

Reciprocity and prosocial behavior in democratic dynamic



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Abstract

Prosocial behavior (PB) currently presents some conceptual overlaps with the construct of reciprocity, understood here as a lubricant of democratic dynamics. The analyses presented in this study are partial and concern the sample of Palermo, consisting of 307 subjects, residing in the eight districts of the city. The proposed study is based on a research agreement between the Universities of Palermo and Malaga, to test the relationship between PB and reciprocity and the multiple dimensions that intervene on the two constructs at the individual, interpersonal and community level. A structural equation model (with the Lisrel method) was used. From the analysis of the data, it emerges that the principle of equity, belief in a just world, sense of community and neighborhood norm increase PB and that together with worldview and social trust, in turn, they increase positive reciprocity and decrease negative reciprocity, even if the effect of the sense of community is not significant. The results suggest working at a level of proximity in which the other is recognized as competent to reciprocate what he has received,

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overcoming the asymmetries of power and resources that would harm the democratic process.

Keywords: prosocial behavior, reciprocity, social trust, normative aspects, structural model, democratic dynamics.

Introduction

In the introduction to this issue, it is argued that the exercise of democracy implies a number of key elements, including trust in social ties and civic coexistence, a system of shared rules, and a sense of similarity and difference between peoples. The latter enhances the uniqueness of each citizen in a cooperative choice. Conversely, a decline in trust and social cohesion has been identified as a significant factor contributing to the overall weakening of communities and democratic systems (Volpato, 2019).

Democracy, as a continuous creative act (Alberti, 2018, p. 62), necessitates the renewal of the socio-affective bond between citizens within a collective conversation of trust. This does not preclude the potential for conflict between individuals; rather, it is conceived as an event that can be crossed and modified according to a particular worldview.

The literature on reciprocity is vast and rich in contributions from different disciplines. In this study, the term “reciprocity” is defined as the exchange of goods and services, not necessarily mediated by money, established between two or more individuals in an interaction that can be historicized over time (Lietaer, 2001; Polanyi, 1965; Radon, 2003; Stanca, 2009; Stanca *et al.*, 2007; Zamagni, 2006). The construct is based on the significance of the intangible and symbolic advantages associated with the relationship, which are also contingent on group affiliations and shared beliefs (Amerio, 2004; Zani, 2005).

Other studies, more recently, recognize the importance of the construct of reciprocity to ensure democratic balances (Schedler, 2021). A comparable observation has previously been made regarding the role of online reciprocity in facilitating citizens’ engagement in the civic and political discourse of democracies (Kobayashi *et al.*, 2006). Schedler (2021) asserts that democracy is not founded on absolute

values, but rather on reciprocal norms that necessitate mutual commitments. The historical development of democracy has established a relationship of reciprocity between rulers and citizens. This implies that if rulers fail to address the needs of citizens, citizens have the power to remove them from office. In contemporary representative democracies, those who emerge victorious in political elections and represent the population, even if only temporarily, assume that no action taken will impede the right of others to govern in the future (Schedler, 2021). Similarly, citizens accept the binding rules of the politically elected, provided that they are valid for all. The construct of reciprocity is therefore closely linked to that of equity and respect for the rules. However, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples, it can be declined in both positive and negative ways.

Empirical evidence exists to support the fact that these are two distinct constructs and not a general reciprocity norm (Eisenberger *et. al.*, 2004). Consequently, positive reciprocity implies a willingness to treat those who treat us well in a favorable manner, whereas negative reciprocity assumes that one will be treated unfavorably in response to a previous unfavorable treatment (Becker, 1986; Schedler, 2021). When democracy is at risk, the bonds of positive reciprocity are weakened, and the practices of negative reciprocity increase, resulting in a series of defections from shared norms and an escalation of violence (Schedler, 2021). The construct of reciprocity thus has the potential to either reinforce or erode democratic balances in a dualistic manner. The democratic system of reciprocity is, in fact, an “almost stationary” dynamic, which, under certain conditions, can have different outcomes. For example, a social contract is insufficient to guarantee its durability over time. Citizens must recognize themselves as a community and share a sense of collective identity that serves to maintain cohesion, both in terms of interpersonal and intergroup relationships and in terms of the relationship between citizens and institutions (Riggio, 2024). The health of democracies is thus largely contingent upon the affective bonds that exist between the members of a given territory. The sense of community represents a commitment to remain united, recognizing the negotiation of individual and egoic needs as the primary means of achieving mutual integration and connection.

