

Social Exchange Theories



Ronald M. Sabatelli

A theory is a bid to explain some observed aspect of the “natural world.” The specific focus of a theory, the aspects of the natural world that it seeks to explain, can be thought of as a theory’s “universe of analyses.” Exchange theory’s universe is the analyses of (1) the experiences of partners within social/dyadic relationships and (2) the patterns of interaction found within dyadic relationships. Social exchange, for example, represents a theoretical bid to describe, explain, and/or predict the wide variances that exist in intimate partners’ experiences of interpersonal attraction, relationship satisfaction, complaints, commitment, and/or trust. It represents a theoretical bid, as well, to account for the differences observed in the patterns of equity, fairness, power, oppression, and stability within marriages and other intimate relationships.

Social exchange is not a single theory. Rather, it consists of several different exchange perspectives that often, but not always, share a set of core assumptions and key concepts. These various exchange perspectives emerged in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The use and development of the framework becomes widespread in the field of family studies starting in the 1970s (Broderick, 1971; Nye, 1979).

Tracing the Intellectual Roots of Exchange Theory

Tracing the intellectual roots of exchange theory is an “eclectic and uncertain enterprise” (Turner, 1986, p. 215). This is because various exchange perspectives were based on ideas drawn from different fields of study (e.g., economics, anthropology,

R. M. Sabatelli (✉)

Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: ronald.sabatelli@uconn.edu

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K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_18

conflict sociology, and behavioral psychology) and grounded in very different philosophical traditions (e.g., British individualism vs French collectivism). Grounded in these different intellectual and philosophical perspectives, two general types of exchange theory evolved throughout the 1950s and 1960s—namely, individualistic versions (cf., Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and collectivistic versions (cf., Blau; Levi-Strauss, 1969). What basically differentiates these two exchange perspectives are different assumptions about what motivates social behavior and different visions of the roles that social norms play in regulating dyadic interactions (Ekeh, 1974).

Individualistic Versus Collectivistic Exchange Perspectives

Homans (1961) used utilitarian economics combined with behavioral psychology as the intellectual foundations for his individualistically oriented version of exchange theory. By assimilating utilitarian economics into his version of the theory, Homans viewed relationships as being “free and competitive marketplaces” within which individuals seek to rationally maximize their benefits and minimize their costs and compared their relationships to their market alternatives. By assimilating behavioral psychology into his version of exchange theory, Homans viewed reinforcement contingencies and the previous history of reinforcement in similar situations as the major determinants of social behavior, and he embraced the assumption that all behavior is motivated by self-interest.

Contemporaries of Homans, influenced by the work of French sociologists and cultural anthropologists, reject the view that relationships are motivated by self-interest and instead view relationships as being structured to represent the collective goals of both partners and society. The development of these collectivistic views of exchange relationships was guided by utilitarian philosophies (not utilitarian economics) and their moral and ethical emphases on promoting social welfare. Levi-Strauss (1969), for example, supported his collectivistic version of exchange by highlighting the observation that people derived benefits from altruistic actions and often willingly participated in unrewarding exchange relationships (e.g., parenthood, caregiving). Blau (1964) used the existence of “rules of exchange,” like the “norm of reciprocity” and “the norm of fairness,” as evidence to support the conclusion that the partners were motivated within exchange relationships by the desire to maximize joint rather than individual profits.

To be clear, the differences between individualistic and collective exchange perspectives revolve around an assumption about motivations that cannot be proved or disproved. Specifically, when people act altruistically, it is impossible to prove or disprove whether self-interest is the primary motivation for this behavior. In recent years, a subset of theorists has set aside this debate by taking the position that the tension between Homans and the more collectively oriented exchange theorists was mitigated when relationships that vary by type and concomitant goals were considered (Clark & Mills, 1993). Simply put, it is perfectly acceptable for a person

who is buying a car to be motivated by self-interest. Communal motivations prevail in those types of relationships that are intended to be enduring and built on foundations of intimacy, trust, and commitment (Arriaga, 2013).

