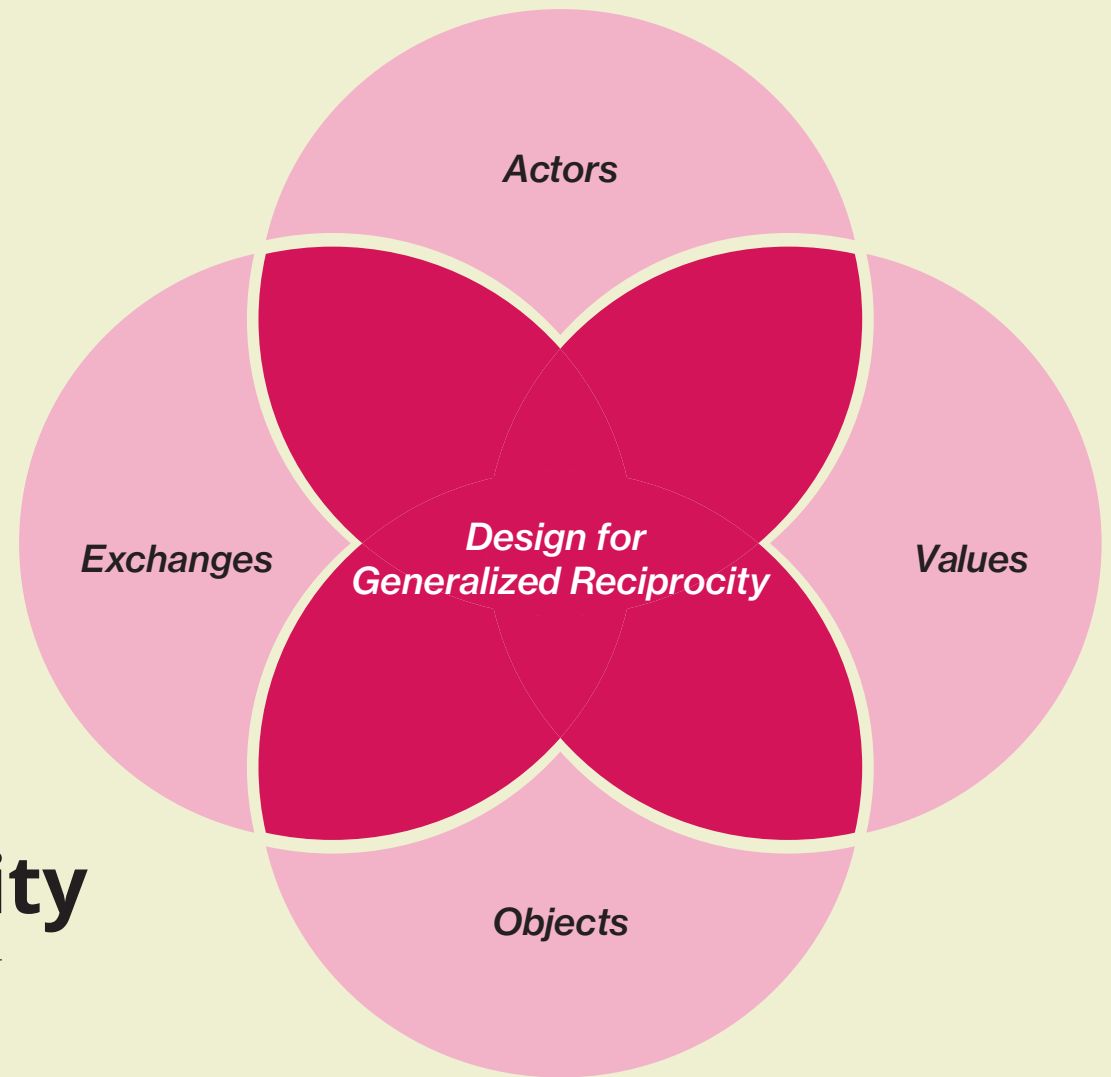


# Design for Generalized Reciprocity

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A practical guidance for  
Social Designers and Pioneers of Social Change

By Shervin Tjon





# The Setup

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# 1. Preface

## An attitude shift towards reciprocity

During my Master Thesis I worked with a social cooperative who worked closely with volunteers in Amsterdam South-East, together we encountered the following challenge: How can we create social impact but also propose additional value and benefits for volunteers?

The social cooperative piloted the following concept: A local currency system in which volunteers can be rewarded with a local currency. This currency can be spent at local businesses which in turn could further make use of this currency to buy supplies and work with volunteers to accommodate a local sustainable economy.  
A win-win-win situation. Right?

The local currency was merely thought as a tool to encourage social good. However, instead of highlighting the social good and the social impact that people can provide, the emphasis was made on the economic benefits of the currency.

This emphasis on economic benefits turned into a lack of motivation as the economic benefits were too low in terms of self-interests. The following thought often occurred at users:  
‘What is the benefit of earning a local currency which is limited within a specific area, if I can earn and use Euros to accommodate myself wherever I want?’

And so, the positive attitude of doing social work for the greater good was neglected, and the spotlights were shined bright on the function and benefits of the local currency.

So where does reciprocity play a role in this?

The concept of reciprocity was particularly relevant in the context of thesis, but is also an important concept in the field of design. Reciprocity focuses on the dynamics of exchanges and underlying values, which can result in community building, social innovation, and sustained engagement between people.

For example by understanding the shared interests and dynamics of relations and exchanges between people or parties in a particular context such as urban safety or sustainability, could result in local neighborhood watches or energy cooperatives.

As designers and active pioneers we are often lost in the complexity of social issues due to diverse contextual environments, needs of stakeholders and the goal-oriented approach of tackling social issues.

But with this goal-oriented approach we often lose the importance of the dynamics in relation and exchanges between actors and the underlying values for collaboration and shared interests.

In this small booklet, I want give guidance to fellow social designers and pioneers of social change to design for reciprocity, with the help of template exercises to familiarize with reciprocity and create an attitude shift in observing particular exchanges, interactions and conversations. Furthermore, this gives practical insights from my case study during the Master Thesis to Design for Generalized Reciprocity.

# 2. Approach of this booklet

## The Booklet

The booklet consists of **four guidelines**, which consists of **familiarizing** the designer with different exchanges, **contextualizing** the actors, **identifying** the objects and services in reciprocities and **describing** the underlying values that create the foundation of certain acts of reciprocities.

Furthermore this booklet aims to help the designer with **synthesizing** the insights from the four guidelines to **Design for Generalized Reciprocity** adjusted towards the designer's design challenge and design context.

It should be acknowledged that the guidelines and the synthesizing process are not part of a linear process, depending on the design context these guidelines could provide a different starting emphasis on the context research and ideation.

### So... For who is this booklet?

1. For social designers who want to familiarize themselves with the concept of reciprocity, and are looking for guidance and tools to observe closely the dynamic of relations, interactions and exchanges between people, parties, or stakeholders and identify underlying values during social exchanges.
2. For people active in social cooperatives, foundations or community groups who want to facilitate mutual exchange and cooperation among people by diving deeper into the relations, interactions and exchanges.

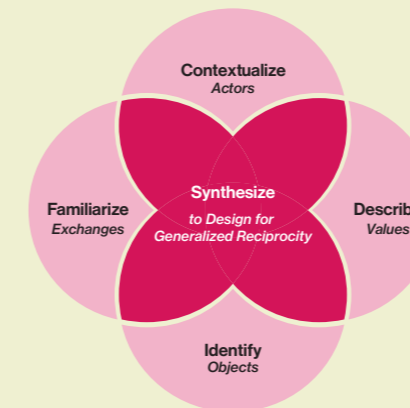


Figure 1: Booklet guidelines

## Implementation of the booklet

The booklet Design for Generalized Reciprocity can be implemented in the a typical design process such as **the Double Diamond** approach [3].

In order to Design for Generalized Reciprocity, this booklet introduces the concept of reciprocity through the Discover phase and context research of a design process. The designer will be familiarized with different types of reciprocities, and learns to observe exchanges, interactions and stakeholders through the lens of reciprocity, this will be done through the usage of additional template given by this booklet.

