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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Ashwin, Sarah, Tartakovskaya, Irina, Ilyina, Marina and Lytkina, Tanya (2013) *Gendering reciprocity: solving a puzzle of nonreciprocation*. *Gender and Society*, 27 (3). pp. 396-421. ISSN 0891-2432

DOI: [10.1177/0891243213479444](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213479444)

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Available in LSE Research Online: July 2015

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Gendering Reciprocity: Solving a Puzzle of Non-Reciprocation

Sarah Ashwin, Irina Tartakovskaya, Marina Ilyina and Tatyana Lytkina

Abstract

Theories of reciprocity have been surprisingly gender-blind. We develop a gendered account of reciprocity using qualitative data from Russia. We focus on gifts of unpaid task assistance, where gender differences are particularly visible. In our data, women's gifts of labor involve greater time and effort than men's, but women report non-reciprocation, while men do not. Paradoxically, the most onerous gifts are those least likely to be reciprocated. We show how this puzzling finding relates to the gendering of reciprocity. We define four stages of the gift cycle—giving, (non)recognition, (non)reciprocation, and givers' responses to (non)reciprocation—detailing how each is gendered. We argue that reciprocity is a socially embedded phenomenon that cannot be considered in isolation from gender norms. This insight has implications for research employing reciprocity as a framework, and for debates in relation to issues such as carework and family relations.

Reciprocity is widely accorded a status akin to a social law. Gifts demand a return. At the same time, feminists have exposed the way in which the help women provide to others, particularly in the form of unpaid work, is often unrecognized or undervalued (e.g., England 2005; Folbre 2001; Moller Okin 1989). Yet even in the context of a discussion of the devaluation of women's unpaid care, Nancy Folbre asserts, "Norms of fairness and reciprocity are surprisingly robust" (2001, 30). This paradox is the starting point for our investigation. Does the writ of reciprocity extend to the forms of unpaid task assistance typically provided by women? And do men providing unpaid task assistance have better prospects of eliciting reciprocation? Here, we begin to answer these questions using qualitative longitudinal data from Russia. We focus on unpaid task assistance because it is a form of giving in which the role of gender is highly visible. The "gift" supplied by men and women—labor—is in one sense the same, but it also differs in ways that are strongly gendered, reflecting the local gendered division of labor. We use this case to develop a theory regarding the gendering of reciprocity, which we think is applicable beyond Russia.

Russia's gender order is a Soviet inheritance, the relevant features of which are high levels of (usually full-time) female employment and a strikingly unbalanced gendered division of labor in which women perform the lion's share of domestic and care work (Ashwin 2000; Kravchenko 2008). As in other countries, this unequal domestic load is associated with gender inequality in the labor market which, in the Russian case, is pronounced (Katz 2001).

We begin by outlining our approach to gender, our understanding of the reciprocity literature, and our proposed combination of the two. We then describe our data and methods. Our data analysis is presented in two sections, the first comparing men's and women's gifts

of unpaid task assistance, and the second analyzing the pattern of reciprocity and providing an explanation for it. Our conclusion underlines the theoretical contribution of our study.

GENDER AND RECIPROCITY

The theoretical literature regarding reciprocity has been surprisingly gender-blind. There have been empirical investigations of the involvement of men and women in various forms of exchange, such as network support (e.g., Gerstel 2000; Hook 2004; Kahn, McGill, and Bianchi 2011). Meanwhile, anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Annette Weiner (1992) have published seminal studies on women and gift exchange in traditional societies, but these have not focused squarely on the question of how reciprocity is gendered. In proposing a gendered approach to reciprocity, we begin by outlining our understanding of gender, followed by its intersection with age.-

We see gender as jointly constituted by gender beliefs that accord women a subordinate status and by an inequitable distribution of resources (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 511). In terms of how these beliefs engender behavior, we concur with West and Zimmerman's view that men and women must continually "do" gender in order to assert their membership of a sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127), and in so doing "simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1987, 146). We supplement this theory with Pierre Bourdieu's explanation of the *consistency* with which gender-appropriate behavior is produced: A woman's apparent "choice" to behave in ways which reproduce her domination, "far from being the conscious, free, deliberate act of an isolated 'subject'," reflects the way in which symbolic domination is "durably embedded in the bodies of the dominated in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions" (Bourdieu 2001, 40). This understanding is particularly relevant in the areas of the provision of help to others where

women's behavior can be seen as expressing dispositions "engendered" by the cultural rules and distributional inequality that they encounter from birth. These dispositions are constantly reinforced by "continuous, silent, invisible injunctions," which, depending on gender, designate behavior as either "natural" or "unthinkable" (Bourdieu 2001, 56-57).

While men and women are required to "do" gender, the social expectations to which they are supposed to conform modify as they age. As Jennifer Utrata has recently argued, drawing on the intersectional perspective of Krekula (2007) and Moore (2001), men and women are held accountable to their age category—their socially perceived age—and must "do gendered age" (Utrata 2011, 619). In relation to our Russian data, as in Utrata's contribution, the salient category is that associated with grandmotherhood. Owing to a tradition of early childbearing (Zakharov 2008), Russian women currently enter this flexible category sometime after age 40. In Russia the retirement age for women is 55 (and 60 for men), so as they near this marker, women are assumed to have more time for caring responsibilities, despite the fact that significant numbers continue to work to supplement their pensions. Therefore, as Utrata (2011, 631) shows, women deemed to have reached grandmother status are expected to live up to the norm of "self-sacrifice and selfless caregiving," which gives younger women a "youth privilege."

