

# Give and Take, the applied psychology of reciprocity - Part 1

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**I**t is becoming more and more unmistakable; much more by changing our behaviour than by (hoping for) new technology, we must enter into a more sustainable relationship with our (immediate) environment. This makes applied psychology of the utmost importance. In the coming weeks, we will look at some basic psychological mechanisms from an applied psychological perspective. To begin with, the psychology of give and take, which is contradictory in its application, like many basic psychological mechanisms: sometimes emphasized, sometimes denied. What's up with that?

As humans, we are equipped with a psychological reciprocity mechanism that constantly judges whether give and take in the social group we belong to is in balance (reciprocal altruism: favour others at their own expense, because it is later repaid). As we know from many sayings and expressions, social behaviour is based on reciprocity: Do not do unto others what you don't want others to do unto you, level playing field for everyone, there should be some give and take from both sides. Reward and appreciation should be divided equally, except in special circumstances (birthdays) or special merits (one has put in more effort than the others). In those cases, a unilateral or unequal pay can be considered fair (meritocracy). Give and take are still in balance. However, if a person receives more than the balance can provide, it either generates resistance and consequent rebalancing (social equality), or acceptance of dominant "rulers" and thus acceptance of hierarchy.

We are all (un)consciously able to evaluate ourselves and members of our group in terms of the balance of give and take. Sometimes we consciously apply this ability. For example, if a shopkeeper offers us a cup of coffee, (s)he tries to slightly skew the balance between giving and taking, in the hope that "guilt" will motivate us to (unconsciously) restore the balance by "paying" back (to buy something). The art of selling is to give attentively, but not disproportionately, because then the customer literally feels bought and sold. Also, giving should not be too institutionalized, because acquired "rights" (things taken for granted) actually end up working against the giver. An employer who doesn't give a Christmas basket risks damaging the relationship with the employees with this apparent zero option. Giving became the standard, not giving is a violation of a hidden right. So, if you do it right, giving allows you to create debt induction, a brief imbalance in the psychology of give and take, where the recipient is motivated to restore the balance and thus proceed to the desired behaviour (buying, continuing to work for the employer, etc.).

On the other hand, sometimes it is necessary to hide inequalities in give and take, especially in a complex hierarchical society. In such system, it is impossible to do equal justice to every person. Stories ensure that imbalances in, for example, physical and mental give and take do not lead to social outrage. An example of such a narrative: For example, a cleaner does something that everyone can do without (much) training and therefore earns less than someone who has had to study for a long time, such as a doctor, to do something that not everyone can do and that is seen as important and valuable. Job evaluation systems are also narratives. The problem, however, is that in a society that is almost continuously confronted with new disruptive technology and other threats (such as wars and pandemics), the shelf life of such stories is getting shorter and shorter. This may lead to social turmoil. Perhaps there is now more need for good cleaners than for coaches and consultants. Why would the life and effort of a cleaner be worth less than that of an academic?

The applied psychological basis of give and take is thus used both visibly (to motivate people to behave), and to obscure it (to "justify" inequality in complex hierarchies). Next week we will discuss its application in the digital world.

*This is the first of a series of four articles on psychological foundations from an applied psychological perspective.*