The Determinants of Relationship Norms

The early exchange perspectives disagreed in their views on the role of societal and cultural factors as shapers of exchange patterns, rules, and norms (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). The early exchange theorists observed the tendency for marital and other intimate partnerships to be characterized by fair, just, and proportionate patterns of exchange (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Collectivistically oriented exchange theorists, like Levi-Strauss (1969), believed that these commonly observed patterns were shaped by cultural norms and functioned for society by stabilizing marital and family relationships. Individualistically oriented exchange theorists discounted the role that culture played in shaping these modal exchange patterns. They argued, instead, that these normative exchange patterns exist in ongoing and intimate relationships because reciprocity and fairness represent the best possible ways for partners to maximize their individual profits (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Each of these competing explanations for the existence of reciprocity and fairness norms in ongoing intimate relationships can be true. That is, there is no way to disprove or prove whether individuals act to meet the needs of their partners because they are influenced by cultural norms and/or motivated by a self-interested desire to maximize personal profits. From a historical perspective, however, this debate about the origin of exchange norms is important because it serves as a foundation for further theoretical discussions of the factors accounting for the variabilities observed in the patterns of interaction and stability within exchange partnerships.

Thibaut and Kelley: The Psychology Underlying Behavior

The early work of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) is noteworthy because of their focus on how symmetrical and asymmetrical distributions of rewards, costs, and alternatives between partners influence how exchange relationships are structured and experienced. In a series of studies, they demonstrate how different exchange patterns can be induced by “experimentally manipulating” partners’ access to rewards, costs, and alternatives. When rewards, costs, and access to alternatives are similar for both partners, each partner’s dependence on the other for benefits and rewards results in reciprocal and fair exchanges becoming established and these relationships remaining stable over time. However, when partners have disparate levels of access to rewards and alternatives, more exploitive and less stable patterns of exchange become established.

The work of Thibaut and Kelley is historically noteworthy because it moves the exchange framework beyond a debate on the origins of exchange norms to a more in-depth analysis of how dyadic factors (i.e., the distributions of resources and alternatives between partners) account for different social exchange patterns of interaction. Their work is significant, as well, because of their focus on how relational dependence, conceived of as the absence of better alternatives, plays a major role in shaping the negotiations between exchange partners.

Emerson's Exchange Network Analysis

From a historical perspective, the work of Richard Emerson (1976) is important because of his expanded emphasis on how the distributions of rewards, costs, and resources between partners are needed to account for complex and emergent relationship dynamics. Emerson's framework draws selectively on the basic concepts used by the early theorists (cf., rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives). However, Emerson's framework goes beyond these earlier works in his emphasis on the concepts of "dependence, power and balance," which he conceives of as being *relational* rather than individual properties. The key questions in Emerson's framework revolved around how the balances in resources and alternatives explain the operation of more complex social patterns—like feelings of commitment and trust, the experience of conflict, and relational patterns of dominance and stability observed within relationships over time. By highlighting the balances of resources and dependence as the key to understanding power processes and emergent relationship dynamics, Emerson compelled relationship researchers to make the "exchange relationship" the theory's unit of analysis (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

To some extent, the works of Thibaut and Kelley and Emerson are thematically similar in that they both focus attention on how the distributions of benefits between partners influence how relationships are structured and experienced. Emerson's contributions, however, are especially noteworthy as he is the first to extend the exchange framework to the understanding of a broad host of complex and evolving relationship experiences, like commitment and trust, that build or undermine relationship stability. He accounts for these emergent experiences and dynamics by shifting the focus of the exchange framework from individual's experiences of attraction and dependence to the balances of attraction and dependence between partners. Emerson's work represents a breakthrough in the development of the exchange framework because he adds to the framework a focus on the interdependence between partners' experiences within their relationships and how these experiences influence ongoing and evolving patterns of interaction. To this end, Emerson's focus on the emergent experiences, structures, and the ongoing interactions between these relationship realms led Turner, in 1986, to claim that Emerson's structural exchange theory represents a conceptual innovation in sociology equal in standing to the works of Marx, Mead, or Durkheim!

Basic Exchange Concepts: Attraction and Dependence

The exchange framework uses two broad relationship dimensions, an attraction dimension and a dependence dimension, to account for the variances observed in (1) the experiences of partners within social/dyadic relationships and (2) the patterns of interaction found within dyadic relationships. The framework can be used with both individuals and dyads as its unit of analyses. Within the exchange framework, individuals are conceived of as experiencing levels of attraction to and dependence on their relationship partners. Within the exchange framework, dyadic relationships are conceived of as being characterized by unique dyadic attraction/dependence configurations. These attraction/dependence configurations are viewed as accounting for emerging and ongoing experiences and patterns of interaction within and between partners.