Turning to reciprocity, the central idea is that gifts generate a return. Scholars from different disciplines have invoked various mechanisms to explain this, beginning with Mauss' idea that the gift contains spiritual power (*hau*) that "wishes to return" to the original giver (Mauss 1990 [1923], 15). Although later anthropologists generally repudiated the mystical elements of Mauss' theory, they fully embraced his insistence on the necessity of reciprocity. In the functionalist sociological account, the norm of reciprocity is sustained by its indispensability for maintaining a stable social system, which "engenders motives for returning even when power differences might invite exploitation. The norm thus safeguards

powerful people against the temptations of their own status” (Gouldner 1960, 174). Meanwhile, economists have used game theory such as the “tit-for-tat” strategy (Wilson 1971) to explain the action of reciprocity. This is echoed in the anthropology of Sahlins, who argued that one-way flows could not be tolerated in what he called “balanced” (dyadic) reciprocity (Sahlins 1972, 195). The presumed inadmissibility of one-way flows means that when they do occur, they are assumed to create a power difference, with the recipient who is unable to reciprocate becoming increasingly dependent (Blau 1964). Thus, a transfer of power replaces the countergift. This highlights the fact that returns can come in different currencies. Gouldner distinguishes between homeomorphic reciprocity, in which exchange items are concretely alike, and heteromorphic reciprocity, in which they can be different but “equal in *value*” (Gouldner 1960, 172 [emphasis in original]). The latter form is more common in modern societies.

Thus, reciprocity is generally seen as a reliable rule. It has been more problematized in treatments of generalized exchange within a community (in which A gives to B, but may receive a return from C). But theorists are still struggling with the problem of how to account for the existence of such exchange (Takahashi 2000).

Meanwhile, in the arena of intergenerational family relations, the idea of altruism offers a competing framework to reciprocity (Bianchi et al. 2008). The idea is that affective bonds between family members may mean they are motivated to help each other without reciprocation. The altruism model is difficult to test, however, and has received little empirical backing (Bianchi et al. 2008, 24-25). Reciprocity has stronger support. In terms of relations between parents and children, there is evidence for reciprocity over the long-term (Antonucci 1990; Henretta et al. 1997; Silverstein et al. 2002) and short-term (Lennartsson, Silverstein, and Fritzell 2010; Leopold and Rabb 2011). Much of our data relates to parent-child relations. We frame our argument in terms of reciprocity rather than altruism, because

our respondents' spontaneous complaints regarding non-reciprocity suggested the greater salience of this norm.

We integrate reciprocity and gender theory, detailing four critical points at which the gift cycle is gendered. This can disrupt the operation of reciprocity expected by theorists. The four points are: giving, (non)recognition, (non)reciprocation, and response to (non)reciprocation.

Giving

A potentially reciprocal exchange begins with a gift. We argue that the giver's motivation will necessarily be gendered. Here we are most interested in the self-gratification that attends giving, rather than directly instrumental motives (though we acknowledge these exist). We argue that giving provides an identity-reinforcing social satisfaction, which motivates men and women to gender-appropriate giving.

In some accounts, the pleasure obtained from giving is self-referential. For example, post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida insists that as soon as someone intends to give, "he begins...to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given, or what he is preparing to give" (Derrida 1992, 14). In economics this is referred to as the "warm glow" effect (Andreoni 1990). But the self-gratification entailed in giving depends on a social context in which gifts and generosity are valued (Bourdieu 2000, 193-94). Thus, "warm glow" is inseparable from the social approbation anticipated by gift-givers. The economic historian Avner Offer gives a good account of the social character of giving, arguing that gifts are a means of granting and receiving *regard*, a primary driver of social interaction encompassing "acknowledgement, attention, acceptance, respect, reputation,

status, power...” (Offer 1997, 451). Achieving such recognition from others is crucial to establishing and maintaining social identity.

The social satisfaction and support for social identity provided by giving are necessarily gendered. Self-gratification through giving depends on the knowledge of having “done the right thing,” but the “right thing” will vary widely by gender. The presumed obligations of mothers and fathers, for example, differ markedly in most cultures. Thus, in giving appropriately individuals are “doing gender.” Part of the “return” they seek from giving is a re-affirmation of their gender identity. This is evident in studies of women’s caregiving. Bubeck, for example, notes that women can gain “empowerment and self-realization” from caring, despite its costs (Bubeck 1995, 171), while Gerstel suggests that carework allows women to affirm their culturally approved gender identity (Gerstel 2000, 481).

(Non)recognition

Recognition of the gift is the second point at which reciprocity is gendered. The significance of recognition can be elucidated by reference to Jacques Derrida’s critique of Mauss, in which he argues that the latter’s famous essay on the gift is not about gifts but exchange (Derrida 1992). According to Derrida, a gift in the proper sense of the term entails no “reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift or debt” (ibid., 12). Therefore, a condition of the gift is that the recipient should not reciprocate nor feel indebted: “It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not *recognize* the gift as gift” (ibid., 13 [emphasis in original]). Inverting this, reciprocity depends on a recipient *recognizing* the gift. Gender norms have a crucial influence on the process of recognition. In relation to our data, we argue that recognition is often blocked in cases where women perform unpaid labor for others, because this usually

occurs in the context of relationships where their behavior is seen as a naturally arising obligation rather than as a gift requiring reciprocation.

