

Social Exchange Theory, Exchange Resources, and Interpersonal Relationships: A Modest Resolution of Theoretical Difficulties

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Social exchange theory has provided organizational researchers with an influential framework for explaining work behavior (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). According to the theory, individuals engage in a series of interdependent interactions that generate obligations among the exchange parties (Blau 1964; Emerson 1976; Homans 1958). When one party provides another with a valued and beneficial resource, an obligation is generated to return a beneficial resource. A series of mutual exchanges strengthen the quality of the relationship between the exchange parties, which thereby produces beneficial and productive behaviors (Blau 1964). Empirical evidence supports this pattern. High-quality social exchanges reduce workplace conflict (Nelson 1989) and destructive work behavior (e.g., Colbert et al. 2004; Liao et al. 2004). They also improve beneficial work behavior, such as

knowledge sharing (Hansen 1999), job performance (Cropanzano et al. 2002), and citizenship behaviors (Masterson et al. 2000; Wayne et al. 1997). Conversely, exploitive or abusive exchanges imbalance social exchange relations (Gouldner 1960). In so doing, they negatively influence employees' attitudes (e.g., Tepper 2000; Tepper et al. 2004), psychological well-being (e.g., Harvey et al. 2007; Tepper 2000), and performance (e.g., Harris et al. 2007; Zellars et al. 2002) and promote destructive work behavior (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Thau et al. 2009).

The term social exchange "theory" is a bit misleading. Social exchange does not involve a solitary conceptual model but rather refers to a family of related theoretical frameworks. While social exchange theorists agree on the reciprocal nature of social exchange patterns, not all models explicate the same principles about resources or how they are perceived. Traditional models of exchange suggest that resources are *objects to be exchanged* (e.g., Adams 1965; Gergen 1980; Homans 1961, 1974; Thibault and Kelley 1959). Parties within the exchange are said to be driven primarily by individual self-interest, maintaining calculations on what was received versus what is to be given in return. By and large, this view of exchange has been criticized partially because it ignores the importance of interpersonal interactions (Cropanzano and Rupp 2008) and because these models assume a universal self-interest (Cropanzano et al. 2007). In response, contemporary theorists have incorporated interpersonal

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relationships into their exchange theories (e.g., Mills and Clark 1982; Organ 1988, 1990). Some of these newer models allow the possibility for individuals to fulfill their obligations toward others even when it is not necessarily in their personal interest to do so (Fiske 1991).

An important caveat, however, is that while virtually all contemporary researchers believe relationships are important, their models tend to conceptualize them in different ways. There is much to learn from each perspective, even though they are not precisely the same. Three broad conceptual paradigms can be identified from the literature. The first approach emphasizes *relationship formation* (e.g., Blau 1964; Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Lewicki et al. 2006; Masterson et al. 2000). The second approach focuses on *attributes* of the relationship as *resources to be exchanged* (e.g., Foa and Foa 1974, 1980; Sternberg 1985). The last approach considers *relationships as a social context that changes the rules by which exchanges are conducted* (e.g., Clark and Mills 1979; Fiske 1991, 1992; Hollander 1958).

We argue that each of these perspectives has unique strengths and insights. Considering them together can provide for a better description of what is exchanged and how meaning is derived from these interactions. Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to review historical and interpersonal approaches to social exchange theory and describe the three dominant theoretical paradigms for understanding the role of interpersonal relationships in exchange transactions between individuals. This chapter will further suggest some integrative ideas that combine the strengths of the various models; we also point out some needs for future research directions.

Historic Models of Social Exchange Theory on Exchange “Resources”

Traditional models of exchange give high focus to the “Economic Man” (for reviews, see Cropanzano and Rupp 2008; Ekeh 1974), wherein social exchange relations are based on self-interested motives about rewards and punishments.

The structure of rewards and costs in relationships influence the pattern of interactions that emerge from the exchange. Interactions among social exchange parties are an exchange of goods (Homans 1958). Accordingly, social exchanges are based on the following conditions: (1) actors are dependent on one another for valued resources, (2) actors behave in ways to increase positively valued resources and decrease negatively valued resources, and (3) actors engage in recurring exchanges with specific partners over time. Parties within the exchange are motivated to maximize personal gains at minimum cost, and, therefore, they make specific calculations about which objects are received and which are given. Gergen (1980) summarizes this exchange reasoning: “To say that people behave in such a way as to achieve maximum rewards at a minimum cost indeed has the ring of universal truth about it... people are bent on achieving what to them is valuable and desirable” (p. 266). In short, the traditional view of social exchange is embedded in economic rationality and considers resources that are exchanged as objects to maximize self-interests.

Thus, traditional exchange theorists suggest rationale and economic principles are the primary motive in exchange. For example, Homans (1958) maintained social behavior can be explained through economic calculations of exchange and emphasized the importance of distributive justice (or fair perceptions of exchange resources received) and balanced contributions among the exchange parties. Thibault and Kelley (1959) asserted that social exchange relations were based on interdependent interactions, wherein contributions are based on the level of dependence on the other as compared to others. Similarly, Adams (1965) suggested that people make calculations about the resources they give to and receive from the exchange partner, and compare their treatment to referent others to gauge whether the social exchange is mutual or equitable. If calculations suggest that more is given than received, individuals become motivated to balance the exchange and restore equity perceptions. In short, the traditional view focuses on the quid pro quo nature of the exchange pattern in terms of balanced benefits and costs.

These traditional theories are useful in that they provide a baseline understanding of how reciprocal patterns emerge. However, they are limited in that they treat individuals as if they were interacting in a “context-free” environment, without regard to the larger social and relational meanings of their interactions (Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler and Blader 2001; Tyler and Lind 1990). In this regard, a number of scholars have proposed alternative theoretical positions that take into account the types of interpersonal relationships that could be formed between exchange partners (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Cropanzano et al. 2001). These models propose that, at least in close relationships, individuals will sometimes behave in a manner that is in response to the needs of others. Recent research provides evidence to support these contentions. For example, Korsgaard et al. (2010) found citizenship behavior is not always driven by self-interest and, instead, can be motivated by aspirations to help others. Likewise, Thau and Mitchell (2010) found retaliation is not always motivated by self-gain.

Consequently, we review various social exchange models that focus on the importance of the interpersonal relationship and describe them within three broad categories: (1) models that emphasize how relationships form, (2) models that emphasize attributes of the relationship, and (3) models that feature the relationship as a social context under which exchange commodities are defined. We review each of these below.

