Repaying favours: unravelling the nature of community exchange in an English locality

Colin C Williams, University of Sheffield
Repaying favours: unravelling the nature of community exchange in an English locality

Colin C. Williams

Abstract A recurring assumption in community development has been that when material support is provided on a one-to-one basis to the extended family or social and neighbourhood networks, such favours are repaid by offering help in return rather than money. Reporting a study of the community exchanges of 120 households in an English locality, however, the finding is that well over one-third of these were repaid using money. The outcome is a call for the community development literature to recognise and respond to the existence of this sphere of ‘paid favours’ which demonstrates how monetary transactions can be neither market-like nor profit-motivated.

Introduction

This paper examines community exchange, by which here meant is the provision of material help on a one-to-one basis within the extended family and social or neighbourhood networks (Williams and Windebank, 2000). This realm of community exchange is what Bulmer (1989, p. 253) calls an ‘intermediary structure’, which is positioned between on the one hand, domestic work (i.e. unpaid work conducted by household members for themselves or other members of their household) and on the other hand, the formal economy composed of private, public and third sector organisations charged with delivering goods and services on a paid, statutory or volunteer basis. Until now, and despite the recognition that community exchange sits between the unpaid and paid realms, the widespread belief has been that such kinship, friendship and neighbourly exchange are repaid by offering help in return rather than money. In other words, the recurring assumption has been that community exchanges do not involve monetary payment.
To do this, firstly, the literature will be reviewed that depicts community exchanges as unpaid and assumes that making monetary payments would shift such exchange from the sphere of reciprocity into the market realm. This will be then followed by a brief review of a small but growing stream of thought that has countered this assumption by starting to unpack the nature of monetary transactions in contemporary economies by revealing that not all are market-like and profit-motivated. The second section then reports the findings of face-to-face interviews with 120 households in an English locality about their community exchanges. Revealing that the exchanges with wider kin, acquaintances and neighbours are often repaid by offering money rather than help, and that this does not signify its shift into the realm of market-like profit-motivated exchange, the concluding section then calls for the community development literature to recognise the existence of a sphere of ‘paid favours’ and therefore monetary transactions that are neither market-like nor profit-motivated.

**Re-thinking the nature of community exchange**

Ever since the studies by Stack (1974) and Young and Wilmott (1975), the provision of one-to-one material help by wider kinship, friendship and neighbourly networks has been seen as an important component of household coping practices (e.g. Komter, 1996; Roschelle, 1997; Silburn *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, this idea that social relationships form a community development resource has been significantly popularised in recent decades by the burgeoning social capital literature (Coleman, 1988; Blau, 1994; Gittell and Vidal, 1998; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Unlike the earlier focus on the benefits households derive from close ties between people who already know each other (‘bonding’ social capital), this latter literature, following Granovetter (1973), has highlighted how the ‘strength of weak ties’ between people who do not know each other very well (‘bridging’ social capital’) is just as, if not more, important in developing effective coping mechanisms (Gittell and Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

Until now, however, a widespread assumption has been that such community exchanges do not involve monetary payments (e.g. Pahl, 1984; Renooy, 1990; Leonard, 1994; Komter, 1996; Gittell and Vidal, 1998). Indeed, the recurring narrative is that making monetary payments would shift such community exchange from the non-market sphere of reciprocity into the market realm. This is premised on the notion that monetary
transactions are always market-like and profit-motivated. Such a reading of monetised exchange not only prevails across an array of economic perspectives ranging from the neo-classical to the Marxian (e.g. Harvey, 1989; Sayer, 1997; Ciscel and Heath, 2001), but is reinforced by a ‘formalist’ anthropological tradition that views exchange mechanisms in contemporary societies as less ‘embedded’ than those in pre-industrial societies. From this perspective, the idea is that there has been a separation of the ‘economy’ from ‘culture’, resulting in exchanges in western societies being ‘thinner’, less loaded with social meaning and less symbolic than traditional exchanges (see Mauss, 1966).

