Reciprocity and social responsibility: a case study of Dobrovnik

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Abstract

Solidarity and reciprocity are well researched and understood phenomena in remote and rural areas where people rely on direct interpersonal cooperation in order to survive. In these contexts, traditionally conceptualized social responsibility plays a crucial role. This study draws from ethnographic research in the village of Dobrovnik, Slovenia, as a part of the project *Inform – closing the gap between formal and informal institutions in the Balkans*. The findings show that there are three different forms of reciprocity active among research participants: generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and negative reciprocity. Each type of reciprocity comes with entirely different sets of motivations, mechanisms of function and eventual results, and each is in a unique relationship with established systems of social responsibility of the village as a social organism.

Key words: Dobrovnik, formal and informal institutions, ethnography, social responsibility, *Inform – closing the gap between formal and informal institutions in the Balkans*
Introduction

The village of Dobrovnik is located in North-eastern part of Slovenia. As a municipality it was established in 1998, it covers 31.1 km² and has 1277 inhabitants (2016) from which there were 610 male and 667 female, with average age of 38.2 years (stat.si). There are 467 family living in 367 households in Dobrovnik. There are 644 people actively involved in labour market (mostly industry, service and agriculture) and 143 are registered as unemployed. The rest are registered mostly as pensioners or students or have no legal status (e.g. some members of Roma).

With regards to the cultural aspect Dobrovnik presents a setting with two major social groups, Hungarian majority and Slovenian minority and it is perceived as the biggest Hungarian settlement in Slovenia. However, those two groups do not live separately, but rather are merged. Formally speaking, it is a bi-lingual village, with bi-lingual school, municipal offices and public signs, but apart from this formal segregation, there is no clear distinction between the two social groups. In fact, people from Dobrovnik largely perceive themselves as Slovenians although their Hungarian often sounds better than Slovenian. Several Roma households and people from former Yugoslav countries living in the village add to the cultural amalgamate that makes Dobrovnik a culturally vivid and socially dynamic setting.

Method

This study draws from ethnographic research in the village of Dobrovnik, Slovenia, as a part of the project Inform – closing the gap between formal and informal institutions in the Balkans. Dobrovnik was chosen for ethnographic study for several reasons. Firstly, Dobrovnik is culturally, socially and economically vivid, diverse and dynamic village, obviously interesting, but equally obviously under-researched and even misunderstood. Although there are several minor studies of different aspects of the village life, mostly history and folklore, there are no studies focusing on formal and informal networks or studies focusing on Dobrovnik as an integrated social system. Secondly, Dobrovnik as a social system was accessible for our ethnographic research - a broad network of social connections existed for researcher prior to our research project, enabling the start of ethnographic work directly and with relatively short introductory period. And thirdly, contacts with majority of key players in both formal and informal networks already existed and it did not take much for ethnographer to establish contacts, discover main platforms of relationships and enter these particular networks. Being a member of one of the key families in Dobrovnik by marriage, researcher was able to take part in almost all key activities in the village, which is the basis for ethnographic work, in particular for the method of participant observation. Three main methods employed during our fieldwork were participant observation, interview and visual notes.

As initial contact a non-random sample of 18 people, mostly researchers relatives and friends, from Dobrovnik was chosen and researched. Participants were approached directly and openly and the design, focus and expected outputs of the study were explained. After acquiring their verbal consent for participation, initial data was collected (personal cards with name, gender, age, location) and snowball sampling was applied in order to broaden the network of potential study participants. In total 33 people directly participated in our ethnographic of Dobrovnik.
Formal vs. informal

Ever since Slovenia joined EU in 2004 our respondents report increase in formalization influencing different aspects of their day-to-day lives:

“/…/everything is different now, somewhat harder, more difficult. In Yugoslavia and even after its collapse it was easier. I remember the days when my grandfather, father and me went to Lendava (neighbouring town), to sell a bull. There were trains waiting, loading cattle for Bosnia. They bought everything and the price was great… you could get a used tractor-trailer for the money of 1 middle size bull. Nowadays I can maybe get new tires. /…/ Today, everything is regulated by law and inspectors. Everything is standardized, your stable, feed you are feeding, breed you’re keeping, milk you’re selling… Everything! And it does not make your life easier.

How’s that? What do you mean? (A.N., interviewer)

Everything is harder and more expensive. There’s ton of papers just for selling a bull or milk, ton of regulations you have to follow and inspectors, breathing down your neck… and it all influences price of meat and milk. Prices are so low… sometimes I think it’s not worth it anymore! And meat and milk is just one of many areas!”