The Relationship-Formation Paradigm: Models that Emphasize Relationship Formation

According to social exchange theories, reciprocity is one means by which close relationships develop (Gouldner 1960). Various authors suggest that the act of giving a social exchange commodity should generate an obligation in the other to return a similar commodity at some point in the future (Homans 1961, 1974). This generalized principle gave way to models of exchange that focus on specific forms of exchange relationships

that emerge from reciprocal patterns. We review some of these perspectives below.

Blau on Economic and Social Exchange Relationships

Blau (1964) distinguished between *economic exchange relationships* and *social exchange relationships*. Economic exchange relationships are shorter term, quid pro quo, and involve weaker interpersonal attachments. Social exchange relationships are longer term, more open ended, and associated with stronger interpersonal attachments. Compared with those in economic exchange relationships, individuals engaged in quality social exchanges demand less immediate payback and are more generous. Given this distinction and patterns of reciprocity, individuals who develop mutual and beneficial exchanges over time often move from economic exchange to social exchange, as reciprocal, mutual patterns engender trust, loyalty, and commitment among the parties.

Many organizational models of social exchange have been influenced by Blau’s (1964) work. For example, Bishop and his colleagues (Bishop and Scott 2000; Bishop et al. 2000, 2003), Organ and colleagues (1988, 1990; Organ and Konovsky 1989), and Porter et al. (1974) give particular attention to how work relationships form. Research suggests that once social exchange relationships are created, workers not only reciprocate via work performance but also engage in beneficial activities that go beyond their formal job duties in order to benefit their employers (for evidence, see Eisenberger et al. 1986; Masterson et al. 2000; Settoon et al. 1996; Sluss et al. 2008; Wayne et al. 1997).

Negotiated Versus Reciprocal Exchanges

Building from Blau (1964), Molm and colleagues (e.g., Molm 1994, 2003; Molm et al. 1999, 2000, 2003) suggested there are two forms of exchange relationships: *negotiated* and *reciprocal* relations. As their names suggest, these two types of relationships come about in different ways. Negotiated exchange relations are based on bargained and binding arrangements, wherein both parties agree upon the terms of a discrete, bilateral transaction

(Molm 2003). Reciprocal exchanges, in contrast, are nonnegotiated and are engaged in voluntarily without specific assigned arrangements in terms of what is exchanged or the time by which the exchange should be transacted. Reciprocal relationships tend to result from a successful series of interactions between two parties.

Consistent with Blau's arguments, Molm and her colleagues have found that the dynamics of each type of relationship differs. Their research shows that reciprocal exchanges produce lower levels of power use and inequality (Molm et al. 1999), stronger engendered trust and affective commitment among the parties involved (Molm et al. 2000), and stronger perceptions of fairness (Molm et al. 2003). In essence, their research shows that reciprocal exchanges involve a willingness to be vulnerable to another for future obligations (i.e., trust), which promotes an overall level of commitment. Negotiated exchanges highlight assurances – or expectations of incentives based on stated agreements – and, therefore, an assessment of risk (i.e., trust) is unnecessary. Like Blau's theorizing, their work suggests beneficial negotiated exchanges may evolve into reciprocal exchanges if partners display trustworthy characteristics. These thoughts were empirically studied by Lawler and Yoon (1993, 1996, 1997) and are described below.

Relationship Formation During Negotiation

Lawler and Yoon (1993, 1996, 1997) empirically tested the idea of whether economic (or negotiated) exchange relations can evolve into social (or reciprocal) exchange relations, and gave close attention to the exchange process. They argued that negotiated arrangements based on inherent cooperativeness can develop affective commitment among the parties involved. An especially noteworthy example can be found in their series of experimental studies (Lawler and Yoon 1997), which found that after a series of negotiated agreements, the act of repeated and successful exchanges produces positive affect. The produced positive affect enhanced relational cohesion among the parties, which generated committed and trusting relationships (Lawler and Yoon

1993; Lawler et al. 1999; for a related discussion, see Molm 2003). Lawler (2001) concluded that two elements are essential for negotiated exchanges to evolve into reciprocal relations: (1) parties must be jointly responsible for the outcomes of a task, and (2) parties must share a sense of responsibility for the results of the exchange arrangement. In short, negotiated exchanges transform when each party's outcomes depend on the other's outcomes via mutual cooperation and an appreciation for the consequences of the exchange. This work highlights the importance of the evaluations made within exchanges that evolve trust and mutual cooperation. We believe models of trust can shed light on when and why some relationships evolve to social or reciprocal exchanges, while others fail, and highlight the work of Lewicki and colleagues (Lewicki and Bunker 1995, 1996; Lewicki et al. 2006) below.

Trust Formation in Exchange Relations

There are a number of models of trust formation in exchange relations (e.g., Butler 1991; Deutsch 1973; Lewicki and Bunker 1995; Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998; Shapiro et al. 1992). Consistent with the focus of this section, we review a transformational model that suggests different forms of trust emerge as exchange relations develop. In particular, Lewicki and colleagues (Lewicki and Bunker 1995, 1996; Lewicki et al. 2006) presented a developmental model that describes how trust *transforms* as relationship quality strengthens. Specifically, they describe three forms of trust: calculus-based, knowledge-based, and identity-based trust. The three forms of trust are not mutually exclusive; they must occur in order as the exchange relationship develops. We describe each below.

At the initial stage of the relationship, partners emphasize *calculus-based trust* (CBT), which involves economic calculations associated with creating and sustaining the relationship relative to the costs of maintaining or severing it. At this stage, neither of the two partners has an understanding of the other and so no trust has been established. Instead, CBT assesses one's vulnerability in the relationship. Consequently, parties

engage in “arms-length encounters” to test the other to see if a more complex relationship is warranted (Lewicki et al. 2006, p. 1011). Exchange partners who engage in a series of mutual and beneficial interactions over time are better able to predict the other’s behavior, which means trust can evolve. Yet, some relationships never develop past CBT. Four reasons are offered: (1) there is no need to develop a more complex relationship, (2) the interdependence among the parties is heavily regulated and so feelings of vulnerability are fairly low, (3) parties understand enough about each other and understand developing a relationship is unlikely, or (4) some type of trust violation occurred, breaching any expectations of commitment toward the other.

