RESEARCH FILE FOR
SP200 Interpersonal Communication

TOPIC #2: Relationship Theories
Social Exchange Theory

Topic 2: Relationship Theories- Social Exchange Theory has many various aspects and has been adapted by several researchers (the most popular ones are John Thibaut and Harold Kelly). This theory views disclosure of information in relationships from a “worth= rewards- cost” (1) Explain this theory using your research. (2) Based on your understanding of this theory can it be applied to all communication? (3) Are there holes or limitations to the application of this theory? If so what are they and explain them. (4) How does this theory apply to the development of relationship in you understanding?


KEY SEARCH TERMS:
Social Exchange Theory
John Thibaut and Harold Kelly
Cost Rewards Analysis in Communication
Cost Rewards Analysis in Relationship Building

WORKS CITED

A First Look at Communication Theory

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Social Exchange Theory
of John Thibaut & Harold Kelley

In 1959 Perry Smith and Dick Hickock invaded a Kansas farmhouse in a senseless robbery that netted under $50. After tying up the four family members in separate rooms, they blasted them with a shotgun to eliminate all witnesses. Two months later the men were captured and placed in separate interrogation rooms. The police had enough evidence to convict them for parole violation and passing bad checks, but the evidence for murder was thin. The prosecutor needed a confession.

Truman Capote's book, In Cold Blood, describes the dilemma faced by Smith and Hickock. Shortly after the crime, they had agreed to stick together so that they could back up their planned alibi if arrested. Yet held in isolation, each doubted the other's will or ability to hold out. Smith saw Hickock as a convincing liar, but thought his "guts were unreliable." Hickock feared dying on the gallows because of Smith's losing his nerve.

Often in jointly committed homicides, the suspect who turns state's evidence gains immunity while the other one who feigns innocence gets the death penalty. This differential treatment provides a strong temptation to cop out. But admitting guilt doesn't always achieve leniency. If both confess, the government has more evidence than it needs to convict for murder, and both killers get a life sentence. Yet if both stonewall, the prosecutor can only get a conviction on a lesser charge. This is the classic prisoner's dilemma: confess the crime or maintain innocence?

**The Outcome Matrix as a Mirror of Life**

Figure 22-1 diagrams the interdependence of Smith and Hickock. This 2 x 2 matrix is the central analytical device of John Thibaut and Harold Kelley's social exchange theory. Thibaut was professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina until his death in 1986; Kelley continues to use the outcome matrix at UCLA to examine the friction of interaction. The column headings show the two choices open to Smith; the row labels describe Hickock's same options. The four cells inside reveal the consequences of the various behavioral combinations. Smith's outcomes are in the upper right corner of each cell. Hickock's
are in the lower left portion. For example, if Smith confesses while his partner stands mute, he goes free and Hickock dies.

The numbers in parentheses are attempts to quantify the values of different outcomes. Thibaut and Kelley assume that all of the relevant costs and rewards that surround the interaction are represented by that figure. Outcome equals reward minus cost.

The idea of totaling benefits and losses to determine behavior isn't new. Since philosopher John Stuart Mill stated his philosophy of utilitarianism, there's been a compelling logic to the minimax principle of human behavior. The minimax principle claims that people seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. So the higher the number in an outcome matrix, the more attractive the behavior that might make it happen.

It would be nice if every interaction offered both parties a chance to get their optimum outcome at the same time. Unfortunately the world's not set up that way. As with the prisoner's dilemma, there's the potential for one person's gain to come at the other's expense. Thibaut and Kelley describe the matrix as "bilaterally discordant" and believe it offers a good way to study conflict in groups. To them a group is a collection of one-on-one relationships. Principles of conflict management that are valid for two individuals (a dyad) will hold true for three individuals (a triad) and beyond.

Social exchange theory assumes that we can accurately anticipate the payoffs of a variety of interactions. Our minds are like computers, and a computer analyst is only as good as the data that are fed in. Garbage in, garbage out. To the authors of the theory, the data we get are remarkably reliable. Not only can Hickock see that twin confessions will result in a life sentence for him, he can also understand that they'll produce the same effect for Smith.

