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# **Generalized Generosity: Lessons from a Social and Educational Organization**

**Running head: Generalized generosity**

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## **Abstract**

While the personal and social benefits of generosity have been demonstrated in sociological studies, little is known about the levers and mechanisms of generosity within organizations. This article explores how members of a social and educational organization can participate in the culture of generosity. Based on an analysis of 89 semi-structured interviews with members of five different institutions oriented toward youth education, the authors provide insight into the different ways to contribute to disseminating generosity. Our study reveals how certain managerial practices can be effective levers for developing generalized generosity within an educational organization. We also show that each member of this type of organization is assigned specific roles of giver and receiver to enable their participation in the educational project.

**Keywords:** childcare workers, education, generosity, logic of gift, reciprocity.

# Generalized Generosity: Lessons from a Social and Educational Organization

Given the increased competition fueled by market globalization, coupled with a growing backlash against immigration, people may tend to become inward-looking and inclined to be less generous. Interestingly, however, more and more scholars have focused on generalized gratitude (Fehr et al., 2017; Locklear, Sheridan, & Kong, 2022), generalized reciprocity (Bruni, 2008; Zamagni and Bruni, 2013), or generalized generosity (Whitham, 2021). The terms gratitude and generosity refer to the emotions that lead people to practice generalized reciprocity, that is, to pay forward what they have previously received. All these authors observe the phenomenon where members of organizations can, under certain conditions, receive from people other than those to whom they themselves give, thus encouraging them to give in turn to people from whom they have received nothing. This observation, which is increasingly prevalent in the organizational literature, is based primarily on the research on giving (Faldetta, 2011), which holds that giving without the expectation of immediate return from the recipient produces strong social bonds. In this study, we use the term generalized generosity to show that acts of generosity lead receivers to experience generosity in their turn. These scholars acknowledge that generosity has personal and social benefits but fail to explain how to encourage it. They fear that a management that stimulates generosity is paradoxical or manipulative (Frémeaux and Michelson, 2011) as it involves requesting generous acts that can only exist in the absence of constraint. As Faldetta (2018) argues, establishing strict behavioral rules makes the spontaneous expression of generosity hypocritical or even impossible. However, Baviera *et al.* (2016) suggest that the different members of organizations, managers in particular, have a role to play in spreading generosity, and regret that there is no hard research on this issue.

Certainly, as can be seen in *European Management Review*, some studies have examined the notion of generosity and suggested a generosity-based management (Bruna and Bazin, 2018). But they have difficulty in defining generalized generosity in relation to the notion of reciprocity. This conceptual imprecision is largely related to the small number of empirical studies on the experience of generosity and the role of management in the culture of generosity.

Yet managers can be expected to practice a very specific generosity in supporting the mission-oriented employees, that is, those particularly challenged by the demands of the field. Organizations oriented toward the care of young people are the ideal research field for this question, because professionals dedicated to troubled young people but who receive little gratitude in return are particularly in need of this managerial generosity. Conversely, if managers generously grant resources to professionals, it is because they expect the latter to be dedicated to the troubled young people whose support is precisely the *raison d'être* of these organizations. These social and educational bodies are therefore structured around three categories of individuals—the managers, the professionals, and the young people—whose expressions of generosity are interrelated.

Our study aligns itself with this reflection on generosity to examine the following question: How can the different members of a social and educational organization, managers in particular, contribute to disseminating generosity? To answer this question, we observed practices either fostering or hindering generosity in a social and educational body composed of 200 institutions and 5,600 members, and specialized in youth development.

Based on an inductive analysis of 89 semi-structured interviews with members of five institutions in this youth-serving organization, our study identifies the managerial levers of the culture of generosity and describes the mechanisms of generosity in which all the actors of a social and educational organization—managers, professionals, and young people—can

participate as donors and recipients. The term “lever” is used to identify that which enables progress to be made in a particular direction by overcoming resistance. The generosity levers highlighted in this study are mainly managerial support actions designed to help professionals overcome the difficulties inherent in their activities.

This article is organized as follows. The first section introduces generalized reciprocity theories and focuses on the links between generosity and reciprocity, clarifying the various explanations of the phenomenon. The second section describes the context in which this inquiry was conducted and specifies how the data were collected and analyzed. The results related to practices encouraging or preventing generalized generosity are presented in the third section. The final section explains our theoretical and empirical contributions and identifies a number of avenues for future research.

## **Literature review**

### *Generalized reciprocity theories*

The contemporary theory of reciprocity argues that generalized exchanges—that is, the practice of giving something of benefit to another person without them giving something back—can produce strong social bonds (Boddeyn and Buckley, 2017; Simpson *et al.*, 2018; Whitham, 2018, 2021). Theorists of generalized exchange have provided an explanation by drawing on the concept of gift. Postulating that “generalized exchange is characterized by unilateral resource giving” (Takahashi, 2000, p. 1108), they consider that the giver expresses a concern for the well-being of others and thus stimulates the desire of the receiver in turn to care for others (Sahlins, 1972).

Studies have found that generalized exchanges are based on indirect reciprocity, which implies that receivers benefit from actors in the system other than those to whom they normally give (Molm *et al.*, 2007). In restricted exchange, there is a one-to-one

correspondence between what two actors give to and receive from each other directly, whereas generalized exchange involves more than two people (Takahashi, 2000). This generalized exchange can be defined as the process whereby each actor provides resources and eventually receives some benefit in return—not from the same actor, but from a different one (Takahashi, 2000; Mashima & Takahashi).