The Attraction Dimension

Individuals are attracted to others when they can obtain positive outcomes (i.e., a high ratio of rewards to costs) from the relationship through the process of exchanging valued resources (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Within the exchange framework, there is a considerable degree of conceptual overlap between the concepts of rewards, costs, and resources. Rewards are very broadly defined as the “pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications the person enjoys” (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p.12). Costs are any negative experiences due to the things the person dislikes (punishments) or rewards foregone that result from being involved in a relationship (Blau, 1964; Nye, 1979). Resources are conceived of as being material or symbolic commodities that can be exchanged within interpersonal relationships and fall into distinct categories like status, money, social approval, and information (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Foa & Foa, 1974).

The Valuation of Rewards, Costs, and Resources

The exchange framework is built around an economic metaphor and assumes that people exchange resources in bids to maximize rewards and minimize costs. This economic metaphor is appealing in that it helps to explain the factors leading to interpersonal attraction simply; attraction is explained by the presence of high levels of rewards and access to resources. Behind this simple metaphor, however, lies a more complex reality in that what constitutes a reward or cost or the values associated with different resources can vary considerably from person to person.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed that individuals’ evaluations of rewards, costs, and resources were mediated through two different types of cognitions—the comparison level (CL) and the comparison level for alternatives (CLalt). Based on developmental and relationship experiences, people develop working models of the

rewards, costs, and resources they think they deserve and can realistically expect from a relationship. Thibaut and Kelley used the term CL to refer to this constellation of expectations. They hypothesized that when the kinds of outcomes available in a relationship tend to match those thought to be important and deserved, satisfaction with and attraction to the relationship would be high.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) defined the CLalt as the lowest level of outcomes a person will accept from a relationship considering available alternatives. As such, the CLalt serves as a context for judging the relative worth and value of the outcomes experienced from any one relationship. In this regard, interpersonal attraction is greatest when salient outcomes are experienced in a way that goes beyond what a person might realistically expect and goes beyond the outcomes that a person believes is available in alternative relationships.

The Dependence Dimension

Within the exchange framework, dependence is defined as the degree to which people believe that they are subject to or reliant on their partners for relationship outcomes (Emerson, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The degree of dependence experienced is influenced by the benefits available from a specific relationship as compared to the benefits believed to be available in the pool of relationship alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The degree of dependence experienced is further moderated by the internal or external barriers associated with the dissolution of an existing relationship (Levinger, 1982). This is to suggest that feelings of dependence are influenced by a constellation of factors including the rewards available from a relationship, the rewards believed to be available in alternative relationships, and the psychological, material, and economic costs associated with terminating an existing relationship.

The broad point here is that attraction and dependence are concepts that anchor the ways in which a person experiences an exchange relationship. The highest levels of attraction exist when a relationship provides high levels of rewards and resources that fall, in addition, well above the available alternative sources of rewards and resources. Generally speaking, people who experience high levels of attraction to their respective partners are more likely to be highly dependent on their relationships because better alternatives are not likely to exist and, over time, the costs of terminating the relationship are likely to increase (Levinger, 1982).

The Emergent Structures and Experiences of Exchange Relationships

The heuristic value of the exchange framework is enhanced by the fact that it can be used with individuals and dyads as its units of analyses (Sabatelli et al., 2018). By making dyads the framework's unit of analysis, Emerson calls attention to how

partners' relative and comparative levels of attraction and dependence can be used by exchange theorists to account for a host of emergent relationship experiences and structures. The focus on exchange relationships is compelling because "real relationships" are dynamic, certainly not static—meaning, due to any number of contextual and relationship factors, distributions of rewards, costs, and alternatives within and between partners are likely to change over time (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

What follows is a discussion of how the distributions of attraction and dependence, within and between partners, can be used in the exchange framework to account for variations in how relationships are experienced and structured. Please note that this discussion does not spend a lot of time discussing how concepts like equity, commitment, and power have been conceptualized or operationalized over the years. This section is designed, instead, to demonstrate how the framework can be used to provide insights into the variability observed in the wide range of experiences and patterns of interaction of interest to relationship scholars.

The Emergent Experiences of Satisfaction

Historically, the individual is largely the unit of analysis in the research focusing on relationship satisfaction (e.g., "Overall, how satisfied are *you* with *your* relationship"). Within the exchange perspective, however, satisfaction can be conceived of as being an emergent relationship experience based on how the levels of attraction and dependence experienced within and between partners shift over time (Sabatelli et al., 2018). For satisfaction to be maintained partners must continually negotiate exchange patterns that result in each partner's expectations being met or exceeded by their respective partner's behaviors. In addition, shifts in the balance of dependence between partners, due, for example, to changes in investments, costs of dissolution, barriers to termination, or a shrinking of the pool of eligible alternatives, all can feedback into the degrees of satisfactions experienced with a relationship (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