Another fundamental aspect of democratic societies is the helping behavior towards the other. Rawls (1971, p. 108) describes this as a

“positive natural duty” to help others and a “negative natural duty” to refrain from causing harm to others. In particular, prosocial behavior refers to helping actions carried out by an individual or a group free of charge, aimed at improving the general well-being of another person or group, and reducing social injustices (Cattarinussi, 1994; Salfi & Barbara, 1994).

As outlined in the psychological literature (Batson, 1987; Marta & Scabini, 2003, 2012; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1985), a range of activities can be considered helping behaviors when no direct benefit is calculable for the individual engaging in them. These behaviors enable prosocial action while also pursuing personal goals, such as the realization of one’s moral prerogatives or social approval. However, they are still attributable to actions that benefit the wider community. Two aspects bring us back to the contribution that this kind of behavior can provide to the democratic dynamic. The first is the search for equity, which motivates people to act in order to restore justice and distribute costs and benefits. The second is attention to the needs of others and the assumption of their perspectives in an empathetic way. This is in contrast to authoritarianism of Adornian memory or the need for dominance of the other (Gray *et al.*, 1991).

The present work explores the construct of reciprocity as a “democratic lubricant”, in relation to other psychological variables. We present an integrated model of reading prosocial behavior, which postulates that it is the result of the interaction between personal, interindividual, and contextual dimensions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). The objective is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between prosocial behavior, reciprocity, and the multifaceted individual, relational, and community dimensions that influence these two constructs involved in democratic dynamics.

The research

Purpose and proposed theoretical model

The research project originated from an agreement between the University of Palermo and the University of Málaga, as outlined in a memorandum of understanding developed by both academic

institutions. The innovative contribution is to consider prosocial behavior as an antecedent of reciprocity, which is contrary to previous studies (see the review by Bartolotta, 2012).

A substantial corpus of literature exists on prosocial behavior (PB). For the purposes of this study, we define PB as proactive behavior that involves direct interaction with other people who want to benefit through one's conduct (Marta & Scabini, 2012). As previously stated, it includes «actions directed at helping or benefiting another person or group of people, without expecting external rewards» (Mussen & Eisenberg, 1985).

The concept of reciprocity, which can be defined as the exchange of goods and services between two or more individuals in a transaction that is not necessarily mediated by money, has recently emerged as a topic of growing interest within the field of psychological studies. This interest has been largely absent from the field of psychological studies, but has been extensively explored by social economists (Lietaer, 2001; Raddon, 2003; Polanyi, 1957; Zamagni, 2006). The two constructs, prosocial behavior and reciprocity have areas of overlap. In general, the characteristics of both can be referred to as follows:

- gratuity: prosocial/reciprocal conduct is gratuitous, i.e., spontaneous and not solicited by another individual;
- proportionality: when people receive an action towards them (positive or negative), they feel “stimulated” to reciprocate in a proportional but not necessarily equivalent way. This implies a willingness to reciprocate with something other than what was initially received, even at a later time, and to involve a third party in the exchange, thus establishing a form of deferred reciprocity (Stanca *et al.*, 2007).
- ability to produce relational goods. The relationship is not a means to an aim; rather, it is the aim itself.

It is our view that the variables which can explain this relationship are situated at multiple levels. We posit that PB functions as an antecedent to relations of reciprocity, representing the *primum movens* towards the other and the recognition of his existential dimension.

At the individual level, beliefs and personal worldviews can be significant factors. The belief that a sense of justice governs the world, rewarding those who deserve it and punishing those who do not, appears to be a key driver of prosocial behavior (Furnham, 2003).