Numerous scholars refer to this phenomenon as generalized reciprocity or generalized generosity. Generalized reciprocity can be defined as the practice of paying forward previously received benefits (Bruni, 2008; Zamagni and Bruni, 2013). Generalized generosity refers to the connective value of generosity, which spreads through generalized reciprocity (Whitham, 2021). These two concepts cover a very similar reality that can be explained by the contagiousness of giving (Fowler and Christakis, 2010).

Indeed, it is hardly surprising that the generalized generosity phenomenon has been addressed by gift theorists who propose a non-calculative and other-oriented conception of reciprocity to impart more meaning and significance to the nature and context of relations. Inspired by the works of the French sociologist Mauss (1924, 1950), numerous scholars have used the concept of “total social phenomenon” to consider the meaning and symbols attached to exchanges of goods, and to highlight that social and business relations cannot be based on economic exchange alone (Bell, 1991; Dodlova and Yudkevich, 2009; Dolfsma *et al.*, 2009; Foweraker and Cutcher, 2020; Moschetti, 1979; Sherry, 1983; Titmuss, 1970). The triad structure of obligations inherent in Mauss’ interpretation of the gift—to give, to receive, and to reciprocate—also rests on the principle of reciprocity, which is not restricted to non-western cultures but characterizes gift exchanges in any given culture.

Gift theorists have also emphasized the proximity between generosity and reciprocity (Baviera *et al.*, 2016; Faldetta, 2011; Frémeaux and Michelson, 2011; Grassl, 2011; Guillen *et al.*, 2015). Rather than opposing generosity and reciprocity (Derrida, 1992; see also the

critical analysis of Hénaff, 2010), they rely on what Bourdieu (2001) called the “double truth of gift,” which includes both generosity and calculation. From this perspective, there is always both generosity and a desire for reciprocity, in proportions that vary over time and across cases. In the absence of direct access to workers’ changing intentions and aspirations, these studies refrain from contrasting between experiences of generosity and desires for counter-gifting.

Faldetta (2011) has endeavored to show that interpersonal relationships in organizations are established through gift rather than contractual logic. In other words, encouraging the logic of gift along with the two other logics of action—the logic of exchange and the logic of duty—fosters more human relationships in organizations. These scholars have also referred to ethical philosophers to address the paradox that unconditional giving fosters strong relationships (Faldetta, 2011). For example, Baviera *et al.* (2016) draw from Ricoeur (1992) who answers this paradox by underscoring that we do not give in order to receive something, but rather we give because we have already received. More recently, Bruna and Bazin (2018) refer to Levinas’ ethics of responsibility to demonstrate that responsibility as well as the logic of gift do not begin with the subject but always originate from the call of the other. This philosophical and spiritual view helps explain why giving is an opportunity to experience more human relationships and to provide deeper meaning to social relations. In this perspective, the logic of gift disconnected from any expectation of return can help engender a generalized generosity in business relations.

#### *Generosity, reciprocity, and management*

Becoming aware that relationships in organizations are based on the logic of gift, these researchers have also speculated about the role of management in organizational generosity. In particular, Baviera *et al.* (2016) identify three ethical implications of generosity for management: (i) it helps explain how giving employees autonomy often produces better

results than imposing systems of pervasive oversight and control, (ii) it contributes to the development of successful teamwork and deters individuals from shirking or free-riding, and (iii) it fosters the pursuit of meaningful social mission. The perception that giving can accomplish a good—be that the good of another individual or larger social, moral, or aesthetic goods (Guillen et al., 2015)—might reinforce the motivation to give. Therefore, Baviera *et al.* (2016) suggest that the logic of gift is capable of generating higher levels of excellence and motivation in organizations, provided that it is fostered by positive interactions between the different members of the organization.

Many scholars have already evoked the efficiency of generosity, but have not investigated specifically into how the various members of an organization can encourage it. Indeed, organizational studies tend to dissociate generosity and reciprocity by focusing on a definition of direct reciprocity (Gervasi, Faldetta, Pellegrini and Maley, 2022) according to which “people should help those who have helped them and people should not insult those who have helped them” (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171). This view of the organizational behavior constructs that use reciprocity can result in neglecting the notion of generalized reciprocity. In other words, there is clear evidence that generosity exceeds the logic of direct reciprocity (Bruna and Bazin, 2018), but there are few empirical studies showing that generosity, particularly managerial generosity, encourages generalized reciprocity.

However, Gouldner (1960, 1973) himself observes that the gift with the greatest chance of attracting attention is the one that is not a result of an ambition or a feeling of duty: no gift is more efficient than the gratuitous and unconditional gift. Gouldner (1960) used the automobile metaphor to evoke the subtle link between gratuitousness and reciprocity: gratuitousness is the key that switches on the starter and may ignite the engine of mutual reciprocity. Some authors have explained that altruistic motivation disconnected from selfish ambition is the most efficient driving force behind the relational dynamic (Feiler *et al.*, 2012).



Other authors have suggested that communities are stimulated by gifts that do not necessarily return to the initial givers but rather produce generalized cooperation (Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Fehr *et al.*, 2017). This generalized generosity—which can also be called a culture of generosity (Zamagni and Bruni, 2013)—benefits every member of organizations, other actors belonging to broader communities, and, potentially, societal actors (Alter, 2009; Bruni, 2008; Caillé and Grésy, 2014).