(P., a member of Family B)

Few years back, before times of strict regulation and formalization, the situation used to be somewhat different:

“It is not entirely true, that in Yugoslavia or before EU people could do anything… It wasn’t like that. There were regulations but it was easier to get around them! Let’s take cattle for example. Home slaughter has been prohibited for a long time, but people somehow managed to slaughter cattle at home. It went like this: I had a friend who was very close friend with a local vet. So, when he felt like killing a small bull, he called his friend (veterinarian) and he made paper conform with official regulations – he wrote a report that calf had an accident or it was sick and that force slaughter was necessary. He (veterinarian) also called his own friend, who was locally responsible for picking up dead animals and bringing them for cremation to “pick up the carcass”. Of course all he picked up was 5 kilos of top-quality beef as a gift for his service. So, everything was OK on papers, people were happy, living their lives… and they even made new friends by bending those rules. Ha, ha… after several rounds like that, my friend became really good friend with that carcase-guy. /…/ After a while those people (regulators) in Ljubljana noticed it… of course, it was widespread, and it is not possible anymore.”

(R., a member of Family S)

“Well, today it is harder, but not impossible! I know this guy from Strehovci (a neighbouring village). He breeds mostly pigs but he also owns several cows. So, once one of his cows was calving and had 2 calves. My friend registered just one at the vet-station, although he was keeping both of them at home. When vet announced a visit to his farm, he quickly moved unregistered calf somewhere else… sometimes to his neighbour, sometimes to his relatives, and when it was big enough, they slaughtered it at home. And that was it…”

(T., a member of Family A)

“Events like that are mostly a thing of the past. I'm not saying it's not happening, I'm just saying it's rare, not very common…

Ok, but if not like that, how are things done today? (A.N., interviewer)
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People sell their calves, bulls and cows officially and buy their beef in the shop. Nobody butchers at home, it's too much of a trouble. It's easier and cheaper to buy meat. /.../

/.../ Once we were really forced to bend formal rules. We didn't break them… not directly… /.../ what happened? You know, you were there. Do you remember 2 years back, when I asked you to come with your trailer to bring a dead calf to the slaughterhouse? Well, one of our calves broke its front leg in the stable. I called my friend who is a vet and he came to take a look. After his examination, he told me that the calf is suffering and it will probably never get well. So, it was either spending money for vet and medicine and hoping for the best or killing it straight away. We decided to kill it at home. We took carcase to the slaughterhouse to be processed and we kept the meat. Well, we kept some of the meat for ourselves and we sold the rest.«

(P., a member of Family B)

By self-report, in addition to meat production formalization also had strongest impact on areas of phytopharmacy and use of machinery. Additional tension caused by formalization could also be observed with regards to the water supply:

“… look, for generations everybody in the village had their own well and supplied their farm independently. Now EU regulation forced us to build and pay for village water system and now they tax our wells… Why? They don’t want us to be independent!”

(R., a member of Family A)

Social networks of cooperation and reciprocity

Mutual support and cooperation is the key for survival in rural areas. There are several networks of intense support and cooperation existing within Dobrovnik. Both formal and informal cooperation is dictated largely by the basic survival strategy of the households, meaning that for instance households that based their activities in agriculture gravitate towards other households with similar orientation. In this respect, Dobrovnik is comprised of several focal points in social interactions among which agriculture, construction and tourism dominate the field. In the area of agriculture, there are four families in Dobrovnik, formalized as small or mid-size farm. Although there are other farming households in Dobrovnik these four are the major players in the region. Each of these four families has a social network of cooperation that includes immediate family members, friends and relatives and hired help (see Picture 1).
By being directly included into family activities, family members are prime actors within these networks who are, apart from doing the main work at the farm, also to supplement the family budget with additional activities:

»Our household lives exclusively on farming. Size wise we are somewhere between small and midsize farm. Let's say a big small farm! We are mostly into cattle and milk production, but we also have fields, forest and a vineyard. According to this, everybody (family member) gets an assignment (division of labour). The most goes to me, since my father is very old. My task is to do everything around the cattle, cows and bulls… first thing in the morning I have to clean animal facilities… barn, standstills… then I feed them, milk them and bring milk to our collector. I also work there, as a milk collector,… every morning and evening…It's not a lot of money, but it helps. To help me along… for cigarettes and beer, ha, ha… Before that (milk collecting) I was working additionally as mortician, digging graves, carrying coffins… «

