

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Reciprocity and the Art of Behavioural Public Policy

By Adam Oliver. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 208 pp.

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(Received 25 July 2023; accepted 25 July 2023)

Neither selfish nor selfless, but we are, in fact, reciprocal! From religion to public policy, reciprocity has constantly been a fundamental social norm within human societies, rooted in the evolution of the animal kingdom, including humankind. Adam Oliver's book is a novel combination of reciprocity and public policy. Oliver's book attempts to utilise the rich body of literature on reciprocity to inform public policy and to design appropriate interventions within the public environment. The book makes an effort to present a novel approach that questions the dubious choice between human beings' pure altruistic or selfish, egoistic intentions. He provides insight into 'giving-and-taking-based generalisations' of human behaviour. Oliver examines the development of reciprocity and its various types and drivers by referencing several academic fields. The book uses examples from various experiments and games on which economists and psychologists have recently worked together to recognise reciprocity as a heavily contextualised concept. Despite being a powerful driver of human behaviour, reciprocity has strangely been somewhat overlooked in behavioural public policy design. Such disregard may be due to the common dichotomisation of pure altruism vs selfishness and the maximisation of one's payoffs.

'Don't be an egoist; be a reciprocator!' (p. 177) is Oliver's concluding statement. It is also the cornerstone of the book's principal proposal. Reciprocity, as a fundamental social norm, has intrigued human societies since time immemorial. 'Reciprocity and the Art of Behavioural Public Policy' presents a fresh perspective by combining reciprocity with the realm of public policy. The book explores the rich literature on reciprocity and its potential applications in designing effective interventions within the public sphere. Oliver makes a compelling case for recognising the central role of reciprocity and harnessing it to inform public policy. He draws from diverse fields like anthropology, psychology and economics to demonstrate that reciprocity largely drives human behaviour rather than pure selfishness or altruism. This perspective provides a refreshing counterpoint to the view of humans as purely self-interested rational actors.

Reciprocity is neither purely selfless nor selfish. It is a notion that permeates every aspect of human behaviour. Oliver highlights the development of reciprocity and its various types and drivers, drawing on a variety of fields such as anthropology, zoology and economics. He emphasises that the concept of reciprocity is highly context-dependent. Namely, the particular context affects how people behave. Understanding the complexity of reciprocity allows policymakers to design interventions that harness their potential while avoiding negative consequences. By emphasising the crucial role of reciprocity across disciplines, Oliver offers a new perspective on human behaviour and public policy in his insightful book. He successfully refutes the idea that people are purely selfish, utility-maximizing actors. Oliver shows how reciprocity – the propensity to respond to others' actions with equal treatment – is deeply ingrained in both human societies and the animal kingdom by drawing on a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, economics, psychology and zoology.

Oliver contends that various forms of reciprocity are manifested in different ways depending on context. Direct reciprocity entails trades between particular people. In contrast, indirect reciprocity appears in larger groups, where people's reputations influence whether they cooperate. Oliver explains how research shows that people willingly cooperate and punish non-cooperators, even at their own expense, showing that reciprocity and fairness matter more than purely self-interest. The book demonstrates the significance of reciprocity within human societies and communities. Oliver delves into the behaviours of tribal communities, revealing that reciprocal tendencies are present across cultures and time. By examining the instinctive reciprocity observed in animals and children, the author emphasises the evolutionary roots of reciprocal behaviour. Additionally, Oliver questions the dichotomy between altruism and egoism, highlighting evidence that humans are motivated to act cooperatively, fairly and reciprocally.

Tracing reciprocity across evolution, Oliver highlights that even infants and animals exhibit attitudinal reciprocity and a sense of fairness. He argues convincingly that reciprocity arose as an 'enlightened self-interest' that allowed species to reap the benefits of cooperation and social bonding. As an environmental researcher, I wonder if conservation policies designed to tap into reciprocal motivations between humans and nature could prove fruitful. There is anthropological evidence of indigenous communities seeing themselves as stewards of the land, and reciprocity could be a behavioural tool to rekindle this relationship.

