70.0%. Secondly, with the growth of the “power” of relations the level of altruism regarding heightened obligations increases: 76.9% consider it necessary to help parents more than the parents do, and concerning acquaintances such answer was only given by 8.3%. Thirdly, uncertainty in attitudes decreases concerning the volume of reciprocal help to parents where 4.0% of respondents found it difficult to answer and concerning acquaintances this number made 18.2%.

5 Conclusion

According to the study it is possible to note that strong relations continue to dominate as the leading adaptation resource. Only family and friends are recognized by the majority of respondents as the potential addressees of help in difficult situations. However, it should be noted here that this does not apply to other relatives (except parents and adult children). If resource interchange with parents and adult children are characterized by a high degree of intensity, then the corresponding contacts with other relatives significantly concede in this regard to friends and even professional networks of mutual aid. The resource potential of family relations (except for lineal relations) is weak and focused on extraordinary cases.

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