

Reciprocity as a Value in Integration: Integration Workers' Reflections On the Role of Gift-Giving For the Process of Integration



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ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for the usefulness of the concept of reciprocity for studying integration. Conceptually, the article draws on a wide disciplinary specter of theories on reciprocity and gift-giving. Concerned with the individual and societal effects of the mutual acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, such theories allow to visibilize the value(s) that is created and exchanged through reciprocal relations, and highlight the social and cultural embeddedness of reciprocal norms. Empirically, the article draws on fieldwork inquiries into the value landscape of the integration sector in Sweden. Aside from explicit values, such as gender equality, democracy, or nondiscrimination, the importance of acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating has manifested itself as a strong, albeit implicit value in the material. Prompted by this insight, this article highlights the ideas and expectations of reciprocal relations that the integration workers reflected on. With these insights, this article adds to the small but increasingly important body of literature that places reciprocity at the heart of integration processes.

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Reciprocity, at its core, generally depicts transactions between people or groups with the aim to create mutual benefit. At an aggregate level, reciprocity is seen to build societies. The purpose of this article is to raise the usefulness of the concept of reciprocity for studying integration in an immigration society. We do so first by providing a conceptual overview of the concept of reciprocity. We also offer an empirical exploration of the notion of reciprocity in the field of integration, more particularly within the area of policy implementation in integration courses.

Analytically, reciprocity as a concept holds the potential for visibilizing norms of giving, receiving, and reciprocation. As is discussed in the reciprocity literature (see [Maldonado-Torres 2007](#); [Strathern 1988](#)), understanding these norms in any given context can, in turn, elucidate what is generally valued, and by extension, shed light on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in an (immigrant) society. In a recent article, Heins and Unrau ([2018: 227](#)) argue that immigrant integration into receiving societies contains and necessitates reciprocity, and that 'without [...] reciprocal responsiveness, social and civic integration cannot succeed'. The authors build on the gift theory originally developed in anthropologist Marcel Mauss's seminal work on *The Gift* from 1925 and argue for conceiving of integration not as a two-way exchange of giving and taking, but rather as a three-step process of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Their scholarly attention is largely focused on the 'arrival gift' by volunteer workers in the reception of large arrivals of refugees in the summer and autumn of 2015 in Germany. Their claim that practices of reciprocity are inherent in the process of migrant integration is worth exploring in relation to other moments and contexts of refugee reception and, by extension, the wider integration process. The field in our study goes beyond the moment of arrival and is constituted by a variety of publicly funded activities with the stated aim to enable participation of migrant newcomers in society, in particular refugees and their families. Our analytical attention for this study is focused on the frontline people we consider to be 'integration workers', the staff of integration courses, who either meet the target group on an everyday basis as part of their professional work or develop activities for them. Integration workers are tasked with making the new society intelligible for newcomers as well as providing knowledge and skills to enable the newcomers' participation in society.

The material we draw on was collected through a qualitative inductive approach within the framework of a larger international study.¹ The fundamental questions that guided our query concerned the values that integration workers had to, or wanted to, convey to migrants. We thus asked them which aspects of life in Sweden they prioritized in the classroom, why they valued these aspects, and how they conveyed them to the participants. Our underlying premise was that values conveyed in an integration course are those that are believed to be core elements of the imagined national self-image. In many of their narratives, they mentioned and explicitly discussed values, such as democracy, gender equality, and nondiscrimination (see

¹ Our study was conducted within the Horizon 2020 project *NoVaMigra—Norms and Values in the European Migration and Refugee Crisis*. The project as a whole investigated changes in norms and values in Europe in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. By and large, the project was concerned with the norms and values stipulated by Europe as a political community and asked which (political) values are deemed important with regard to migration and integration on the supranational, national, and local levels, in the political, public, and civil society spheres.

Suter, Ramsøy & Böhm 2020). At a second gaze, however, the transcriptions and field notes reveal more. Of interest for this article are the many implicit references to reciprocity as a value—references to ‘giving, receiving and giving back’—the analysis of which prompts our conceptual overview and stands at the center of this piece. As such, while our material is somewhat fragmented on the particular issue of reciprocity, and thus prevents a solid analysis, it nevertheless offers a curious and illuminating glimpse on the matter and serves as a pointer for the relevance of reciprocity in the study of integration.