The broad point here is that the exchange perspective compels relationship researchers to consider how a "snapshot" of partners' satisfaction with their relationship, at any point in time, is contextually grounded in the relative levels of attraction and dependence experienced by both partners. Furthermore, it is likely that these balances shift over time due to a broad constellation of individual, relationship, and societal factors (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

The Emergent Experiences of Equity and Fairness

In everyday usage, the terms equity, fairness, and justice are used synonymously. To some extent, at times, relationship researchers have used these terms in overlapping and imprecise ways, thereby undermining the abilities of relationships researchers

to systematically and precisely focus on how these emergent experiences differ (Leventhal, 1980). Irrespective of how these terms have been conceptualized and operationalized, experiences like equity and justice can be thought of as emergent relationship experiences because they are grounded in assessments of the distributions of rewards, resources, and costs *between* partners (That is, partners judge their relationships to be inequitable or unjust when rewards, resources, and costs are disproportionately distributed *between partners* (Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994).

As aspects of the ongoing evaluative landscape of relationships, it is reasonable to assume that ongoing feelings of satisfaction are moderated by the experiences of equity and distributive justice. That is, experiences of justice and equity are likely to contribute to feelings of satisfaction. However, it is possible for equitable and just relationships to be experienced as unrewarding and unsatisfactory when the unpleasantness associated with the relationship is distributed proportionately between partners.

In addition, it is theoretically compelling to consider the ways in which relative levels of dependence factor into how individuals construct their views on what constitutes fair and equitable exchange patterns. When a person considers whether the relationship benefits are equitably distributed, it is obvious that these perceptions require reflections on how benefits compare between partners. Consistent with the exchange framework, it is important to consider, as well, how perceptions of equity, fairness, and justice are further moderated by within and between partner variances in the degrees of dependence on the relationship. The broader point here is that the exchange framework compels relationship researchers to consider how various emergent relationship experiences are distinct and interrelated.

The Emergent Experiences of Commitment and Trust

Commitment has been described as including an attachment bond, a long-term orientation, and the intention to persist, even in the face of adversity (Johnson, 1991). Most perspectives on the development of commitment in ongoing relationships conceptualize two sets of factors, consistent with the exchange framework, as promoting commitment: forces that draw people to a relationship and forces that keep people from leaving (Johnson, 1991; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In these views, heightened levels of attraction and dependence result in individuals feeling highly committed to their partners and relationships.

McDonald (1981), clearly influenced by Emerson's exchange framework, holds to the view that within-individual experiences of attraction and dependence do not sufficiently explain the emergence of commitment in ongoing partnerships. To this end, McDonald proposed that commitment emerges over time, only when individuals experience high levels of attraction to and dependence on their relationships and perceive that their partners are similarly invested in and rewarded by the relationships. In the absence of the perceptions of high and reciprocal degrees of attraction and

dependence, the motivation to work for the continuation of the relationships is tempered.

Relationship researchers conceive of trust, like commitment, as existing on a continuum. Trust involves a set of beliefs, expectations, and attributions about the degree to which partners can be counted on to support one's long-term interests (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kramer & Carnevale, 2008). Trust is important in relationships because it allows individuals to be less calculating and seek longer-term outcomes (Scanzoni, 1979) due to increased confidence and sense of security in the relationship (McDonald, 1981). McDonald (1981) pointed out, similar to his perspectives on commitment, that high levels of trust result only when individuals perceive that their partners share their high levels of attraction to and dependence on the relationship.

Finally, it is instructive to consider the methodological implications of Emerson's and McDonald's understanding of how the experiences of commitment and trust emerge and shift over time. Though commitment and trust are experienced by individuals, insights into the relationship factors contributing to these experiences are limited when respondents are only asked to report on their personal experiences of satisfaction and/or dependence. A more complete understanding of the factors building the experiences of commitment and trust follows from asking respondents about their experiences of attraction and dependence and their assessments of the degrees to which these experiences are shared by their partners.

Dominance and Power in Close Relationships

Resource theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) is an example of an early exchange-based bid to explain the distributions of power, control, and dominance observed within intimate relationships. As an application of exchange theory to the domain of marital power, the basic tenet of resource theory is that the power of each spouse is directly dependent on the relative value of the resources he or she possess. The partners with the greater resources have more power in the relationships because they would lose less if the marriage dissolves (Blood & Wolfe, 1960).