Over the past decade or so, however, this conventional ‘thin’ reading of monetary exchange as always conducted under market-like relations for the motive of profit has been subjected to critical scrutiny by an array of analysts (e.g. Zelizer, 1994; Carrier, 1997; Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Carruthers and Babb, 2000; Crewe, 2000; Lee, 2000; Kovel, 2002; Williams, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006). As Crewe and Gregson (1998, p. 41) put it, ‘the major defect of such market-based models of exchange is simply that they do not convey the richness and messiness of the exchange experience’ in the advanced economies. The result is that the formalist anthropology approach and economistic discourses that adopt a ‘thin’ understanding of monetary exchange have begun to be challenged from a ‘substantivist’ anthropological position and institutional economics approach that adopts a ‘thicker’ understanding of monetary exchange in which transactions are viewed in terms of social norms and values and as being socially, culturally and geographically embedded (Davis, 1992; Zelizer, 1994; Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Lee, 2000; Bourdieu, 2001; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001; Comelieau, 2002).

These studies providing ‘thicker’ descriptions of the relations and motives involved in monetary exchange have until now focused upon what Leyshon, Lee and Williams (2003) term ‘alternative economic spaces’. They have investigated car boot sales (Crewe and Gregson, 1998), nearly new sales and classified advertisements (Clarke, 1998, 2000), second-hand and informal retail channels (Williams and Paddock, 2003), inflation-free local currency experiments such as Local Exchange and Trading Schemes (Lee, 1996; Williams, 1996; North, 1999; Williams et al., 2001), sweat-equity currencies such as time dollars (e.g. Boyle, 1999; Cahn, 2000; Seyfang and Smith, 2002) and small horticultural nurseries (Lee, 2000). In this paper, the intention is to make a further contribution to this small but growing literature by examining community exchange.
Examining the nature of community exchange in an English locality

In late 2002, research was conducted in the North Nottinghamshire area of Bassetlaw, England, to investigate the nature of community exchange. Situated between the coalfields of Derbyshire, agricultural Lincolnshire and industrial South Yorkshire, this area has a population of some 105,700, concentrated in the towns of Worksop and Retford, and is positioned very much in the middle of the UK table that ranks local government areas in terms of their level of multiple deprivation (DLTR, 2000). Indeed, perhaps the only distinguishing feature of this area is that it is the original home of the Pilgrim fathers who set sail for the Newfoundland of America in 1620.

Given how previous studies reveal that the level of deprivation has some influence on the extent and character of community exchange (e.g. Pahl, 1984; Renooy, 1990; Leonard, 1994; Jensen, Cornwell and Findeis, 1995; Kesteloot and Meert, 1999; Williams and Windebank, 2000), the decision was taken to select three wards for study with contrasting levels of multiple deprivation using the 2000 Index of Multiple Deprivation (DLTR, 2000) that ranks all wards in England and Wales. One of the most affluent wards within the locality was thus selected (i.e. Blyth ranked 6070 out of 8414 wards nationally), the middle-ranking ward (i.e. East Retford West ranked 2451) and one of the wards displaying the highest levels of multiple deprivation in Bassetlaw (i.e. Worksop South East ranked the 122nd most deprived ward in the UK). To ensure that the data collected within each ward was representative, a spatially stratified sampling method was then used (Kitchin and Tate, 2001). Every \( n \)th dwelling was targeted, depending on the number of households in the ward, in order to generate 40 interviews in each locality (120 in total). If there was no response, then after one call back, the \( n \)th+1 dwelling was surveyed and failing this, the \( n \)th – 1, \( n \)th+2 and so forth until an interview was completed.

A pilot study using unstructured face-to-face interviews identified that interviewees found it difficult to recall instances of one-to-one material help provided to, and received from, wider kin, neighbours and acquaintances. As a result, a relatively structured interview method was devised centred around a list of forty-two common domestic service tasks, derived from the seminal study of household work practices by Pahl (1984) on the Isle of Sheppey.\(^1\) To identify instances of such community

\(^1\) The forty-two tasks examined covered house maintenance (outdoor painting; indoor painting; wallpapering; plastering; mending a broken widow and maintenance of appliances; walling/fencing), home improvement (putting in double glazing; plumbing; electrical work; house insulation; putting in a bathroom suite; building an extension; converting an attic; putting in central heating and odd DIY
exchange, the sources of labour last used to carry out each of the forty-two tasks were identified. The interviewee was asked whether each activity had been undertaken in the household during the previous five years/year/month/week (depending on the activity). If it had, they were asked: who had conducted the task (a household member, a relative living outside the household, a friend, neighbour, firm, landlord, etc.); whether the person had been paid or a gift given; and if paid, whether it was ‘cash-in-hand’ or not as well as how much they had been given. They were then asked in an open-ended manner why they had decided to use that person to do the task so as to enable their motives for using wider kin, neighbours and acquaintances to be understood. Following this, the interviewee was asked whether a household member had conducted each task for another household and if so, who had done it, for whom, whether they had received money or a gift, how much they had received and why they had decided to do the task. Below, the results are reported.