Relationships that do emerge grow to *knowledge-based trust* (KBT). KBT involves assessments of the exchange partner’s predictability or knowledge about the other person’s expected future behavior. The exchange history generates boundaries of acceptable and forgivable behavior. Because of this sense of predictability, members become more tolerable to inconsistencies if such inconsistent behavior can be adequately explained. Thus, KBT does not necessarily denote full affective commitment. Members may still feel as though they can affordably “bail out of the relationship” if need be. Hence, KBT is less calculated than CBT but is still restrictive. Mutual interactions that continue over time develop the relationship and change the nature of trust. Exchange partners who do not perceive the interactions as consistently mutual might never evolve beyond KBT. Those that do evolve to *identity-based trust* (IBT).

IBT occurs at the full relationship-development stage, where relationship quality is at its highest level. Here, trust is based on the members’ shared desires and intentions. Accordingly, IBT reflects each of the party’s ability to understand and appreciate the other’s wants and needs based on a strong affective connection. Furthermore, at this stage of the relationship, members engage in pro-relationship acts, such as accommodating the other and making sacrifices for the other (Lewicki et al. 2006). The stronger the level of IBT, the more dependent the partners become on the exchange relationship.

Ballinger and Rockman’s Anchoring Model of Social Exchange

Ballinger and Rockmann (2010) recently proposed a new theory of social exchange that articulates the relationship-development process in greater detail. These scholars argue that relationships can change over time, going through different phases. Individuals experience *phase shifts* when they encounter certain key exchanges. A key exchange is either one transaction or a related series that are highly emotional and instrumentally relevant. These key exchanges serve as *anchoring events*. Based on theories of memory and emotion, Ballinger and Rockman argue that once an anchoring event is set in motion, current and future exchanges and their associated outcomes are evaluated based on that particular event. Unlike other theories of social exchange, which posit gradual changes in relationships (cf. Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005), Ballinger and Rockman propose that anchoring events produce dramatic alternations in relationship quality. These new relationships tend to be durable, maintaining themselves until another anchoring event produces a subsequent phase shift.

Ballinger and Rockmann (2010) have presented a thorough model of social exchange. As was the case for Lawler and Yoon (1993, 1996, 1997), Lewicki and colleagues (Lewicki and Bunker 1995, 1996; Lewicki et al. 2006), and Molm (1994, 2003), Ballinger and Rockman provide details as to how transactions are conducted within various relational settings. Though we will deal with the relationship context later in this chapter, it is worth mentioning some key ideas here. Ballinger and Rockman were concerned with how relationships move from reciprocal exchanges to other forms of transactions. Based on a positive anchoring event, the relationship between two parties can rapidly shift from *quid pro quo* to one that is more trusting and flexible. Interesting, Ballinger and Rockman further maintain that a negative anchoring event can also change a relationship in a way that makes it more contentious and angry (cf. Mitchell and Ambrose 2007). In either case, one anchoring event changes the rules by which exchanges are governed. Within work relations, reciprocity is presumed until it is importantly breached, and

then nonreciprocity norms are presumed and guide future exchanges.

How Exchanges Build Closer Relationships (and How They Do Not): The Role of Environmental Moderators

Future research needs to consider the various features of the environmental context within which an exchange can occur. These include the *constraints* surrounding the exchanges, the *motives* of those in the exchange, the *resources available* to those in the exchange, and the *time* by which the exchanges occur. According to Gouldner (1960), not all exchanges are equal. As such, they do not impact relationship formation in identical ways. In the space below, we review these four issues in detail, emphasizing how they impact the formation of social exchange relationships.

Constraints

Gouldner (1960) argued that relational constraints can hinder the nature of reciprocity, as they generally lessen the amount of trust each exchange partner holds in the other. Moving beyond such constraints may provide greater symbolic meaning. As an example, Gouldner drew from the work of Malinowski (1932) with tribal groups that engaged in gift exchanges. In such tribes, it was customary for tribesman to offer a “gift” (or resource) to another tribe to initiate interactions among the two partners. If tribes had previous hostile interactions, such interactions served as “constraints” on the relationship. For tribes working under such constraints, giving up a resource to the other would suggest goodwill and, thus, would be more meaningful. Within other contexts, goodwill efforts can be equally as meaningful. For example, one effective way to deescalated conflict is “tit for tat” (e.g., Wright 1994). When using tit for tat, one party makes a voluntary concession of a nontrivial amount. The other party is thereby urged to reciprocate. If he or she does so, then the original party makes a second contribution, once again awaiting a reciprocal benefit. In so doing, trust can be built and conflict diminished. Hence, reciprocity can help us overcome the constraints imposed by relational distrust.

Motives

Motives also influence exchange relations and are arguably one of the biggest failings of social exchange relations (Price 2006). Sahlins (1972) suggests three types of motives are typical in exchange arrangements: self-interest, mutual concern, and a generalized concern for the other. Self-interested motives emphasize one’s own gains, mutual motives emphasize the balance of gains and costs to each party involved, and generalized motives tend to emphasize gains for the other versus the self. Indeed, Gouldner (1960) discussed the importance of motives and, specifically, as they relate to exploitation. Within mutual arrangements, there is supposed to be an understanding that the interests of the parties involved are mutual – that each party will reciprocate equivalent commodities. If individuals are self-interested, exploitation is likely. Both Gouldner and Sahlins suggested that self-interested individuals are likely to promote “negative” reciprocity arrangements, wherein the self-interested partner is opportunistic and seeks to take advantage of the other, resulting in an imbalanced exchange relationship. Moreover, self-interested behaviors promote retaliation, in which the exploited exchange partner seeks to restore the perceived imbalance and get back at the other for trying to take advantage of the situation.

Thus, exchange commodities from self-interested individuals are perceived to be of speculative value. The other person in the exchange essentially does not trust that the self-interested individual plans to reciprocate appropriately and/or that by accepting the exchange commodity from the self-interested individual, they somehow owe the other in some fashion at some point in the future. We use, for example, a promotion within the context of a work arrangement. Generally speaking, an employee might find the promotion of high value, depending on the supervisor’s motives for providing it. If the promotion was given because the employee’s contributions demonstrated success and value to the organization, the employee might feel the promotion is valuable and deserved (or equivalent). If the promotion is based on what the employee believes is based on their demonstrated potential, there too the employee might find the promotion

particularly valuable. However, if the employee thought the supervisor provided the promotion as a way of passing off more work, setting up the employee to fail or, worse, as an exchange for political favor, the employee might not see the promotion as highly valuable. Ultimately, exchange partners who do not believe the other is acting mutually and in a self-interested fashion will be cautious in future exchanges. As a result, the quality of the relationship will suffer.