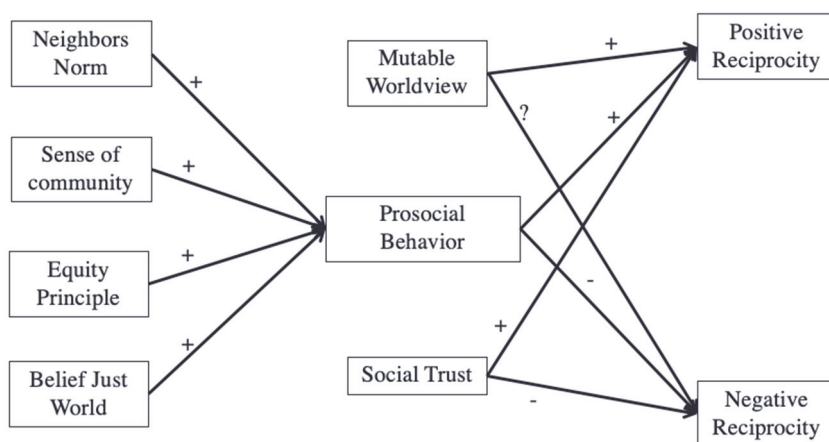
Additionally, the belief in a just world is correlated with positive reciprocity in instances where an individual has received a gift without having requested it (Edlund *et al.*, 2002). Conversely, individuals who perceive the world as modifiable, rather than fixed and immutable, are more inclined to act and transform their surroundings through their own actions (Dweck, 1986; Heyman, Dweck & Cain, 1993). At the interpersonal level, we have previously discussed the importance of trust in maintaining certain relational balances. As evidenced by the literature, the relationship between trust and reciprocity remains unclear (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000). In some studies, no correlation is identified between the two constructs (Abbink *et al.*, 2000). In other studies, reciprocity is conceptualized as cooperative and non-trusting behavior (Cochard *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, the relationship between the two is proposed to depend on the duration or sequence of actions (Cochard *et al.*, 2004). In this context, trust is understood as generalized trust based on commonly shared norms and moral values among members of a community (Fukuyama, 1995). It can be reasonably assumed that an increase in trust leads to a corresponding increase in positive reciprocity. In other contexts, it has been defined as «the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to others in a matured state under conditions of uncertainty» (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). This emphasizes that even in the presence of reliable institutions, it can become an expected and “regular” behavior. However, this does not imply that it is possible to predict it with absolute certainty.

At the social level of analysis, we considered both the normative and the affective aspects, at the micro and macro levels, and identified respect for the rules of a specific neighborhood and the sense of community as variables capable of eliciting prosocial behavior. With respect to the former, it has been demonstrated that if the inhabitants of the same neighborhood of residence consider prosocial behavior to be important and are willing to assume it, they will come to view it as a social norm, and thus be inclined to assume it (Lenzi *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, individuals tend to engage in behaviors that they believe are approved of by others, a phenomenon known as normative social influence (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) and this occurs without conscious intention (Aarts *et al.*, 2003). In conclusion, a stronger sense of community should lead to a greater sense of cohesion with other citizens, a greater willingness to provide social support as a result of that bond,

and thus a greater likelihood of prosocial behavior (Novara *et al.*, 2021). In general, it has been demonstrated that the sense of community exerts a positive influence on the willingness of individuals to pursue constructive solutions to conflicts, thereby counteracting the onset of violent and abusive conduct (Fisher & Sonn, 2002; Hombrosdos-Mendieta *et al.*, 2013; Novara *et al.*, 2023).

The extant literature demonstrates that the aforementioned variables are directly or indirectly related to one another. However, no definitive model has been proposed to elucidate the nature of these relationships. The present research aims to address this gap in the literature. The model, illustrated in Figure 1, postulates that neighborhood norm, sense of community, principle of equity, and belief in a just world increase PB (H1). This, in turn, increases positive reciprocity and decreases negative reciprocity (H2) to which social trust and the mutable worldview (H3) are also related.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Participants

The theoretical model was tested on a sample of 307 participants, aged between 18 and 28 ($M = 24.30$, $S.D. = 9.5$; 42.4% men and 57.6% women), residing in Palermo (Italy), extracted from the registry list of the city's eight districts. The survey was conducted using a random-

route sampling method. We established limits for the selected neighborhoods, and random-route sampling designated the blocks, streets, sidewalks, and so on. Trained interviewers administered the questionnaires in different places of city.

Measures

The variables under investigation were gathered through the self-report administration of a protocol containing the instruments described below.