Reciprocity can be seen as a universal and fundamentally human concept that underlies the creation of social cohesion (Gundelach & Traunmüller 2014). The concept, however, has cultural connotations, and thus also shows sensitivities to norms depending on gender, class, race, age, and other social markers (Adloff & Mau 2006; Phillimore, Humphries & Khan 2018). While natives and long-term residents often take these norms for granted and deal with them only implicitly (just as the integration workers have done), they may often elude the migrant newcomer’s grasp. Since norms of reciprocity are culturally embedded, it is worth examining more closely which general ideas and experiences of reciprocity the interviewees expressed. More accurately, we explore the expectations the integration workers expressed concerning the reciprocal act by immigrants and offer an attempt to explain these. Owing to the nature in which the material has been collected, this article’s aim is first to highlight the integration teachers’ valuation of reciprocity, and second, to offer a conceptual foundation for further research into the policy field of integration.

The structure of this discussion is organized as follows: The next section provides a literature review on the concept of reciprocity specifically within the field of integration. After a brief conceptual review of the literature on reciprocity, we offer our own conceptual take on the concept. This is followed by a brief description of the context of the research, namely the integration courses and the institutions providing them, to create an understanding of the context in which the integration workers act and on which they reflect for the purpose of this study. After that, we present our methodological choices and clarify further the setting of the study. The subsequent analytical part then presents the integration workers ideas and practices from three different perspectives; detailing their ideas on reciprocity between individuals and state (information on how the exchange system works) on reciprocity as practiced between individuals, as well as their ideas on what constitutes a gift and a counter gift in those reciprocal relations. The final discussion sums up the preceding parts, highlights the key findings, and spells out relevant foci for further research on the role of reciprocity in integration.

RECIPROCITY AND INTEGRATION

There is a small but growing body of relevant literature on reciprocity and integration in a migration context. As explained in the introduction, Heins and Unrau (2018) have examined the question of refugee integration after 2015 and the principle of reciprocity from a political theory point of view. Building on Mauss’s (1990) work on reciprocity as a basis for solidarity, they examine the expectations underlying gift-giving in the context of welcoming refugees, the refugees’ obligation to repay the arrival gifts, and explore the consequences for social relationships in case of an inability to reciprocate. Also, Phillimore, Humphries, and Khan (2018) make a strong case for reciprocity as a concept through which to conceive of integration. In their study on

newly arrived migrants in the United Kingdom, they show how newcomers create networks through the means of reciprocity, and how they access integration resources through such acts of exchange. They define relationships based on different forms of reciprocity—formal and informal reciprocity, equal and unequal reciprocity—and point out that an individual's reciprocal relationships may be varying or changing over time and are dependent on gender, cultural affiliation, life situation, and migration trajectory. Barwick's study (2017) is concerned with reciprocity as a mechanism to build ethnically diverse networks. Barwick points to the negative attitudes of the majority population as a crucial factor in hindering reciprocity between different groups (in this case, native Germans and middle-class Turkish-Germans), and in creating ethnically homogeneous (rather than heterogeneous) networks. Another study, also on Germany, explored the creation of social capital in culturally diverse regions. The authors, Gundelach and Traunmüller (2014: 600), juxtapose two sources of social capital, reciprocity, and social trust. They find a negative correlation between social trust and cultural diversity, while they find a positive correlation between norms of reciprocity and cultural diversity. They point out that norms of reciprocity work as a 'more universal and fundamental form of social capital', one that is not reliant on value consensus, but based on 'mutual acceptance of procedural norms in various settings of social interaction'. Furthermore, Ramsøy (2019) has used the concept of reciprocity to examine reciprocal relations in the global market of care between Bolivia and Spain. Drawing on Strathern (1988) and Maldonado-Torres (2007), Ramsøy noted that reciprocity in the Spanish care work sector, which largely employs immigrant women from Spain's former colonies, is scripted on particular notions of race, gender, as well as class. Finally, Rozakou's (2016) study problematizes the act of giving without expecting something in return. Her study centers on pro-migrant activist groups in Greece that pre-2015 consciously refused to give material items to refugees. The reason for this was their strong conviction that acting without expecting something in return jeopardizes the autonomy of the refugees and impeded the equal relationships they aimed at creating. This 'gift taboo', however, was overthrown when the refugee crisis of 2015 culminated leaving bare the scarcity of (state) resources and the existential adversity of the refugees. As shown, reciprocity is useful in conceptually capturing both social and economic exchanges that processes of integration might entail, as well as visibilizing the ways in which power and positionalities intervene in these exchanges.

