Social Exchange Theory on Romantic Relationships

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I am interested in what literature exists on the topic of romantic relationships seen through a social exchange theory perspective. This piece will begin by explaining social exchange theory and the way it has been used for understanding intimate relationships. The article will then cover specific topics that have an impact on romantic relationships including partner selection, trust building, gift giving, expectations, and equity. The focus of this paper will be in developing an understanding of how various factors in an exchange affect relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Social exchange theory is an interdisciplinary perspective that has roots in anthropology, economics, sociology, and social psychology. As it derives from so many different disciplines, social exchange theory, likewise, has been applied to a number of different topics. (Emerson 1976). In this paper, I explore the fundamental elements of social exchange theory in order to gain a better understanding of factors that can affect romantic relationships. Other corresponding theories will be used to strengthen the understanding of the examined topics and provide a more complete perspective on certain issues.

An important aspect of any romantic relationship is found in the selection process of a partner. Social exchange theory paired with matching hypothesis effectively analyzes the mechanisms that lead an individual to select their partner. Once a partnership is established, building trust is seen as a priority in order to cultivate commitment in the relationship. Social exchange perspective has also been encouraged in counseling for romantic partners. Exchanges between the couple should remain equitable to ensure mental and emotional health. The lens of social exchange theory is indispensable in analyzing many of the important factors that influence a romantic relationship.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Social exchange theory is not a consistent model across every field of
study, with certain disciplines emphasizing certain rules while excluding others. Still, the premise of social exchange theory is generally agreed upon as “based on earlier philosophical and psychological orientations deriving from utilitarianism on the one hand and behaviorism on the other” (Cook and Rice 2006). This perspective sees every social interaction as a series of exchanges between people of both materialistic and symbolic resources. Most social sciences agree on three main principles to social exchange theory:

1. Social behavior is seen as a sequence of exchanges.
2. Individuals will always try to maximize their rewards while concurrently attempting to limit their costs.
3. A person who receives a reward will feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate.

Despite the large number of back and forth exchanges, the overall outcome is usually perceived to be reasonably fair by participants on both sides. This process of exchanges between individuals will tend to work towards equilibrium (Homans 1958).

Rewards can be described as exchanged resources that are pleasurable, gratifying, and desirable. Costs on the other hand, can be seen as resources that lead to loss or punishment and are generally not desirable. In some approaches, the definition of costs may include the value of the highest rewards foregone in order for the current reward to take place. The outcome can be summarized with the following equation: Outcome = Rewards - Costs. If the outcome is positive, then the outcome may be referred to as benefits or profits. A person who has a high positive outcome may be labeled "overbenefited" while a person who has a negative outcome, where the costs outweigh the rewards, can be described as "underbenefited."

Many times, reciprocity, the idea of giving back to someone who has first given to you, also plays a factor in satisfactory exchanges.

It is important to note that the theory does have limitations. Social exchange theory relies on arithmetic to determine whether an outcome is beneficial or detrimental to a participant. Certain factors like the value of time or happiness are a bit more difficult to quantify, yet relationships are still shown to be more resilient and longer lasting if these emotions are properly felt and expressed (Lawler and Thye 1999). Since emotions are stated to be responsible for determining how social exchanges occur in a relationship, some theorists argue to integrate emotion theories with exchange theories.

"It is necessary for social exchange theory to consider the inability or unwillingness of actors in social relationships to calculate rewards and costs in social transactions. It is also necessary to consider the possibility that exchanges may be initiated with the purpose of establishing and maintaining the relationship, rather than to maximize individual outcomes" (McDonald 1981).

Although there are certain aspects in the field of romantic relationships that do
not quite fit the mold of traditional social exchange theory, theorists have adapted by altering the theory with additional variables or other mechanisms—thereby allowing social exchange theory to be effective in interpreting romantic relationships.