- The *Prosocial Behavior Scale* (PBS; Caprara *et al.*, 1991) was assessed using the 16-item version of the scale (Caprara *et al.*, 2005). The scale employs a three-point Likert scale (ranging from “never” to “many times”) to assess the tendency to act for the benefit of another person in an altruistic manner and with trust. Examples of items include “I try to help others” and “I trust in others” ($\alpha = .92$).
- The *Neighborhood Norm Scale* (NNS) was constructed on the basis of the PBS, comprising a 16-item scale in which participants were requested to estimate, on a 3-point Likert scale (ranging from “never” to “many times”), the probability that a specific normative behavior would be adopted by the inhabitants of the neighborhood (e.g., “The people who live in your neighborhood, how likely are they to help other people?”). ($\alpha = .84$).
- The *Brief Sense of Community Scale* (Peterson *et al.*, 2008) was employed to assess the sense of community (SoC) within a particular neighborhood or district. The scale employs a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) and is composed of four subscales, corresponding to the four dimensions of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model: memberships (eg.: “I feel like a member of this neighborhood”), influence (eg.: “People in this neighborhood are good at influencing each another”), emotional connection (eg.: “I have a good bond with others in this neighborhood”), needs fulfillment (eg.: “This neighborhood helps me fulfill my needs”). In the study we considered the total score on the scale ($\alpha = .84$).
- In regard to the *equity principle* (EP), we used the brief version of the *Merit Principle Scale* (Davey *et al.*, 1999) through which

- participants indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with the idea that it is just to distribute benefits in the community services via the equity principle (eg.: “Sometimes it is appropriate to give a reward to the worker who needs it most, even if he/she is not the one who worked the hardest”). The 6-point Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) includes 9 items ($\alpha = .69$).
- The construct of *General Just World* was measured using the 6-item version of the *Personal Belief in a Just World Scale* (PBJW, Dalbert *et al.*, 2001). This scale valued the belief that events in one’s life are just (e.g., “I am usually treated fairly”, “Overall, events in my life are just”). Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale (from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”) ($\alpha = .80$).
 - The *Social Trust* was measured with an adapted version of the *Social Wellbeing* by Keyes (1998). The scale was composed by 8 item that value the answers using the 5-points Likert scale (from “not at all” to “totally agree”) (e.g.: “I think people deserve trust”; “I think people are more and more dishonest nowadays”) ($\alpha = .71$).
 - The *Mutable Worldview Scale (WS)*, as developed by Dweck (1986), comprises 3 questions answered on 5-point Likert scale (from “not at all” to “totally agree”) (e.g.: “Even if we can change some aspects of it, the essence of our world is unlikely to change; “Our world has its fundamental traits and really not much can be done to change them”) ($\alpha = .77$).
 - The *Reciprocity* was measured through the scale developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (2004); the Scale consisted of 14 statements concerning the advisability of retribution for unfavorable treatment and others 10 items concerning actions of positive reciprocity. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), obtaining two measures one for positive reciprocity (Rec+) and one for negative reciprocity (Rec-) (e.g., Rec+: “If someone does something for me, I feel required to do something for them”); (e.g., Rec-: “When someone treats me badly, I still act nicely to them”) (respectively, $\alpha = .83$ and $.82$).

Data analysis and results

The four independent variables in the model were neighborhood norm, SoC, equity principle, personal belief in a just world whilst pro-social behavior and reciprocity (positive and negative) were dependent variables. Descriptive statistics (mean, s.d, α -Cronbach) and relationships among variables (Pearson's r) are reported in Table 1.

As we know, starting from a certain theoretical causal relationship (hypothesized) a theoretical covariance matrix can be produced which, when compared with the analogous observed matrix, will allow us to understand how much the theoretical model is compatible with the observed data.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, α -Cronbach and correlations

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	PBS	5.57	.91	.92	1.00								
2	NNS	3.87	1.11	.84	.21**	1.00							
3	SoC	3.27	1.33	.84	.15*	.56**	1.00						
4	EP	5.19	.59	.69	.33**	.17**	.02	1.00					
5	PBJW	4.05	1.27	.80	.30**	.27**	.26**	.05	1.00				
6	WS	4.61	1.34	.77	-.04	.04	-.00	.13*	.03	1.00			
7	ST	4.38	1.03	.71	.17**	-.04	.05	.21**	.07	.15**	1.00		
8	Rec+	3.15	1.02	.83	.21**	.08	.11	.14*	.01	.23**	.10	1.00	
9	Rec-	5.61	.97	.82	.20**	.02	.24**	-.00	-.05	.09	.05	-.04	1.00

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

The theoretical model of the relationships between the variables was then tested by analysis of the Structural Equation Model, using Lisrel (version 8.8, Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). The theoretical model, graphically represented in Figure 1, included 6 exogenous variables (X1-X6) and 3 endogenous variables (Y1-Y3).