Oliver provides a fresh perspective on human behaviour and public policy by emphasising the fundamental role of reciprocity. He contrasts with traditional economic views of humans as selfish utility maximisers. Thinkers like Gary Becker portrayed people as rationally pursuing self-interest. Oliver upends this notion by drawing on diverse fields to demonstrate the centrality of reciprocity across societies. His interdisciplinary approach combining economics, psychology, anthropology and zoology differs from narrower perspectives. Emphasising the significance of context in eliciting direct, indirect or negative reciprocity, Oliver contrasts with authors like Richard Thaler, who focus on individual cognitive biases rather than situational factors. Oliver also surfaces unanswered questions around policy design to leverage positive forms of reciprocity and curb harmful kinds. How can governance structures limit inequality and build social cohesion to nurture cooperation? More examples

of successful and failed applications of reciprocity principles could enlighten real-world complexities. Tracing reciprocity's evolutionary roots, Oliver argues it arose as 'enlightened self-interest' enabling cooperation and bonding. This contrasts with E.O. Wilson's view of reciprocity as genetic altruism. Oliver does not delve into neuroscience findings on brain circuitry underlying reciprocity and fairness, which requires further exploration. I wonder if conservation policies could tap into reciprocal motivations between humans and nature. Could reciprocity help rekindle indigenous communities' stewardship of the land? The book makes a robust case for reciprocity underlying markets, contrary to notions of capitalism relying on selfishness. However, he surfaces key unanswered questions around designing policies and spaces fostering reciprocity in an age of technology and social media. As algorithms mediate interactions, how can we cultivate reciprocity online? Oliver does not analyse tech's potential to disrupt reciprocity and fuel polarisation. This technological dimension is a critical frontier requiring scholars' attention.

A key strength of Oliver's book is demonstrating that reciprocity underlies social exchange and markets, countering the notion that capitalist systems rely solely on selfishness. However, he rightly points out that reciprocity has a dark side if not properly nurtured. Inequalities, lack of shared identity or language, and power imbalance can breed inferiority, resentment or retaliation instead of cooperation. Oliver provides policy lessons for how contexts that reduce inequality and promote small groups and inclusive institutions can allow reciprocity to flourish. But he does not delve into enough detail on the tools available or political hurdles that may hinder implementation. More examples of reciprocity principles successfully (or unsuccessfully) applied would have illuminated real-world complexities.

Oliver lays out a coherent blueprint for incorporating reciprocity into policy mechanisms like incentives. But today's world faces new forces shaping social contexts and connections. Oliver does not analyse how technology and social media transform relationships in ways that may disrupt reciprocity. As bots and algorithms mediate more interactions, understanding how to cultivate reciprocity online to counter polarisation will be vital. This is one key frontier Oliver does not address and analysing tech's reciprocity impact could enlighten regulation.

While Oliver's work focuses primarily on reciprocity in the context of public policy, it is worthwhile to consider other realms where reciprocity plays a crucial role. For example, within the realm of food systems and environmental sustainability, reciprocity can be observed in practices such as community-supported agriculture, where farmers and consumers establish reciprocal relationships based on shared responsibilities and benefits. Exploring such examples from diverse fields can further enrich the understanding of reciprocity and its potential applications. Oliver could have expanded on the implications of these nuances for policy design. Negative reciprocity can fuel revenge cycles, so policies addressing antisocial behaviour should avoid triggering retaliation. Oliver also does not analyse crowdsourcing, online communities and other technology-mediated groups where indirect reciprocity enables collective action.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge potential challenges and critique the ideas presented in the book. Although Oliver proposes that reciprocity should inform public policy design, there may be instances where the implementation of

reciprocity-based policies could lead to unintended consequences or reinforce existing inequalities. Careful consideration of the cultural and contextual factors is necessary to ensure that reciprocity is harnessed ethically and effectively.