EXCHANGE AND PARTNER SELECTION

An individual must select a partner before a romantic relationship can even begin. While proximity, religious values, and personality all influence the decision making process, a particular focus should be given to Walster's matching hypothesis for partner selection. According to this hypothesis, the more socially desirable a person is, in measurements of physical attractiveness, social status, skills, intelligence, etc., the more socially desirable this person will expect his or her partner to be (Sprecher 1998). The second assumption in the matching hypothesis is that a relationship composed of two individuals who are equally socially desirable will be happier and longer lasting compared to a relationship with partners who are unequally socially desirable. Though research has been found to support this theory with actual couples showing strong degrees of similarity in characteristics involved with social desirability, the occurrence of similar characteristics in one's partner may not be attributed to an understanding of matching hypothesis. Most evidence from these studies indicate that people in general prefer to have a partner who exhibits more socially desirable traits, regardless of their own level of social desirability. It is believed that the result of many equally socially desirable couples is due in part to market forces, where people with high levels of social desirability will reject people of lower levels of desirability, thus creating a population that is composed of partners who are on similar levels (Murstein 1972).

Because most people prefer to be with the most socially desirable partner they can obtain, it is useful for individuals to display their most desirable features to society. An article describing the self-advertisement strategies of men and women depict individuals expressing only desirable traits about themselves to potential suitors—a common practice for people searching for a romantic partner (Bolig, Stein, and Mckenry 1984). The strategies used from that article demonstrate that characteristics that are desirable are interchangeable to some degree. For example, in many cultures, it is commonplace for a man with wealth and status to form a romantic relationship with a woman who is young and beautiful. This stereotype should not be assumed everywhere. A recent study found that there is a negative correlation between women who demonstrate high intelligence and the desire to be with a partner that exhibits qualities of status and wealth (Stanik and Ellsworth 2010). The intelligent women from the study were more willing to partake in short-term relationships, disliked qualities of wealth and status in their partners, and tended to not identify with traditional gender roles found in relationships. From a social exchange theory perspective, this occurs because a woman that possesses intelligence that
can facilitate wealth and status will not be deficient in either of those categories. The intelligent woman will probably seek a partner who can contribute in areas that she is lacking in, therefore making wealth and status qualities less desired. On the other hand, a woman who does not have high intelligence or possess skills that can facilitate wealth and status may value wealth and status much more in a partner.

EQUITY EXCHANGE & OUTCOME INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY

A variant form of social exchange theory is known as equity theory. The theory is similar to social exchange theory but has some key differences. Firstly, it is assumed that groups will create a system that promotes equity among its members. Secondly, there is a positive correlation between inequity and distress. Lastly, if an individual finds himself or herself in an inequitable relationship, that person will try to restore equity. Equity can be defined as the perceived balance between costs and benefits in a relationship. Inequity in a relationship has been known to cause distress as well as anger and depression in the underbenefiter, or person receiving fewer benefits in a relationship (Sprecher 1992). The overbenefiter, or the person receiving more benefits in an inequitable relationship, has been shown to experience guilt.

From the findings above, it is clear equity is vital for the mental and emotional health of participants in a relationship. In another study on the topic, equity was found to play a huge role in both satisfaction and commitment. It was concluded that decreasing underbenefiting inequity leads to increasing satisfaction and commitment (Sprecher 2001). Commitment is a very important aspect in a relationship because it is directly related to the life of a relationship.

Another form of social exchange theory is the outcome-interdependence theory and investment model, which adds comparison level and comparison level alternatives into the social exchange equation. Comparison level refers to what the individual expects from a relationship based on past experiences and the norm of similar relationships. Comparison level alternatives measure how dependent an individual is in the relationship by comparing the outcomes of the individual’s real relationship with hypothetical outcomes they expect to receive from alternative relationships. If they are receiving higher outcomes with their real relationship compared to what they expect to receive from their best hypothetical alternative relationship, they will be more dependent on their real relationship and in turn be more committed.

