Social Exchange Theory

Kathleen Sapola

Kent State University
Abstract

This paper is a review of research done on the Social Exchange Theory including several studies that have been done. The articles I researched have applied the theory to different scenarios including Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions, Making and Breaking Relationships, Romantic Relationships, Volunteering, benefits of procedural and distributive justice, and Organized Leisure Activities.

Key Words

Costs, Rewards, Relationships, Emotions
According to our book the Social Exchange Theory suggests that the major force in interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of both people’s self-interest. When self-interest is recognized it will enhance a relationship. The Social Exchange Theory is all about costs and rewards, and giving and receiving. I was able to find several excellent articles that explain different scenarios using the theory.

The first article I came across titled *Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions* is all about sexual negotiations within heterosexual relationships. The article explains that straight men and women are often seen as buyers and sellers in a marketplace affected by the exchanges between other buyers and sellers. According to the article there are four main points that we should be aware of. “First, the behavior of individuals is interconnected in market systems in which individual choices are shaped by costs and benefits in the context of stable preferences. Second, scarce but desirable resources are allocated by price shifts and other market influences. Third, sellers of goods or services compete with each other (as buyers also do, but not as much). Fourth, people seek to maximize their outcomes.”

The article also mentioned that intercourse does not mean the same to women as it does to men. Women need more of a commitment than sex. “As a result, sexual intercourse by itself is not an equal exchange, but rather an instance of the man getting something of value from the woman. To make the exchange equal, the man must give her something else in return and his own sexual participation does not have enough value to constitute this.” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Men often give material gifts, respect, and commitment to women in order to be appreciated.
The second article that I researched titled *Social Exchange Theory: The Maker and Breaker of Relationships* suggests that the Social Exchange Theory explains how and why people make or lose friends. “According to Homans’s theory, every relationship comes with costs and rewards, and people only keep relationships if the rewards outweigh the costs. The reward versus cost scale is actually derived from economics. In economics, trading goods is essentially about getting the most “bang for your buck.” Homans made the connection between economics and sociology when he found that people also want the most rewards for the least costs in relationships. If rewards outweigh the costs, then a relationship is likely to cease.” (Bruland, 2008). For example, if you are in a relationship where you have to pay every time you go out to eat, or if you do all of the chores around the house with out any help, etc, there is a chance that your relationship might fail because your costs out weigh your reward. You aren’t getting enough in return for what you put in to the relationship.

The author of the article did an experiment. She bought her friend Barbara dinner because she did not have any money. Another friend lent Barbara tokens to play a game. Barbara did not say thank you for dinner or the tokens! Almost all of Barbara’s friends are annoyed by her. They were all contributing to her, but not receiving from her. The last thing I want to share from this article is an opinion from a professor at Texas University “She claims that human interactions are too complicated to be defined by economic concepts, such as the reward verses cost scale. Miller argues that other aspects, like previous relationships, play a role in present relationships: “Individuals make psychological assessments of their current relationship and compare those assessments to past relationships” (Bruland, 2008). This professor make a very good point in suggesting that we critique are relationships bases on our past experiences.
The third article I researched titled *Social Exchange Theory Applied to Romantic Relationships* is very similar to the first article I talked about. However, it talks more about how women are in control of sex within a relationship. “Men, on the whole, tend to expect relationships to become sexual considerably sooner than women do. [Cohen 294, 295] When evaluating how these expectations compare with men and women’s actual experiences in relationships, it is seen that only the women’s expectations are a good indicator of when sex actually occurs. This suggests that it is women, not men, who have the most influence on when sexual intercourse occurs; women are the “gatekeepers” of sexuality within relationships [Cohen 297].” (Wang, 2004).

Women do not want to give sex up freely. According to the article, women usually have fewer partners than men, and usually think about their virginity as more of a gift than men do. Men usually try to get rid of their virginity as soon as possible. It is proven that a woman’s sexuality is much more valuable than a man’s. “More evidence for the social exchange theory is the fact that it is women, not men, who are perceived to enforce the sexual double-standard, judging fellow women more harshly when they engage in sexual promiscuity” (Wang, 2004). I have definitely seen this in real life! When a man has sex with many females he is often praised. When a woman has sex with many males she is often called a “slut”. That has always bothered me.

The end of this article reminded the readers that the Social Exchange Theory is only one way of analyzing many different motivations. There are many factors that cause different roles that men and women play. Most of these are cultural and biological.

The fourth article titled *An Affect Theory of Social Exchange* explains how and when emotions, produced by social exchange, generate stronger or weaker ties to relations, groups, or
networks. We know that there are rewards and punishments within relationships. It definitely makes sense that they can affect our moods. “Mild everyday feelings, therefore, are intertwined with exchange. Positive emotions include excitement, pleasure, pride, and gratitude, and negative emotions include sadness, shame, and anger. Second, social exchange is a quintessential joint activity, but the nature and degree of jointness varies.” (Lawler, 2001). This theory argues that, contingent on the exchange structure, emotions or feelings from exchange influence how actors perceive and feel about their shared activity, their relation, and/or their common group affiliations.