Looking ahead, the following significant issues with reciprocity could revolve around exploring the intersectionality of reciprocity with other social norms and values. How does reciprocity interact with notions of fairness, trust and social justice? Additionally, further research could delve into the potential of reciprocity as a catalyst for transformative change, such as addressing systemic inequalities or promoting sustainable practices.

In terms of style and structure, the book follows an easy-to-follow and coherent structure, ultimately enabling the reader to conveniently follow the chapters in the harmonious order in which they are structured. Oliver adequately and convincingly combines various theories with extensive empirical evidence supporting his arguments. However, the author's proposal might be conceptually stretched because he uses many different definitions of reciprocity (indirect reciprocity, altruistic reciprocity, etc.), making the term vague. Inevitably, it also risks making a tautological argument because, although reciprocity is the desired result, a different term and idea (negative reciprocity) is suggested as a means of getting there.

The dichotomy between altruism and egoism has long been discussed. Furthermore, many policy-related issues associated with the rational choice theory (Buskens, 2015) and the maximisation concept are much debated in various disciplines of social sciences. Having said that, Adam Oliver's proposal is novel in that it takes a less conventional approach to a hotly debated topic. In addition to introducing reciprocity as a fundamental social norm that can be used to design public policies, he also provides encouraging evidence that points to a fresh approach to resolving complex, long-discussed issues.

Following Oliver's book, it is possible to outline some new future research directions for reciprocity scholars including how governance structures and institutions can be designed to reduce inequality and nurture positive forms of reciprocity. Oliver argues that promoting social contexts that promote fairness and egalitarianism is crucial, but more examples of successful policy applications are needed. In addition, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the widespread use of social media, researchers need to examine how relationships and cooperation are impacted by algorithms and online platforms, as well as whether or not digital norms encourage or discourage reciprocity. Future research should look into the effects of technology, AI and social media on reciprocity because it is crucial to understand the dynamics of reciprocity in digital spaces.

Another attractive pathway for future scholars is to explore whether conservation policies tapping into reciprocal motivations between humans and nature can provide new avenues for sustainability. Oliver does not address the reciprocity between people and the environment, a specific focus on the environment could help reinvigorate indigenous communities' stewardship of the land in certain parts of the world. Additionally, there are untapped opportunities at group and network levels, as the book merely focuses on individual reciprocity. Future research can illuminate how organisational policies can harness indirect reciprocity and reputation effects to strengthen teams and communities. Finally, it is worth asking what the most effective

approaches are for including reciprocity in incentive programmes and performance management should also be considered. Oliver offers broad guidelines, but actual-world examples would help to put his policy recommendations to the test. The question of whether reciprocity can lead to a different, more equitable and sustainable economic system that can be incorporated into human societies is one that needs to be answered by researchers in the future.

Overall, Oliver's book is successful in demonstrating the value of reciprocity as a behavioural strategy for policymakers. He offers a multidisciplinary framework that illustrates the origins and pervasiveness of reciprocity in human societies. He provides novel suggestions for how to use policy to foster motivations for cooperation and the common good. Designing civic institutions and spaces that encourage fair environments and encourage reciprocity raises important questions. The book successfully positions reciprocity as a persuasive behavioural strategy for those considering enhancing public policy interventions. He contrasts conventional notions of what drives people's behaviour as they relate to economics and government. Oliver provides cross-disciplinary proof of the importance of reciprocity and its origins in evolution. The promotion of reciprocity in the digital age and the conversion of knowledge into innovations in governance continue to be major issues. Oliver, however, offers a helpful conceptual framework for examining how human behaviour, culture and policy interact. Nevertheless, the book offers a compelling exploration of the concept of reciprocity and its application in behavioural public policy.

Oliver has laid the groundwork for scholars to translate reciprocity into innovations in governance and interventions that are appropriate for 21st-century realities. This calls for interdisciplinary strategies spanning organisations, the environment, culture and technology. We can improve our comprehension of reciprocity's role in various domains and enhance its potential as a catalyst for beneficial societal change by elaborating on the concept, discussing additional examples and taking potential obstacles and future directions into consideration.

Reference

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