(Non)reciprocation

Reciprocation depends on recognition, but it is also influenced by the valuation of the gift. Valuation is a social process and as such will be influenced by gender status beliefs, which privilege men and “masculine” attributes and objects over their feminine counterparts (Ridgeway 1997). This is evident in the labor market, where the undervaluation of women’s labor results in, among other things, those who work in female dominated occupations being paid less, even after controlling for human capital, skill demands, and working conditions (England et al. 1988, 554). This is particularly notable in areas where the skills are seen as “feminine,” such as carework (see England 2005 for an overview). If such undervaluation of the contributions of women occurs in a public arena supposedly governed by dispassionate market rationality, it is even more likely to feature in personal relations.

Response to (Non)reciprocation

The final point at which reciprocity can be gendered is the giver’s response to (non)reciprocation. The tit-for-tat logic discussed earlier suggests that non-reciprocation should lead the giver to cease their gifts. But this depends on the nature of the original motivation for giving. If agents’ generosity stems from the way they “do gender”—that is, is crucial to their identity—they may not be deterred by a lack of appreciation. There may also be gendered aspects of a relationship that make the “exit” option problematic (Folbre 2001).

Thus, we argue that the gift cycle is gendered at each stage, such that men and women will have different conceptions of appropriate levels of giving and recompense. This will influence not only their own giving, but also their responses to gifts from others. We now

show how this explains the paradoxical non-reciprocity women experience in relation to their gifts of labor.

DATA AND METHODS

This article is based on data from a longitudinal qualitative project examining the adaptation of men and women to Russia's transformed labor market. The sample used here was drawn from three groups facing distinct labor market transitions at the beginning of the research in 1999. These were: those working in economically struggling organizations (in Moscow); registered unemployed job seekers (in Samara), and those receiving state social assistance (in Syktyvkar). The original sample comprised 90 men and 90 women. (For more details regarding the sample, see Ashwin 2006). At six monthly intervals between 1999 and 2001 we conducted four in-depth interviews with all respondents that focused on their aspirations, labor market behavior, and domestic circumstances. The research was resumed in 2010, when 102 of the sample were found and interviewed (47 men and 55 women).¹ The analysis presented here is based on this latest round of interviews. By this point, our sample was distinctly middle-aged, ranging in age from 30 to 72. The mean age for men at T5 was 49 and for women 51.

The Russian team who conducted the interviews, which includes the three Russian co-authors, had either been involved in the project since 1999 or were fully briefed by a team member. Wherever possible, respondents were consistently interviewed by the same researcher to foster trust. Attrition occurred for a variety of reasons, from death to a change of address. Pseudonyms are used when respondents are named in case histories.

We referred to interviews from waves 1-4 for background information, having previously analyzed them in relation to helping behavior (Ashwin and Yakubovich 2005; Tartakovskaya and Ashwin 2006). T5 interviews contained the most systematic information

regarding help provided to others. We asked respondents about the different forms of help they provided and received and coded all these instances. However, we did not systematically ask about reciprocation of particular gifts. Thus, what we know about non-reciprocation comes from information volunteered by respondents when describing the help they had given.

First we focus on unpaid task assistance, which has been used in studies of assistance to kin (e.g., Chesley and Poppie 2009). The Russian label of the code was “*pomoshch' trudom,*” which literally means “help through labor.” This global code groups together all the different ways in which men and women provided help to others in the form of unpaid labor. We then broke this down into the different types of labor provided, which were highly gendered.

Our unit of analysis was initially “instances” of unpaid task assistance provided. However, we realized that in the context of a study of reciprocity this was unsatisfactory, since when several forms of unpaid task assistance were given to a particular recipient, it was unclear which of the “instances” was reciprocated or otherwise. We therefore chose as our unit of analysis the *relationship* within which unpaid task assistance was provided, so that we count the number of individuals or groups to whom unpaid task assistance was given. This yielded 13 relationships in which men gave unpaid task assistance, and 30 in which women did so. Both groups of givers contained individuals from across the social spectrum, from highly qualified professionals to unskilled manual workers.

Within each relationship we further analyzed the characteristics of the recipient (group or individual, male or female, nature of relationship), the type of help provided, the time commitment involved, whether the respondent was physically or emotionally tired by the work, and whether their “gift” of labor was reciprocated. We divided time commitment into three categories: episodic (help provided only occasionally), regular (work performed

frequently), and “regular, significant opportunity cost” (when the respondent reported that the extent of their unpaid obligations had restricted or ruled out their choice of paid work).

In terms of reciprocity, we recorded a result only in those cases in which the respondent explicitly noted a return or its absence. Although the notion of heteromorphic reciprocity can entail repayment “as intangible as the granting of approval or allegiance” (Portes 1998, 7), we recorded only instances in which a specific return was noted by the respondent. This could include emotional support, but if the respondent received only recognition (for example, in the form of gratitude), then we recorded this as “recognition.”

We analyzed the patterns in the data revealed by our coding, and we also conducted a detailed analysis of what respondents said about the help they provided, and the response they received. In doing so we were attentive to gender differences in the way respondents accounted for their behavior.

Gifts of Labor: Men and Women Compared

Men and women in our data provided different kinds of unpaid task assistance, and the volume of work also varied considerably. Women gave unpaid task assistance more regularly, and their work was more intensive. The types of unpaid task assistance provided closely match the prevailing gender division of labor in Russia.

TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The details regarding each relationship within which unpaid task assistance was provided are summarized in Tables 1 and 2, which record the information regarding men and women respectively. It is notable that women in our sample provided help to more than twice the number of individuals or groups (30) than did men (13). In terms of the types of help

given, men provided: workplace-based unpaid work for colleagues (3 cases), childcare (3 cases), gardening (3 cases), yardwork (2 cases), and unspecified manual work (2 cases). Women in our sample gave others unpaid help with: childcare (16 cases), housework (6 cases), gardening (4 cases), eldercare (2 cases), and conserving vegetables (2 cases), as well as a wide variety of other tasks, such as errands and decorating (no more than one case of each).