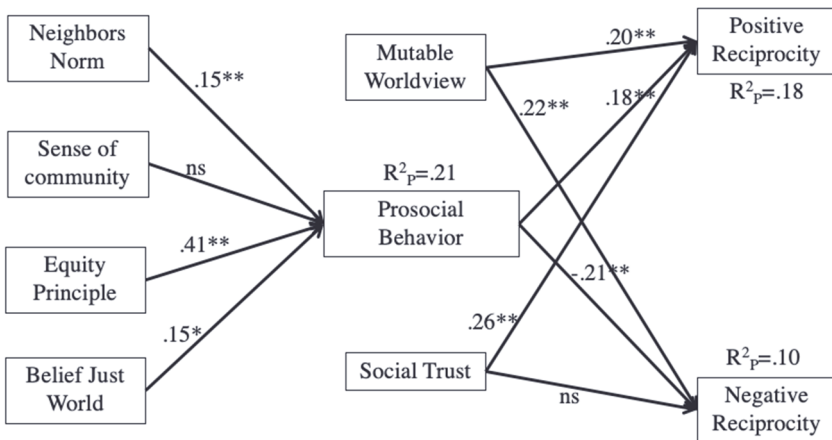
Since the Chi-square is heavily influenced by sample size (Bollen

& Long, 1994), two indices have been taken into consideration to model fitting (Bentler, 1990; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1981):

- goodness of fit index (GFI), where the value of the statistic T is standardized with the maximum value it can reach; consequently, this measurement takes values between 0 (bad model-data fit) and 1 (perfect fit). We can consider a good fit if $> .90$.
- the Root mean squared residuals (RMR), i.e. the square root of the average of the residuals squared. The index indicates a good fit when $< .10$, a sign that the theoretical residues are similar to the empirical ones.

The hypothetical model, although rather complex, reaches satisfactory adaptation values (GFI=.98; AGFI=.92; RMR=.044; $\chi^2 = 84.10$; $p = .00$; $df = 7$). Essentially, the model seems to show that neighborhood norms, fairness, and belief in a just world correlated with prosocial behavior, which, in turn, related with reciprocity behaviors that can also be influenced by modifiable worldview and social trust. LISREL estimates graphic is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Model with structural coefficients ($*p < .05$, $**p < .01$)



In detail, the model presents good explained variance percentages for all dependent variables:

- prosocial behavior ($R^2 = .21$), whose antecedents are neighborhood norm ($r = .15$), principle of equity ($r = .41$) and belief in a just world ($r = .15$) but not SoC as hypothesized.

- positive reciprocity ($R^2 = .18$), whose antecedents are worldview ($r=.20$), prosocial behavior ($r=.18$) and social trust ($r=.26$), as hypothesized;
- negative reciprocity ($R^2=.10$), whose antecedents are worldview ($r=.22$), prosocial behavior ($r=-.21$), but not social trust as hypothesized.

Conclusions

With regard to H1, looking at the coefficients, all variables except the SoC were statistically significant. The results therefore indicate that the sense of cohesion and connection with other citizens does not directly connect to the PB which was found to be related to the reciprocity. On the other hand, neighborhood norms, which are shared at the level of a specific social context or group, are correlated with prosocial actions. This is because they are not as expansive in terms of their physical and relational boundaries as those of a metropolitan city. The recognition of another individual's need, which is a prerequisite for initiating a helping behavior (Bartolotta, 2012-2013), may be influenced by the circumstances of crowding and anomie prevalent in large cities. This is not the case, however, with regard to the neighborhood norm, which is a norm shared in a more intimate context in which people recognize themselves. Indeed, as evidenced by prior research (Aarts *et al.*, 2003), the mental representation of behavioral norms is more accessible when the tendency to act in accordance with the norms is proximal to the subject, thereby confined to a recognizable environment of value to the individual (Quinn *et al.*, 2002). In such an environment, adults and significant others may serve as prosocial models (Lam, 2012).

The tested model indicates that personal beliefs in a just world and the principle of regulation based on equity would also favor PB. The conviction in a just world provides the individual with the assurance that they will receive what is rightfully theirs, given that the world is perceived as fundamentally stable and ordered. This belief is, in fact, conceptualized in the literature as a personal resource (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2000), as a necessary condition for maintaining a sense of fairness (Dalbert *et al.*, 2001). It is antithetical to discriminatory treatment

and serves as a guide for social interactions, promoting, when feasible, helping actions (Furnham, 2003), in accordance with the model tested here. Similarly, PB is related to the principle of equity, which posits that investments made in accordance with fair expectations will be duly rewarded (Furnham, 2003).