RECIPROCITY AND GIFT-GIVING

Reciprocity, or the social mechanism through which we give to others and receive something in return, is considered by many anthropologists and other scholars to be at the basis of all human relationships. It has been a hugely influential concept in theory building on social cohesion and society building (see Komter 1996). Our understanding of reciprocity relies closely on the anthropological gift theory developed by Marcel Mauss in 1925.² Inherent in reciprocity is the object of the gift, which is given, received, and reciprocated between actors. This exchange thus constitutes a 'triple obligation' to give, to receive, and to give in return. A gift can take the form of a material object, or it can be something intangible or symbolic, in the form of ideas or information. It is

² While the gift was first studied in 'archaic' societies (Malinowski 1920; Mauss 1990), sociologists and anthropologists employ reciprocity as a principle present also in the construction of modern societies.

exactly this process of reciprocating that builds relationships and that constitutes the basis of social connectivity. On an aggregate level, it is what builds societies (Komter 1996). Deliberately or involuntarily refusing people to participate in such exchange is effectively excluding them from society. Building on this, the integration process for migrant newcomers means to work toward becoming part of the system of reciprocal exchange (see Heins & Unrau 2018). The temporal dimension is significant in shaping reciprocal relations. As Heins, Unrau, and Avram (2018) point out, 'reciprocity in gift exchange is asynchronous'. A gift is thus not meant to be returned immediately as this would simulate an economic transaction and not result in building social relations. Rather, gift relations are meant to be formed over time. However, one should not take too long to reciprocate what has been given, as this would lead to conflict and the risk of terminating the relationship at hand. Thus, failing to return the act of giving a gift, or doing so too late, changes the very essence of the relationship—it 'poisons' it (Heins, Unrau & Avram 2018). Time and timing are thus inherent components in reciprocal relations, and the knowledge and ability to reciprocate in a timely fashion profoundly affects the possibility of constructing reciprocal relationships.

Gift-giving as part of reciprocal relations is not, however, always a well-intentioned practice. It can also be a way of building and wielding power, as well as of intentionally harming someone (Komter 1996). Following Mauss's logic of the gift's 'triple obligation', to receive more than one can give in return is to be placed in a subordinate position, while to give ostentatiously can mean boasting one's power (Komter 1996; Rozakou 2016). Heins and Unrau (2018: 232) point at the 'false gift', the gift that 'fails to establish, strengthen, or restore a lasting bond between strangers or separate communities'. The origin of this failure may lay in selfish motives on the part of the giver or the giver's and receiver's divergent valuation of the gift ('the absence of common metrics'; Heins & Unrau 2018: 234). Norms of reciprocity thus can be seen to be forged by social interests and power relations and can be used to reproduce the status quo (see also Malinowski 1920). In other words, entering a reciprocal relation is to recognize hierarchies, precisely because reciprocity in practice is a mechanism that often (re)produces asymmetries of power (Adloff & Mau 2006). However, such norms are not static but can transform based on negotiations and, assumingly, generate a shift in the conditions of power (Adloff & Mau 2006).

Reciprocal systems of exchange are universal as norms of reciprocity can be seen as a basic feature of human sociality. In diverse societies without a strong value consensus among the population, norms of reciprocity can work as an alternative to social trust and as a source of social capital (Gundelacher & Traunmüller 2014). However, the intricacies of lived reciprocity differ depending on specific cultural and social contexts (Adloff & Mau 2006; Phillimore, Humphries & Khan 2018). The norms on which the system of exchange is built contain implicit ideas of who the givers and receivers can be, of what to expect as the counter-gift, of which metrics to use to assess the value of a gift, as well as of the appropriate timeframe of exchange. As discussed in Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), gift exchange requires the giver and receiver of an object to, at least partially, recognize each other's (gendered) positionalities. Furthermore, Maldonado-Torres (2007) has shown that positionalities in reciprocal relations not only entail gendered aspects, but are also shaped by other processes of (post-)colonial stratification, such as race and class. While recognition of the other is thus a fundamental precondition for individuals or groups to engage in the process of giving, receiving, and giving back (Komter 2007), the nature of how

humans recognize each other is decisive for which kind of social bonds are created. In sum, while reciprocity as a concept is universally present, it shows particularistic features. These include the context-specific rules of exchange, including timeframe, metrics, and expectations on the counter-gift. As seen, reciprocity can work to both access resources in order to advance in society and can also be used to preserve a status quo.