In this perspective, generosity characterizes gifting beyond what is rational and predictable to give, and in the context of a work environment, generosity can explain the multiplication of tasks accomplished beyond what is prescribed in a “spontaneous, random, unpredictable, and serving way” (Baviera *et al.*, 2016; Frémeaux and Michelson, 2011, p. 12). Our study focuses on generosity benefiting not only recipients but also other members of the organization as a whole. The purpose is to identify the different ways to contribute to the culture of generosity: How can every member of a social and educational organization encourage generalized generosity?

## **Methods**

### *Choice of a youth-serving organization*

A youth-serving organization constitutes a particularly relevant place for studying interconnected acts of generosity and their potential impact on youth education. In line with Hebson *et al.*'s (2015) reflection on the job satisfaction of care workers despite their working conditions, we analyze the organization of work in the youth development field. Some studies have focused on the working conditions of childcare workers and teachers deprived of the time and freedom to innovate (Burrow *et al.*, 2020). Other studies have connected the theme of youth development to the issue of generosity, showing in particular that gratitude can improve the well-being of adolescents when they have the opportunity to express grateful

feelings (Froh *et al.*, 2010). However, these studies have tended to focus on the development of the young person rather than explicitly connect the support provided to young people with the employment conditions necessary for this support (Rockow *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, we explore the potential links between managerial practices and generalized generosity in an organization located in France staffed by 5,600 dedicated professionals whose mission is to support at-risk people aged 6 to 21. Some of these young people are educated in the organization's schools, whereas others are educated in children's homes in line with court orders or decisions made by social services. In the organization's schools, the professionals focus on progression in terms of behavior, and on the obtention of diplomas. In children's homes, professionals aim to enable the youngest children to return home and to give the older children sufficient autonomy to access regular work and their own housing. There are multiple reasons why these young people are in difficulty, which is reflected in their care needs (school dropout; addiction to tobacco, alcohol, or narcotics; relationship problems with adults; psychiatric difficulties).

#### *Data collection*

We collected data from a range of qualitative methods, including 89 semi-structured individual interviews, lasting an hour on average, conducted over two years with members of five institutions in this youth-serving organization. We felt that the diversity of the five institutions (three children's homes and two school complexes, one of which is a middle school and the other a high school including a horticultural school and a professional training school) was key in making our study more representative than a homogeneous sample. The methodical study of five institutions allows us to put into perspective micro social orders, defined as "recurrent interactions, emotional reactions, perceptions of a group, and affective sentiments" (Lawler *et al.*, 2008, p. 519). We also selected interviewees based on their diversity in terms of gender (46 women and 43 men) and occupation. Indeed, the sample

consisted of 55 professionals (including teachers, educators, housekeepers, security guard, nurses, art therapists, psychologists, executive assistants, and pastoral officers) and 34 managers (including regional directors, heads of department, pupil welfare officers, and establishment directors such as school directors or children’s home directors). Demographic information for participants is presented in Table 1.

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We began interviews with open questions related to the interviewees’ work activity, aiming to stimulate a narrative that the interviewers sought not to interrupt. During the second phase of the interview, we focused a little more on difficulties encountered in the workplace. We prepared several follow-up questions to obtain clarification or to cover all employment and work-related aspects (e.g., How can work organizations reduce these difficulties? Can you give some additional examples?). Therefore, we did not raise the issue of generosity in our interview questions, rather it was evoked spontaneously by the interviewees.

*Data analysis*

The importance the respondents attributed to generosity convinced us to focus on it. On the one hand, professionals are highly motivated and willing to go beyond their usual functions to meet the specific needs of young people. On the other hand, those young people placed in an educational home because of their psychological, behavioral, and personal difficulties often cannot express gratitude to these professionals. Because the professionals accept that they will not receive gratitude from the young people they serve, they are particularly attentive to managerial support. This difficult situation, which professionals are likely to face, attracted

our attention from the beginning of our investigation and constitutes the focus of our data analysis.

Through a thematic coding process (Boyatzis, 1998), we generated a list of conceptual categories. As suggested by Tracy (2013), we conducted a two-phase process of data analysis. First, we coded the interviews into themes related to generosity. The respondents did not necessarily use the concept of generosity, but they evoked terms very close to this concept to describe what work or management turns out to be or should be. Indeed, they talked about the culture of giving, the logic of sharing or service, care for others, and attention to others, and all kinds of expressions that relate to a “hyperbolic generosity” which surpasses and exceeds direct and expected reciprocity (Bruna and Bazin, 2018, p. 580). Once confident that we had grasped the different expressions of generosity, we examined how the respondents spontaneously highlighted a connection between certain managerial practices and generosity. We concentrated on extracts in which interviewees explained that certain managerial practices are conducive or not conducive to the development of generosity, their own generosity, and the generosity of their colleagues. In the second step, we made connections between the categories to identify different managerial means of contributing to generosity. The various managerial practices constitute our first-order categories (attention to professionals’ acts of generosity; attention to the generosity of educational care; attention to generosity needed to overcome difficulties; attention to generous sharing of information; attention to the opinions and proposals generously expressed by others; setting of generous, clear, and achievable targets; provision of sufficient resources and autonomy allowing professionals to take generous initiatives; and development of common ethical guidelines), which we reorganized into broader second-order categories, labeled as follows: (1) welcoming professionals’ generosity, (2) making generosity between professionals possible, and (3) implementing conditions for spreading generosity. While we quickly agreed the first-order and the second-

order categories, we had many discussions before reaching consensus on the mechanism of generalized generosity and its impediments. We finally agreed on a dynamic vision of generalized generosity based on both direct and indirect forms of reciprocity.