Furthermore, after getting a good grasp of the concept of reciprocity this booklet converges to Design for Generalized Reciprocity, using the synthesizing template. This stage can be done to help the designer with ideation and the Develop phase of the design process.

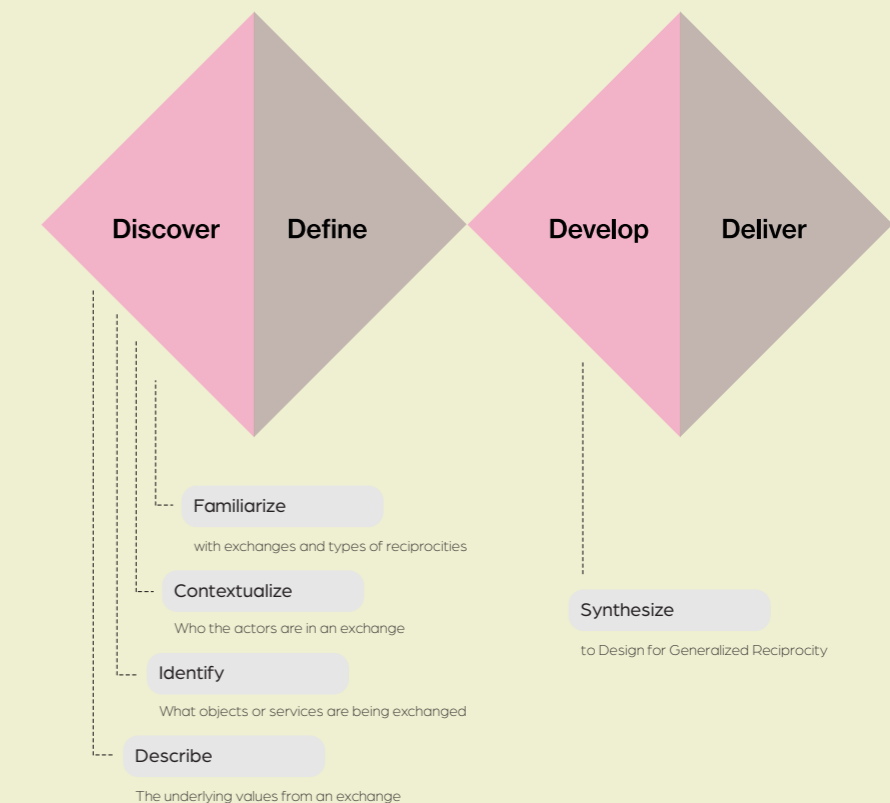


Figure 2: How the booklet can be integrated in the Double Diamond approach

Want to read more about the Double Diamond? (Design Council, 2024)



# 3. What is Reciprocity?

## What is Reciprocity?

Reciprocity is a topic which has been extensively explored in the field of anthropology. And is often defined differently by various anthropologists and social psychologists, as seen in the sketches and definitions below.



Due to the many different perspectives and definitions [5], [6], [10], [11], the concept of reciprocity might still be hard to grasp. But to keep it simple, this booklet embraces reciprocity as an exchange of things or services between people or parties that can take different forms and creates the basis of social relationships in communities.

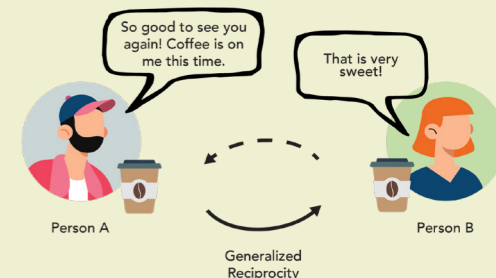
## Types of Reciprocities

By Sahlins [10]

For us to get a better understanding of reciprocity, I would like to highlight the different types of reciprocities emphasized by Sahlins. Reciprocity can be characterized in three different types, generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and negative reciprocity [10].

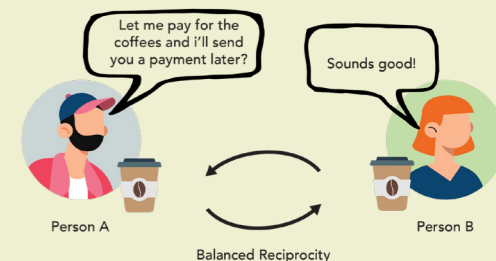
### Generalized reciprocity

Generalized reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver does not expect a (tangible) return from the receiver. There is no calculated or measured return of favor from the receiver (no specific time period to return a favor). E.g. Buying a coffee for a friend without expecting the person to return a favor or to do a transaction.



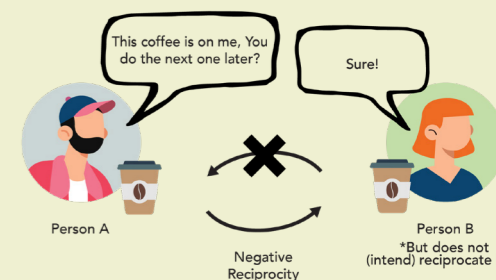
### Balanced reciprocity

Balanced reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver and receiver are obligated to give and receive items of perceived equal value. Balanced reciprocity is less personal compared to generalized reciprocity, expectations are being set to reciprocate. E.g. Buying a coffee for a friend who has agreed to pay you back later.



### Negative reciprocity

Negative reciprocity refers to exchanges where one party between the giver and receiver attempts to act entirely on self-interest with the goal of material advantage or profit. Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal type of exchange where one of the parties confront each other to maximize own benefit at the expense of the other party. E.g. Buying a coffee for a friend expecting that the other person would return the favor, but that friend never buys a coffee back for you or pays you back.



# 4. Why Design for Generalized Reciprocity?

## Why generalized reciprocity?

The concept of reciprocity plays an important role for community building and creating social impact as it enhances collective actions and enforces behavioral regularities [4], [5], [6]. However based on the typology of Sahlins the different types of reciprocities could often be found depending on the strength of relationships or bonds between people [10]. You would often find generalized reciprocity between close friends and family, balanced reciprocity within a community or negative reciprocity with outsiders. However, this might not be always true, as in real-life doing social good or gifting without expected return happens occasionally, such as doing volunteer offering seats to elderly

in public transport, giving change to homeless people, or donating money to good causes. With this booklet I would like to extend on the work of Sahlins and help designers to design for generalized reciprocity in contexts where a force for social good is needed. Designers can think of challenges such as: Creating behavior change in social topics like climate change, urban planning or economic inclusion. Creating opportunities in design which include improving mutual trust, expressing appreciation or affection. And helping social communities or cooperatives to scale and invoke doing social good.

## Underlying values of reciprocity

There might be different motivations and reasonings on why people or parties would like to reciprocate. In this booklet, we focus on underlying values in exchanges such as **Instrumental values** and **Symbolic values**. These underlying values often build the foundation to motivations and reasonings behind an act of generalized reciprocity. Instrumental values are values derived from benefits of objects, things or services themselves. And symbolic values are values which are conveyed by the act of reciprocity itself such as expressing mutual trust or showing affection [9].

To put the instrumental and symbolic values in context. In the reciprocal act of buying a coffee gift-card for a friend, the benefits of the coffee gift-card (the gift itself) would be instrumental value and showing appreciation or affection by exchanging the gift (the gifting itself) would be the symbolic value.

Read more about  
underlying values of  
reciprocity by Malm et al. (2007)



# 5. Social Design or Design for Generalized Reciprocity?

## Social Design or Design for Generalized Reciprocity?

### What are the differences?

#### Social Design

Social design aims to **create solutions that address social issues and improve societal well-being** [13]. It focuses on creating systems, services, products or environments that enhance the general well-being of communities, and particularly marginalized groups.

Furthermore, social design often involves collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including communities and individuals directly affected by the issues being addressed [2], [13]. It can span in fields such as urban design, service design or product design but its main goal is to create positive social impact.

Examples of projects within social design are: Designing solutions for affordable housing, improving safety in the neighborhood through product design, creating solutions or opportunities for affordable sustainable energy.