Most of men's task assistance was either workplace-based or involved various kinds of manual work, including gardening. Gardening generally entails planting, tending, and harvesting fruit and vegetables, and can occur either at *dachas* (technically country houses, though they are often modest), in private houses with gardens, or at allotments. Both private houses and *dachas* are typically self-built and require regular maintenance. Yardwork would include such maintenance, as would other tasks, such as fetching water and firewood, and possibly animal husbandry.

Men also reported taking part in childcare in their capacity as grandfathers. But in all cases this work was shared with their spouses, who, the men's comments revealed, played the leading role. Anatoli (Syktyvkar) related his wife's greater involvement to her experience as a mother of four, and Ivan (Moscow) to his wife's profession of teacher. The comments of these two men recall Lareau's methodological caution about men's rhetorical "participation" in activities mainly performed by wives (Lareau 2000, 412), and highlights the care needed when assessing levels of unpaid labor.

In the vast majority of cases, men provided unpaid task assistance episodically. There were only three cases in which men reported providing regular help, and two of these were cases of shared childcare. None of the men reported the work they performed for others to be tiring. Overall, therefore, men's provision of unpaid help to others in our data is limited. This

mirrors the situation in the Russian domestic arena, where “there are few conventionally masculine tasks to perform” (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004, 203).

By contrast, the demand for women’s unpaid labor is high. The most common form in our sample is childcare, in the majority of cases for grandchildren. Grandmothers were a vital supplement to state childcare during the Soviet era, and continue to be so today (Utrata 2011; Zdravomyslova 2009). While grandfathers can also participate, this is not perceived as an obligation. Housework and gardening were the next most common forms of unpaid labor provided by women. Finally, although the responsibility of only a minority in our data, eldercare is the most onerous form of unpaid task assistance that women offer. The vast majority of eldercare in Russia is carried out privately by family members (Naberushkina 2002). The care homes that exist are generally of poor quality, and it is considered shameful to “abandon” family members to such institutions. It is possible in the post-Soviet era to hire private carers, and this is a growing practice in middle-class families. When such care is not affordable, however, it is women who are expected to take on caring responsibilities, with men generally only doing so when no woman is available.

In sharp contrast to their male counterparts, in more than half of cases (17 out of 30), women provided unpaid task assistance on a regular basis. In six of these cases, all involving childcare or eldercare, this entailed a significant opportunity cost, with the woman concerned either accepting low-paid employment in return for time flexibility or foregoing employment altogether, in order to offer unpaid care. In nine cases, again involving childcare or eldercare, respondents reported being physically or emotionally tired from the help they provided.

We are cautious about making statistical generalizations on the basis of qualitative data, but gender differences in the volume and intensity of unpaid task assistance are nonetheless striking. Compared to men, women in our sample provide help to a greater number of people, more regularly, and use more time and energy in so doing.

Gifts of Labor: The Puzzle of Gendered Non-reciprocation

Mauss confidently advises his readers “to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily. We run no risk of disappointment” (Mauss 1990 [1923], 91). The evidence presented in this section calls into question the wisdom of this advice, at least in the case of women providing unpaid task assistance. Indeed, our data reveal a paradoxical situation: The more costly the gift of unpaid task assistance (in terms of time, effort, and lost earnings), the less likely it is to be reciprocated. We account for this finding theoretically, by showing how it relates to the gendering of each stage of the gift cycle.

As noted earlier, men’s gifts of unpaid task assistance involved considerably less time and effort than women’s, but there was not a single case in which the giver complained of non-reciprocation. Indeed, we excluded some cases because men’s gifts of labor had been paid for in cash, and they reported them as a form of supplementary earnings rather than as help to others. For example, Vasilii (b. 1949), a fitter from Moscow, somewhat uncomfortably acknowledged the payment he received, stressing recipients’ eagerness to pay him: “At the garden plots they ask for help with repairs...I didn’t [want to] take money because I helped people in my circle of friends and relations, but all the same they pushed me [into it].” We encountered no cases of women of being offered payment for their task assistance in our data. This replicates our finding from waves 1-4 of our research (Tartakovskaya and Ashwin 2006).

By contrast, in one third of cases (10 out of 30) women reported that their unpaid labor had been unreciprocated. In nine cases they reported reciprocation, and in eleven it was hard to judge. All but one of the cases of non-reciprocation involved regular help, and five entailed a significant opportunity cost. That is, in only one of six cases where the woman sacrificed earnings in order to provide unpaid help did she consider her gift to have been

reciprocated (the case of Nina from Moscow, which we will discuss). All but one of these cases involved childcare or eldercare, and all but one were maternal gifts to adult children. Our sample is too small to judge whether there is a class dimension to non-reciprocation; this is a matter for future research.

How can we explain this non-reciprocation of onerous gifts? We begin our analysis by setting out a paradigmatic case of non-reciprocity. We then explain how the interaction was gendered, and bring in other cases to develop our argument regarding the gendering of reciprocity, focusing on the four stages of the gift cycle we have outlined.