The 2 × 2 matrix plots either-or decisions, but most conflict situations
require a much larger map to represent the multiple options of both parties. Despite this complexity, Thibaut and Kelley believe that those caught up in conflict, as well as outside observers, can realistically grasp the potential outcomes shown across the grid. In addition, the participants have the sense to choose what's best.

The best choice is not always the one associated with the highest number on the board. Take a look at Smith and Hickock's options. There's no doubt that freedom is the most desirable outcome, yet if each man confesses in the hope of avoiding prison, they will both end up behind bars for the rest of their lives. Like playing a game of checkers, it's not enough to know you want to advance your marker to the far side of the board to gain a king. You also must credit your opponent's desire to do the same. Success requires that you take into account what the other player is likely to do.

The need for a strategy of anticipation leads some to refer to this exchange approach as game theory. However, Thibaut and Kelley want to avoid the head-butting, win-lose, adversarial tone that goes with seeing the other as an opponent in a game. The internal cost of conflict cuts into the worth of an outcome; its resolution is value added. It is for this reason that they prefer the term interdependence theory. Whatever label we use, successful players learn to synchronize their moves with the actions of others.

**Comparing the Results—Is Everybody Happy?**

It may have occurred to you that a life sentence could mean something quite different to Smith than to Hickock. Social exchange theory presents two standards of comparison by which to evaluate a given outcome, whether in prison or under more normal circumstances. The first deals with relative satisfaction—how happy or sad an interpersonal outcome makes a participant feel. Thibaut and Kelley call it the comparison level.

A person's comparison level (CL) is the threshold above which an outcome seems attractive. If your CL for clerical employment is an hourly wage of $7, you would be satisfied working for $8 an hour but feel exploited if you only received $6 for your labor.

Satisfaction depends on expectation, which is shaped by prior experience, especially gripping events of the recent past. A run of bad outcomes can make previously distasteful results more palatable. A string of successes whets the appetite for a gourmet feast.

If Smith's memory is filled with killers who either go free or merely get token jail terms, his CL will be at +9, and a life sentence rated at +3 will seem a cruel joke. In spite of his murderous brutality, even a moderate term in jail will strike him as unfair. Hickock may see execution as the likely result of committing homicide. As a former convict he knew men who went to the gallows. With a CL of only +2, a life sentence at +3 looks quite attractive.
COMPARING THE RESULTS—IS EVERYONE GOING TO STICK AROUND?

Thibaut and Kelley suggest that there is a second standard by which we evaluate the outcomes we receive. They call it the *comparison level of alternatives* \(C_{\text{alb}}\), and the level is pegged by the best payoffs available outside the current relationship. \(C_{\text{alb}}\) is the worst outcome a person will accept and still stay in a relationship. As more attractive outside possibilities become available, or as existing outcomes slide below an established \(C_{\text{alb}}\), instability increases. This may sound like a stock market analysis rather than a description of intragroup relationships. Not surprisingly, some advocates of a social exchange approach refer to it as a “theory of economic man.”

\(C_{\text{alb}}\) doesn’t speak to the issue of attraction or satisfaction. A woman could be happy in her job, yet leave for a new position which offers even higher pay, better working conditions, or a more interesting assignment. Conversely, she might remain in a loveless marriage because the high cost of exit lowers the attractiveness of the best outside alternative. Social workers describe the plight of a battered wife as high cost, low rewards. Yet she often remains with her abusive husband because the option of being alone in the world appears worse.
She'll end the relationship only when she perceives an outside alternative which promises a better life (CL_{alt} > Outcome).

Nonvoluntary relationships have an extremely low CL_{alt}. Smith and Hickock each tried to escape and failed. Their only alternative to the unwanted dilemma was suicide, an outcome on a par with execution. Thibaut and Kelley arbitrarily set CL_{alt} at zero in a payoff matrix, so that's why every outcome but hanging is shown as positive in the prisoner's dilemma. Even without displaying the three absolute values of an outcome, CL and CL_{alt}, the rank order reveals a lot about the state of relational health. Figure 22-2 outlines the six possibilities. The last option describes the situation of Smith and Hickock.