#### Design for Generalized Reciprocity

Design for Generalized Reciprocity is a particular aspect of social design that emphasizes **mutual exchange, collaboration and shared interests and benefits** between users and different stakeholders.

Furthermore, it focuses on the relational dynamics and mutual benefits that can be found through **active engagement, observing and participatory design or co-creations from a bottom-up approach**.

The main goal of Design for Generalized Reciprocity is similar to social design which is to create positive social impact that can span in different fields and topics. But its emphasis or approach lies on the focus on relational dynamics and perspective through the lens of reciprocity. This emphasis could help designers overcome certain limitations in current social design practices in which they lack a coherent guidance and are often unable to identify abstract social entities or how to work with them [1], [2], [7].

Although the principles of Design for Generalized Reciprocity and core differences from Social Design could be applied for all types of reciprocities, this booklet aims to focus on generalized reciprocity due to its typicality of trust and long-term relationships, where the giver believes that the system of mutual aid will benefit them at some point, even if the return is not immediate or from the same person. This contrasts with balanced reciprocity (where there is an immediate or agreed-upon return) and negative reciprocity (where one party seeks to gain more than they give). Generalized reciprocity fosters cooperation and social bonds over time, helping to maintain social cohesion, which is essential for social challenges.

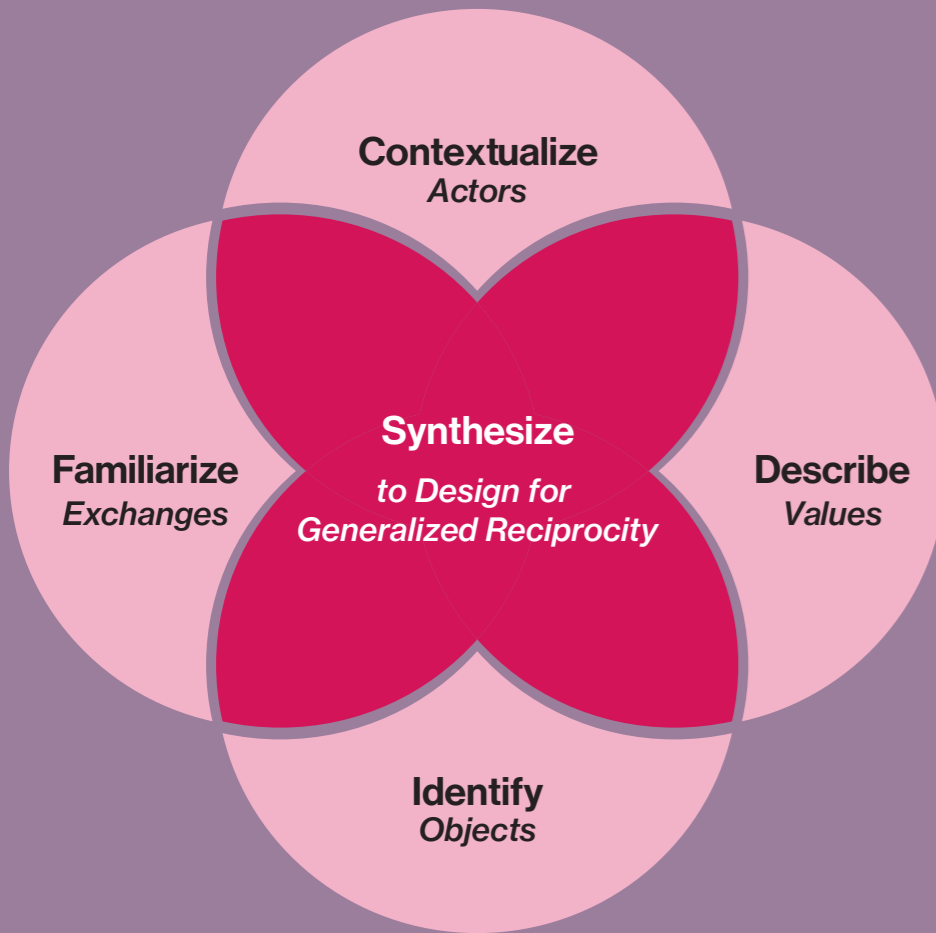
Examples of Design for Generalized Reciprocity are: Creating mutual benefit among stakeholders of affordable housing, aligning shared interests with neighborhood watch groups, Identifying exchanges and exploring mutual benefits and opportunities between stakeholders in sustainability and environmental initiatives.

#### Key distinctions

Social design aims to address **broad social issues** such as designing affordable housing and is often led by designers which can be both top-down and bottom-up processes. Whereas, Design for Generalized Reciprocity focuses on a **particular aspect of social design** which are the **relational dynamics and mutual benefits** found through a bottom-up approach.

In essence, while both terms are concerned with improving human conditions and social relations, social design is more **goal-oriented** toward addressing specific social challenges, and Design for Generalized Reciprocity is more **process-oriented**, emphasizing mutual benefit, relational dynamics and collaboration.





# 6. The Four Guidelines

## A proposed guidance

This booklet proposes a guidance based on the foundation of four guidelines. The four guidelines are aimed to help designers and people active in social cooperatives, foundations or community groups to:

- Contextualize who are involved in certain exchanges, and emphasize on how the exchanges take place.
- Identify the objects, things or services involved in the reciprocity to understand how these objects, things or services play a role in the reciprocity.
- Be familiarized with certain exchanges and types of reciprocities based on the design context.
- Describe underlying instrumental and symbolic values in social exchanges that highlights the potential reasoning behind exchanges and reciprocal actions.
- Synthesize the insights from observed exchanges, relations and underlying values with a process-oriented approach.

## The Four Guidelines

### Contextualize who the actors are

Understanding the actors or stakeholders is an essential aspect of doing context research while designing, however the relations, exchanges and the dynamic between them is often neglected or less emphasized. In this step the designer is challenged to focus on the dynamics and exchanges of actors or stakeholders.

### Identify what objects or services are involved

In product design the object, thing or service is often central, but through the lens of reciprocity they take a completely different role depending on the context of the exchange. In this guideline designers are challenged to think about the role of the objects, things or services during exchange, and the reason why these objects or services could be valuable for that particular exchange.

### Familiarize exchanges and reciprocities

To design for generalized reciprocity it would be helpful to be familiarized with the different types of reciprocities and think of different contexts of exchanges. This could help with identifying existing types of reciprocities that are occurring in the user group's community, and gain insights of exchanges which are important for your design concept.

### Describe what the underlying values are

The underlying values of an act of reciprocity might often be vague and blurred, it might not be necessarily clear what the motivations and benefits are behind a specific reciprocity or exchange, as it is often dependent on the context. However this step could help designers to create clarity by clustering the observed motivations in symbolic and instrumental values.

Contextualize  
who the actors are

## Contextualize *Actors*

## Who are the actors in an exchange?

Knowing who the actors or stakeholders are, is essential when designing for generalized reciprocity because it helps to understand the social dynamics, trust levels, and relationships that underpin the system. Stakeholders may have different roles, expectations, and values, all of which affect how objects or services are exchanged and reciprocated over time. By contextualizing these actors and their relations, designers can create systems that align with their needs, motivations, and the norms of the community, ensuring that reciprocity is encouraged and sustained in a way that benefits all participants.

In regular design research, the focus is often on understanding users' needs, behaviors, and motivations to create solutions that meet their immediate or functional goals. The emphasis is on individual user experiences and direct interactions with the product or service.

However, when designing for generalized reciprocity, the research extends beyond individual needs to consider the social foundation of the community or network. This requires a deeper exploration of relationships, how trust is built and maintained over time, and how exchanges are distributed across the group [10], [12]. The focus shifts from direct and transactional interactions to understanding how people give and receive in a broader, less immediate context, which involves more complex social interdependencies.

The trust and social bonds that connect the actors, forms the foundation of their willingness to give without expecting immediate returns. Understanding their motivations for participating—whether it's a sense of community, altruism, or anticipation of future benefits—helps ensure that the design aligns with what drives their behavior. Additionally, recognizing the social norms and expectations that govern how exchanges happen is key to fostering a design where giving and receiving are uncalculated, sustaining generalized reciprocity within the network.