**Repaying favours: the nature of community exchange in Bassetlaw**

Analysing the source of labour last used by households to undertake these forty-two domestic service tasks along with their motives for using that person, Table 1 reveals that although some three-quarters (74.3%) were conducted on a self-provisioning basis, some 2.9% were last completed using unpaid help from wider kin and social and community networks, 1.9% drawing upon favours from wider kin, friends and neighbours who were recompensed with money for their efforts, 0.7% using favours from wider kin, acquaintances and neighbours who were recompensed with gifts, 3.4% using profit-motivated cash-in-hand workers and 16.8% using formal labour. Table 1 therefore reveals the persistence of community exchange as a coping practice in this English locality and also how such exchange is not confined to specific populations or household-types. Perhaps surprisingly, although those living in the affluent neighbourhood more heavily use such help than those living in more deprived areas, and no-earner households are more reliant than households with members in employment, community exchange is a common feature of household coping practices across the whole population. Indeed, 97% of all households
asserted that at least one of the forty-two tasks had been last completed by either kin living outside the household, friends or neighbours.

Breaking down community exchanges by how they are repaid, Table 1 reveals that although 2.9% of all tasks were unpaid community exchanges, 1.9% of all tasks were favours from wider kin, friends and neighbours recompensed through the payment of money and 0.7% through a gift. Here, the intention is to focus upon unpacking these ‘paid favours’, a type of community exchange that until now has gone unnoticed in much of the community development literature.

In conventional ‘thin’ readings of monetary exchange, the assumption is that the introduction of money into transactions between kin, friends and neighbours shifts such exchanges from the non-market sphere of community exchange into the market realm since monetary transactions are always market-like and profit-motivated. However, this study finds that in just 5% of cases did the recipient paying wider kin, neighbours or friends assert that their primary motive was to save money and in only 7% of cases did those recompensed with money for supplying material help to wider kin, friends and acquaintances assert that they undertook the task primarily to make money. If they were not engaged in such paid exchanges primarily for monetary gain, then why was money changing hands?

When asked why they had offered or accepted payment to wider kin, friends or acquaintances, most initially asserted that it was a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ thing to do. In other words, there was for them a self-evident culture of paying for favours. As became widely evident, the only time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of forty-two tasks completed</th>
<th>% of tasks that were last completed using</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unpaid domestic work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By area</th>
<th>All responses</th>
<th>Unpaid</th>
<th>Unpaid</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Gift</th>
<th>Cash-in-hand</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affluent ward</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle ward</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deprived ward</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By no. of earners in household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By no. of earners in household</th>
<th>All responses</th>
<th>Unpaid</th>
<th>Unpaid</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Gift</th>
<th>Cash-in-hand</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single earner</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No earner</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s survey

Table 1. Sources of labour used to undertake forty-two domestic tasks in Bassetlaw
payment did not occur was in situations when it was unacceptable, inappropriate or impossible to do so. It was unacceptable, for example, in situations where the favour was too small to warrant a payment (e.g. when a tool is loaned), inappropriate when the social relations mitigated against payment (e.g. when the customer could not afford to pay and had no choice but to offer a favour in return) and impossible in those situations where the supplier would not accept a payment because they wanted a specific favour in return that only the customer could provide (e.g. babysitting). In all other circumstances, monetary payment was the norm in community exchange.

The first reason commonly stated for giving or receiving payment for favours related to ‘community building’. Such payments prevented relations turning sour if a favour was not reciprocated. As one woman put it, ‘the last thing you want is to owe a neighbour a favour and not repay it. I always pay so as to avoid any problems later on’. This use of money to avoid the need for reciprocity was particularly prevalent among elderly people, single-parent families and multiple-earner households, especially those perceiving themselves as potentially unable or incapable of repaying favours. By paying cash, they saw themselves as offsetting the need to reciprocate while still maintaining and/or cementing their social support networks. Suppliers similarly often preferred to be paid, once again so as to avoid a souring of their relations with the recipient if the favour was not returned. Consequently, money seems to act not only as a substitute for trust, but also a lubricant to facilitate community exchange.