## **Results**

Our results reveal that managerial support can contribute to the dissemination of generosity through welcoming professionals' generosity, making generosity between professionals possible, and implementing conditions for spreading generosity. In contrast, the absence of managerial support may infer denial of the professionals' generosity, denial of the difficulties they face, and create a confused educational project for which the granting of resources and autonomy is insufficient.

### *Welcoming professionals' generosity*

#### (i) Welcome the generosity of professionals' acts

In youth-oriented institutions, certain managers welcome and recognize the free and non-constrained generosity of professionals' acts: work beyond usual roles, solidarity actions within teams and between departments, or voluntary participation in think tanks. All of these spontaneous actions, which are not expected by managers, have in common that they better meet the needs of young people. These managers mention both the generous actions of professionals and the more general idea that the work of professionals is inherently a gift in "helping children to grow, to settle down, to calm down, because we are giving them what they need" (Female, head of department, in a children's home). Moreover, leaders who are sensitive to the mission accomplished by professionals tend to view their own work as a gift:

We sow little seeds and hope it sprouts for them. You feel like you're at the crossroads of everything, you have leverage over everything. I find it very interesting. I have a great time with my team members who are in the same frame of mind. We have different stories, but we have the same mindset, which is to put ourselves at the service of the kids. (Male, director in a school)

However, while directors are aware of the generosity that permeates the work of professionals, they do not necessarily seek to protect them, mainly for economic reasons: “the professionals compensate a lot, if they decide to stop compensating, I’ll blow my replacement budget” (Male, director in a school).

Other heads of departments do not refer to generosity, even implicitly. Here, professionals indicate that they feel misunderstood about how they define their profession: “Everything that is social, more specifically psychology, you are considered an alien, whereas it is the heart of the mission” (Female, teacher in a school). Deprived of managerial acknowledgment of their involvement and generosity, these professionals can discontinue acts of generosity that gave meaning to their professional activity. Here is a typical example reported by a housekeeper:

I work with an educator who gave a lot of himself, he spoke his mind and tried to help others. He was told that he was talking too much because he was trying to help others who were suffering, and he was told that it was none of his business. He didn’t take it well, and since then he has kept his mouth shut. He closes himself up. You can feel it: he gives up. (Female, housekeeper in a school)

(ii) Pay attention to the generosity of educational care

Another way of welcoming generosity is to pay attention to the care with which professionals’ work is done. A few managers strive to stay close to the field to better understand the work achieved by professionals; they realize that the care professionals show in their relationships with young people and the care they demonstrate in the performance of their duties are expressions of generosity. Considering the quality of work as a sign of generosity helps professionals “to feel committed to what is human [...] not to forget why they are there” (Female, educator in a children’s home), and to “give young people a form of affection that helps them to grow up, to be respectful of social rules, to become citizens” (Male, educator in a children’s home). However, even in cases where managers recognize the care with which the work is done, they do not always take enough time to express it: “we talk about the functioning, the organization, we come back to the contentious cases, but we will never say: it

is well what was done. I try to encourage the educators when there is something positive, but we don't do it enough" (Male, executive assistant in a school).

(iii) Pay attention to the generosity needed to overcome difficulties

A third way in which managers can welcome the generosity of professionals is to observe how they overcome the difficulties inherent in the work activity. Referring to relational difficulties with young people, some respondents recognize the extraordinary generosity of professionals:

You put your whole heart into it. You have to give more than 100 percent. (Male, executive assistant in a school)

A few managers ensure that the attention they pay to work difficulties is not experienced as a form of control but rather as an expression of empathy: "I like being on the ground, but I don't want to be on the educators all the time. I want to show the educators that they're not alone when the kids are messing up. What's important is to support the teams, even if they don't see it. I know what it is to be an educator" (Female, head of department in a children's home).

Professionals who feel supported by their managers in accomplishing the most complex tasks state that they can more easily accept and resolve difficulties. This managerial support encourages a positive spiral, the most visible signs of which prove in some institutions to be very low staff turnover, fewer periods of long-term sick leave, good educational development of young people, and good development of professional opportunities for older children. The following night watchman's statement exemplifies professionals' generosity with young people when the difficulties inherent to the activity are known and understood by their managers:

I feel good. There are more difficult nights, but we adapt. They are our children, our children are not easy. Young people who start to hit, to shout, to run in the corridors. For example, yesterday there was the game, it ends at 11pm. You say, "It's time to go to

bed,” and you close the room. They don’t want to go to bed. When they come out, they start to shout and go out into the corridors. Then they come back and say, “I know what I did yesterday was wrong, it’s not right.” Overall, it’s going really well. (Male, security guard in a children’s home)

In contrast, professionals who perceive a lack of managerial recognition of their generosity and the difficulties inherent in the work activity feel torn between the joy of giving and the feeling of isolation:

Young people, I know why I’m here: just for them, even if they are capable of questioning us. I have cried a lot. But we are the ones who help those who are in trouble. (Female, teacher in a school)

If there is recognition, it will come from the youth. You can unblock a situation; you’ll never be told that it’s good. But there are the young people. (Female, teacher in a school)

The lack of managerial support risks depriving professionals and young people of the benefits of generosity, even if most professionals are proud of themselves, particularly for doing such a difficult job:

I love this job, I will make it my career. I refused a position as head of department because I would lose too much human contact to an administrative responsibility that does not correspond to me. We are soul kneaders, it’s an enormous responsibility. There is a form of pride in being able to sculpt something. It’s a very beautiful job, very hard, not for everyone. (Male, educator in a children’s home)

### *Making generosity between professionals possible*

When managers are aware of the generosity of their teams, considering that professionals give themselves entirely to their activity, they can develop a set of practices oriented toward dialogue to facilitate the dissemination of generosity among professionals.