To contextualize the actors, this guideline focuses on mapping the actors and the objects or services involved within an exchange, highlighting certain interactions within an exchange and observing the context of the exchange, such as the environment, way of speech, particular reasonings or explanations behind an exchange, certain emotions or expressions, etc.

### How to contextualize actors in an exchange

- **Understand who are involved in the exchange and what the context is.**
- **Understand the relation between the actors.**
- **Know how the exchange looks like.**
- **What different interactions are involved within the exchange.**

# Contextualize who the actors are

## Template for contextualizing the actors

### How to use it

This template helps designers to contextualize the actors, their relations and the exchanges they make. It dives deeper into the context of the exchange and the interactions that were involved within that particular exchange.

Designers can use this template as an exercise to reflect on self-experienced exchanges within the user groups' community or use this template to contextualize actors in observed exchanges through field research and ethnography during the context research. The template consists of five key questions in which the designers can fill in.

### Who were involved?

### Explain the context between the actors

### What is the exchange between the actors?

### Explain how the exchange looks like

### What are the different interactions?


### Pro-Tip


Visit locations or events where your user group often goes to and observe different interactions, exchanges and conversations. E.g. Community events, popular shops, etc.

### Practical Example

In this example, the template is filled in for the context of the actors Lisa and Peter. In which Lisa is a good friend and visiting Peter during his work as a barista.

The template creates an overview of the exchange when ordering a coffee and the different interactions that Lisa and Peter had.

Contextualize	who the actors are	
<p><b>Who are involved?</b> Think about a particular exchange with two people, this could be a gift to a friend, buying a product at a store or even an exchange where you felt scammed. Who were involved? And explain the context.</p> <p>Actor 1 LISA GOOD FRIEND OF PETER</p> <p>Actor 2 PETER BARISTA WORKING IN HIS CAFE</p> <p><b>Explain the context between the actors</b> Be specific, what kind of relation in business, family or friends? How close or distant? What is the history?</p> <p>LISA AND PETER HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR YEARS. LISA OCCASIONALLY VISITS PETER AT HIS WORK FOR A COFFEE.</p>	<p><b>What is the exchange between the actors?</b> How does the exchange look like? What objects, services or gestures?</p>  <p>Actor 1 LISA</p> <p>Actor 2 PETER</p> <p><b>Object or service</b> LISA: PAYS WITH CARD, MONEY FOR HER COFFEE PETER: PROVIDES COFFEE AND BECAUSE SHE IS A GOOD FRIEND GAVE A 50% DISCOUNT.</p> <p><b>Explain how the exchange looks like</b> Again be specific, where was this exchange? How did each actor react? Was it an online or physical? Did you need to use certain products or tools for this exchange? How did the exchanged objects, services, or gestures look like?</p> <p>LISA ORDERED A COFFEE AT PETER IN FRONT OF THE REGISTER TO HER SURPRISE SHE ONLY HAD TO PAY €1.60 INSTEAD OF €3.20. AFTER ORDERING SHE PICKED HER COFFEE UP AROUND THE CORNER</p>	<p><b>What are the different interactions?</b> E.g. if you described an exchange of buying a product in a store. Describe the interactions with the store clerk, how did you order, how did you pay, how did you received the product from the clerk, etc.</p> <p>1) LISA AND PETER FIRST HAD SOME SMALL TALK. 2) THEN LISA ORDERED A LATTE. 3) PETER PREPARED THE CARD READER WHEN SAID €1.60 4) LISA SMILED AND THANKED PETER. 5) AFTER A FEW MINUTES PETER ANNOUNCED "LATTE FOR LISA!" 6) LISA THANKED PETER AGAIN AND FOUND A SEAT NEXT TO THE WINDOW.</p>

Contextualize	who the actors are	
<p><b>Who are involved?</b> Think about a particular exchange with two people, this could be a gift to a friend, buying a product at a store or even an exchange where you felt scammed. Who were involved? And explain the context.</p> <p>Actor 1</p> <p>Actor 2</p> <p><b>Explain the context between the actors</b> Be specific, what kind of relation in business, family or friends? How close or distant? What is the history?</p>	<p><b>What is the exchange between the actors?</b> How does the exchange look like? What objects, services or gestures?</p>  <p>Actor 1</p> <p>Actor 2</p> <p><b>Object or service</b></p> <p><b>Explain how the exchange looks like</b> Again be specific, where was this exchange? How did each actor react? Was it an online or physical? Did you need to use certain products or tools for this exchange? How did the exchanged objects, services, or gestures look like?</p>	<p><b>What are the different interactions?</b> E.g. if you described an exchange of buying a product in a store. Describe the interactions with the store clerk, how did you order, how did you pay, how did you received the product from the clerk, etc.</p>

Download the Design for Generalized Reciprocity Templates here



## Identify *Objects*

# Identify what objects or services are involved

## What objects or services are involved in exchanges?

When designing for generalized reciprocity, understanding what objects or services are exchanged is important because these exchanges carry more than just material value—they are embedded with social, emotional, and/or cultural meanings [16]. The type of object or service being shared can affect how reciprocity plays out over time, influencing how people perceive their roles within the community and how trust is built or eroded.

For example, if the items exchanged are essential (like food, shelter, or care), the act of giving and receiving them could create stronger obligations and deeper social bonds. These exchanges are often seen as more significant because they directly impact well-being [5], [10]. In contrast, non-essential or symbolic exchanges (such as sharing information or small favors) might foster a lighter form of reciprocity, where the expectation of return is more flexible and less formalized.

Moreover, different types of exchanges may follow different cultural or social norms. In some communities, sharing food might carry deep symbolic importance, while in others, services like helping with a task might be more valued [5]. By understanding the context of these exchanges, designers can better facilitate ideas and concepts that align with the participants' values and social practices, ensuring that reciprocity remains meaningful and balanced within that particular group.

This nuanced understanding of what's being exchanged is critical for designing where trust is reinforced, and social ties are strengthened, making the model of generalized reciprocity both viable and resilient over time.


To identify the objects and services which are involved in exchanges, this guideline focuses on choosing a specific pair of actors. This is encouraged to simplify and help the designer to dissect the exchange in two perspectives and list out potential reasonings or motivations in which the objects or services could carry more (or less) value compared to other exchanges with different objects or services.

### How to identify what objects or services were involved?

- **Choose a pair of actors in a particular exchange**
- **Describe this exchange from actor A to actor B and vice-versa.**
- **List out the objects and services which are being exchanged.**
- **Describe why these objects or services could carry any importance or value for this exchange.**

# Identify what objects or services are involved

## Template for identifying the objects and services within an exchange

Identify	what objects or services are involved	
<p><b>Choose a specific pair of actors involved in an exchange</b>  <small>First name the pair of actors, and then describe the exchange (the objects that are exchanged) from A - B and from B to A.</small></p>		
<p><small>Name the pair of actors.</small></p>		
<p>Exchange from A to B</p> <p>Actor A: </p> <p>Actor B: </p> <p>Object(s): .....</p>	<p>Exchange from B to A</p> <p>Actor A: </p> <p>Actor B: </p> <p>Object(s): .....</p>	
<p><b>Objects or services by actor A</b>  <small>List out the objects or services offered by actor A in the exchange.                      E.g. Money, products, things, services</small></p>	<p><b>Objects or services by actor B</b>  <small>List out the objects or services offered by Actor B.                      E.g. Money, products, things, services.                      If actor B does not reciprocate at all, or exchange no objects or services you can leave this empty.</small></p>	
<p><b>Why?</b>  <small>What could be motivations or reasonings behind the objects or services used in this exchange?                      E.g. Goodwill, gestures, building friendship, expressing affection.</small></p>	<p><b>Why?</b>  <small>What could be motivations or reasonings behind the objects or services used in this exchange?                      E.g. Goodwill, gestures, building friendship, expressing affection.</small></p>	

Download the Design for Generalized Reciprocity Templates here



### How to use it

This template helps designers to identify the objects and services involved within an exchange, but more importantly the potential reasoning of importance or value this object or service could carry in this exchange.