Research in the organizational sciences provides evidence for these arguments. In particular, Dirks and Skarlicki (2009) argued that trustworthiness characteristics of the exchange partner – specifically, integrity and benevolence – can offer information about the other’s motives. Integrity is defined as one’s adherence to moral and ethical standards; benevolence involves the degree to which the exchange partner considers the other’s interests and welfare (Mayer et al. 1995). Dirks and Skarlicki argue that both integrity and benevolence of an exchange partner can provide baseline information about the likelihood of being taken advantage of. Results from their experimental studies show that even though individuals were capable of performing at a particular level, if they believed the exchange partner (a coworker) held low integrity, their reciprocated performance levels were significantly lower than if the individual was perceived to be of high integrity. Furthermore, individuals were more willing to provide the exchange partner with beneficial resources if the focal partner was considered of high versus low integrity. While these findings are not a direct test of perceived motives, they do provide suggestive evidence that perceived motives influence exchange dynamics and potentially how exchanges are valued among the parties.

Availability of Resources

Another quality that influences an exchange commodity’s value is the availability of resources of each exchange partner. The importance of which is embedded in the spirit of the gift (Mauss 1967; Sahlin 1972). Not all exchange partners have the same resources. Therefore, meaning or worth of a commodity is also drawn from the resources

available to the parties. Anthropology evidence suggests that in tribal relations, if a receiving tribe had fewer resources than the other, the initiating tribe would not expect the exchange commodity to be concretely the same. Whatever the other tribe could reciprocate with would imply good faith, and the tribesmen would begin to “protect” the other’s interests in the event that other, more hostile tribes entered into their areas. These ideas can be realized within a work exchange. For example, today’s waning economy has pressed many organizations financially, and many employees are aware of this. If a supervisor provides an employee with a raise in light of this knowledge, the employee might find the raise (even if small) particularly valuable. Furthermore, other acts of recognition may further heighten the value.

Time

Lastly, the time by which the exchange of resources occurs also provides exchange partners an indication of how valuable each other perceives the relationship. Blau (1964) suggested social exchanges are based on an indefinite time frame. While the time frame may not be stipulated, there is an expectation that exchange commodities will be reciprocated at some point in the near future. Yet, there is an interesting interplay in terms of the immediacy of the return. Mauss (1925) observed that exchange commodities that are returned immediately invoke feelings of distrust among the other exchange partner. Conversely, delaying returns over an extended period of time can build social friction. Both immediate and extensive delays in reciprocation suggest the commodity is not very valuable to building a quality exchange relationship. Essentially, what is needed to demonstrate a valued exchange is an equivalent time delay from both parties. There is some empirical evidence of this pattern. In particular, Uhl-Bien and Maslyn (2003) found that subordinates who perceived exchanges were of high immediacy characterized their social exchange relationship with their supervisor (via leader-member exchange perceptions) as not as high quality as those exchanges on a more balanced time frame.

The Relationship-Formation Approach: Summary and Future Research Needs

Our review highlights the creation of high-quality exchange relationships from their lower quality antecedents. Some models within this perspective focus on the specific form of the relationship: whether it is economic, tangible, or negotiated or whether it is social, reciprocal, or intangible (e.g., Blau 1964; Molm 1994). Other models attempt to discern how economic or negotiated forms of exchange can evolve into committed and mutual reciprocal exchanges (e.g., Lawler and Yoon 1993; Lewicki et al. 2006; Ballinger and Rockmann 2010). In either case, these models treat the relationship as an outcome that emerges as a result of previous interactions between individuals.

While these models of social exchange have proven quite influential, especially within the organizational sciences, they are limited in two respects. First, as we shall see in our next section, various scholars have found that relationships do more than *form* as a result of the exchange. Individuals may also conduct transactions in *attributes* of the exchange. One might loosely think of this as a sort a relational “currency,” whereby we return the treatment that we receive from others. For example, Berscheid and Walster (1975) argue that we reciprocate the liking that people feel for us. Second, we have yet to consider how people treat one another *once the relationship is in place*. Advantageous exchanges may produce closer working relationships, as Lawler (2001) and Ballinger and Rockmann (2010) argue, but once the relationship has been formed, then the formed relationship will impact subsequent transactions. The theories reviewed above have all discussed this issue at length, and we will return to these ideas later in this chapter.

The Relational-Attribute Paradigm: Models that Emphasize Attributes of the Exchange Relationship

In the preceding conceptual paradigm, resource exchanges – when taken over time – can produce

high-quality interpersonal relationships. The relationship, therefore, is a consequence of the exchanges. A different approach is taken by our next paradigmatic family of theories, which we term the relational-attribute paradigm. In these frameworks, attributes of the relationship serve as *one of the resources that are exchanged*. In other words, the relationship is not the (only) product of serial exchanges. Rather, the relationship can actually *be exchanged* along with other resources.

Sternberg on Romantic Love

As an example of this approach, let us consider Sternberg’s (1985) triangular theory of love, which draws from the social exchange perspective. Sternberg argues that love includes three things – intimacy (feelings of closeness and connection much like liking), passion (a “hot” desire for union with another person), and commitment (a short-term and long-term decision to give one’s love to another). Based on social exchange theory, Sternberg (1985, pp. 159–160) argues that intimacy and commitment, though not necessarily passion, can be exchanged between individuals.

There is evidence for these ideas. For example, Berscheid and Walster (1975; see especially their Chap. 5) discuss evidence for the “reciprocity-of-liking” rule. Essentially, when we discover that another person likes us, we tend to like them in return. Hence, we exchange liking for liking. The reciprocity-of-liking effect seems to be especially strong when our self-esteem has been damaged (Deutsch and Solomon 1959; Walster 1965). These ideas are important because they suggest that attributes of a relationship, such as liking or intimacy, can be exchanged among parties.