The second reason for paying for favours related to a ‘redistribution’ motive. Customers often actively want to redistribute money to the person doing the work. Indeed, this was often the primary reason why they asked that person to do the task. Such ‘redistributive’ rationales usually apply more when kin conduct the work. Paying therefore is in these circumstances a means of giving the supplier some much needed spending money, such as when they are unemployed. As a multiple-earner household in East Retford West put it, ‘more often than not, it involves people you know, so you are doing them a favour by finding work for them’. Or as a retired male in a no-earner household in the deprived neighbourhood put it, ‘I … get people to do work to help them out’. Asking for favours and paying for them is thus a way of giving money, especially to kin, in a way that avoids all connotations of charity, even if this is the objective. As Kempson (1996) has previously revealed, people avoid accepting charity at all costs. This was well understood by the populations surveyed here. As a result, anybody wishing to do so paid others for doing a task in order to ‘help them out’.
This redistributive motive is similarly present when examining the motives of those supplying favours to wider kin, friends and neighbours for money. They often did the work because they recognised that the customer would not otherwise have been able to do it. This applied not only when skilled craftsmen were supplying favours to wider kin, friends and neighbours but also when the unemployed, early retired and so forth used their free time to help out others suffering from time famine and were thus unable to do certain tasks.

Generally, the fee for paid favours is not the market price. Indeed, it diverged from the market price to a greater degree among closer social relations and moved closer to the market norm as the social distance between customers and suppliers increased. It also diverged from the market price more when redistribution was the primary rationale of the recipient (i.e. above the market price) while when the motive of the supplier and customer was to prevent relations turning sour if a favour was not repaid, the fee was often little more than a token-gesture among closer social relations but moved more towards the market price the looser and more distant the social relationship.

Paid favours, in consequence, are not market-like exchanges motivated by monetary gain. Instead, the social relations involved are more akin to unpaid mutual aid than market-like relations and the motives grounded in not-for-profit rationales akin to unpaid mutual aid rather than the profit-motive.

**Conclusions**

To evaluate critically the dominant discourse that assumes one-to-one community exchanges within the extended family and social or neighbourhood networks to be unpaid, this paper has reported the findings of a survey of 120 households in an English locality. This has revealed that well over one-third (35%) of favours provided by wider kin, neighbours and friends involve monetary payments. On the one hand, this strongly intimates that what is considered as community exchange perhaps needs to be broadened to encompass such ‘paid favours’. On the other hand, it clearly demonstrates that not all monetary exchanges in contemporary advanced economies are market-like and profit-motivated.

This identification of the prevalence of paid favours has important implications for both the theory and practice of community development. Until now so far as the practice of community development is concerned, the focus has been upon fostering community organisations, not least because few have been able to decipher how to nurture informal one-to-one community exchange. By identifying the existence of a culture of paying for
favours, however, this paper opens up new possibilities for nurturing community exchange. Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of new vehicles for community development that not only recognise this culture of paying for favours, but seek to provide ‘monetary’ rewards for those providing favours to others, namely time banks (Seyfang and Smith, 2002) and local exchange and trading schemes (Williams et al., 2001). By identifying the presence of a culture of paying for favours, this paper provides a clear rationale for a renewed emphasis in community development practice on these vehicles for stimulating community exchange that reward those engaged in providing favours.

The existence of these paid favours also has significant implications for not only the theorisation of community exchange in the community development literature, but also theorising monetary exchange more generally. Until now, the assumption grounded in the ‘thin’ reading of monetary exchange has been that once monetary relations permeate community exchange, they shift into the realm of market-like profit-motivated exchange. Here in Bassetlaw in England, however, it has been shown that this is not the case. There exists a realm of ‘paid favours’ composed of monetary exchanges grounded in non-market relations and not-for-profit rationales, demonstrating that monetary transactions are not always and everywhere market-like and profit-motivated. What is now required is to evaluate whether the same applies elsewhere. If this paper begins to stimulate this rethinking of both the theory and practice of community development, then it will have fulfilled its objectives.

**Funding**

This research was funded by Nottinghamshire Business-Link. The usual disclaimers apply.

---

Colin C. Williams is Professor of Public Policy in the School of Management at the University of Sheffield, 9 Mappin Street, Sheffield S1 4DT, UK. His books include Cash-in-Hand Work (2004, Palgrave-Macmillan), Community Self-Help (2005, Palgrave-Macmillan) and A Commodified World? (2005, Zed).

Address for correspondence: email: C.C.Williams@sheffield.ac.uk

**References**


Granovetter, M. (1973) The strength of weak ties, American Journal of Sociology, 78 (6), 1360–1380.