In this article, we draw on these previous works as we depart from an understanding of reciprocity as universal, yet context-specific and cultural-inherent in this dynamic are norms of reciprocal relations that build sociality, and, therefore, engaging with such norms serves as a path to become part of the collective. We recognize the potential of reciprocity to both include but also exclude individuals, and that entering into reciprocal relations often means entering into a relation of power asymmetry. We further see the potential of transforming such norms in processes of negotiation and shifting of resources. Our article contributes to this small but growing body of knowledge by focusing on an under-researched group in migration studies, integration workers. In analogy to Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrats, we see them as 'frontline workers of integration' that on the one hand, in their professional capacity, they epitomize 'the long arm of the state', in the sense that by organizing and teaching language courses and civic education they ultimately implement government policy. On the other hand, as individuals they play—by way of their personality, social positionality, experience, and political ideology—an active part in (co)producing the outcome of the policy (Lindsay et al. 2018; Lipsky 2010). In contexts where what constitutes knowledge is not solely dependent on the government's agenda and interests, teachers are important actors in creating what counts as knowledge. This often happens in interaction with the course participants (Bernstein 1996). Integration course participants can thus potentially also be seen a coproducing the outcome of the policy (see Suter, Ramsøy & Böhm 2020). The integration workers' professional position is thus situated between state intervention through policymaking and the discretion they have to draw on their own perspective as cultured citizens with different social markers, experiences, beliefs, and ideologies.

THE CONTEXT OF INTEGRATION WORK IN SWEDEN

Integration workers and their activities are embedded in a framework of institutions, each of which (implicitly) shapes their view on integration and on reciprocity. What follows here is a brief overview of the Swedish integration program, followed by a contextual description of two key institutions, the language course 'Swedish for immigrants' (SFI) and what is known in Swedish as '*samhällsorientering*', the civic integration course.

The government's official integration program in Sweden—which is referred to as the 'establishment program'—runs for the first 24 months after an individual has been granted a residence permit in Sweden. During this time, the newly arrived refugees and their family members are encouraged to participate in the integration program, which consists of a language course, SFI, and the civil orientation course, along with a variety of labor market preparatory and other activities. In exchange, participants receive a monthly allowance, paid per individual. The SFI and civic orientation courses are provided by the municipalities with the monitoring and supporting help of the regional administrative bodies. In order to understand the integration workers' role, including mandate and leeway in producing policy outcomes, more information concerning their job description is required.

The stated aim of the SFI language course is to ‘provide language skills for communication and active participation in everyday life, societal life and work life’ (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018). The teacher is thus to teach the language and work toward the aim of ‘managing everyday life in Sweden’. The pedagogical approaches are broad and ‘person-based’ (SFI teacher 1), as are the selection of value-related topics and the interpretation of values (see also Thornberg 2008). SFI teachers have diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, yet it is safe to assume that the vast majority are white Swedish natives, many of them women (Suter, Ramsøy & Böhm 2020).

The civic orientation course has a different focus to SFI, as it is for participants to ‘develop knowledge on human rights and the fundamental democratic values, individual rights and obligations, organization of the society, and practical everyday life’ (Swedish Government 2010). The course is provided in ‘mother tongue’ languages, and as a result, most of the teachers are foreign-born with migration experience. The most common languages are Arabic, Farsi/Dari, and Somali. Many civic education classes go beyond the liberal values and practical information stipulated in the legislation and contain normative stances as to what ‘the correct lifestyle’ is (Milani, Bauer, Carlson, Spehar & von Brömssen 2021: 765). Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the course material used across the municipalities varies widely, and is under continuous revision.