Foa and Foa’s Resource Theory

Perhaps the most comprehensive model to discuss the exchange of relational attributes is Foa and Foa’s (1974, 1980) resource theory. This framework attempts to build an understanding of the types of resources transacted within exchange relations. They identified specific “resources” that are considered contributions to exchange relations. Foa and Foa argued that resources can involve “any commodity – material

or symbolic” – which is transmitted through interpersonal behavior (1974, p. 36). Based on this reasoning, they developed a typology that categorizes and identifies the structure underlying which resources can be exchanged between two actors (Foa and Foa 1974, 1980). Accordingly, these resources could be classified into Cartesian space to depict the relationship and dynamics between the resource classes. Resources are categorized along two dimensions: particularism and concreteness. The particularism dimension refers to whether a resource is valued by its source (i.e., particular) or by individuals more generally (i.e., universal), whereas the concreteness dimension refers to whether a resource is tangible (i.e., concrete) or intangible (i.e., symbolic). Based on these dimensions, the typology further dissects resources into six descriptive *classes*:

1. *Love*: an expression of affectionate regard, warmth, or comfort
2. *Status*: evaluative judgment conveying either high or low prestige, regard, or esteem
3. *Information*: any advice, opinion, or instructions
4. *Money*: any coin or token that has some standard of exchange value
5. *Goods*: any product or objects

6. *Services*: activities on the body or belonging to the individual

Figure 6.1 provides a configuration of the typology and the six classes of resources. Accordingly, services and goods are considered overtly tangible and are concrete. Since status and information are conveyed verbally and hold meaning to particular individuals, they are considered to be particular and symbolic resources. Status and services are similar in terms of particularism but differ in concreteness; services are far more concrete than status is. Status and information are similar in symbolism but differ in particularism. That is, status is given relevance based on the individual who receives it, whereas information is far more universal in terms of its worth. Money and love are equally general on concreteness but contrast in particularism. Money is universalistic, since it has the same value regardless of who provides it. Love is more symbolic, since it cannot be priced in a market exchange and ascribes meaning from the individuals receiving it.

In addition to the basic resources and classes described in resource theory, Foa and Foa (1974) richly describe in detail the dynamics and forces

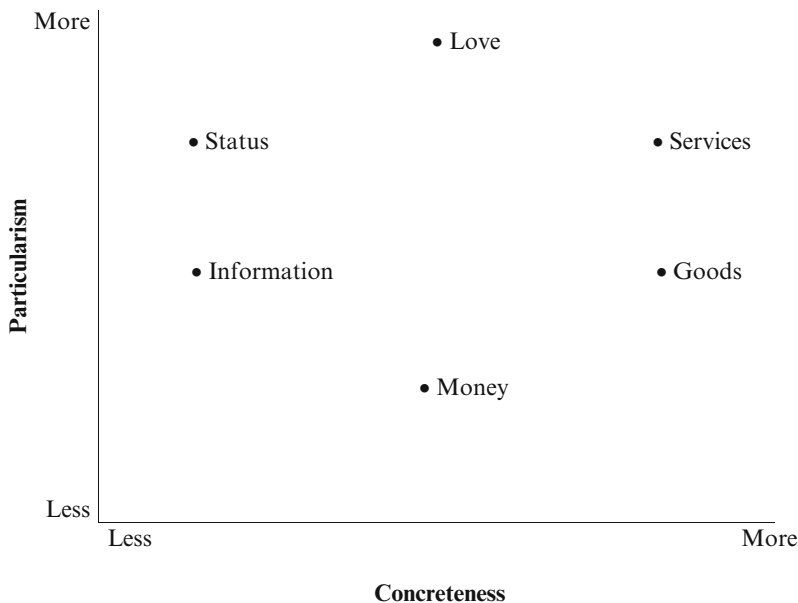


Fig. 6.1 Configuration of the six resource classes (Note: Original typology depicted in Foa, U. G. (1971). Interpersonal and economic resources. *Science*, 171, 345–351)

operating within social structures. Characterizing the nature of resources in this framework is a significant contribution to the interpretation of social exchange. Like the periodic table in chemistry, the typology establishes basic elements and boundaries of social exchange and the nature of their differences. From this understanding, we can begin to theorize about how resources behave in different combinations and social contexts. Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) contend interpersonal behavior can be considered synonymous with the resources exchanged among the parties. Similarly, they contend that all six classes of resources tend to obey different exchange patterns. In particular, abstract and particularistic goods, such as love and respect, are exchanged differently than concrete and universalistic goods, such as money. More concrete and universalistic resources tend to be negotiated in advance and are specific and defined, whereas symbolic and particularistic resources are generally not negotiable and evolve over a longer term. For example, love is not *quid pro quo*; it can be given without the expectation for exact repayment. In fact, the same resource may obey different rules due to situational dynamics. In short, different *types* of benefits are exchanged in different *ways*.

Classical Approaches Based on “Gift” Exchanges

A slightly different approach to this issue was taken in famous classical accounts of social exchange, presented by anthropological theorists such as Malinowski (1922, 1932), Mauss (1925), and Lévi-Strauss (1949, 1957). These authors did not explicitly distinguish among families of resources, as articulated by Foa and Foa (1974, 1980). Rather, they presented all exchange resources as concrete objects, such as when specific gifts are exchanged. In other words, they separated the specific exchange commodity from the meaning that it might convey.

Resources, in the classic social exchange formulation, often possessed a strongly symbolic value. The item itself was concrete, but the message it offered need not be. Malinowski’s (1922) original work highlighted the Kula exchange, in which parties of two distant tribes

would meet to perform a ceremony (i.e., a “gift” exchange). Two items were exchanged: one tribe offered a necklace and the other returned an armlet. While both objects were material, they held no practical value, nor did they quell a specific need of either tribe member. In short, the objects offered no objective “utility” (as suggested in economic exchanges of the traditional view). Instead, the tribes exchanged the objects in ceremony, communicating the symbolic sense of commitment for a long-term exchange arrangement. Thus, Malinowski’s work attempted to dispel the notion that exchange parties are solely motivated by economic self-interest. Even more importantly, he asserted that tangible commodities can communicate something more than they are objectively worth.

A more contemporary example of this same phenomenon can be seen with the gift of an engagement ring. To be sure, the ring is an economically valuable material object, but it can also symbolize love between two people. Two otherwise identical rings might have different value if one is freely given from someone you love and the other is won in a lottery. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss (1969) contends social exchanges are culturally defined, wherein commodities exchanged are based on symbolic value (p. 138). These acts are important, and the symbolism derived from them seems to impact the provider as well as the recipient. In three studies, Lambert et al. (2010) found when people expressed gratitude for good deeds, they felt that they had a stronger relationship with the other party.

Notice that the relational attribute is not exchanged directly but can be carried or signaled through material objects. Even money does not always send a universalistic and concrete message. For example, in an experimental study, Rosenfield et al. (1980) paid undergraduate subjects to work on a task. When research participants were led to think of the payment as a reward for high performance, they showed greater intrinsic motivation. When they were led to think of the payment as a “bribe,” their intrinsic motivation was diminished. The same amount of the same stimulus (money) produced different results depending upon how it was conceptualized.