This case concerns Galya (b. 1945), who, in 2001, at stage 4 of our research, was among the poorest of our respondents, having spent two years working as an unpaid carer for her granddaughter, and the two grandmothers of her daughter-in-law, one of whom was paralyzed. She continued in this caring role for three more years, until both grandmothers had died. At stage 5, reflecting on this period, she said:

It turned out that my first granddaughter was born, and I had to help, immediately I had to look after two grannies. Five years were wasted...My daughter-in-law was on maternity leave, she didn't work. But as well as the little girl, she had two sick grannies on her hands. It was physically impossible for her to look after all of them at the same time. I went there every day...I gave up work, and had no time at home. Every day in the morning I went there like to a job. Those years of mine were wasted. I was offered work at that time—not bad [work]. But how could I abandon them all?

This period certainly had costs. Galya has higher education, and worked most of her life as a laboratory engineer. She is now a pensioner, working as a cleaner at a summer pioneer camp

to supplement her pension. She attributes her downward mobility to her time as a carer: “In the course of five years I lost my contacts. Then young people rushed into those positions.” She also suffered poverty, depression, and social isolation during her “lost years”:

There were times when I turned in on myself. I had nothing to boast about, and I didn't want to talk about my problems. There were times when I simply didn't have anything to take with me [as a gift] to go visiting, and I can't go empty-handed. I love to give presents. So I sat at home.

Asked if she received financial help during that period, Galya initially said no, before noting that her oldest son, to whose family she had devoted so much time, had helped her “a little bit.” But the so-called financial help she then detailed was not a gift at all, but his monthly repayment of the interest on a loan she had given him from the proceeds of the sale of her *dacha*. Likewise, she reported receiving emotional support from her girlfriends and younger son, but not from her older son.

During the fifth interview, Galya claimed not to regret this time, though her designation of the years as “wasted” tells a different story. At stage 4, Galya was more open about her resentment, saying of her oldest son, “He doesn't help at all, not with food, or anything... You do so much for them, and you don't receive any help.” She noted bitterly that when she was given things by her son and daughter-in-law, they were only worn-out items fit for the bin. Worst of all, her son allowed her to buy groceries from the market stall he owned, thus revealing his ingratitude to the world: “They know me there, probably they tell him, ‘Your mother came to buy sugar or buckwheat.’ And he hasn't once said, ‘Mum, why do you do that? Tell me how much you need, and I'll bring it round.’”

This strikingly unequal interaction was gendered at every turn. First, Galya's giving cannot be seen as an instrumental attempt to secure future benefits from her son. Had she merely been interested in material security, it would have been better to continue working. Rather, her action makes sense if it is seen as a means of "doing gendered age" (Utrata 2011). This can be seen in Galya's account of her motivation: "I had to help, so that nobody could say to Dima [her son] that you don't help your own [relatives], but, look, *we* help." Galya does not even consider the possibility that her son should assist his wife in caring for his elderly in-laws. As a woman nearing retirement, Galya feels responsible for maintaining the family honor in face of onlookers she presumes to be critical. She "had to help"—this was an "invisible injunction" she found impossible to ignore.

The invocation of duty is common in relation to "feminine" caring responsibilities. In many cases, this is combined with forms of "doing gender" that provide a "warm glow" along with the reinforcement of gender identity. We did not find this in relation to eldercare, but it was common in relation to care of grandchildren, as illustrated by the comments of Daria from Moscow:

I help the children with their children...I try to somehow help. I go shopping—of course she [the respondent's daughter] doesn't have time, she's with the children, they are aged seven, five, and one and a half...I always try, to buy something, to sew and knit, well, I help, I help...*It's the meaning of my life, her family is now the meaning of life; I haven't got any other* [emphasis added].

Such affirmation of identity was often experienced by women looking after their grandchildren. This work also brought intrinsic satisfaction; as Daria said of her

grandchildren, “They bring me joy.” In the light of this powerful cocktail of gendered motivation for giving, it is easy to see how the “rule” of reciprocity could be disrupted. We will return to this point when we consider reactions to non-reciprocity.

The second critical moment in the gendering of reciprocity is recognition or its absence. Dima’s actions suggest he did not recognize his mother’s unpaid labor as a gift, but rather as an unexceptional enactment of maternal duty. In place of recognition, Galya received precisely the opposite: an open declaration of non-recognition in front of her son’s employees. Why was Galya’s gift unrecognized? Our data suggest that unpaid task assistance provided by women is often not perceived as a gift because it is rendered invisible by its taken-for-grantedness. Maternal care is particularly likely to be unrecognized, because it is perceived as a duty. Again this relates to prevailing gender norms, according to which women approaching pension age are presumed “naturally” responsible for a series of caring tasks.

The invisibility of women’s caring labor was also notable in the case of Lyuba from Samara, who provided her daughter with substantial help with childcare. Again, she complained of her daughter’s non-recognition:

Lyuba: She just can’t understand. She thinks that everything comes easily.

How it comes easily to her, she doesn’t ask herself.

Interviewer: With your help...

Lyuba: Yes. And she’s not aware of it. And now she sends the child [to me], and she knows he’s fed and nourished.

While Lyuba is “held accountable for doing gendered age” (Utrata 2011, 631), her daughter enjoys a “youth privilege” that obscures and naturalizes the lack of reciprocity in her relationship with her mother. Thus, when it comes to women’s unpaid labor, norms of gender and age play a key role in blocking recognition of gifts.

As we have argued, recognition is crucial, because without it there can be no reciprocity, including of the long-term variety that is expected to operate in parent-child relations. By contrast, where adult children indicate recognition at the time a gift is given, there is greater chance of reciprocation. This can be seen in Zoya’s response, when asked whether her gifts to her children (which included childcare, but also substantial financial help) were reciprocated: “They are very grateful to us [laughs]. And help will come from them later. Now it’s not possible. I think that, all the same, help will come later.” This certainty of future help is founded precisely on the gratitude, the *recognition*, she receives: Without this, there would be no reason to anticipate a return.