Historically, the policy field of integration was solely under the state’s mandate; however, over the past two decades, the government has actively strengthened collaboration with civil society organizations. This has resulted in civil society organizations, such as folk high schools, study associations, sports clubs, and religious groups, to now be regarded as valuable collaboration partners in working with integration issues. For several years following the large arrival of refugees in 2015, more folk high schools and study associations³ have received government funding to offer language and civic orientation courses as part of the establishment program. While the basic task was the same, these courses often differ from those offered by the municipalities in terms of pedagogical approaches and content. In sum, the integration workers we interviewed can be differentiated according to how much leeway they had in selecting and framing topics: from pure ‘one-way information’ to a structure that allows for, encourages, and thrives on discussion and reflection by the whole group. The teachers at the folk high schools and study associations in general seemed to have the biggest leeway. For many integration workers, the topics they selected for discussion became a mix of government views and personal views and experiences. Consequently, the knowledge that is being created—and sometimes cocreated—varies greatly not just between the different education providers, but also between colleagues working at one and the same organization.

METHODOLOGY

The material discussed here was collected between 2018 and 2020 through ethnographic fieldwork within the framework of a larger international research project. It includes participant observation and field notes from 10 national conferences and

³ Both study associations (*studieförbund*) and folk high schools (*folkhögskola*) are types of popular adult education outside the official school system. It is particular to the Nordic region and promotes the universal, lifelong right to acquire new knowledge. Study associations offer short courses, while folk high schools offer longer programs.

stakeholder meetings on integration-related topics as well as interviews with 21 integration workers in the South of Sweden. They worked as language teachers, civic educators, course developers, or course coordinators for courses specifically designed for newly arrived refugees and other foreign-born persons and are provided as part of the official integration program. The interviewees were employed by municipalities, county administrative boards, study associations, and folk high schools. Most of them were women between 30 and 60 years of age. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and transcribed afterward.⁴ The material was analyzed through text analysis. The overarching research question that guided the fieldwork, including the open-ended interview conversations, inquired into which values the integration workers deemed most important to convey to their course participants, given the task they had to fulfill and the leeway they had in doing so. Follow-up questions concerned the methods through which to convey and discuss a value as well as the motivation for doing so. As stated previously, while the interviewees would in the conversation name some values explicitly—such as gender equality or democracy, the transcribed material, and field notes reveal that questions of giving, receiving, and giving back also had a prominent place in the interviewee's teaching, either as an (implicit) value that they want to convey or as a practice that they place importance and meaning on.

IDEAS AND PRACTICES OF RECIPROCITY IN INTEGRATION WORK

In this section, we take a closer look at our research material and sort through different ideas and practices of reciprocity that have come forth in the narratives of the integration workers. Interestingly, in our material, we find narratives about reciprocal relationships on two levels. First, reflections on actual and imagined relationships between the individual migrants and the wider society. Here, the interviewees mostly refer to the specific mechanisms of the welfare state and the residents' role in it. As Adloff and Mau (2006) point out, different welfare state models rely on and, in turn, shape different societal norms of reciprocity. Second, the integration workers talked about relationships between the course participants and themselves as teachers. Importantly, in these narratives, the role of language as a facilitator of exchange is highlighted. This division can likely be attributed to the integration workers' dual position as both a representative of the state and as an individual with a specific situated worldview based on social positionality and personal experiences. Finally, a third theme we found reflected in our research material were the expectations regarding the objects of the counter-gift on the part of the migrant newcomers. Importantly, the expectations of whether someone is expected to give in return, what this should be and when this should take place often varied among the integration workers. Their narratives show a range of different ways in which they recognize 'the other' (the course participants, in this case). This points again to a diverse citizenry in terms of social positionalities, experience, and worldviews. Here, our study differs from other studies on integration courses in the Nordic countries (e.g., Carlson 2017; Masoud, Holm & Brunila 2021) who generally presented similar views on participants among integration workers.

⁴ The study has received ethics approval by the Regional Ethics Board at Lund University, nr. 2018/770.

As mentioned previously, language teachers at the municipal SFI courses are tasked not only with teaching vocabulary and grammar, but also with providing information on Swedish society, and they have considerable leeway in how to interpret the latter. We find clear references to reciprocity in the words of a SFI teacher who sees it as central to provide course participants with information on how the logic of redistribution of the welfare state works:

‘It’s important that they understand, because then they may have to put some effort into learning Swedish, try to get a job, get into the society, to *pay back* to the Swedes, you see [...]. I think this is important to tell our participants that this is how it is, but if you do what you can, if you do your best, then it’s no problem [...]. The society is not doing them a favor by *just giving*, instead, we need something *in return*, and I think it is essential for our participants to understand that as long as there is something in return, then there is no problem’ (SFI teacher 2, italics by the authors).