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) accounted for power dynamics in relationships by focusing on the alternatives available to each partner. In their view, partners with the greatest access to alternatives hold the power advantage in their relationships due to their abilities to control the fate of their partners. In other words, within the exchange framework, power dynamics become established within ongoing relationships based on how control over valued resources and access to alternatives are distributed between partners. As such, power does not reside in a person, but power dynamics are certainly influenced by personal attributes like access to valued resources, a large pool of relationship alternatives and/or low financial and intrapsychic costs associated with the loss of an existing partnership. These personal attributes provide a basis for power only when they are asymmetrically distributed between partners (Cook & Emerson, 1978; McDonald, 1981).

Conflict and Conflict Management

Conflict is an inevitable and, hence, emergent feature of ongoing intimate relationships. Discussions of conflict, in the relationship literature, follow two basic paths—one focuses on the sources of conflict, and the other focuses on how couples manage conflict. The exchange framework provides heuristic and theoretically parsimonious views on each of these issues.

The exchange framework highlights the role that the violations of expectations play in fostering conflict and tensions between partners. Conflict is activated when experiences, particularly involving issues at the core of partners' CL, fail to measure up to expectations (Nye, 1979; Sabatelli, 1984). The very fact that individuals differ with respect to the salience they attribute to different aspects of their relationship makes it hard to predict or generalize about the kinds of issues that will trigger conflict between partners (Nye, 1979).

Conflict is activated, as well, when distributive patterns consistently violate the expectations held by individuals. Here it is important to consider, once again, the fact that asymmetrical exchanges can be tolerated and viewed as fair. That is, while most individuals in a culture have somewhat similar views on what constitutes a fair, equitable, and/or just relationship, considerable variability exists as these culturally supported expectations are refined and shaped by a host of macro and micro level forces (McDonald, 1981).

Conflict management, from within the exchange perspective, involves efforts to reduce the dissonance between the expectations and the behaviors that violate these expectations. That is, conflicts around the violation of expectations typically involve bids on the parts of both partners to alter each other's behaviors and/or expectations (Sabatelli, 1988). In instances where the conflict is due to the violation of equity or fairness norms, conflict management strategies might involve (1) decreasing the costs of the relationship, (2) increasing the benefits derived from the relationship, or (3) decreasing the partner's benefits derived from the relationship (Blau, 1964). The broader point here is that a variety of strategies, some more constructive than others, might be used to restore the subjective experiences of equity and/or fairness.

In sum, the exchange framework's straightforward and theoretically parsimonious views of conflict and conflict management are one of the strengths of the theory. Conflict is a relational construct grounded in the emotions that are evoked when salient expectations are violated. There are wide variations in sources of conflict, in part, because people can differ widely in terms of what they expect from a partner or consider important in relationships.

Furthermore, while there are wide variations in conflict management strategies, all conflict management processes are strategic efforts to create a more acceptable alignment between behaviors and expectations. The wide variations in conflict management strategies that exist are moderated by the different degrees to which partners are symmetrically or asymmetrically rewarded by and dependent on their relationships.

Relationship Stability

Within the exchange framework, individuals are likely to act to end their relationships when their relationships become less rewarding *and* better alternatives are thought to exist *and* the barriers or costs of the dissolution are perceived to be tolerable (Levinger, 1982; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As such, declines in satisfaction alone are not sufficient to explain instability if alternatives are unacceptable or the costs associated with ending the relationship are judged to be too high.

These exchange-based factors were used by Lewis and Spanier (1982) to describe the variances possible in stable and unstable marriage relationships. Their typology of relationships consisted of four different types of marital-exchange relationships broken down by the experiences of satisfaction and dependence—namely, satisfying/stable relationships, satisfying/unstable relationships, unsatisfying/stable relationships, and unsatisfying/unstable relationships. This typology is relevant because it compels relationship researchers to refrain from treating stability as proxies for relationship satisfaction or success.

Furthermore, the typology presents a compelling theoretical rationale for relationship researchers to attend to partners' experiences of attraction *and* dependence if the goal is to better understand the factors that differentiate stable from unstable partnerships. The 1950s was characterized, for example, by historically low levels of divorce. These rates shifted dramatically throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and demographers (cf., Amato & Irving, 2006; Cherlin, 2016) have suggested that these increases in the rates of divorce were tied to a constellation of factors associated with wives gaining access to alternatives and or experiencing a lessening of the barriers to and costs associated with divorce—namely, access to contraception and the lowering of fertility rates, increases in access to education, and increases in employment opportunities and economic resources. These findings, in other words, support the conclusion that divorce rates increased because more women in the 1990s who were in unhappy relationships had alternatives and options not available to women in the past.