With regard to H2, the relation between PB and positive and negative reciprocity is confirmed, although with the latter no significant inverse relationship is observed with social trust. The second path sees, in fact, a modifiable worldview related to the positive reciprocity, as well as social trust and PB. In accordance with this result, in literature we find that a world change orientation predicts prosocial actions to make the world a better place (Oceja & Salgado, 2013). As previously stated in the introduction, this result addresses the necessity to distinguish between the two constructs, PB and positive reciprocity, which are frequently confused or conflated. In the tested model, PB is identified as the antecedent of a specifically reciprocal relationality that is no longer regarded as a means to help the other, but is instead conceptualised as an end to be achieved in itself. In the context of reciprocity, the objective is to establish and maintain a positive relationship with another individual. This entails recognizing the other person as a capable and deserving counterpart, with the intention of reciprocating their actions and contributions in a mutually beneficial manner (Bruni & Faldetta, 2012). The crucial aspect of reciprocity, which makes it a democratic lubricant, lies precisely in this characteristic: to give people access to a relational dimension that includes the other (Novara & Varveri, 2021). As Moghaddam argues in *The Psychology of Democracy* (2016), this movement towards the other has a democratic potential as it rejects the possibility of monopolizing power and resources as well as fueling stereotypes and relative social immobility. A capacity that sees the recognition of the characteristics common to all human beings together with the value of their differences. In contrast, dominant leaderships frequently engender a hostile attitude towards the other, thereby devaluing any potential for constructive engagement (Moghaddam, 2016). According to Brooks (2012), reciprocity serves as an indicator of mutual recognition based on a shared bond between citizens. This is why a vision of a modifiable world is related to both positive and negative reciprocity.

Schedler (2021) posits that democratic reciprocity is a “self-

limiting norm” that strives to maintain equilibrium in social relations, predicated on the dynamics of giving and receiving. It is anticipated that both cooperation and conflict will occur, but they must be proportionate and congruous in order to preserve the democratic balances that are essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy. It is not the case that conflict, or a hostile response or retaliation, is excluded a priori. Rather, what is required is an interpretative code that the reciprocity model can offer us. Schedler also indicates that retaliation may be a justifiable reaction to transgressions against fundamental democratic norms (Schedler, 2021, p. 258). In such instances, political leaders may be removed from their positions by the popular will. Additionally, negative reciprocity serves to safeguard against unilateral aggression and channels competition within the context of a recognized dynamic. The theoretical model posits that social trust functions as a social thermostat, regulating the threshold of possible injury while maintaining the reciprocity inherent to democratic systems. However, empirical evidence suggests that social trust does not exert the opposite effect on negative reciprocity that was hypothesized. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is confirmed, with the exception of the role of social trust. It seems reasonable to conclude that this is due to the fact that, in addition to generalized trust, it is social responsibility that ensures that negative forms of reciprocity do not emerge, which could otherwise put democracy itself at risk. One potential explanatory variable is reliability. In contrast to generalized trust between citizens, it would necessitate direct and historically informed knowledge between the actors involved in a particular relationship (Delgado-Márquez, 2012; Serva *et al.*, 2004).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the tested model, while reliable, remains susceptible to improvement. It is important to note that the findings of this study are specific to the context of a city in southern Italy. Further research should be conducted in other contexts, with a view to comparing the findings. For this reason, the study was conducted in two European countries, Italy and Spain, although the results are limited to the Italian sample.

Additional methodological constraints include the relatively modest sample size, the restricted age range of the sample (young people), and the cross-sectional design of the study, which precludes the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the value of the contribution in the discourse on the care

of democracy and the attention paid to the dynamics of democratic reciprocity as a relational system to be developed in community contexts remains. With regard to intervention, the fostering of processes of social change, the regeneration of bonds of trust, and the deconstruction of fixed and stereotyped representations of the world have the potential to make a significant contribution to collective growth and the construction of responsible coexistence (Lavanco & Varveri, 2008; Mannarini & Arcidiacono, 2021). At the same time, leveraging greater equity and a sense of justice already in the norms that are shared at the neighborhood level, so as to solicit prosocial behaviors of help towards the other and therefore of reciprocity, could outline a program of collective intervention to accompany the democratic development of entire countries (Salvatore *et al.*, 2018).

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