As reflected in this quote, the teacher finds it important to inform course participants that it is collective tax money that finances the integration program. In the interview, the teacher explains further that many of her colleagues fail to provide this information to the course participants, who, in turn, remain unaware of how the course is funded by the Swedish government via taxes from all citizens. The teacher is concerned that the lack of this essential piece of information leads migrant newcomers to develop feelings of inferiority and exclusion from Swedish society. In analytical terms, this teacher has observed that the lack of information on the financing of integration courses obscures the norms of exchange upon which activities/measures in the field of integration are built. As put forward by scholars of reciprocity, receiving ostentatiously without the possibility to give back can lead to feelings of inferiority on the part of the receiver. In this teacher’s experience, providing information about this system of exchange often leads to a ‘whole different motivation, a whole different will to do or accomplish things’. Thus, in order for the integration course not to be a false gift, participants need to have information on the norms of exchange on which the system builds. And further, there need to be expectations toward the receiver of giving back. We see in the teacher’s words what this counter-gift is expected to consist of: eventually, to find work and pay taxes, but for the moment to ‘just do your best’. The narrative can be read both as a teacher giving information about the welfare system, but also as a citizen who values reciprocity.

A similar anecdote was provided by a coordinator of civic integration courses with a longer work history of meeting migrant newcomers in the context of civic orientation. Their feedback was that many refugees who participate in introduction courses express that they perceive their unemployment and the reception of social allowance as ‘undignified’. Experience has shown, in this case, that providing information about the possibilities to reciprocate at a later stage has often proven to be essential to restore their sense of dignity. As the coordinator highlights: ‘I usually told the course participants “right now, learning the language and learning about Swedish society is your job, and then later on, you shall participate in the system as well [and reciprocate] by getting a job and paying taxes”’.

These examples point to two different aspects of reciprocity: First, both excerpts capture the ‘darker’ side of reciprocity well by pointing out how feelings of inferiority and exclusion can evolve if the receivers are unaware of the larger system of exchange and get the impression that they cannot reciprocate or are not expected to do so. In both cases, it is the providing of information about the metrics used, the norms of reciprocity particular to Sweden (or the policy field of integration), that shifts the gift from a potentially ‘false’ gift to one that is valued, not only in itself, but because there is the promise that it can be reciprocated, both now and in the future. The excerpts also lead us back to considering power asymmetries in reciprocity. Interestingly, in the previous examples, the material inequality experienced is not redeemed. Instead, the course participant’s attention is shifted to a time perspective in the reciprocal relation. Focus is thus redirected from the here-and-now to a future in which the individual (likely) will be able to do their share of giving back. This time, perspective also comes with the promise of social mobility and the mitigation of inequalities between the general society and the migrant newcomers. This perspective allows the counter-gift to change its shape. While here-and-now, in conditions of obvious inequalities, the counter-gift is ‘to do your best’, in the future, when inequalities are expected to be mitigated or eliminated, the counter-gift is constituted by paying taxes. From the experience of the two interviewees, it is this crucial piece of explanation and the participants’ acceptance of it that has restored the gift from a false to a (potentially) real gift.

Another example comes from an interview with a civic orientation teacher who points to another aspect of reciprocity between the individual and the state. The civic orientation course is given in the participants’ mother tongue and our interviewee provides the course in Farsi/Dari. He believes that it is essential to receive crucial societal information in one’s mother tongue. In particular because the course contains important reflections on the new situation, including norms and values, in relation to what the participants are used to.

‘I think [mother tongue instruction] prevents a lot of misunderstandings and it prevents false myths about the society. I am against letting people find their own [truth]’ (Civic education teacher 12).

This statement can be read as to contain the expectation of newcomers to make their own informed decisions about their lives in Sweden rather than relying on their conationals’ interpretation. In concrete terms, the expectation is for participants to engage with and participate in the wider society (rather than solely with their conationals). Indeed, many integration workers see civic orientation as a tool to hinder segregation. The importance placed on providing information can be interpreted as the newcomers’ initiation into the logic of the larger reciprocal system of exchange. The pieces of information the teachers convey, either explicitly or implicitly, include the ‘rules of exchange’ in Swedish society—the societal rules that are well-established yet often taken for granted by natives and long-term residents.