Unlike the work of Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) and Sternberg (1985), the key distinction for these classical theorists is not among the different types of resources. Rather, it is among the messages that they send. Consequently, individuals are not actually exchanging, say, love, but are mutually defining a loving relationship in which they both participate. More to the point, a symbolic resource can either affirm an existing relationship (e.g., the gift of anniversary flowers to a loved one) or can signal the opportunity to participate in a relationship (e.g., an invitation from a supervisor to present one's viewpoints on an important issue). In this way, the exchange of concrete resources with symbolic and (hopefully) understood meanings can draw people into particular relational modes.

These anthropological frameworks are important; they help us to solve a reoccurring conceptual question – what is exchanged among social exchange relations? It is easy to comprehend how people might exchange something concrete and monetizable, such as money or goods. However, it is more challenging to understand how something intangible, such as intimacy or liking, can be passed from person to person. One solution, of course, is that one could simply articulate one's feelings or have another person communicate them for you. This is usually done in tests of reciprocity-of-liking model mentioned above (Berscheid and Walster 1975). But in other settings, this idea might be more difficult. Besides, the approach does not fully capture the notion of “exchange,” as usually understood. Malinowski (1922, 1932), Mauss (1925), and Lévi-Strauss (1949, 1957) offer another solution. These classical theorists would argue that we need not *directly* exchange, say, status or love. Rather, we can *indirectly* communicate our feelings and intentions by transacting concrete goods that proffer a culturally understood message. These considerations would allow people to exchange relational qualities though both direct communication and through symbolic messages carried by gifts.

The above review redefines resources as commodities with symbolic messages. Something specific is always transacted, even if it is

little more than a smile. However, the same resource can carry different meanings, depending upon the context. In other words, an item may convey distinct symbolic messages based upon the setting in which it is proffered. For example, in a close social exchange relationship, a smile from a supervisor may be reassuring. However, in a quid pro quo exchange relationship, the meaning of this same smile could be ambiguous. It could even be perceived as cynical and contemptuous. While this is a helpful observation, it has a number of implications. A social exchange theory is incomplete unless it can adequately describe the contextual factors that create the symbolic meanings given to objects of exchange.

Socioemotional Resources

A number of social exchange researchers have proposed a two-part taxonomy of benefits that is simpler than Foa and Foa's (1974, 1980) resource theory, while also emphasizing the idea of symbolic messages communicated by resources. These scholars, who are often interested in justice perceptions, tend to separate *economic resources* from *socioemotional resources* (e.g., Chen 1995; Cropanzano and Schminke 2001; Folger and Cropanzano 2001; Martin and Harder 1994). Cropanzano and Ambrose (2001, p. 120) explain this distinction as follows:

Economic, sometimes called “instrumental,” benefits are those that have to do with material well-being, comfort, and standard of living. They tend to be easily monetizable and relatively concrete. Socioemotional benefits are those that refer to one's standing in and identification with a group. Socioemotional benefits are often called “symbolic” because they provide an indication of one's status and value within the context of some social group.

Notice that the notion of socioemotional benefits tends to get very close to what is meant here by relational attributes. Profits and office are economic rewards, whereas friendliness and voluntary helpfulness are socioemotional (Martin and Harder 1994). Martin and Harder further note that socioemotional resources tend to be divided equally, while economic resources tend to be divided based on equity.

There are exceptions, though. At times, even socioemotional resources may be allocated based on relative contribution, rather than providing everyone with an equivalent amount. For example, Chen (1995) found that Chinese managers, as opposed to Americans, were more prone to divide socioemotional goods equitably. Another relevant study was conducted by Bowling et al. (2005). These scholars were studying social support, a type of socioemotional resource, and found that employees who generously provided support to their peers were also more likely to receive support when they required it. Conversely, those who were stingy with their support received less from others. Thus, there is evidence that – at least on some occasions – the rule of reciprocity holds for socioemotional benefits.

The Relational-Attribute Approach: Summary and Future Research Needs

The research review in this section treats the relationship as *something to be exchanged* rather than as, or at least in addition to, *the result of an exchange*. This is an important conceptual distinction, which has some interesting theoretical implications. We will here discuss three issues in need of additional empirical exploration – the structure of relationships and integration with the relationship-formation models.

Scholars who take a relational-attribute approach tend to propose multidimensional structure models, with different relational elements exchanged in different ways. Perhaps the most notable idea is that if relationships are to be exchanged, it would help to break them into dissociable parts. For example, we saw earlier that Sternberg (1985) offered a three-component conceptualization of romantic love. Two parts – commitment and especially intimacy – are amenable to exchange, while a third part – passion – is less so. Foa (1971) and Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) proposed six classes of resources, at least two of which (status and love) were relational in nature. Viewing interpersonal relationships as composed of multiple parts is a conceptual idea that we hope will receive additional research attention.

Another issue in need of inquiry involves the integration between the relational-attribute para-

digm and the relationship-formation paradigm. Combining these two approaches to social exchange may provide researchers to a plausible account of how people can transact intangible goods, such as status and love. Besides simply stating one's feelings (e.g., saying "I love you"), the classical anthropological theorists have provided a useful mechanism. It is important to appreciate that objects have symbolic meanings that are understood in a particular cultural setting. These meanings communicate intimacy, status, love, and so forth, between persons.

Finally, it is important for relational-attribute theorists to take seriously the importance of repeated exchanges over time. Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) make a good start in this regard. Based on previous work, we suggest that individuals often begin by exchanging more tangible and concrete resources; they will later include less tangible and more symbolic goods in their transactions (cf. Rousseau 1995). Of course, this is a hypothesis in need of investigation.