(P., a member of Family B)

These family members are also expected to build spin-off social networks when additional help is needed:

»Of course then there are times and situations when you cannot do everything by yourself. In these situations, since it is expected from me to get a job done, I have to find friends or family members to come and help me out. This usually happens when we're working in forest (falling trees), preparing hay and harvesting. These are activities when we usually need outside help, in particular the harvest. This is the toughest…. otherwise we can manage it by ourselves.«

»/…/ I usually call my friends to come to help me out. During the harvest I call those who have tractors. To do the harvest you need at least 3 or 4 tractors, and we have 2. My friends have small farms with 1 tractor and no big harvest, so they can come during these times to help me. I don't call other farmers (members of big farms), because they don't have time to help me out. They're doing their own harvest.«

(T., a member of Family A)

»We can count on our family members… we help each other a lot and that's very important… mostly by helping with work, not financially, because everybody is in a same boat (in need of fancies). Help is not a material thing, it's help… in the fields or
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vinyard. When I was unable to work, they came, and then we went to help them. But the crisis changed all that… people don't come to help as often as before. It's almost not possible to find somebody to help you nowadays.«

(P., a member of Family B)

»Without the others (people from the village) you cannot survive here. You simply need help. Preparing animal feed, foresting, vine picking, fieldwork an all the rest… Those are things you cannot do by yourself even if you have all the machinery. Most of the times our friends and family come to help us. In most cases they already know when to come and what's the mission (type of work) and they come by themselves. Sometime we call them… Of course, we go and help them, when that time comes. That's how these things go here.«

(V., a member of a Family S)

Hired help comes into play mostly when inside help (family, relatives and friends) is not sufficient:

»Who do I call (when in need of additional help)? Ghostbusters, of course, he, he… No, I'm just joking. Well, we call people that are available for this kind of help. Usually somebody that's unemployed or in need of money and able to work. Somebody from our or neighbouring village. Usually somebody (a friend, relative) knows somebody, or I just call people that are available. /…/ No, we don't hire people from Hungary (cheaper labour force)... only construction guys (2 firms based in the village) are doing that.«

(T., a member of a Family A)

It is important to note that all three categories of cooperation within the context of farming are based on reciprocity and therefore done exclusively informally. The only cooperation not based on reciprocity is with the local owner of the combine, who is hired in order to do the harvest:

»Yes, you pay all hired help, but this is all done… you know, person to person, no receipt… Well, it's no different with a combine. Everybody needs him, because it's a specialized piece of machinery. And of course you have to pay him. And we all would take receipt, if we'd get our money back (reimbursement of farming expenses) from the state.«

(T., a member of a Family A)

Reciprocity and the economy of favours and their relation to social responsibility

The importance of reciprocity in different social and cultural settings is widely researched and well recognized (i.e. Mauss, 1925, 2001; Malinowski, 1972; Sahlins, 1972; Bourdieu, 1979; Godelier, 1996; Ledeneva, 1998, and others). At the first glance there is a clear connection between social responsibility and reciprocity in particular, if we understand both as based on proactive societal objectives. However, deeper analysis of reciprocity depicts somewhat different situation.

In anthropology reciprocity is defined as:

»/…/ a principle of organizing an economy in which exchanges are between those who are (more or less) equals and tend strongly to balance out in the long run /…/«

(Barfield, 2009: 398)
According to Barfield’s broad definition all parties are relatively free to withdraw from the exchange and money and prices are not involved. While, generally speaking, the first part of this definition may to a certain degree refer to the social practise of exchange, this is clearly not the case for the second part of the definition. In-depth anthropological analysis of different modes of reciprocity clearly show lack of both, voluntary involvement and absence of money, but above all altruistic motives of participants in the process. In his study of affluent societies Sahlins (1972) analyses three different forms of reciprocity, namely generalized, balanced and negative reciprocity, each with its own motivation, form and function:

»**Generalized reciprocity** refers to transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned.«

(Sahlins, 1972: 193-194)

Sahlins conceptualizes these transactions as corresponding with Malinowski's "pure gift" and indicative of ethnographic formulas of "sharing," "hospitality," "free gift," "help," and "generosity." (Sahlins 1972: 194). At the same time, these are tied to the categories of "kinship dues," "chiefly dues," and "nOBLe". Generalized reciprocity could be observed for instance in acts of hospitality, where return favour is not expected or, if returned, then in a longer time span. These forms are typical in familial settings and relatively close spatial contexts.