ON RECIPROCITY BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS

In the narratives of the integration workers, there are also many illustrations of implicit reciprocity between themselves and the course participants. The majority expressed that they find their work rewarding as they enjoy the encounters and forming

relationships with the course participants. The reward was usually exemplified in terms of learning about others, but also learning about oneself:

‘I think it’s really nice and rewarding to talk about [the Swedish society] but also to hear and to understand how they, in turn, interpret us or interpret situations’ (SFI teacher 4).

This is a common statement in our material and stands in contrast to earlier studies that highlighted integration providers’ view of migrant newcomers from a deficit perspective, a perspective that positions immigrants as lacking knowledge, mostly on issues related to Sweden, but also other dimensions of life (see [Fejes & Dahlstedt 2022](#); [Thomsson 2009](#)). One interviewee, a dean at a folk high school in Malmö that offers both language and civic education courses to migrant newcomers, sees a general difference in perspectives between teachers who work at the municipal schools and teachers who find employment at folk high schools. As mentioned previously, Swedish folk high schools work with a particular pedagogical approach that emphasizes learning and growing through encounters with each other. This approach promotes a specific view on course participants:

‘In my experience, all teachers here look at our participants as competent people—people that *can* [do things rather than *cannot*], and that are not blank sheets when they come here. Rather, they carry something with them and can *contribute*. We work with encounters and through encounters we start learning’ (Dean of folk high school 7, italics by the authors).

As the quote shows, the pedagogical lenses of the folk high schools enable newly arrived immigrants to be seen as contributors (reciprocators) from the very start. This is in contrast to other forms of education (SFI, civic orientation) that lack this explicit emphasis. Many teachers who value an exchange of views and experiences between course participants and teachers pointed at the need for participants to have a certain language level.

‘At the moment, I work with participants on [beginners’ level]. It’s much harder to discuss as they don’t have the language. I mean, they don’t have the words [...]. Well, they might have them in their own language, but the situation impedes that I can take part in their [...] to be able then *to give back to them* [...] *this exchange* does not work at all in this situation’ (SFI teacher 3, italics by the authors).

This experience suggests that a broad part of integration workers appreciate exchange. Some teachers (in our sample, it was the SFI teachers) point, however, at language skills as crucial to enable this exchange.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE COUNTER-GIFT

While the above mentioned excerpts focused on ideas and practices of reciprocity, we have already seen that the integration workers have expectations toward the migrant newcomers about reciprocating at some point in time and in some form. Analytically, it is here in these expectations that the cultural and social embeddedness of the concept comes to bear the most. It is also here that the recognition of the other plays an important role. Because of personal worldviews formed by social positionality and

personal experiences, we can see significant differences in how integration workers in our sample viewed, and, in other words, recognized, participants. One interviewee, an SFI teacher with long-term experience working in this field, stated that the teachers' different views of participants and their situation also imply different opinions as to what migrant newcomers can be expected to reciprocate:

'There are many [teachers] that think that SFI participants should not have homework because they don't have the time for this, they have a lot of stress, and they have many children [...]. So in these questions you also see a difference in [personal] values. (Asking rhetorically) What do you think? Do you feel pity for them because they have to go to summer school [...] or do you think that it is positive with the summer school because they advance quicker? There are political values also, ideological values in the view on how the society should act towards the newcomer; there's a lot of different opinions about this among SFI teachers' (SFI teacher 1).

In this quote, the SFI teacher refers to the fact that 'advancing quicker' implies that participants will be able to access the labor market faster and through that reciprocate by taking part in the circulation of welfare. It also implies (an at least imagined) integration in the form of participation in society.

Drawing on our conceptual discussion of reciprocity, what, how much, and when something is expected in return from the receiver indicates how the giver views and positions the receiver in relation to themselves. This recognition 'proves to be an essential precondition for the coming into being of patterns of exchange' (Komter 2007: 102). While some integration workers clearly regard the recipients of their work as individuals eligible for them to exchange with on both personal and societal levels, others see their own task more as a 'one-way street'—or also a 'pure gift'—and would thus not expect—or desire—anything in return from the students. This non-expectation can be viewed as partly related to a feeling of pity toward the participants ('they have a lot of stress, a lot of children'). It can also be due to the perspective of participants being viewed as blank sheets and as individuals with a 'deficit', the correction of which takes place in the integration courses (Fejes & Dahlstedt 2022; Milani et al. 2021). Either way, from an analytical point of view, such an approach is unlikely to create mutual recognition and is likely to inhibit the inclusion of migrants into a receiving society. In contrast, the narratives that expressed an expectation of reciprocity generally indicate an intention to build some form of relationship, both on the more abstract level between the newcomer and the imagined society and also on the personal level among individuals.