#### (i) Encourage generous sharing of information

Most managers promote discussion of work-related issues through interindividual meetings and weekly team meetings. These formal or informal times and spaces dedicated to dialogue and sharing enable the professionals to exchange information, develop their level of



knowledge of initiatives and practices, and adapt their activity according to young people's needs. To facilitate spontaneous and generous transmission of information, directors might deliberately not set steering committee agendas in advance, allowing everyone to raise apparently innocuous subjects and reveal important information about work initiatives. Such discussions, which allow for spontaneous exchange, are perceived by the professionals as a resource that helps them better adapt to the needs expressed by the young people:

Get back into work dynamics, discuss discipline issues, relationship problems with families, logistical issues for course organization and for the use of the computer room. It lets us get back into the swing of things and start the week well prepared to take care of young people. (Female, teacher in a school)

(ii) Encourage the generous sharing of difficulties

Some professionals use meetings as opportunities to express difficulties in their relationships with youth: "We have educational meetings, but it's hard to work. Because we are in contact with the youth, we need to vent, to share our experiences. Once everyone feels heard, we can discuss the organization of the work. We can find solutions" (Man, teacher in a school). In this perspective, in addition to coordination meetings, some institutions organize practice analysis meetings "once a month, for an hour and a half. It's a place to talk about how we experienced things. It allows us to read the situation differently and to start again with something else" (Female, educator in a children's home).

Demonstrating generosity is also based on a manager's ability to resolve organizational and educational difficulties in an equitable and effective manner: "sometimes I wish there were more heads of department and fewer educators. It's up to the leaders to decide whether people like it or not. Show authority" (Male, educator in a children's home). When professionals are deprived of active listening and thus decisions that would allow them to solve problems, they tend to stop expressing their difficulties, leaving problems unsolved and at risk of becoming embedded:

We see the young person who is going to be a problem quite quickly. You can't talk about it, it's taboo. Between what happens in meetings and what happens in the field, there is a gap. There is no time to discuss it. You have to adapt and then that's it. It's damaging for the youth. (Male, teacher in a school)

Board meetings are not very productive. From one meeting to the next, it's kind of like copy-and-paste. We have a director who is not very present and holds this meeting to legitimize his position. We keep coming back to the same topics. At the end of the year, we can see the same problems as at the beginning of the year. (Male, executive assistant in a school)

Professionals' generosity in preventing and resolving educational difficulties can thus be impeded by the inaction of their managers. For example, in a class of troubled teenagers, an art teacher had to deal with a fight started by a pupil who had already been in trouble with the police for another knife fight during which he had wounded someone. The teacher e-mailed the manager to find a solution, but in the absence of a clear answer felt she was not being supported:

They send us students who don't fit in, they fall under the jurisdiction of the judicial system. It can start very quickly. One of them threatened someone with a knife. I didn't see it coming. We are told not to interfere. I pushed them outside the classroom and they fought in the next room. We're not trained for that. I would like to be trained: what to say, what to do, what to answer. They insult each other, they talk badly. That's not my job. I sent an e-mail, I couldn't figure out how to handle it. But there was no follow-up. There were only e-mail exchanges. (Female, teacher in a school)

In this institution, management did not seem to recognize the efforts and needs of professionals, who thus felt alone in facing difficult situations and stopped expressing their difficulties to colleagues. The lack of opportunity to discuss and resolve difficult situations negatively affects professionals and young people alike.

(iii) Encourage the generous expression of opinions and proposals

The diffusion of generosity is significantly affected not only by having the opportunity to express difficulties but also by empowering professionals to effect change and to feel supported in the implementation of that change:

As a team, we exchange on the different proposals we can take. It is extremely rare that the head of the department makes a decision that does not go in the direction of the team. We bring arguments and we agree. (Female, educator in a children's home)

There is a strong sense of solidarity. I'm amazed. If one person asks for a change, it makes everyone change, I am surprised to see how people adapt. (Female, psychologist in a children's home)

However, not all department heads necessarily encourage this creative generosity, sometimes even complaining about their team's resistance. Obstacles to the expression of generosity can be linked, for example, to the recruitment of certain personalities who favor the logic of competition over the logic of listening and mutual aid:

When we try to change things, there is a lot of passive resistance, because they don't want to change things. In order for things to change, you have to be participatory. But when there are strong personalities, people don't dare to speak up. It's obvious in some team meetings, it's always the same people talking. (Male, head of department in a school)

#### *Implementing the conditions for spreading generosity*

Aware of the importance of the generous and unexpected behaviors adopted by professionals in their relationships with youth, most managers implement conditions that allow different members of the organization to be effective in meeting the needs of young people. These managers can create a safe working environment for professionals, enabling them to complete projects and to make unconstrained acts of generosity:

Secure the teams I work with so that they can give. We need security or we don't commit. (Female, teacher in a school)

Just make sure my team's okay. If a team is okay, the kids are okay. (Male, head of department in a children's home)

One of the main signs of the dissemination of generosity is the positive attitude of young people who, rather than resisting the rules implemented within the institution, are concerned about not only their own educational development but also that of other young people:

When I didn't have any incidents, fights. The students were not bored, they were absorbed in the session. (Male, teacher in a school)