Designers can use this template to dive deeper into particular exchanges and list out possible reasonings on why these objects or services are influential for this exchange.

By creating this overview, this template aims to let designers understand how different types of exchanges could follow different cultural or social norms. The template consists of 3 sections in which the designers can fill in.

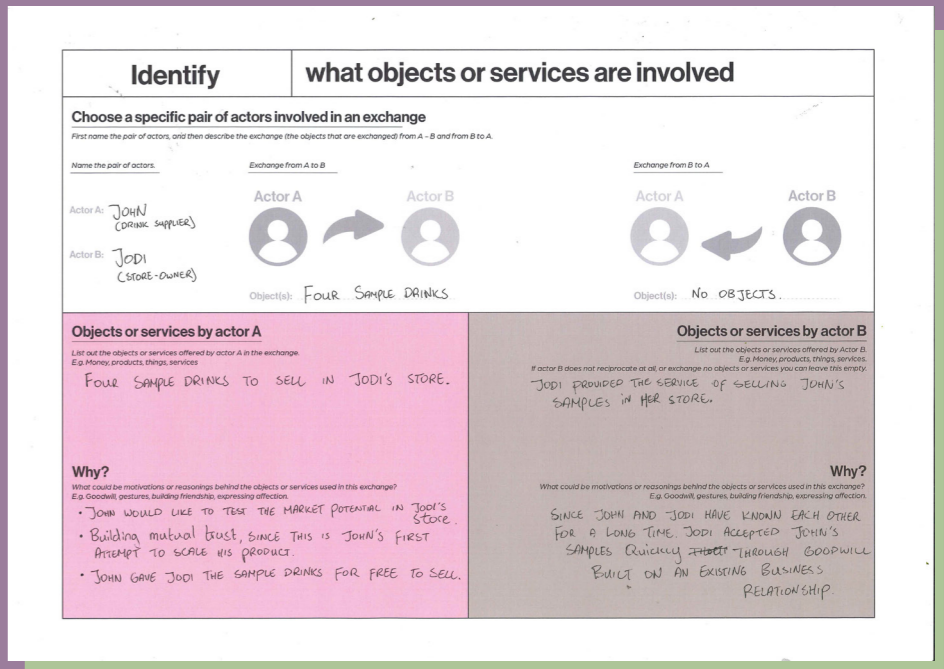
- Choose a pair of actors involved in an exchange.
- List out the objects or services by actor A and actor B.
- Describe potential reasonings or the value that this object or service could carry in this exchange.

### Pro-Tip

Imagine the exchange you have filled in the template with different actors. How would the meaning and motivations behind this exchange differ?

### Practical Example

In this example, John and Jodi are business-related, it shows a one-way exchange from John to Jodi, in which John gives Jodi four sample drinks to sell in her store. However, Jodi gains the benefit of testing out the market potential through the store of Jodi and building mutual trust. This template shows the different meanings of the four sample drinks (the objects being exchanged) depending on the actors.



# Familiarize

exchanges and types of reciprocities

## Familiarize *Exchanges*

## What are the different exchanges and reciprocities?

It is important for designers to be familiar with different types of exchanges and forms of reciprocity when designing for generalized reciprocity as these nuances influence how people interact, what they expect from each other, and how they maintain social cohesion. Different exchanges carry unique social and emotional meanings, whether they involve goods, services, time, or knowledge. These meanings can affect the willingness of individuals to participate in generalized reciprocity and the level of commitment they feel to repay favors or contribute to the community over time [4], [5], [9].

Additionally, reciprocity itself takes various forms. In generalized reciprocity, individuals give without an expectation of immediate return, trusting that the favor will be reciprocated by someone else in the network at some future time. This contrasts with balanced reciprocity where exchanges are more transactional and involve an agreed-upon return, and negative reciprocity where one party seeks to gain more than they give [10]. A designer must understand these forms and be able to differentiate them depending on the design context, as each form influences a difference in values and the social dynamics involved.

Without understanding the different types of reciprocities and exchanges, a designer might inadvertently create systems, concepts or ideas that encourage more transactional behavior (balanced reciprocity) when the goal is to foster trust and long-term cooperation (generalized reciprocity). Moreover, certain exchanges might be more suited to one type of reciprocity than another. For instance, highly valuable or scarce resources might necessitate balanced reciprocity, while everyday, smaller exchanges (like sharing knowledge or minor favors) could naturally fit into a generalized reciprocity model.

Familiarity with these nuances enables designers to create environments that encourage the right kind of interactions, align with the values and needs of the participants, and ensure the final outcome to remain equitable and sustainable.

To help designers to be more familiarized with exchanges and the different types of reciprocities, the designer is encouraged to provide examples of generalized, balanced and negative reciprocities in the form of exchanges. These exchanges could come from own experiences but the designer could also use this template to categorize observed exchanges in this template.

### How to be familiarized with different exchanges and types of reciprocities?

- **Choose a pair of actors in a particular exchange**
- **Describe the possible different exchanges which can be divided in the different types of reciprocities**
- **Describe the context in the different types of reciprocities**
- **Describe possible reasonings behind the exchanges or acts of reciprocities**

# Familiarize with different exchanges and reciprocities

## Template for familiarizing yourself with different exchanges and reciprocities

Familiarize exchanges and types of reciprocities		
<b>Identify the actors</b> Choose a pair of actors in an exchange. E.g. Jodi (actor 1) buys a coffee for Jodi (actor 2). <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> <span>Actor 1 .....</span> <span>Actor 2 .....</span> </div>		
<b>How could these two actors engage in the following reciprocities?</b>		
<b>Generalized reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Generalized reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver does not expect a (tangible) return from the receiver.</small>	<b>Balanced reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Balanced reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver and receiver are obligated to give and receive items of perceived equal value.</small>	<b>Negative reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Negative reciprocity refers to exchanges where one party between the giver and receiver attempts to act entirely on self-interest with the goal of material advantage or profit, without negative consequences.</small>
<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John treats a Jodi for a coffee.</small>	<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for Jodi and Jodi sends him the money owed after they have met up.</small>	<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for his colleague Jodi but Jodi never buys a coffee back for John.</small>
<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John treats Jodi a coffee to catch up, after not seeing his friend for a few years. They go to a popular cafe in the neighborhood, in which John is a regular customer.</small>	<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for Jodi. However, they had agreed that he would pay her coffee in advance and she would pay for the next coffee for John, instead of Jodi paying back John of what she was owed in money.</small>	<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John is new in the company and tries to get to know his colleagues during coffee breaks. During coffee breaks at work John buys a coffee for his colleague Jodi, multiple times. However, Jodi never shows effort or tries to buy a coffee for John.</small>
<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John treats his friend Jodi to show affection to their friendship and show appreciation to Jodi, that she made time to meet up again.</small>	<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John and Jodi would regularly have coffee together. And to prevent a relationship in which one person would be the one who would constantly have to pay, they decided to pay in turn, for each coffee meet-up.</small>	<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John might try to buy coffee for his colleague Jodi, to create a good work relationship with his colleague. However after a few coffees he realized that Jodi does not tries to offer a coffee back. As a consequence, John decides to have coffee with other colleagues and tries to foster other work relationships.</small>

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### How to use it

This template aims to help designers to understand the different types of reciprocities and exchanges in which actors could engage with each other.

This template can be used as an exercise for designers to be familiarized with the concept of reciprocity by providing examples of Generalized reciprocity, Balanced reciprocity and Negative reciprocity. Additionally, designers could also use this template to fill in after field research and cluster observed interactions into the different types of reciprocities to create an overview for the context research (Discover Phase of the Double Diamond).

The template is divided in the three types of reciprocities by Sahlins [11], and given the following key questions:

- What would be the exchange?
- What would be the context?
- What could be the reason?

### Pro-Tip

Fill this template in with the user group. And ask them about different exchanges which happen in the community.

### Practical Example

In this example, a mother-son relationship was described through the actors Sandra and Jake. Different exchanges, contexts and reasonings were given on how Jake was able to get a new football from Sandra.