More generally, however, we think that the idea of long-term reciprocity oversimplifies the social mechanisms governing parental relations. We argue that norms of reciprocity and gender are enmeshed, such that men and women encounter different expectations of what is “due” from them at different points in their lives. This has significant consequences. If parent-child relations are seen as being governed by “pure” reciprocity, then sons and daughters, for example, should incur the same “debt” for help they receive from their parents. In many contexts, however, including Russia, a daughter is first in line to provide care to an elderly parent, not because she has received, and therefore owes, more, but because she is a woman and caring is socially defined as a “feminine” responsibility. The idea that family relations are governed by gendered concepts of duty presents an equal challenge to the altruism perspective. Researchers also cite a normative basis for altruism

(Bianchi et al. 2008, 13-16), but fail to stress the gendered content of these norms. Thus, both perspectives misidentify the mechanism through which family work is accomplished.

Reciprocity is the third stage of the gift cycle. Even where this occurs, the valuation of women's gifts will be influenced by gender status beliefs, in our case related to the perceived worth of men's and women's labor. In the Russian labor market, jobs demanding characteristics defined as "masculine" command substantially higher pay than those associated with "feminine" skills (Katz 2001). This social valuation extends into personal relationships. As noted, men do not complain of non-reciprocity, and also report being offered cash for small jobs. Thus, in the case of men, gender status beliefs support reciprocity: Men's labor appears to demand a return. By contrast, women's caring labor is notoriously undervalued, even in more gender-egalitarian countries than Russia.

This undervaluation of women's care work can be seen in the case of Nina (b. 1961), a technical inspector at a Moscow factory. She provides her daughter with childcare, usually collecting her granddaughter (8 years old at the time of the last interview) from school, and supervising her homework. Nina's caring role is quite significant: As she noted, "I spend more time with her than her parents do." Moreover, Nina turned down the opportunity of a better paying job, because the longer hours it required would have limited her ability to care for her granddaughter.

Nina does not complain of non-reciprocity, and appears satisfied by what she gains in return for her help. She cites her daughter as her main source of emotional support:

Naturally, my emotional release—it's once again my daughter. That is, she and I have a relationship—really like friends...We sit up together in the evenings, we get together, chat...I know everything, I'm in the know, even, excuse me, about her lovers. So you see what kind of relations we have.

As can be seen, Nina finds her closeness with her daughter intensely satisfying. She also receives occasional financial support from her daughter, though she reports feeling poor, while her daughter is affluent. Despite the contrast in their fortunes, Nina wishes she could offer her daughter financial support: “Of course, I would be very pleased if I had the resources to provide them with some more help with something...But I haven’t got the resources.”

Nina’s comments highlight two important points, first, the tendency for women to accept society’s undervaluing of their labor: It is only against this background that Nina can view her help to her daughter as insufficient. Nina’s daughter, meanwhile, appears to perceive occasional gifts as sufficient recompense for her mother’s labor, despite the fact that Nina’s low wages reflect the time flexibility she requires to pick her granddaughter up from school. Thus, though Nina and her daughter appear happy with their exchange, it reflects the social devaluation of care. Second, their relations reveal the expectation of unequal exchange entailed in youth privilege: Although Nina gives more than she receives, she would like to give even more. Like Galya, her key complaint about her poverty is her restricted ability to give to others.

The final stage in the gift cycle is the giver’s response to the counter-gift, or lack thereof. If the gift has been reciprocated there is no reason to cease the exchange, but if the recipient has neither recognized nor returned the gift, tit-for-tat logic suggests the giver should suspend further giving. Thus, according to this theory, Galya should have withdrawn her help in response to her son’s non-recognition. But this ignores the complexity of such relations. First, gifts of care are often not strictly dyadic in that the direct recipient is not perceived as the exchange partner. Thus, for example, Galya did not expect a return from the women for whom she cared, but rather from her son, on whose behalf she performed the care.

The same logic applies to the care of grandchildren (at least while they are young). This interferes with the “rational” calculation demanded by tit-for-tat, since the care recipient is not responsible for the non-reciprocation. However unfair the situation, most women will be loathe to hurt someone for whom they have been caring; they become “prisoners of love” (Folbre 2001, 40). This invites exploitation rather than reciprocity.

The dilemma can be seen clearly in the case of Oksana (b. 1955), a mother who had given up a job at the most prestigious enterprise in Syktyvkar in order to care for her granddaughter. Oksana was frustrated by her daughter’s inability to recognize her reliance on maternal help, and expressed her desire to end the one-way flow. But Oksana’s attempted “exit” was undermined by her love for her granddaughter, as the interviewer reveals in her joking response:

Oksana: I don’t help her [the daughter] in order to get her to understand everything. So that she feels the difficulty, how hard it is to earn money. So that she learns the value of money. I don’t help her, and I am not going to help her.

Interviewer: Yeh, right, you don’t help her. You want to sell your flat to buy her somewhere to live. Now she takes the rent [from your property] and rents somewhere for herself. You’re preparing a room for your granddaughter, so she’s got somewhere to study. It’s completely obvious that you’re going to pay for the computer. That’s what you call not helping?

Oksana: She just doesn’t see it.

So, despite her frustration, Oksana continues to give.