Criticisms of the Framework

There are two themes present in the commonly expressed criticisms of exchange theories. One set of criticisms is directed at assumptions associated with individualistically oriented exchange theories. The other set of criticisms is directed at the failure of the framework to “contextualize” how partners' access to resources and experiences of dependence plays an important role in how exchange relationships are negotiated and, ultimately, structured and experienced.

Theme One: Criticisms Related to Motivations

This thematic set of criticisms is nicely summarized by White and Klein (2002). They called attention to the disconnect between the assumption that individuals are motivated by self-interest and the presence of altruistic behaviors and equitable and fair distribution norms within many intimate partnerships. They discussed how parenthood serves as an example of a type of relationship that is not congruent with the assumption that people are motivated by self-interest and the desire to maximize rewards and minimize costs.

This line of criticisms, in other words, is directed at how the framework's use of the market place metaphor and viewing people as being motivated by self-interest and the maximization of profits is not a good fit with the patterns of exchange observed within marriage and other family relationships. Clearly, these criticisms are directed at philosophical positions taken by individualistically oriented exchange theorists and revolve around assumptions that cannot be validated or invalidated.

It is the case, as well, that this thematic set of criticisms ignores the assumption made by more contemporary exchange theorists, namely, that individualistic and collectivistic motivations exist and are acceptable when the *type of and goals for relationships are considered*. In this regard, family scientists focus on communal relationships populated by partners who share, for the most part, the goals of intimacy and stability. Achieving these goals requires participants to negotiate highly interdependent patterns of exchange (e.g., Arriaga, 2013; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). By highlighting the "interdependence metaphor" instead of the exchange metaphor, these theorists focus attention on how partners within communal relationships, who have intimacy as a goal for their relationships, must strive to balance the levels of attraction to and levels of dependence on the relationship to promote feelings of intimacy and insure the continuation of the relationships over time.

Theme Two: Ignoring the Context of Exchange Relationships

In *The Future of Marriage* (Bernard, 1972), Jessie Bernard argued that the experiences of marriage were fundamentally different for husbands and wives due to the fact that marriages were more beneficial for men than for women. She concluded that the institution of marriage would survive only if the differences in the benefits distributed to husbands versus wives were restructured. The issues highlighted by Bernard are at the center of a persistent set of criticism directed by feminist scholars at the exchange framework over the past 50 years.

Specifically, the feminist critique of exchange perspectives revolves around its failure to address the ways in which exchange relationships between men and women are influenced by broader cultural, economic, and political conditions (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Feminist theorists challenge the exchange assumption

that women are free to negotiate rewarding and fair exchanges when they enter into the marriage market. As under-resourced partners, women have less power in their marital relationships, in general, and are more dependent on their relationships than their husbands (Scanzoni, 1979). This means that women have less options available to them than men when entering marriages and less options available to them when confronted with inequitable, unsatisfying, and oppressive exchanges.

It is relevant to note that early attempts at integrating the exchange framework into the marital realm focused on cultural factors as a way of explaining why women were satisfied with their husband-dominated marriages. For example, McDonald (1981) built his structural exchange theory around the assumption that cultural value orientations influence husbands' and wives' normative expectations for: (a) how each partner should contribute to the relationship, (b) what each partner deserves to obtain from the relationship, and (c) how positive and negative outcomes should be distributed between partners. For McDonald, the widespread existence of husband-dominated marital exchanges prior to the 1980s is accounted for by the fact that cultural value orientations resulted in both men and women believing that marriage should benefit husbands more than wives *and* that wives should derive benefits from providing their husbands with these benefits.

McDonald's theory is important because he discusses the connections between macro factors and micro relationship dynamics by tying normative marital orientations to historically grounded cultural value orientations. His work, however, does not address the feminist critique of the exchange perspective in that he fails to acknowledge the societally grounded and systemic factors that provide a context for how partners approach their exchange negotiations. The Feminist critique, in other words, remains relevant as long as the exchange framework fails to take into account how contextual factors influence the access that heterosexual married men and women have to valued resources and alternatives to unhappy partnerships.

Furthermore, the contextual blindness that the exchange framework is guilty of is fostered by its failure, over the years, to directly address how factors in addition to gender, like race, class, and sexual orientation, impact the negotiations between these diverse groups of intimate partners. These issues are highlighted in Sabatelli et al.'s (2018) bid to develop a more "ecologically/contextually nuanced" version of the exchange framework. Sabatelli et al. (2018) held the view that different subgroups of intimate partnerships are best understood when partners' relative access to resources and alternatives are contextualized by factors like their sexual orientation, race, class, or immigration status and the historically relevant policies and practices found within the major institutions in the country. That is, their work represents a call for exchange-oriented researchers to more carefully examine how differential access to resources and options creates different exchange realities for different subsets of intimate partnerships.