This template gave an overview of how the exchanges and reciprocities differ with the same outcome (Jake eventually ending up with a new football).

Familiarize exchanges and types of reciprocities		
<b>Identify the actors</b> Choose a pair of actors in an exchange. E.g. Jodi (actor 1) buys a coffee for Jodi (actor 2). <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> <span>Actor 1 ... SANDRA (MOTHER) .....</span> <span>Actor 2 ... JAKE (SON) .....</span> </div>		
<b>How could these two actors engage in the following reciprocities?</b>		
<b>Generalized reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Generalized reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver does not expect a (tangible) return from the receiver.</small>	<b>Balanced reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Balanced reciprocity refers to exchanges in which the giver and receiver are obligated to give and receive items of perceived equal value.</small>	<b>Negative reciprocity</b> <small>Definition: Negative reciprocity refers to exchanges where one party between the giver and receiver attempts to act entirely on self-interest with the goal of material advantage or profit, without negative consequences.</small>
<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John treats a Jodi for a coffee.</small> <p>SANDRA GIFTED JAKE A FOOTBALL.</p>	<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for Jodi and Jodi sends him the money owed after they have met up.</small> <p>SANDRA GAVE JAKE €20, TO BUY A NEW FOOTBALL, IN EXCHANGE FOR CLEANING HIS ROOM.</p>	<b>What would be the exchange?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for his colleague Jodi but Jodi never buys a coffee back for John.</small> <p>JAKE TOOK €20 FROM SANDRA'S WALLET TO BUY A NEW FOOTBALL.</p>
<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John treats Jodi a coffee to catch up, after not seeing his friend for a few years. They go to a popular cafe in the neighborhood, in which John is a regular customer.</small> <p>SANDRA WAS SHOPPING AND SAW THIS FOOTBALL WHICH REMINDS SANDRA THAT HER SON JAKE WAS LONGING FOR A NEW FOOTBALL.</p>	<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John buys a coffee for Jodi. However, they had agreed that he would pay her coffee in advance and she would pay for the next coffee for John, instead of Jodi paying back John of what she was owed in money.</small> <p>JAKE WAS LONGING FOR A NEW FOOTBALL AND ASKED HIS MOTHER SANDRA TO BUY A NEW BALL. SANDRA ASKED JAKE HOW HE HAD AGREED THAT JAKE WOULD NEED TO CLEAN HIS ROOM.</p>	<b>What would be the context?</b> <small>E.g. John is new in the company and tries to get to know his colleagues during coffee breaks. During coffee breaks at work John buys a coffee for his colleague Jodi, multiple times. However, Jodi never shows effort or tries to buy a coffee for John.</small> <p>THE WALLET WAS LEFT IN THE LIVING ROOM AND JAKE NEEDED A NEW FOOTBALL, SINCE THE OLD ONE WAS UNUSABLE. AS A CONSEQUENCE JAKE FORGOT TOOK MONEY FROM HIS MOTHER'S WALLET.</p>
<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John treats his friend Jodi to show affection to their friendship and show appreciation to Jodi, that she made time to meet up again.</small> <p>TO SHOW LOVE FOR HER SON JAKE. TO GIVE JAKE THE CHANCE TO PLAY FOOTBALL WITH BETTER EQUIPMENT.</p>	<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John and Jodi would regularly have coffee together. And to prevent a relationship in which one person would be the one who would constantly have to pay, they decided to pay in turn, for each coffee meet-up.</small> <p>TO LET JAKE KNOW THAT HE HAS TO EARN A NEW FOOTBALL AND THAT IT IS NOT ALWAYS GIVEN. JAKE DOES NOT OFTEN CLEAN HIS ROOM, AND SANDRA COULD CREATE AN INCENTIVE TO DO SO, BY THIS EXCHANGE.</p>	<b>What could be the reason?</b> <small>E.g. John might try to buy coffee for his colleague Jodi, to create a good work relationship with his colleague. However after a few coffees he realized that Jodi does not tries to offer a coffee back. As a consequence, John decides to have coffee with other colleagues and tries to foster other work relationships.</small> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TO PLAY WITH HIS FRIENDS.</li> <li>• SANDRA WAS NOT HOME WHICH PROVIDED AN ENVIRONMENT WITH NO IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES.</li> </ul>



## Describe Values

Describe  
what the underlying values are

## What are the underlying values?

When designing for generalized reciprocity, it is crucial for designers to be able to describe the underlying values of exchanges and reciprocities (such as instrumental values and symbolic values), because these values shape how participants perceive and engage with the system. Instrumental value refers to the practical or functional worth of an exchange—what it directly provides in terms of utility, resources, or benefits. Symbolic value, on the other hand, is the social, emotional, or cultural significance of the exchange, which may go beyond its material worth [9].

Understanding these values allows designers to recognize not only what is being exchanged but also why these exchanges matter on a deeper level to the individuals involved. For instance, giving someone a meal may have clear instrumental value (nourishment), but it may also carry symbolic value (showing care, reinforcing social bonds, or expressing solidarity). Similarly, a favor like helping with a task might seem minor in its instrumental value, but the gesture could symbolize friendship, trust, or a sense of belonging within the community.

By being able to articulate these underlying values, designers can ensure that the system they create resonates with participants' motivations and fosters meaningful interactions. If the design only considers the instrumental value of exchanges, it may overlook the emotional and social dynamics that drive reciprocity in communities. For example, in some cultures, the act of giving or receiving might carry a deep sense of honor or duty, and failing to acknowledge the symbolic aspects could disrupt the delicate balance of generalized reciprocity, leading to unintended consequences such as resentment or disengagement [10], [14], [15].

Moreover, the balance between instrumental and symbolic values influences how participants experience fairness and equity within the system. In generalized reciprocity, participants are not keeping strict accounts of what they give and receive, but they often rely on a shared understanding of mutual support.

Describing these underlying values also helps designers tailor their concepts to specific cultural or social design contexts. What holds symbolic value in one community may differ greatly in another, depending on cultural norms, traditions, and social expectations. A deep understanding of both instrumental and symbolic value allows designers to create systems that reflect the community's priorities and values, ensuring that reciprocity is not just a functional exchange but a meaningful, culturally relevant practice.

### How to describe the underlying values?

- **Choose an exchange and name the actors involved.**
- **Map out the Instrumental and Symbolic values for actor A**
- **Map out the Instrumental and Symbolic values for actor B**
- **Think about other possible underlying values which might give the exchange between actor A and actor B importance.**



# Describe the underlying values

## Template for describing the underlying values

### How to use it

Although, it needs to be acknowledged that the interpretation and the definition of the borders of underlying values is vague, and highly dependent on the context of the exchange. However, this template aims to help designers to describe the foundation of Instrumental and Symbolic values which shape the aspects of reciprocities [9] and give designers a clear overview of underlying values that compliments the users' context, cultural norms or social norms. This template can be used dive deeper into a particular exchange, and describe the actual benefits behind an act of reciprocity (such as products, objects or services themselves) and the value conveyed by the exchange itself (such as expressing affection or showing trust). The template is divided in four sections.

Choose an exchange and name the actors involved.

Describe the Instrumental and Symbolic values for actor A.

Describe the Instrumental and Symbolic values for actor B.