Even in less complex situations, “rationality” is unlikely to be the dominant influence on behavior. To return to Galya: she perceived her work as the unavoidable duty of a mother of adult children, and to turn her back on such a burden was, to use Bourdieu’s term, “unthinkable.” Even with the benefit of hindsight, she would do the same again: “All the same I wouldn’t abandon them then. For me the family, grandchildren, children are the most important.” Women’s gifts of labor, especially those involving care, are particularly likely to involve a sense of obligation and emotional entanglement, which rules out the use of tit-for-tat.

A final protective mechanism is the censure of society in the face of violation of the norm of reciprocity. But this does not function effectively in relation to women’s gifts of labor. First, as has been argued, such labor is rendered invisible by its taken-for-grantedness. If a gift is not recognized, then non-reciprocity is also concealed. Moreover, not only is women’s domestic and caring labor taken for granted, it is perceived as an obligation. Thus, for example, a Russian woman who refused to care for an elderly person for whom she was deemed responsible would attract criticism, while those who fail to thank women for such work pass unnoticed. In this case, gender norms trump the norm of reciprocity, and, indeed, serve to undermine it.

It is important to mention alternative explanations for the pattern of non-reciprocity we found. First, the onerous nature of women’s gifts may have made them more likely to complain of non-reciprocity than men whose gifts were less demanding. But our data do not suggest there is a concealed problem of non-reciprocation in relation to men’s unpaid help. In seven out of 13 cases we know that reciprocation occurred. In the six cases in which information about reciprocation is missing, the men’s comments did not suggest that they felt unappreciated.

Second, it is notable that most cases of non-reciprocity occur in maternal relationships. It could be objected that mothers are a special case. To the contrary, we argue that the widespread equation of maternity (and its perceived obligations) with femininity informs the taken-for-grantedness of women's unpaid labor more generally. Thus, mothers exemplify (perhaps in an exaggerated form) what we propose are wider processes. As there were few paternal gifts of labor in our data, it is hard to compare mothers and fathers. Our preliminary analysis of other forms of help, such as financial assistance, did not suggest that fathers were vulnerable to non-reciprocation, but further research is needed on this issue.

As for the sustainability of gender unequal exchange, it is possible that the increasing penetration of market relations in Russia will undermine the gender norms we have discussed. It has now become possible to purchase the kinds of task assistance women typically provide (Zdravomyslova 2009), which questions the norm that women should supply it *gratis*. Meanwhile, individual fulfillment is increasingly seen as a legitimate aspiration (Utrata 2011). Nevertheless, our data suggest that rebellion against the obligation to care is far from a dominant tendency. It may grow with the increasing visibility of hired carers and domestic workers, but the experience of the U.S. and Europe suggests that women are likely to continue doing the majority of unpaid care for some time to come.

CONCLUSION

Women in our sample expended greater time and effort on unpaid task assistance than men, but they are paradoxically at greater risk of non-reciprocation. To explain this, we used our qualitative data to generalize to a theoretical proposition that we believe needs further investigation. Focusing on gifts of labor, we have shown that, as a socially embedded phenomenon, reciprocity cannot be considered in isolation from gender norms. This insight

has implications for research employing reciprocity as a framework, and for debates in relation to issues such as carework and family relations.

We define four stages in the gift cycle at which reciprocity is gendered. First, we argue that giving is central to social and gender identity. Through their giving, men and women “do gender” and “gendered age,” and thus certain forms of giving may be perceived as obligations rather than gifts. When this occurs, the gift becomes invisible, blocking recognition, the second stage in the gift cycle. Gender or age-related obligations also naturalize inequality between givers and recipients of gifts. Even when a gift has been recognized, reciprocation, the third stage of the gift cycle, will depend on a gendered process of valuation. The fourth stage is the reaction to (non)reciprocation. This will be determined in part by the motivation for giving: When giving is a gendered obligation, a giver may not be deterred by a lack of reciprocation. Tit-for-tat will also be limited in caring relations where this might hurt the care recipient. Finally, “community policing” will not occur in cases where gender norms undermine the norm of reciprocity.

Viewed through the lens of reciprocity, the behavior of women in our sample makes no sense: They continued to give after the “rule” of reciprocity was violated. But when understood in the context of wider social and gender norms, the puzzle is solved. As Bourdieu insists, reciprocity must be understood as embedded in “the social and economic conditions in which historical agents are produced and reproduced, endowed (by their upbringing) with durable dispositions that make them able and inclined to enter into exchanges, equal or unequal” (Bourdieu 2000, 200). Although he is not referring to gender, the fit is clear. Within a wider gender division of labor, women develop dispositions to care for others, and to experience others’ needs as an “invisible injunction” demanding a response. This primes them to enter and tolerate unequal exchanges, since the very notion of exchange

is obscured by the conception of feminine duty. “Altruism” is a potential label for such behavior, but this only naturalizes a gendered expectation.

We do not consider the gendered risk of non-reciprocation we have identified to be specific to Russia. Rather, we judge it likely to be present in societies where the taken-for-granted assumption is that caring and domestic roles are “women’s work,” and dominant gender status beliefs disfavor women. Non-reciprocation of women’s gifts should decrease as the gender division of labor is problematized.

We found that women offering gifts of labor were vulnerable to non-reciprocation. But, as we have noted, a key limitation of our study is that we did not specifically ask about reciprocation of every gift. The patterns in our data are clear, but our knowledge of the extent of non-reciprocation is imprecise. Meanwhile, further research is required regarding men and women’s vulnerability to non-reciprocation in other areas.