In sum, the feminist critique of the exchange framework chastises relationship researchers when they fail to pay attention to the ways in which gender influences the resources available to husbands when compared to wives. While this critique remains timely and relevant, it can be argued that the critique does not necessarily discount the usefulness or theoretical strengths of the exchange framework. Instead,

the critique can be framed as a challenge to exchange-based scholars to sharpen and broaden their focus on the contextually relevant factors influencing how different subsets of intimate partners experience interpersonal attraction and relational dependence.

The Research Applications of the Exchange Framework

Theories are held in higher regard when they appear to meet a cluster of criteria. These criteria include the scope, testability, parsimony, and utility/heuristic properties of the theory (Fawcett, 2005). Meeting these criteria, in a more general sense, means that the theory is used by researchers to guide the justifications for and methods employed within their studies. In this regard, the exchange framework serves as an excellent example of a “concept-laden” and “variable-rich” framework that can be used as the theoretical foundation for a broad range of studies on how close relationships are structured and experienced (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

While the exchange framework is used to justify the design of studies on a broad array of personal and intimate relationships, it could be argued the breadth and depth of the theory is underutilized by relationship researchers to guide their studies. In a bid to energize the synergy between the exchange framework and the research on intimate and family relationships, a brief discussion of some of these key issues follows.

Relative Inattention to the Dependence Dimension

Attraction and dependence are the driving and restraining factors that impact on relationships that are structured and experienced. However, relatively few exchange-oriented researchers make a good-faith bid to examine within and between-partner indicators of dependence as moderators of relationship experiences. Ignoring dependence as a dimension of exchange relationships ignores a constellation of factors that contributes in powerful ways to how relationships are structured and experienced.

This inattention to dependence as a shaper of how relationships are structured and experienced may be exacerbated by the difficulties associated with operationalizing this complex construct. In the extant exchange research where bids are made to explore dependence, partner’s relative income levels or employment status are used as indicators of this construct (e.g., Sayer et al., 2011). It should be clear that these factors only partially capture the full range of factors that influence partners’ views on their relationship alternatives and the barriers to and costs associated with dissolving an existing relationship.

Attention to Various Forms of Dyadic Data

The exchange framework focuses on dyadic relationships. It follows, as such, that dyadic data are needed to better understand the factors that influence how social relationships are structured and experienced. This bid to encourage relationship researchers to collect and analyze dyadic data is not unique—similar bids have been made, sporadically, over the past three decades (see Proulx et al., 2017). The bid being made here to attend to dyadic data, however, is not based on an affection for more complex statistical modeling. It is grounded, instead, in a compelling theoretical rationale for collecting a different type of information from each member of a dyad.

Specifically, all exchange relationships involve the negotiation of a distribution of resources, rewards, and costs between partners that results in each partner experiencing a level of attraction to and dependence on the relationship. In these negotiations, partners pay attention to their perceptions of their own rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives *and* their perceptions of their partners' experiences of rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives. Clearly, in other words, the call here is for the collection of data that focuses on each partner's experiences within a relationship and data that focuses on each partner's perceptions of the partner's experiences of the relationship.

In other words, and following the lead of Emerson and McDonald, future research grounded in the exchange framework would be energized by paying greater attention to the ways in relationship negotiations are moderated by the perceptions that individuals have of their respective partners' access to resources and alternatives. The belief that the partner has access to alternatives, for example, changes the approach to exchange negotiations. Concomitantly, the belief that the partner is highly invested in the relationship influences, inevitably, how the relationship is structured and experienced over time. It is rare that these types of dyadic data are used in studies of intimate partners.

Variable-Centered and Person-Centered Approaches to the Study of Exchange Relationships

The exchange framework serves as an example of a “concept-laden” and “variable-rich” framework that supports “variable-centered” approaches to relationship research (Sabatelli et al., 2018). Variable-centered approaches aim to relate variables to one another to determine the degree of associations between these variables. The assumption of a variable-centered approach is that the *sample is drawn from a single population*; therefore, on average, individuals experience factors similarly. Group differences can be examined, but only for observable groups. For example, variable-centered approaches can allow for detecting differences between males and females.