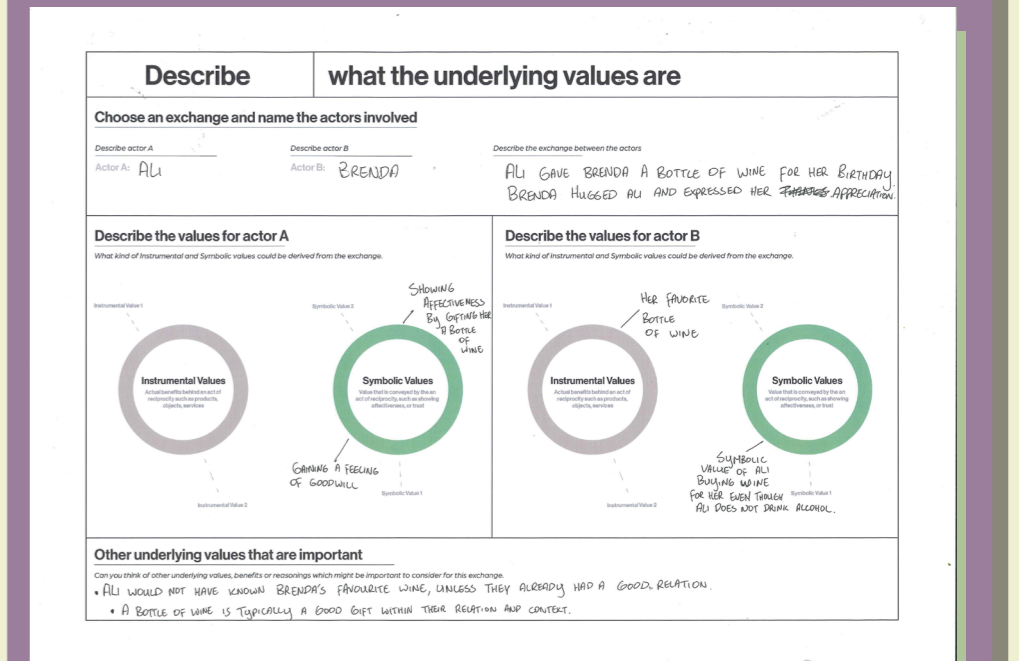
Other underlying values that are important.

### Pro-Tip

This template can be used for the same actors but different exchanges which highlights different values, that can be taken into account for the ideation phase.

### Practical Example

In this example, Ali exchanged with Brenda by giving Brenda her favorite wine as a gift. This exchange showed different values for Ali and for Brenda, and provided possible reasonings on why the exchange gave importance for both actors. The template showed different symbolic and instrumental values from both perspectives, as Ali does not consume alcohol, the wine gift was appreciated by Brenda as a symbolic value of buying something that Ali normally would not buy.



## Describe

## what the underlying values are

### Choose an exchange and name the actors involved

Describe actor A

Describe actor B

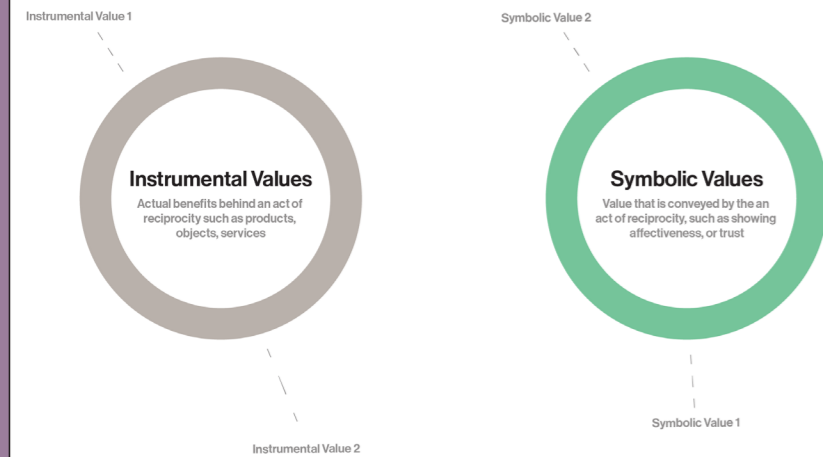
Describe the exchange between the actors

Actor A:

Actor B:

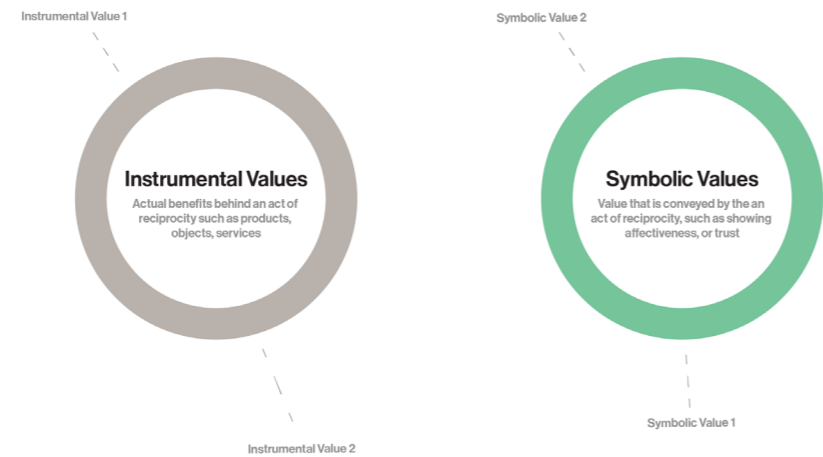
### Describe the values for actor A

What kind of Instrumental and Symbolic values could be derived from the exchange.



### Describe the values for actor B

What kind of Instrumental and Symbolic values could be derived from the exchange.



### Other underlying values that are important

Can you think of other underlying values, benefits or reasonings which might be important to consider for this exchange.

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# 7. Synthesize

## To Design for Generalized Reciprocity

### How to Design for Generalized Reciprocity?

To design for generalized reciprocity, synthesizing key insights is crucial for creating concepts that reflect the complex social dynamics involved.

Understanding the actors within the exchange provides insight into their relationships and motivations, which is essential for creating mutual trust and invoking aspects of long-term relationship building into your concept.

Identifying the exchanged objects or services clarifies the practical and symbolic weight of these exchanges, influencing how participants engage and the differences of perception of the exchange itself between actors.

Describing the underlying values (both instrumental and symbolic) ensures that the designed concept can be aligned with participants' motivations and social bonds. Furthermore, by describing the underlying values from different perspectives, it highlights the different motivations and reasonings from the actors involved.

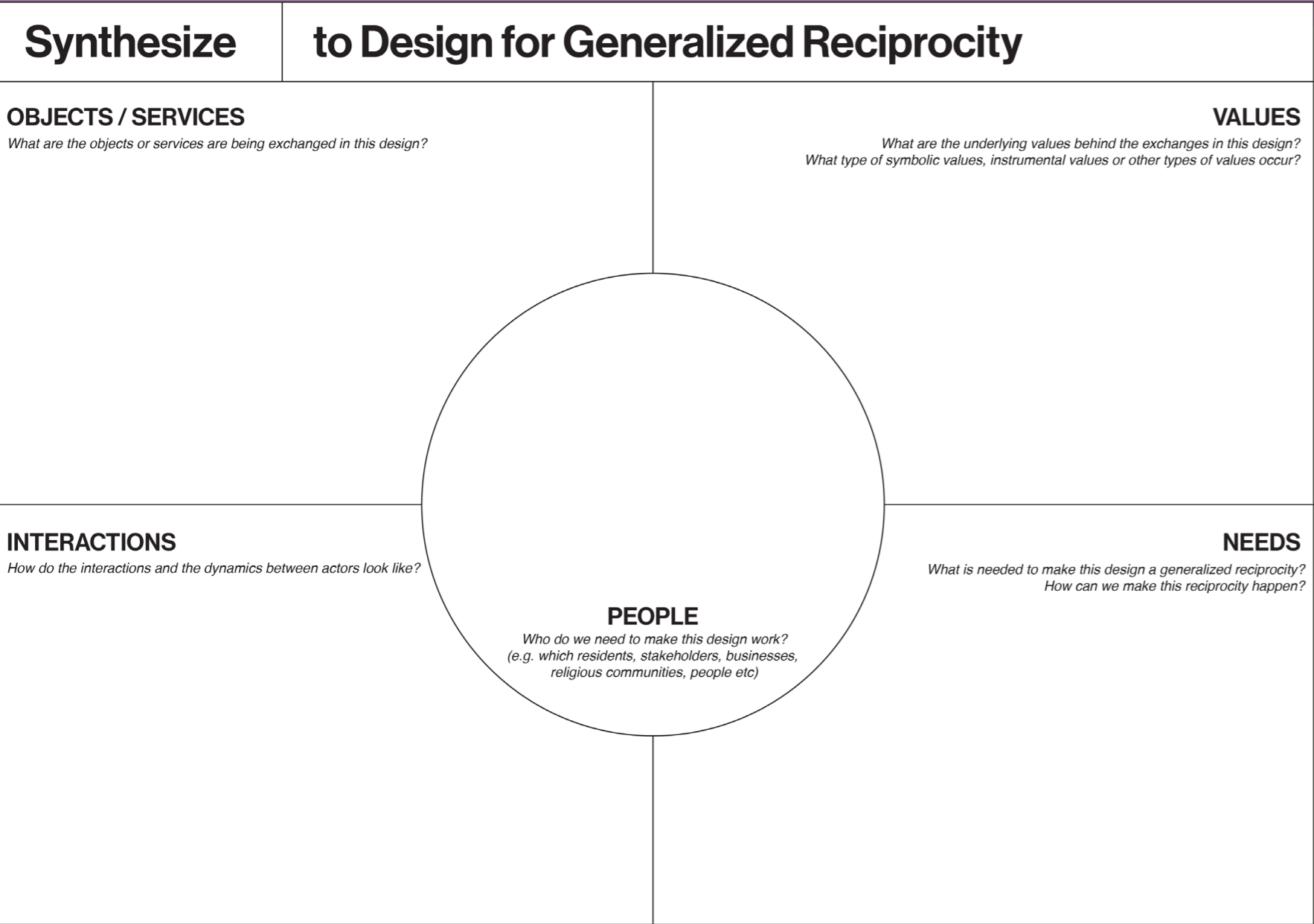
Lastly, by being familiar with different types of reciprocity it allows designers to tailor the future concept to encourage cooperation rather than transactional behavior.