Our qualitative data revealed gender differences in the extent of help provided, which, as authors of quantitative studies acknowledge, can be obscured in surveys (Kahn, McGill and Bianchi 2011, 90). In our data, some men claimed participation in caring labor largely provided by women, while women sometimes downplayed their contributions, as revealed when the interviewer challenged Oksana’s claim that she had ceased helping her daughter. This underlines the need for carefully designed research on this issue.

Reciprocity is gendered. In some cases gender norms may support reciprocity, but in others they can undermine it. This explains the paradox of non-reciprocation in relation to women’s onerous unpaid work. Norms of fairness may be “robust” (Folbre 2001, 30), but gender beliefs possess “a devilish resilience” (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 523). When the two conflict, our analysis suggests that gender dominates.

NOTES

1. The original research was funded by INTAS grant 97-20280 and a top-up grant from Sticerd. The 2010 interviews were funded by the LSE Research Committee Seed Fund.

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Table 1: Unpaid Task Assistance Provided by Men

Respondent (Age at last interview)	Helped	Time commitment	Tired by helping?	Reciprocity?
Boris, Moscow, academic botanist (49)	Students, workplace-based unpaid work	Episodic	No	–
Egor, Moscow, academic (55)	Colleagues, workplace-based unpaid work	Episodic	No	Yes, workplace-based unpaid work
Ivan, Moscow, fitter (65)	Daughter, childcare	Regular, shared with wife	No	–
Yuri, Moscow, electrical mechanic (53)	Male friend 1, manual work	Episodic	No	Yes, manual work
	Male friend 2, manual work	Episodic	No	Yes, manual work

Anatoli, Syktyvkar, medically retired construction worker (47)	Son, childcare	Regular, shared with wife	No	Yes, decorating
Aleksei, Syktyvkar, driver (51)	Father, yardwork	Episodic	No	–
Nikolai, Syktyvkar janitor (53)	Daughter, childcare	Episodic, shared with wife	No	–
Vyacheslav, Syktyvkar, unemployed electrician (46)	Male friend, workplace-based unpaid work	Regular	No	Yes, various kinds of unpaid work
	Female relative, gardening	Episodic	No	–
Pavel, Syktyvkar, electrician (46)	Mother, yardwork	Episodic	No	–
Aleksandr, Syktyvkar, police officer (35)	Family, gardening	Episodic	No	Yes, gardening
	Friends, gardening	Episodic	No	Yes, gardening

Table 2: Unpaid Task Assistance Provided by Women

Respondent (Age at last interview)	Helped	Time commitment (SOP = significant opportunity cost)	Tired by helping?	Reciprocity?
Veronika, Moscow, editor (65)	Colleagues: hospital visits, organizing cultural outings	Regular	No	Yes, organizing outings rotates
Irina, Moscow, academic biochemist (50)	Sister: childcare; unspecified home help for sister's mother-in-law	Episodic	No	Yes, financial and emotional support
Natalya, Moscow, academic microbiologist (42)	Colleagues: workplace-based unpaid work	Episodic	No	-
Tanya, Moscow, retired fitter (59)	Daughter: childcare	Regular, SOP	Yes	No
	Mother: housework	Regular	No	-
Nina, Moscow, technical inspector (48)	Daughter: childcare	Regular, SOP	No	Yes, financial and emotional support
	Mother: gardening	Episodic	No	-

Daria, Moscow, nurse (59)	Daughter: childcare, cooking, shopping, knitting, sewing	Regular	No	No
Nadia, Samara, retired accountant (64)	Daughter 1: childcare, errands, conserving vegetables	Regular, SOP	Yes	No
	Daughter 2: childcare, conserving vegetables	Regular, SOP	Yes	No
Aleksandra, Samara, retired accountant (56)	Uncle, housework	Episodic	No	–
Galina, Samara, retired laboratory engineer (65)	Son: childcare; eldercare for son's grandmothers-in-law	Regular, SOP	Yes	No
Lyuda, Samara, furnace operator (50)	Husband: eldercare for his mother	Regular	Yes	No
Alla, Moscow, shop assistant (53)	Mother: housework	Episodic	No	–
	Sister: childcare	Episodic	No	–

Zoya, Samara, entrepreneur (50)	Son: childcare	Regular	No	No, but recognition
Lyuba, Samara, shop assistant (54)	Daughter: childcare	Regular	Yes	No
	Mother: gardening	Episodic	No	Yes, financial help
Marina, Syktyvkar, shop assistant (38)	Mother: housework	Regular	No	Yes, unspecified help and emotional support
	Ex-mother-in-law: gardening	Episodic	No	Yes, unspecified help
Polina, Syktyvkar, retired teacher (69)	Daughter: childcare	Regular	No	–
Tamara, Syktyvkar, hospital orderly (46)	Mother: housework	Regular	No	–
	Sister: decorating and gardening	Episodic	No	Yes, gardening and financial support
Maria, Syktyvkar, cook (50)	Daughter: childcare	Episodic	No	–
Valentina, Syktyvkar,	Aunts: cooking, organizing parties	Episodic	No.	Yes, hosting her mother,

construction engineer (54)				and small presents
	Friends: Housework	Episodic	No	–
Tanya, Syktyvkar, retired salesperson (72)	Daughter: childcare	Episodic	No	–
Olga, Syktyvkar, retired janitor (58)	Son: gardening	Episodic	No	No
Vera, Syktyvkar, retired cleaner (69)	Daughter: childcare	Regular	Yes	Yes, rides from work and to <i>dacha</i> ; products
	Son: childcare	Regular		–
Oksana, Syktyvkar, hospital administrator (55)	Daughter: childcare	Regular, SOP	Yes	No