**DEPENDENCE FOSTERS CONTROL**

In addition to distinctions in attractiveness and stability, Figure 22-2 separates relationship types on the basis of power. Consider the tie that exists between you and your mother. Her power over you is directly proportional to the amount of dependence you have on her for the benefits of life. If she is your only source for college tuition, wise counsel, emotional support, and fudge brownies, her ability to govern your life is great. If you can easily get the benefits she offers someplace else, you avoid interdependence. When outcomes exceed CL_{alt} by a large margin, dependence is great. Thibaut and Kelley make no claim that this is either good or bad. They merely point out the link between dependence and control. Their discussion of conflict involves three different forms of control.

![Figure 22-2. Relational Typology](Adapted from Roloff, *Interpersonal Communication: The Social Exchange Approach*, p. 48.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome &gt; CL &gt; CL_{alt}</th>
<th>Satisfying Stable Dependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outcome &gt; CL_{alt} &gt; CL</td>
<td>Satisfying Stable Non-dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL_{alt} &gt; CL &gt; Outcome</td>
<td>Not satisfying Break relationship Happy elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL_{alt} &gt; Outcome &gt; CL</td>
<td>Satisfying Unstable Happier elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL &gt; CL_{alt} &gt; Outcome</td>
<td>Not satisfying Break relationship Continue unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL &gt; Outcome &gt; CL_{alt}</td>
<td>Highly unsatisfying Can’t break away Dependent and unhappy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Reflexive Control. The ability to reward yourself is reflexive control. It’s pulling your own strings, taking responsibility for your own outcomes, being your own best friend. This is what Jane has in the first matrix of Figure 22-3. By choosing to do whatever behavior “X” represents, she can give good things to herself regardless of Dick’s response. Self-provided rewards are portable. They continue to provide independence when carried into new relationships. These appear nonexistent for Smith and Hickock, since the best outcome they can achieve on their own is a life sentence.

2. Fate Control. The ability to affect another’s outcomes regardless of what he or she does is fate control. In the second matrix of Figure 22-3, Jane has fate control over Dick. She can exercise this power with tender, loving care or jerk him around unmercifully. Either way, he can’t do a thing about it as long as they’re together. His only recourse is the one available in most low-power situations—break off the relationship. Massive environmental fate control has removed even that option for Smith and Hickock. They’ve got to deal with each other, and each one by confessing can condemn the other to a lifetime in prison—or worse. That’s mutual fate control.

3. Behavior Control. The ability people have to change another’s behavior through variations of their own is behavior control. It doesn’t necessarily generate high outcomes; it’s simply the power to move the other person around the matrix. By shifting her choice from Behavior X to Behavior Y, Jane gives Dick a strong inducement to act toward her in Option A rather than Option B. Hickock was the first to admit guilt in the Kansas murder case. Foreknowledge of his partner’s confession would have given Smith a great impetus to abandon his claim of innocence.

Interdependence juggles the three forms of control, usually in some blend of mutuality. Mutual reflexive control is the power of individuals to make what they want come true in their own lives. Mutual fate control is the power they
have to make what they want come true in others' lives. Mutual behavior control is the power they have to resolve the conflict that's generated by the clash of the first two kinds.

Transforming Conflict into Cooperation

Thibaut and Kelley present a number of matrices which simulate real-life conflicts. As with Prisoner's Dilemma, the games come with intriguing titles: Chicken, Battle-of-the-Sexes, Threat, Zero-Sum. Social exchange theory assumes that once outcome values are set, prediction of a player's moves is automatic. However, life is rarely that simple. Playing for points, jelly beans, or money, people who are thrust into these conflict scenarios continually act contrary to what outsiders see as their own interest. Usually the variant choices reflect a prosocial, nonselfish bias.