When reflecting on the welfare state and larger societal level, for some, the ultimate counter-gift constituted speaking the Swedish language, finding a job, and living in a gender-equal partnership (Suter, Ramsøy & Böhm 2020). Many of the teachers also reflected on how these expectations imply different counter-gifts from individuals, depending on their gender, age, level of education, or family situation. Often, however, the counter-gift was envisioned in less tangible outcomes, and, rather, in a certain behavior: 'making an effort and being motivated' or 'engaging in a joint process of discussion, extending respect and building trust', along with adapting to values pertinent in Sweden, especially secular and emancipatory values (Puranen 2021). Another expectation of what constitutes reciprocation was 'to choose their own path into society and not just follow their conationals', or in other words: not

to segregate. On the personal level, the counter-gift consisted of the migrants teaching their teachers about 'other cultures' and providing, through engaging discussion with the teacher, their personal views on Swedish society and there are indications in our material that this engagement can lead to cocreated knowledge. As described previously, integration work was generally experienced as personally enriching. While gratitude has not been mentioned explicitly as an expectation, it was nevertheless implied as rewarding. For example, when integration workers referred to the satisfaction of course participants as expressed through 'a glow in their eyes' or when the participants tell them that something they provided has been deemed useful in real-life situations and appreciated. Komter (1996: 301), referring to Simmel's essay on gratitude in the process of gift-giving, sums this up neatly when saying that 'gratitude is [...] a powerful means to establish social cohesion' while it is also 'an extremely powerful means to reproduce, (disturb, or end) social relationships'. While some of these expectations may have a universal bearing, we can also sense context-specific features relating to the narratives circulating in the Swedish public space forming the contours of a Swedish self-image. A comparative study with integration workers in other countries is needed, however, to shed more light on this discussion. Finally, many interviewees reflected on the risk that idealistic expectations of newcomers' eventual reciprocation may clash with structural hindrances to access the Swedish labor market, for example, due to discrimination. There was a general agreement to avoid representing Swedish society in an *ideal*⁵ (rather than a *real*) way, as it could lead to a rejection of values and culture (see also Abdulla 2017), and ultimately, segregation and exclusion. This view was seen to be the most prominent in the civic education course offered by a folk high school, in which the central point was to draw from the participants' views and experiences of Sweden rather than the teachers' views.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have brought to the fore that reciprocity is a central yet implicit value in integration work. The integration workers' ideas of reciprocity manifested themselves on two levels: first, on the societal level, and second, on the personal level. These ideas of reciprocity contain a temporal perspective, in particular, the act of reciprocating to the larger welfare state. Language was both named as a facilitator of exchange as well as a tool to create trust between the participants and the teacher and, by extension, the larger society. This article further highlighted the integration workers' differences in their recognition of the other, which result in heterogeneous expectations on *whether* and *what* the migrant newcomers should reciprocate. The findings have suggested that the attitudes of the integration workers toward the newcomers (refugees as resourceful or victims; view on religion, gender norms, and age) depends on the teachers' own worldviews.

It is through this myriad of lenses that the frontline workers' blended position—both as representative of the state and as an individual with a specific situated worldview—comes to the fore. However, the inductive nature of our data collection limits the extent to which we can accurately establish conclusive patterns. Hence, further research on the connection between social positionalities, norms of reciprocity, and

⁵ As a fantasy image with regards to, for example, gender equality or labor market access.

their impact on integration processes, such as the inclusion of migrants into receiving societies, is needed. Of further interest would also be to study integration as a series of ongoing everyday processes outside the realm of the integration courses and to explore which norms of reciprocity are salient in different arenas of everyday life. Also, related to this, further research is needed to examine the role of language (including body language) in establishing reciprocal relationships. Finally, given the culturally specific character of norms of reciprocity, a comparative approach may reveal relevant insights into the similarities and differences of the universal, yet context-specific practices of building relationships in integration contexts through giving, receiving, and giving back.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Both authors have:

- Made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work.
- Contributed to the drafting of the work, or revising it critically for important intellectual content.
- Provided final approval of the version to be published.
- Agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.
- Agreed to be named on the author list, and approved of the full author list.

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