When you see a young person who takes off and evolves in a positive way by helping others. (Male, head of department)

A young person who talks at the dinner table when he didn't speak before, who makes an effort to speak French, who jokes, who thinks it's normal to serve the table, who asks how to wash his clothes properly, who appreciates being accompanied to buy clothes. (Male, educator in a children's home)

(i) Set clear, achievable, and generous goals

The first lever is the setting of clear, achievable, and generous targets. Professionals can display greater generosity when they consider that their actions are consistent with managerial objectives. For example, one director explained that, because he was interested in the question of parenthood, he encouraged the professionals to engage in innovative projects such as the publication of a parenting guide produced in partnership with children's judges and social services or to set up an emergency reception service for short-term child custody:

I am extremely delighted to see you very much involved in a co-constructed project, surprised by your openness to a different way of thinking, surprised by the quality of exchanges... and proud to have made my small contribution. (Male, school director)

(ii) Allocate sufficient resources and autonomy allowing professionals to take generous initiatives

Allocating sufficient resources and giving professionals autonomy also enable them to intervene in situations beyond their normal responsibilities, and to experience mutual support:

Very often I work overtime, I decorate the pavilions. I do it because I want to do it, I do it for the kids ... I have the opportunity to do it. (Female, housekeeper in a school)

Such agile work environments can also stimulate professionals to develop humanitarian missions that benefit both young people and others experiencing similar difficulties:

Every Thursday night, with a former colleague, we did the "homeless" operation. We left with the truck, seven young people and two educators. We had coffee, chocolate, tea, and water, and we went to Paris where we got soup at a restaurant. The young

people used to distribute this to the homeless at Austerlitz station, from 8pm to 11pm It had to stop because the police asked us if we had obtained the necessary authorization. We asked for it. We couldn't get it. A few years later, I asked the director if we could try again in another place. He agreed and let me. And it's been a huge success. (Male, educator in a children's home)

Conversely, a lack of autonomy and resources can prevent professionals from embracing a logic of generosity, which they would otherwise have given meaning to:

I accompany a young person who has difficulty integrating into the group, a very good reader. I give him this role: "Go to your friends and find me a magazine that the whole group will like." In the end they chose a subscription to *S&V Junior*. I made a purchase request and gave it to my head of department. I was told that subscriptions are not included in the group budget. (Male, educator in a school)

A lack of resources can be reflected in the non-replacement of educators on sick leave, for example. In one children's home characterized by an excessive proportion of difficult young people and inadequate infrastructure that required residents to spend long periods of time traveling between sites each day, the non-replacement of a sick educator created a crisis. Professionals experienced an increased and disorderly work rhythm that made them less available to the young people, who then committed many violent acts. This created a climate of insecurity and increased the incidence of sick leave, which affected the other educators. Rather than acknowledging the excessive increase in workload and questioning the effect of non-replacement of educators on sick leave, the director shifted responsibility onto all the professionals, depriving them of recognition and support. As a result, professionals progressively abandoned an attitude of going beyond what their job descriptions prescribed, the level of educational care was weakened, educational rules became confused, and educational difficulties multiplied (disregard for the rules, and even violence between young people):

Each educator makes his or her own little rules. They are going to change every day. Young people can say: with this professional, we have the right to do this. So we're having trouble positioning ourselves. And yet, there are rules for life. Example: No TV in the morning. A young girl, I said to her: "You turn it off." I learned in the evening

that once I had left, she watched TV all morning long. (Female, security guard in a children's home)

(iii) Ensure an alignment of practices

A safe working environment presupposes clear educational guidelines that favor the progression of young people. To avoid divergent interpretations of professional standards, institutional regulations, and rules of procedure, most managers encourage an alignment of practices on the following issues: the organization of family weekends; access to television, schedules, and rules regarding bedtime; levels and enforcement of sanctions; tobacco and medication management; and management of the relationship between young people and their parents. This standardization of practices allows professionals to embrace the culture of generosity without exhausting themselves in inconsistent and counterproductive actions:

To have formalized common requirements, on which to build this safe framework for students, with colleagues and educators. (...) It is a habit to work as a team and to say things to each other. (Male, director in a children's home)

In the absence of clear educational guidelines, professionals may be prevented from exercising the authority that young people need:

A student didn't come to a test on purpose, he hasn't been there for three days. The system should be changed, but we can't discuss it. Similarly, we tolerate students coming in every day at noon. This is the result of a lack of willingness to work together. I often feel like my hands are tied. (Female, educator in a school)

Some professionals point out that generosity does not mean demagogic practices but rather the attention paid to young people within a set of clear rules defined by management:

By not reframing the young people, they are allowed to overflow. There is a fear of the young person, it is a form of demagogy: we adopt the role of the kind person. It does not help young people. (Female, educator in a children's home)

Table 2 offers a synthesis of the different managerial levers that are conducive to the development of a culture of generosity.

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## INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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### Discussion

#### *Theoretical implications*

Our study contributes to the literature on generosity (Molm *et al.*, 2007; Whitham, 2021), which highlights the benefits for oneself and for others of acts of generosity. Revealing how a social organization can constitute an efficient structure for generosity, our study specifies the subtle levers of a culture of generosity. If acts of generosity in relationships with young people are performed primarily by professionals, the main levers of this generosity lie in management's ability to support the generosity of those professionals. This first observation confirms the findings of studies about the role of management in the development of trust and indirect reciprocity (Boddewyn and Buckley, 2017). It also enriches the literature on generalized reciprocity (Baviera *et al.*, 2016; Bruna and Bazin, 2018; Gervasi, Faldetta, Pellegrini and Maley, 2022; Whitham, 2021; Frémeaux, Grevin and Sferrazzo, 2022) by providing insight into the role of managerial practices that can encourage or impede generosity.