The fifth article I researched titled *Social Exchange Theory, Interpersonal Communication Motives, And Volunteerism: Identifying Motivation to Volunteer and The Rewards and Costs Associated* was very different than the previous articles. This study was designed to find out the reasons why people volunteer.

“The participants for this study were drawn from a sample population of 177 individuals from three states (Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia) who actively participated as volunteers. The sample participants were active volunteers in six different organizations that assisted hospital patients, underprivileged or at-risk youth, church related concerns, schools, and other miscellaneous services.” (Corrigan, 2001). From the results they were able to assume that Interpersonal Communication Motives play a strong role in determining what motivates an individual to volunteer. It was found that volunteering several hours a week lead to self-competence and self-liking. Volunteering makes you feel good about yourself. Even though it costs you time to volunteer, it is worth it when you get something positive in return. “Volunteers can gain experience in a possible field of study or build up their resumes for a new career path by exchanging their personal time. Some exchange their love and compassion for reinforcing
gratitude in the form of a simple, reciprocating ‘thank you’ or smile (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).” (Corrigan, 2001). I found it interesting to see that the Social Exchange Theory can be applied to volunteering, not just romantic relationships.

The sixth article I researched titled *Social exchange in supply chain relationships: The resulting benefits of procedural and distributive justice* explains how Social exchange theory is used to model the outcomes of procedural and distributive justice in supply chain relationships. This article was very long and intense. The summary of this article was this “In this study, we examine how the enacted procedural and distributive justice policies of a firm influence its partner’s attitudes and behaviors within a sample of 290 supply chain relationships. Findings indicate that the perceived procedural and distributive justice of a supplier’s policies enhance the long-term orientation and relational behaviors of its distributor, which, in turn, are associated with decreased conflict and increased satisfaction, that influence the distributor’s performance. The authors discuss the importance of the results for academics and practitioners.” (Griffith, Harvey, Lusch, 2006).

The seventh article titled *Social Exchange Theory as a Framework for Understanding Ceasing Participation in Organized Leisure Activities* definitely caught my attention. I love finding Social Exchange articles that don’t have anything to do with romantic relationships. It is amazing how this theory can be applied to so many other things!

“Individuals engage in organized leisure pursuits to satisfy a need. Usually, the need has emerged as important, albeit sometimes on a transient basis, and thus serves to be of sufficient motivation for the individual to pursue involvement in a particular activity. The social exchange model suggests that in order to understand why individuals cease participation in organized leisure services, the following must be discerned:
1. The need(s) they sought to satisfy and their relative priority

2. Their perception of the degree to which these needs were satisfied

3. Their perception of the degree to which their needs were being addressed fairly, relative to others involved in the same or similar program

4. Their definition of the costs they incurred in participation and whether they were in proportion to the benefits they perceived themselves receiving


The Eighth article I researched is titled *Fostering cooperation on the Internet: social exchange processes in innovative virtual consumer communities*. This article talks about gift giving and exchange within virtual communities.

“As producing consumer groups do not need to make major investments, besides a computer in a network and their brains, they are no longer dependent on firms producing digital goods, but instead jointly create and exchange digital products themselves. Furthermore, and even more important, they produce digital goods and provide on-line services that better fulfill their own needs. Virtual communities of creative consumers, therefore, dramatically challenge the hitherto prevailing view that the sphere of production is separated from the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).”(Hemetsberger, 2001). These consumers are giving and receiving rewards when they create and exchange digital products.

I wanted to share the definition of the Social Exchange Theory according to About.com. “Social exchange theory proposes that social behavior is the result of an exchange process. The purpose of this exchange is to maximize benefits and minimize costs. According to this theory, people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. When the risks
outweigh the rewards, people will terminate or abandon that relationship."

The final source that I used was www.washington.edu. According to the site “Social exchange theory is based on a central premise: that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. With roots in earlier theories developed in cultural anthropology, neoclassical economics, and psychology, the school of thought on social exchange developed at the UW focused on how interaction patterns are shaped by power relationships between individuals, and the resulting efforts to achieve balance in exchange relations. The simulation involved 112 male and female participants in a specially developed computerized laboratory and communication network. Each of eight subjects was connected to three others as bargaining partners, forming two separate four-person networks. Subjects sought to increase their profits by entering into "trade agreements" for "resource units." Subjects could pursue either formal or informal negotiating procedures before a "transaction" was completed. The experimental design allowed the researchers to study power, equity, and the creation of commitment during these bargaining processes.”

I found all of the articles and websites that I used very useful and interesting. I was fascinated to learn that the Social Exchange Theory can be used in other situations besides romantic relationships.
References


http://psychology.about.com/od/sindex/g/socialexchange.htm