Rather than abandon the basic principle of maximizing rewards and minimizing costs, Thibaut and Kelley speculate that people caught up in conflict reconceptualize the situation to relieve tension. Anxious participants alter the numbers so that they are in effect responding to a matrix different than the one they were given. The transformation process Thibaut and Kelley describe is similar to the reframing which Watzlawick considers the only hope for dysfunctional family systems (see Chapter 14).

Figure 22-4 shows a prisoner's dilemma transformation that regards good things happening to the other man as of equal value to benefits for self. Systems theorists would say that the individuals have redefined the system so that it now includes the other person. The subjective shift to joint outcomes clearly makes stonewalling the desirable choice. The men no longer face a dilemma. Although there's no evidence that either Smith or Hickock added their partner's rewards into their own benefit mix, some close friends and lovers obviously do.

The revised theory sketches other transformations that people use to resolve interpersonal conflict and reduce the inner agony of making hard decisions. An altruistic strategy flip-flops the payoffs within a given cell. If Hickock claims sole responsibility for the crimes, Smith can go free. A concern for justice prefers equal prison terms of whatever length over differential treatment. A

![Figure 22-4. Prisoner's Dilemma Transformation: Maximizing Joint Outcomes](image)
competitive mind-set places a premium on getting a personal outcome as good or better than the other killer. ("I'd rather we both hang than you get off easier than me.") Truman Capote reports that this was Hickocks's thinking at the time he confessed, and both men did hang.

The field of group dynamics has a long tradition of studying group norms. Norms are the stated and implicit rules of a group that identify the range of acceptable behavior. Often couched in moral terms, these principles provide a basis for action when the situation is confusing. Social exchange theory describes norms as socially rewarded transformations aimed at curbing the use of raw power. The language of prison reveals that there is indeed an enforced honor among thieves. Labels of cheat, finik, or snitch add to the cost of squealing on a buddy, so the classic prisoner's dilemma looks different from within the walls.

Another set of moral transformations comes into play when people deal with each other over time. For example, parents promote a turn-taking norm as a way to reduce conflict among their children. As with all transformations, children who adopt this stance do so in the hope that it will work to their advantage in the long run. As for Smith and Hickock, this was not an option, they had only one chance to resolve their prisoner's dilemma.

**CRITIQUE: WEIGHING THE OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY**

Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory is an ambitious attempt to quantify and calculate the friction of interdependence. Altman and Taylor's wholesale use of the reward-cost analysis for social penetration theory (see Chapter 15) shows the value of the exchange approach. Yet some students regard mathematical models of human interaction as foreign territory. They balk when asked to cross the borders of the outcome matrix and work through the numbers of comparison levels, transformations, and fate control. They could avoid culture shock by first immersing themselves in the theory's rich description of the causes and resolutions of conflict.

But even those who appreciate Thibaut and Kelley's technical analysis must ask hard questions about the theory's basic assumptions: Can a complex blend of advantages and disadvantages be reliably reduced to a single number? Do individuals respond so selfishly that they always opt to do what they calculate is in their own best interest? Are the suggested transformations testable refinements of a solid theory, or just shotgun attempts to salvage faulty hypotheses? Is group controversy merely an extension of one-on-one conflict?

Although negative answers would cast doubt on the theory's validity, the research findings stimulated by the social exchange approach offer helpful insights on conflict resolution. In prisoner's dilemma situations, for example, the chance to communicate dramatically increases cooperation. A single play presents greater temptation to zap a partner than does continual interdependence. Once trust is broken, it's hard to restore joint collaboration.
There are different reasons for noncooperation. People with a competitive mind-set regard the prisoner's dilemma as a chance to take advantage of a weaker opponent. Folks with a high need for affiliation fear that others will exploit them, so they adopt a defensive strategy. The end result is the same—an unwinnable war. The ironic conclusion is that pursuit of selfish interest provides fewer personal benefits than a concern for the general welfare. That insight alone makes social exchange theory attractive. For all but the most severe critic, the outcome exceeds the comparison level.

**A SECOND LOOK**


*Prisoner's dilemma:* Anatole Rapoport and Albert Chammah, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1965.