Our results are also consistent with the literature on gratitude (Emmons, 2003), which suggests that this “sense of joy and thankfulness in response to receiving a gift” (Emmons and McCullough, 2004, p. 554) may encourage the strengthening of supportive relationships between people and “drive a positive spiral of reciprocity” (Fehr *et al.*, 2017, p. 373). As “over half of the organizational behavior papers on gratitude (55%) were published within the last 5 years” (Locklear, Sheridan, & Kong, 2022, p. 226), research on gratitude is nascent and still struggling to understand how this feeling emerges and influences workplace outcomes. While it is well established that the gratitude of the direct recipient can be the source of direct

reciprocity (Locklear, Sheridan, & Kong, 2022), we show the benefits of the gratitude of the indirect recipient. We demonstrate in a more precise way that professionals' acts of generosity may generate managerial gratitude, leading managers to foster a generosity-friendly environment.

We also contribute to research on giving (Baviera et al., 2016; Bruni, 2008; Faldetta, 2011; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011; Verhesen, 2009) by observing how different members of the organization participate in the culture of generosity in various ways: some categories of individuals give directly to the beneficiaries of the mission (professionals care about the education of young people) while others are indirect actors in the culture of generosity, focusing upstream on the creation of conditions conducive to the achievement of the mission (managers support the professionals in fulfilling their mission). The generosity of managers is based on the confidence of knowing that, by supporting a category of individuals, those individuals will in turn support others. This organizational perspective reverses the traditional focus on management's role in mission development and implementation. Instead, it enshrines the idea that the primary managerial function is to support the mission indirectly by supporting those who will act directly.

### *Practical implications*

Our study reveals that the positive spiral in some institutions and portrayed in Figure 1 is partly linked to managerial practices that favor better execution of tasks by professionals, more generous involvement of the professionals with the young people, and, from the point of view of the different members of these institutions, the participation of the young people in the educational project by sometimes generously helping other young people. These managerial practices focus on welcoming the gratuitousness of professionals' acts; other managerial practices afford professionals the same level of attention that they give to young people by providing them with favorable conditions for dialogue; and, finally, other



managerial practices create a safe working environment for professionals based on achievable targets, sufficient resources and autonomy, and common and clear rules, enabling them to adapt themselves to the needs of young people. This managerial support helps professionals to show a certain generosity in their relationships with young people who, as a result, may be more inclined to commit to the educational project.

In contrast, the negative spiral existing in other institutions and depicted in Figure 2—the most visible symptoms of which can be the increasing amount of sick leave taken by educators and the rising number of incidents involving young people—results from a lack of managerial support, which hinders the culture of generosity and the fulfillment of youth needs. Without managerial support, professionals risk feeling divided between the needs of young people and the demands of management without being able to practice generosity.

We highlight the dominant acts of generosity that allow the establishment of a culture of generosity and demonstrate the benefits of generosity. The benefits of managerial generosity are reflected in the professionals' devotion to and the young people's involvement in the educational project. Various forms of direct reciprocity are amplified by the managerial consideration of the generosity of professionals: just as young people may express gratitude to professionals, professionals may be thankful to managers for their support.

Figure 1 depicts the generalized generosity mechanism when supported by the managerial practices adopted by the social and educational institutions. Figure 2 highlights the difficulties encountered by professionals in the absence of managerial support. The arrows in these two figures show how generosity can be disseminated through acts of generosity that are performed with varying degrees of ease depending on organizational and managerial circumstances.

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## INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

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### *Limitations and future research*

One limitation of our study is that we focus on a social and educational organization oriented at the welfare and progression of young people at risk. There is no doubt that professionals working in a youth-serving organization adhere to generosity as a core value of the organization and give more meaning to social and symbolic recognition than to material and financial recognition (Hebson *et al.*, 2015). Organizations that do not promote the notion of generosity in their mission as clearly as this organization may reject it entirely. In addition, our results confirm Rockow *et al.*'s (2016) findings on the importance of managerial support in the youth development field, but we question whether these results are generalizable to other kinds of organizations. The time and energy needed to educate young people in difficulty require a clear professional and educational framework for both employees and young people. As the supportive practices described in our study are broadly related to managerial issues common to all organizations, they may be likely to encourage generosity in all kinds of organization. But this issue merits consideration in future studies on generosity, which could examine more varied organizations in terms of objective and size to verify whether the supportive managerial practices identified in the present study are effective in other contexts, encouraging members of the organizations to act as citizens by going beyond what is formally expected.

Another limitation of our study is that we do not capture the reasons why managers who welcome the generosity of professionals tend to support generosity or why professionals who welcome managerial generosity tend to devote themselves more carefully to their work. Therefore, future research on the efficiency of generosity could verify that individuals

welcoming and recognizing generosity go beyond episodic gratitude and experience a persistent and collective gratitude that Fehr *et al.* (2017) define as “a stable tendency to feel grateful within a particular context (...) that is shared by the members of an organization” (Fehr *et al.*, 2017, pp. 363, 364). Future research could explore the causal links between the various acts of generosity by all participants in the company’s project and, more particularly, between managerial support, persistent and collective gratitude, and a culture of generalized generosity.