To help designers to synthesize the insights gained from the four guidelines of Design for Generalized Reciprocity, we challenge designers to think about their idea, product or concepts and focus on the exchanges which revolve around the concept.

The designer is encouraged to think about the people involved in the design or idea, the objects or services which are being exchanged, the underlying values, the interactions within the context of the design and what is needed to make the design a generalized reciprocity.

#### How can we synthesize insights to Design for Generalized Reciprocity?

- **Think about which actors are needed to make this idea and the exchanges work.**
- **Describe what kind of services or objects are being exchanged in your design context.**
- **Explain the symbolic and instrumental values behind this exchange.**
- **Map out possible interactions and dynamics within your design context.**
- **Specify what is needed to make this exchange and generalized reciprocity a success.**



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# How can we Design for Generalized Reciprocity

## Template to synthesize the insights to Design for Generalized Reciprocity

### How to use it

This template aims use the insights gained from the four guidelines of this booklet to synthesize towards a design appropriate to invoke generalized reciprocity.

The template can be used by designers, but by users involved within participatory design such as co-creation sessions. It forces participants and designers to think about the context of the idea through the lens of generalized reciprocity.

The template is divided in 5 sections, and challenges the participants and designers to think about the following key questions:

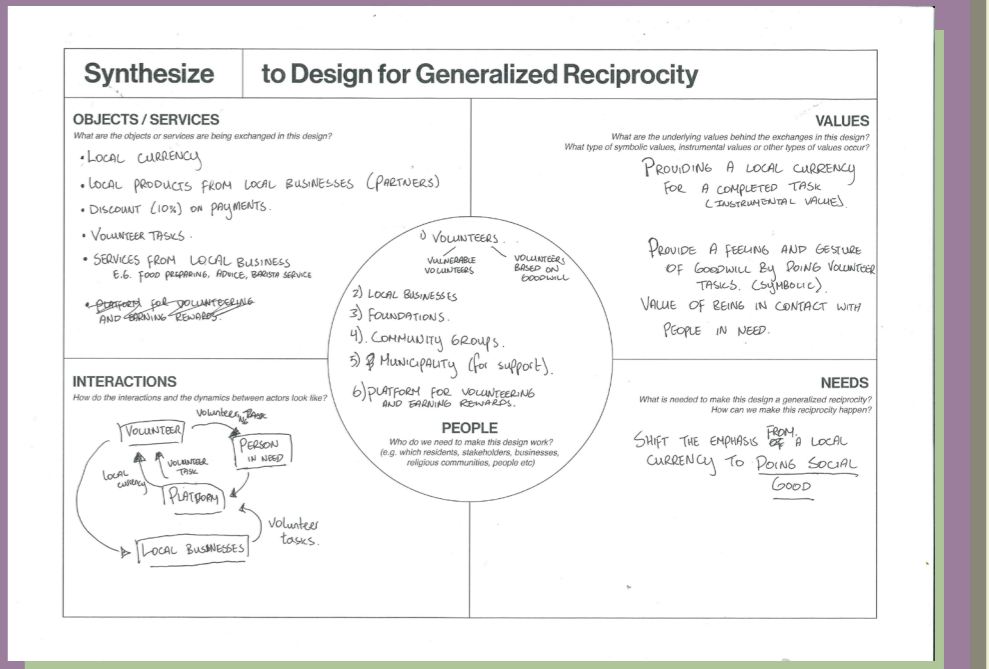
- Who do we need to make this design work?
- What are the objects or services exchanged in the design?
- What are the underlying values behind these exchanges?
- How do the interactions between actors look like?
- What is needed to make generalized reciprocity happen?

### Pro-Tip

Generalized reciprocity might be a complicated concept for participants in co-creation sessions. To simplify this give enough examples and metaphors during moderating.

### Practical Example

In this example, the template was used to conceptualize a local currency system. It created an overview of what objects or services, values, interactions and people were needed for the designed local currency system. And lastly, how we could make the design a generalized reciprocity for this specific design context. It was concluded that a shift of purpose was needed to prevent the perception of a local currency, and highlight the doing of social good, in order to invoke generalized reciprocity.



## 8. Note to designers

This booklet was made with the intention to help fellow designers to recognize the depth of simple exchanges between actors who play a key role within the potential design. I would like to emphasize to focus on understanding the people who are involved, the nature of what is being exchanged and the deeper values driving those exchanges and interactions.

For designers interested in fostering generalized reciprocity, keep in mind that this type of exchange is not about transactional exchanges, but rather about cultivating a community built on trust, generosity, and long-term relationships. Unlike balanced exchanges, where immediate returns are expected, generalized reciprocity depends on the belief that what you give today will come back to you or others in the community at some point in the future. This requires deep understanding of the social context in which the design operates.

When designing, it's essential to consider not only the functionality of the exchange and the design outcome, but also the social context that sustains it. You need to understand who the actors are, what they value, and how they relate to one another.

Pay attention to the objects or services being exchanged, their practical (instrumental) value as well as their symbolic meaning (the act of reciprocity itself). Something as simple as helping a neighbor could hold great cultural or emotional significance, far beyond its immediate utility. Recognizing these underlying values, helps to create a design that resonates emotionally and encourages sustained participation.

Lastly, understanding different forms of reciprocity is critical. You're not just building a system of give-and-take, but crafting an environment that promotes unselfish giving and trust. You need to anticipate how people might behave if imbalances arise, and design mechanisms to maintain perceived fairness, equity, and inclusion over time.

Ultimately, I would like to once more encourage designers to emphasize more on the culture of the actors and stakeholders involved within the design context. A great understanding of insights to design for generalized reciprocity comes from engaging, observing and interacting with the user groups' community. Even though it can be time consuming, by being involved with that community, you will be introduced to plenty of interactions, exchanges and sparks of reciprocities that create insights which cannot be derived from a goal-oriented approach or a design process which solely focuses on the design outcome.

## 9. Additional information

I am happy to conversate about this booklet, my Master's thesis project that played a huge role in the making of this booklet and the project with 2Ping, the thesis . Furthermore, I would like to express a big thank you to my supervisors Sander and Abhigyan for their feedback and guidance in making this booklet, and accompanying me with the Master's thesis journey.

### Downloadable Links

#### Design for Generalized Reciprocity Templates



Scan this QR Code, to download all the Design for Generalized Reciprocity Templates

#### Master's Thesis report



Scan this QR Code, to be referred to the accompanying Master's thesis report

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