The Relationship-Context Paradigm: Models that Feature the Social Context of the Exchange Relationship

The third category of relational exchange models focuses on the social context of the relationship. This research suggests that exchanges take place *within* different types of relationships. This relationship-context view separates the resources exchanged from the relationship itself. Some contemporary social exchange theorists take this approach. They distinguish between the relationship encompassing the parties and the goods that are exchanged within that relationship (e.g., Clark and Mills 1993; Clark and Pataki 1995). Stating the matter very generally (and loosely), when individuals are in high-quality relationships, they become more generous toward and more forgiving of the other person. This is even so when confronted with a seemingly disadvantageous distribution. For example, in one field study, Fulk et al. (1985) examined employees' attitudes to performance feedback. When they trusted their supervisor, they were more accepting of

unfavorable information. Likewise, Mansour-Cole and Scott (1998) explored reactions to downsizing. Workers who had a high-quality leader-member exchange relationship with their supervisor reported less negative reactions than did those with a poor-quality leader-member exchange relationship. In a final empirical example, Mikula et al. (1998) investigated how couples respond to seemingly unfair treatment from their partners. These scholars found that those individuals in close relationships tended to be more tolerant of ill-treatment than did those in more distant relationships.¹

These studies suggest that the character of the relationship moderates how individuals respond to interpersonal transactions. This possibility is not inconsistent with the paradigms we have already discussed. Indeed, the opposite is true. The theorists we have cited who are interested in relationship formation also assume that once a strong relationship is in place, it will change the way that goods are transacted (e.g., Blau 1964; Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1996, 1997). In a like fashion, relational-attribute theorists, such as Foa and Foa (1974, 1980), have also considered the relationship context. Nevertheless, these are conceptually distinct ideas, even though they have often been integrated into the same specific theories. For the sake of emphasis and clarity, it is worth considering the relationship context separately from the other two paradigms we have already discussed. Toward this end, we will review three perspectives that fall into this category: Hollander's (1958) ideas on idiosyncrasy credits, Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) research on communal and exchange relationships, and Fiske's (1991, 1992) model of relational modes.

¹We caution that we are simplifying these findings for conciseness. The results were quite rich and interesting. Notably, Mikula et al. (1998) were interested in actor/recipient differences in judgments of fairness. In general, people who performed the questionable acts (the actors) were more generous in their judgments than were the people harmed by the actions (the recipients). However, these differences were reduced for couples in higher quality relationships.

Hollander and Idiosyncrasy Response Credits

Hollander (1958) recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships in social exchange during the 1950s. He suggested exchanges between leaders and followers are transactional, and their transactions should be considered in terms of the evolving relationship that builds among the parties. Hollander further asserted that pure economic reasoning does not consider "idiosyncrasy credits" that develop among the partners, which constitute each partner's earned status with the other. During the course of leader-follower work relationships, it is possible for one of the exchange partners to return a nonbeneficial contribution back to the other; if the partners built a stock of idiosyncrasy credits of loyalty and commitment, quid pro quo reactions (or returning with nonbeneficial contributions to the exchange relationship) would be lessened. Stated differently, social exchange partners who develop loyalty and commitment toward the other essentially give each other the benefit of the doubt when exchanges are not seemingly mutual and beneficial. Indeed, Hollander's (1960, 1961) empirical work supports these ideas.

Clark and Mills on Communal and Exchange Relationships

Clark and Mills (1993; see also, Clark 1984, 1986; Mills and Clark 1982) argued that human relationships could be divided into two types, each of which was governed by a different set of normative rules. *Exchange relationships* often occur among people who do not know one another well or among people doing business together (even when these involve long-term associates). Exchange transactions tend to be relatively short term and involve specific benefits for services rendered. *Communal relationships* tend to be more open ended. When compared to those in exchange relationships, those governed by communal norms tend to pay somewhat less attention to their own inputs and more attention to the needs of the other party (Clark et al. 1989, 1986). Immediate and direct repayment is less likely to be demanded (Clark and Mills 1979). Within communal relationships, one accepts a degree of

responsibility for the well-being of the other person. The extent to which one feels this way has been labeled *communal strength* (Lambert et al. 2010; Mills et al. 2004). Relationships high in communal strength are more likely to exist among family members and close friends, while they are less likely to exist among strangers and acquaintances (Clark and Pataki 1995).

Clark and Mills (1993) argue that their model is more concerned with *how* benefits are exchanged and less concerned with *what* benefits are exchanged. Clark and Mills (1979) observe explicitly that “The rules concerning the giving and receiving of benefits are what distinguish communal and exchange relationships, rather than the specific benefits that are given and received” (p. 13). This suggests that the same concrete benefit can be differentially transacted depending upon where a relationship is governed by exchange or communal norms.

In one experiment, Clark and Mills (1979, Study 1) compared undergraduate men who desired an exchange relationship with an undergraduate woman to those who desired a communal relationship with the woman. When these subjects were helpful and desired an exchange relationship, they liked the female participant *more* when she repaid him for his assistance. When these subjects were helpful and desired a communal relationship, they liked the female participant *less* when she repaid him. An economic benefit provided for service rendered actually *harmed* the prospects for a communal friendship. Consistent with the work of Hollander (1958), people exchange goods in distinct ways, depending upon the type of relationships they have formed.

Fiske’s Four Relational Modes

Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) proposed only two types of relationships – communal and exchange. Some scholars have proposed additional relational forms (e.g., Meeker 1971). These sundry models were comprehensively reviewed by Fiske (1991, 1992), who then proposed an integrative framework. Other than the “null” case of no relationship, Fiske (1991) suggested four relational modes may occur in exchange: *communal sharing*, *authority ranking*, *market pricing*, and *equality*

matching. These four relational types simplify our social lives. Once we decide which of the four relational models we wish to share with another person, then subsequent exchanges can be interpreted based on the relational mode that is transacted.

Communal Sharing

When a relationship is defined in terms of *communal sharing*, then people give and take freely what they need from a source of pooled resources. What is exchanged is not based upon what each party contributes. Instead, group belonging and identity are emphasized. There is no scorekeeping in terms of who contributes and who receives commodities. The value of commodities in communal exchange is, therefore, based on intimacy (love; cf. Foa and Foa 1974) and the motivation to maintain one’s identity with the overall group.

Authority Ranking

When a relationship is defined in terms of *authority ranking*, people with status and power are provided with the greatest benefits. The principles of exchange in authority ranking modes are based on social custom and tradition of nobility. Superiors demand what they wish from inferiors. In exchange for proffering superiors with what they need, inferiors are guaranteed that superiors will provide a level of protection to them and inferiors may use commodities left over from superiors.

Market Pricing

When exchange relations are based on *market pricing*, the value of the commodity is determined as a function of the market price or its utility. The value of the commodity is based on its proportion to some market standard. Exchanges in the market pricing mode are determined based on what people will pay or the governing principles of supply and demand. In this way, market pricing relations can be seen as very similar to economic exchange relations stipulated by Blau (1964). Individual self-interest is a primary motive, and, as such, commodities can be bargained and negotiated in an attempt to gain as many commodities as possible at minimum cost.