## **Conclusion**

Our study suggests that the members of organizations who appreciate their colleagues’ acts of generosity are more capable of contributing in turn to a culture of generosity. Above all, our study highlights the role of managers, who, although not the main recipients of professionals’ generosity, are the main facilitators of generalized generosity. This involves paying attention to: professionals’ acts of generosity; the setting of generous, clear, and achievable targets; the provision of sufficient resources and autonomy, allowing professionals to take generous initiatives; and the development of common ethical guidelines. We observe that this business support fosters not only professionals’ motivation but also a generalized generosity or reciprocity, which encourages greater participation of the professionals and the young people in the educational project. The main contribution of this study is to reflect on a culture of generosity by acknowledging its possible efficiency, which can be both welcomed and facilitated by management and the different members of organizations: management provides a safe working environment for professionals, who provide care to young people, who are in turn encouraged to participate in the educational mission pursued by all the members of the organization. This implies that managerial practices focus on the real work done and not only on prescribed and predictable work. Welcoming work done well, discussing work-related

issues, and encouraging quality work all contribute in a concrete and non-idealistic way to the formation of a community of givers and receivers.

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**Table 1: Demographic information for participants**

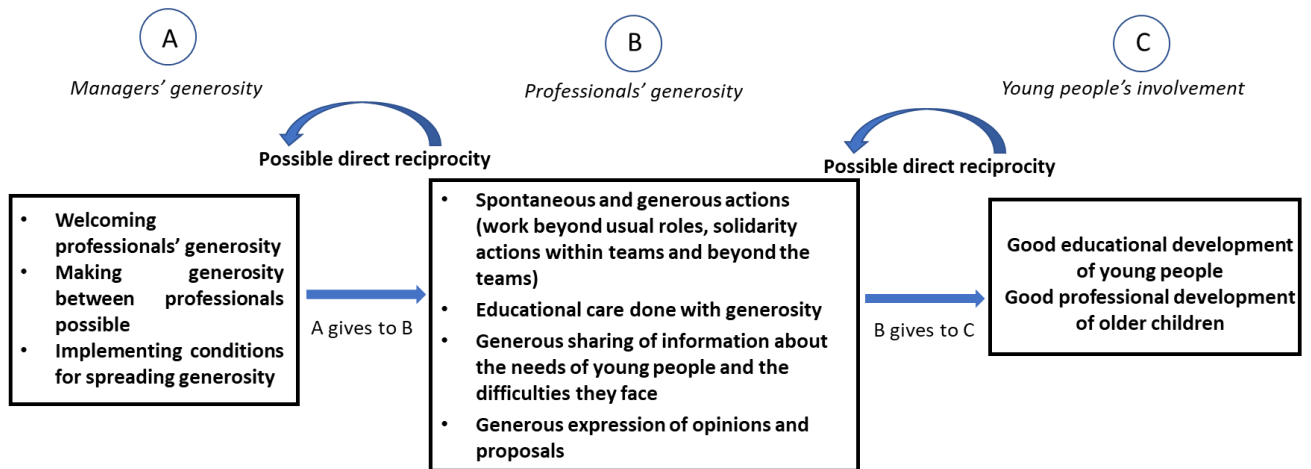
Respondents		Sample (N=89)		Gender		Total
		School complexes	Children's home	Female	Male	
Professionals	Teachers	9		4	5	9
	Educators	9	17	13	13	26
	Other professionals	5	15	17	3	20
Managers	School or children's home directors	5	5	2	8	10
	Heads of department	2	5	4	3	7
	Pupil welfare officers	3		1	2	3
	Regional directors	14		5	9	14
Total		89		46	43	89

**Table 2: Generalized generosity and illustrative data examples**

<b>Second-order categories</b>	<b>First-order categories</b>	<b>Business practices</b>
<b>Welcoming professionals' generosity</b>	<b>Welcome the generosity of professionals' acts</b>	Considering work beyond usual roles/considering work outside regular working hours/paying attention to solidarity actions/looking at voluntary participation in groups
	<b>Provide attention to the generosity of educational care</b>	Going into the field/paying attention to what is happening in the field/taking into account professionalism/considering initiatives launched in the workplace
	<b>Provide attention to the generosity needed to overcome the difficulties inherent in the activity</b>	Considering relational difficulties with young people/expressing empathy toward professionals in contact with young people
<b>Making generosity between professionals possible</b>	<b>Encourage generous sharing of information</b>	Formalizing times and spaces dedicated to generous sharing of information/organizing regular team meetings/encouraging formal and informal interindividual meetings/using informal procedures with a flexible agenda
	<b>Encourage the generous sharing of difficulties</b>	Providing time for professionals to talk about the difficulties encountered/providing active listening and decisions that allow problems to be solved
	<b>Encourage the generous expression of opinions and proposals</b>	Asking for the professionals' opinion/accepting their remarks/taking new proposals into account
<b>Implementing</b>	<b>Set clear, achievable, and</b>	Providing a clear and generous explanation of the aims

<b>the conditions for spreading generosity</b>	<b>generous goals</b>	
	<b>Allocate sufficient resources and autonomy allowing professionals to take generous initiatives</b>	Providing financial support/providing support in terms of human resources/ allowing them to take generous initiatives/allowing them to organize themselves autonomously
	<b>Ensure an alignment of practices</b>	Avoiding divergent interpretations of the rules/being attentive to the coherence of the practices/avoiding each professional making their own rules

**Figure 1: Structured and stable generalized generosity in a social and educational institution**



**Figure 2: Barriers to generalized generosity in a social and educational institution**