»**Balanced reciprocity** refers to direct exchange. In precise balance, the reciprocation is the customary equivalent of the thing received and takes place without delay. Perfectly balanced reciprocity, the simultaneous exchange of the same types of goods to the same amounts, is not only conceivable but ethnographically attested in certain marital transactions (e.g., Reay, 1959, pp. 95 t), friendship compacts (Seligman, 1910, p. 70), and peace agreements (Hogbin, 1939, p. 79; Loeb, 1926, p. 204; Williamson, 1912, p. 183). "Balanced reciprocity" may be more loosely applied to transactions, which stipulate returns of commensurate worth or utility within a finite and narrow period. Much "gift-exchange," many "payments," much that goes under the ethnographic head of "trade" and plenty that is called "buying-selling" and involves "primitive money" belong in the genre of balanced reciprocity.«

(Sahlins, 1972: 194-195)

According to Sahlins, balanced reciprocity is a less personal form of reciprocity and is in its form and function more economic, for all parties are driven by individual social and economic interests. Exchange is based on the equal transactions (relative equality of value), within a shorter time span or even without any time delay. It is important to note that one-way transactions are not permitted within this context, meaning that if return exchange is not performed, social ties rip.

**Negative reciprocity** presents the unsociable extreme:

»Negative reciprocity" is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, the several forms of appropriation, transactions opened and conducted toward net utilitarian advantage.«

(Sahlins, 1972: 195)

Unsociable nature becomes more evident by tying this form of reciprocity with ethnographic terms of "haggling", "bartering," "gambling," "chicanery," "theft," and other varieties of
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seizure (Sahlins, 1972:195). Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal sort of exchange and is often perceived as socially destructive, for it is based on egoistic and exploitative motives of parties involved in exchange. This form of reciprocity is often associated with short time distance and great social and spatial distance.

Ethnographic research clearly shows all three different forms of reciprocity to be present in the community of Dobrovnik. The most common form of reciprocity is the generalized reciprocity:

“… of course we help each other. That’s how it works here. You know: small everyday things. Things nobody even counts. I already told you – you cannot live in the village otherwise.”

(P., a member of Family B)

This form of reciprocity is evident on all levels of social space (see picture 1), most commonly among family members (micro level) and people from the village (mezzo level). It is motivated by social responsible relationships with family members within a household.

Balanced reciprocity on the other hand could be observed in the examples of direct exchange, based on customary equivalent:

When you call your friend Robi to help you out in the fields, how do you pay him back? (Andrej Naterer, interviewer)

“Hmm… well, never with money. I usually go and help him, when he needs me or I give him a portion of our crops as a payment.”

How do you know how much to give him? (Andrej Naterer, interviewer)

“Well, I know approximately how much he charges per hour, I calculate how many hours he helped me, I transfer this to, let’s say corn or potatoes, and that’s it.”

How do you know it was enough? (Andrej Naterer, interviewer)

“Well, if he’s not complaining and he comes back to help, it was enough, he, he…”

(P., a member of Family B)

This form of reciprocity is evident on all levels of social space (see picture 1), most commonly among family members (micro level) and relatives and friends (mezzo level). It is parallel to the socially responsible relationships with family members, relatives and friends.

Negative reciprocity is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, the several forms of appropriation, transactions opened and conducted toward net utilitarian advantage. This form of reciprocity is extremely rare and occurs at the level of social interaction that is not directly tied to the familial or village social networks:

“… it isn’t happening very often. Once my friend sold his car very cheaply to somebody from another village. He practically gave the care for free. But he also knew that there was something wrong with the car and that the buyer will come back to his shop for repairs. And that’s when he’ll make his money.”

(P., a member of Family B)

This form of reciprocity is based on selfish interests and does not pursue proactive societal objectives. Therefore, negative reciprocity presents a direct opposite to social responsibility.

Conclusion

 Gathered ethnographic data shows high level of formal and informal relationships in the village of Dobrovnik and reciprocity and social responsibility as the main characteristic of
interpersonal relationships. Findings also show that three are different forms of reciprocity, namely generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and negative reciprocity; they are not directly parallel to the social responsibility. Each type of reciprocity comes with entirely different sets of motivations, mechanisms of function and eventual results, and each is also in a unique relationship with the established systems of social responsibility of the village as a social organism.

**Literature**