In the variable-centered studies grounded in the exchange framework, it is hypothesized, for example, that equity leads to increased satisfaction or high levels

of rewards lead to increased experiences of commitment. These variable-centered approaches to the study of intimate dyads assume that the relationship between the observed variables has the same impact on how relationships are structured and experienced across the entire population (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). While the exchange framework clearly implies that the relationship between satisfaction and commitment might be moderated by the degree of dependence on the relationship, which is influenced, in turn, by variables like gender, age, and years married, these variables are typically introduced as covariates. When this is done, insights are gained into the strength of the relationship between experiences of satisfaction and commitment. However, what is lost in the process is the ability to understand the variability that most certainly exists within the population of intimate and married dyads.

The study of the variability and uniqueness existing within and between relationships requires relationship researchers to make a different set of assumptions in the approaches used to the study of exchange relationships. To this end, relationship research that is interested in understanding the variability existing within and between relationships within the population is better accomplished by using person-centered approaches to research (Sabatelli et al., 2018). Rather than focusing on a variable having a specific effect on how the relationships is experienced, as an example, the person-centered focus is on the different ways variables cluster together to describe distinct groups. These distinct groups are not directly observable but are instead latent. That is, person-centered approaches assume that there is not a single population distribution. The assumption, instead, is that there are subgroups within the population made up of individuals who are more like each other than they are to those in other subgroups (Jung & Wickrama, 2008).

Person-centered analyses take several forms, although all have in common: (1) a rejection of the assumption that the entire population is homogeneous with respect to how variables influence each other and (2) a search for categories of individuals characterized by patterns of association among variables that are similar within groups and different between groups (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). To this end, person-centered analyses identify key patterns of values across variables, where the person, viewed holistically, becomes the unit of analysis (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). Theories do not typically lend themselves to thinking about the unique ways in which the person and his or her context have theoretical importance. The exchange framework, with its emphasis on within and between-partner variances in driving and restraining forces does, in fact, make these dyadic realities theoretically important (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

For example, reflecting back to the Lewis and Spanier (1982) typology of married couples, person-centered analyses are needed in order to better understand the differences that exist between the couples who are dissatisfied with their relationships but remain married—and whether and to what degree do factors like gender and indicators of socioeconomic standing operate within and between these groups. The point here being that Lewis and Spanier's application of exchange theory requires more nuanced approaches to the study of dyads, approaches that look at subgroups within the groups of stable and unstable partnerships.

Another example is the extant research on gay and lesbian couples. When gay and lesbian couples are studied using variable-centered approaches, it is assumed that the samples are homogeneous. This assumption is easily challenged, however, as a host of factors, like the cohort of partners, the regions of the country within which they reside, their religious background, can influence access to resources and alternatives. As such, as pointed out by Sabatelli et al. (2018), person-centered approaches would add to the understanding of the variability present within same-sex couples by identifying specific subgroups of individuals who are characterized by particular constellations of factors associated with their relationship exchanges and relationship outcomes. Such studies would provide new insights into the ways in which individual, relationship, and broader contextual factors interact and are related to exchange patterns.

A final note is in order here. Person-centered approaches are not necessarily better than variable-centered approaches to the study of exchange relationships. The approach used to the analyses of data should be, clearly, tied to the goals of the study. The exchange framework easily lends itself to variable-centered studies. The framework, however, when attention is directed at within and between-partner variances in factors promoting levels of attraction and dependence, is compatible with approaches to studies that are person-centered.

Conclusion

There is a certain simplicity and elegance to the exchange framework when it comes to theorizing about the factors that account for the variability observed within social relationships. The framework is built around a simple metaphor. Relationships are goal directed and continuously evaluated and negotiated. Social exchanges result in patterns of attraction and dependence being established that, in turn, will determine whether the relationship is continued, discontinued, or renegotiated.

The simple metaphor, however, masks the theoretical elegance of the framework when it comes to understanding the many factors that account for the variability observed in how relationships are structured and experienced. Using the full breadth and depth of the framework compels researchers to pay attention to both micro and macro factors that influence the various types of driving and restraining forces experienced by partners within their relationships.

Lastly, the exchange framework is greater than the works of the various theorists who contributed to the development of the framework over the years. It is rather disingenuous to make a bid to deconstruct the unique contribution of each of these scholars. They were all trying to account for the factors contributing to the variability in social relationships, and they were all influenced by their interpretations of similar historical and philosophical readings. Collectively, their works contribute to the development and then the evolution of the exchange framework. What is interesting, in this regard, is to chart how the framework has evolved over the years with the expectation that the framework and its research applications are still evolving.

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