BUILDING TRUST AND COMMITMENT

Commitment is also developed through building trust between partners. However, though trust is an integral part of social exchange, it is not always easy to measure or achieve “because of the unspecified nature of the reciprocal obligations in social exchange, and because of the (often long) time that must elapse between the receiving of a
favor and the repaying of it" (Haas and Deseran 1981). To understand what factors play in the role of building trust, it is important to understand the different forms of exchange. Two types that are of particular interest for romantic relationships are negotiated and reciprocal exchange. In negotiated exchange, partners partake in “a joint decision process, such as explicit bargaining, in which they seek agreement on the terms of exchange. Both sides of the exchange are agreed upon at the same time, in a discrete, bilateral transaction that gives each partner benefits of equal or unequal value" (Molm 2003). This type of exchange is often seen in economic exchanges, but can also be found in social exchanges, such as in an agreement of how household labor should be divided among family members. Reciprocal exchanges involve exchanges that are not negotiated and are individually performed. Under these circumstances, an individual who performs an exchange that is beneficial to another person will not know if, when, or how the beneficial act will be reciprocated. The main difference between these two exchanges is that negotiated exchange is a binding agreement whereas reciprocal exchange is not guaranteed any form of reciprocation.

It may seem logical that negotiated exchanges are superior to reciprocal ones because there is far less risk involved. However, studies show that reciprocal exchange is more effective in building trust because of the risk of incurring a loss in the exchange. The risk factor “is most critical to the development of trust, because it provides the opportunity for exchange partners to demonstrate their trustworthiness” (Molm, Takahashi, and Peterson 2000). It has been shown that reciprocal exchanges are more effective than negotiated exchanges in creating higher levels of trust, feelings, and ultimately commitment. Reciprocal exchange also results in lower inequality and a better perception of fairness in comparison to negotiated exchanges.

Evidence dictates the solution to creating trust is to have individuals in a relationship risk incurring a net loss in exchanges by investing time, energy, money, or other resources. The more an individual invests into a relationship, the more trust their partner will have for him or her. Gifts are especially effective investments because they are physical manifestations of an individual’s intent to build a relationship.

EXCHANGING GIFTS

Gifts are a special form of exchange because of the symbolic meaning they carry. People usually refrain from exchanging monetary gifts because they are too convenient to give and may be perceived as evidence of the unwillingness to invest time or thought in the relationship. Instead, the best-received gifts are usually meaningful, which are then classified as symbolic exchange. One such type of gift is treating a person to a meal in exchange for his or her company. A meal successfully relays the message that the giver desires to establish a certain type of relationship that entails more meaning than a simple economic exchange. However, treating someone to food and drink is only one method of gift giving.
in romantic relationships. A more important focus in developing a relationship is to have the gifts given in a relationship transition from economic exchanges into social exchanges.

One study describes gift giving in a romantic relationship as a three step progression: first starting as economic exchange, then evolving into social exchange, and finally transitioning into romantic love exchange (Belk and Coon 1993). It is believed that the exchange theory is most applicable to gift giving in a relationship’s early stages, where the couple knows less about each other and can act more strictly like buyers and sellers in an exchange. As they get to know one another, their gifts become more symbolic and the couple explores compatibility and commitment with social exchange. However, because of the ambiguity of what level of exchange is appropriate, there is typically much anxiety involved in gift giving. A poorly chosen gift may hinder or even completely end a budding relationship. For instance, giving an economic exchange when the partner was expecting a more sentimental gift may hurt the progress of the relationship. On the other hand, if a gift implies heavy romantic intentions, the partner may feel uncomfortable if he or she is not ready to transition to that level. “Once the social exchange level is reached there is less concern with being exploited, and commitment is cautiously built together. And, once romantic love emerges, caution is thrown to the wind and partners abandon themselves to emotions and give unselfishly and without concern for reciprocity” (Belk and Coon 1993). Though the fact that certain people can give without expecting anything in return may go against certain social exchange theories, it is important to understand that the cost benefits assumption is still fulfilled in the social exchange theory. If a person is indeed in love and gives without expecting reciprocity, it can also be assumed that the knowledge of making their partner happy will bring emotional happiness to the gift giver and provide more benefits than the cost of the gift itself. An example of this can be found with individuals investing large amounts of time searching for an appropriate Christmas present (Fischer and Arnold 1990). The fact that these individuals are willing to spend so much time and effort to make their partners happy clearly demonstrates that unselfish romantic gift giving is possible.