Equality Matching

Lastly, in the *equality matching* mode, all parties are viewed as equally deserving.² Contributions from one exchange partner are reciprocated with an equal commodity. Thus, much like Blau's (1964) social exchange relationship principles, offering a commodity to one exchange partner builds an obligation in the other to return a commodity and balance the exchange. This assumption embedded in these exchanges suggests commodities exchanged must be "equivalent." The value of the commodity exchanged is culturally determined based on what is equal or equivalent. Indeed, Gouldner (1960) discussed the subtleties of equivalence. He described the issue in terms of heteromorphic versus homeomorphic reciprocity. Heteromorphic exchanges involve things that may be concretely different but equal in value (i.e., *tit for tat*). Homeomorphic exchanges involve things that are concretely alike or identical in form (i.e., *tat for tat*). Most social exchanges models within the contemporary organizational sciences literature seem to describe relations in terms of equality matching and focus on heteromorphic or more symbolic exchanges. Yet, the trouble of determining what constitutes an equivalent or heteromorphic exchange still requires attention. If all exchanges are concrete, what determines the symbolic value of a heteromorphic exchange?

Fiske (1991) suggests that the value of equality matching commodities is dependent on cultural norms and expectations. We believe Gouldner (1960) and Sahlins (1972) offer guidance. Both theorists draw heavily from the work of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1925) to understand the nature of exchange resources within the context of social life. As we saw previously, when discussing the classic anthropological theorists, giving something to another always *means* something. The meaning of a particular exchange commodity is based on the nuances of cultures

and the structure of exchange partners and their relationship, and specifically the nature of constraints, motives, the availability of resources, and time by which exchanges are made (which we reviewed above).

Concluding Thoughts

According to Fiske (1991, 1992), commodities are exchanged differently, depending upon the sort of relationship that people hold, would like to have, or should have with another person. After making that selection, exchange partners provide symbolic messages as a signal to the other party. Communal sharing involves love. That is, the interests of an overall community (or group) are the basis of exchange. Authority ranking involves status. Market pricing involves more concrete, less symbolic resources like money, goods, and services. Finally, equality matching can involve the reciprocal exchange of concrete resources (i.e., money, goods, and services) in terms of what is an "equal" exchange.

Offering symbolic resources can also signal a desire to change a mode. For example, one may send flowers to suggest a more communal relationship. Or one may receive the proverbial corner office as a sign of authority and rank (or "status," in Foa and Foa's (1974, 1980) terms). Once a symbolic message has signaled a relational mode, the receiving individual can choose to accept or deny the relationship offer. If accepted, the exchange relationship begins and follows patterns based on the mode chosen.

The Relationship-Context Approach: Summary and Future Research Needs

The relationship-context approach to social exchange emphasizes the role of interpersonal feelings in altering the normative rules of resource transactions. This is a powerful way of looking at exchanges. As other theorists have also emphasized, successful interactions can build strong relationships (Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1996, 1997), but once these new relationships are in place, people began to treat each differently (Clark 1984, 1986; Clark and Mills 1979, 1993). Future inquiry should keep this distinction carefully in mind. In the relational-formation research, the relationship

²A factor analytic study by Haslam and Fiske (1999) found evidence for all four relational modes. However, it was noteworthy that equality matching was highly correlated with communal sharing. It may be that these two modalities are less easily distinguished than are the others.

is a *dependent variable* that results from transactions. In relationship-context research, the relationship is a *moderator* that changes the impact of the transaction on other criterion variables. Scholars should carefully distinguish the two.

It is also important to consider the implications that the relationship-context paradigm has for relational-attribute models. It is possible that different types of resources are likely to be differentially exchanged, depending upon the nature of the relationship (Foa and Foa 1974, 1980). Intriguingly, this suggests that attributes of the relationship are correlated with, but distinguishable from, the relationship itself. Therefore, the type of resource may not always match with the relationship in question (e.g., providing one status in a communal relationship).

Cropanzano et al. (2001) discuss this possibility directly. Drawing from the research reviewed above, they distinguish two types of benefits – economic and socioemotional. Based on Blau (1964), they also separate economic exchange relationships from social exchange relationships. Crossing the type of benefit with the type of relationship in which it is exchanged produces a set of three categories: simple, strong, and strained.

- *Simple*: Under these common conditions, a socioemotional benefit is exchanged in a social exchange relationship or else an economic benefit is exchanged in an economic exchange relationship. Here the benefit and the relationship match.
- *Strong*: In a strong relationship, an economic benefit is transacted within a social exchange relationship. Such circumstances occur, for example, when people who trust one another do business together.
- *Strained*: When a relationship is strained, individuals who have an economic exchange relationship transact socioemotional benefits. Such a setting is unusual, since it involves intangible resources transferred among parties who may not be interpersonally close. However, such an exchange could signal a desire to develop a social exchange relationship sometime in the future.

While this taxonomy is in need of additional development and testing, it illustrates the

importance of separating the type of resource from the type of relationship. Investigating these different combinations would be a worthwhile area for future study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have provided a conceptual review regarding the role of interpersonal relationships in social exchange models. As we have seen, there are at least three perspectives. First, the relationship-formation paradigm emphasizes that beneficial exchanges could lead to the formation of close relationships. Second, relational-attribute paradigm emphasizes qualities of the relationship that might become resources for exchange. Third, the relationship-context paradigm emphasizes that interpersonal closeness can moderate the manner in which goods are exchanged as well as how people respond to these transactions. Throughout we have emphasized that these are three distinct but certainly not contradictory points of view about social exchange. Based on previous conceptual and empirical work, we have discussed how these different paradigms can reinforce one another by being combined into specific theoretical positions (e.g., Blau 1964; Foa and Foa 1974, 1980; Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1996, 1997; Molm 1994, 2003). From this perspective, we can begin to understand how and why some relationships evolve into committed and trusting commitments in which relational attributes, as well as concrete benefits, are exchanged, and why others simply emphasize economic, tangible, and negotiated interactions. An integrative relational perspective allows for a better understanding on why social exchange relations develop from economic exchanges, why economic exchanges may never develop, and why some tarnished social exchange relations can be reinvigorated. In particular, it is important to consider dissecting and valuing resources within the “context” of the relationship. Doing so will proffer embedding meaning in exchange transactions and ultimately influence the nature of the exchange relationship.

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