Gift giving has also been shown to manipulate the duration of a romantic relationship. Certain gifts can extend the life of a relationship while other gifts can expedite the process of dissolution in a troubled relationship. A study about types of romantic gifts found the following three characteristics about these exchanges:
1. Gifts to females that enhance their attractiveness will delay dissolution of a relationship.
2. Gifts to males that express their partner’s love accelerate dissolution of a relationship.
3. Gifts received by both males and females that announce the couple’s relationship to the world will delay dissolution of a relationship.

This information shows that gifts are not only useful in establishing relationships; they are effective at maintaining or terminating a relationship as well (Huang and Yu 2000).
EXPECTATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The research shows that the expectations for what is realistically obtainable in a relationship vary considerably between never before married and married individuals. Expectations from individuals who have never been married are much higher than from married individuals. According to marriage educators, the "data suggest that some reevaluation of expectations will need to take place after marriage occurs if couples are to continue to be satisfied with their relationships.… Thus, the relatively high and idealistic relationship expectations held by individuals before marriage may contribute to the drop in marital satisfaction typically noted after the "honeymoon" period is past" (Sabtelli 1988).

This unhappiness is consistent with the social exchange theory perspective. When an individual has an expectation that is unfulfilled, they will feel underbenefitted and become distressed. High expectations are to be expected because people will naturally view their partner as better than all the alternatives, thus creating a potential to mistakenly inflate their perception of their partner’s value. Unfortunately, the high expectations that lead the couple to marriage are also the cause for disappointment after the marriage occurs.

The study proposes that couples that are dating should attend a workshop that uses social exchange perspective on relationship expectations. The workshop will cover relationship expectations, comparison levels, relationship satisfaction and how satisfaction can vary over the course of time. It will also use social exchange theory to help establish realistic expectations in a romantic relationship and help prevent unnecessary distress and problems. (The author did not elaborate on how to persuade couples to attend the workshop or what institution would sponsor the program.) While the workshop appears to show promise in theory, another study cautions that if both partners approach the relationship through a social exchange perspective, it could actually be detrimental to the health of the relationship (Murstein, Cerreto, and Mac Donald 1977). Some sociologists argue that exchange orientation is more suitable for choosing a partner, but once the partner is chosen, that orientation is not particularly useful in maintaining the relationship.

Sprecher argues against the research that finds social exchange orientation damaging to relationships by using data that shows only a few of the correlations presented in the particular research were significant. Her findings indicate that social exchange orientation does not have a negative impact on the health of a romantic relationship. Although understanding of the social exchange theory creates awareness of underbenefiting exchange orientations, this has "...only a modest negative effect on the quality of the relationship" (Sprecher 1998). Although Sprecher proves the findings of the previous research to be insignificant, the study still demonstrated some negative correlations between satisfaction and underbenefiting exchange outlook, which implies there may be some connection between the two. It is also
important to note that the scales for measurement are different between the two studies. Until further research is done with reliable and consistent methods, it is difficult to identify with certainty the effects of having a social exchange perspective on a relationship.

CONCLUSION

Social exchange theory has proven to be an effective and versatile tool in understanding the social world. Researching different types of exchange has proven useful in identifying what factors are responsible for building trust and commitment in a relationship. In selecting a partner, giving gifts, or reevaluating a relationship, social exchange theory is an interesting alternative to approaching romantic relationships. There are a multitude of factors that can affect a relationship that have not yet been researched. Potential areas for future study can involve the affects of exchanges in romantic relationships done through mobile digital devices, exchange activity on social networking websites, and any exchange that incorporates new technology between individuals. Despite the substantial amount of literature on these topics, there are still many questions left to be answered.

REFERENCES


