Marital Relationships: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective

PAUL A. NAKONEZNY
Departments of Clinical Sciences and Psychiatry, The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA

WAYNE H. DENTON
Department of Psychiatry, Family Studies Center, The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA

The central thesis of this article is the treatment of the marital relationship within the context of social exchange theory. This article opens with a discussion of marital solidarity and marital power from a social exchange perspective. Next, the article addresses the differences between social exchange and economic exchange in order to provide insight in delineating marital relationships in a social exchange context. The conceptualization of couple therapy in terms of social exchange theory is next discussed. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of the deficiencies of social exchange theory as an attempt to delimit the scope of treating marital relationships as a social exchange system.

Social exchange theory is a viable theoretical framework to examine relational processes in marital and familial relationships. The paradigm of social exchange theory—which borrows from behavioral psychology, sociology, and classical economics—seeks to explain the development, maintenance (e.g., solidarity, power), and decay of exchange relationships in terms of the balance between the rewards that marital partners obtain and the costs that they incur by selecting themselves into marital relationships. Costs are the factors that inhibit or deter a performance of a sequence of behaviors within a marriage, whereas rewards are the pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications that a person enjoys within a marriage (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Hence,
Marital Relationships: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective

Marital exchange relationships can be conceptualized as the cyclical patterns of transactions of valued resources, tangible or intangible, between partners and the rewards and costs associated with such transactions, which culminate in dyadic or individual outcomes of profit or loss (McDonald, 1981). Chavannes (1901), one of the first modern sociologists to make explicit use of the concept of social exchange, argued that

exchange lies at the base of all relations of men [sic] to each other, and is the ground work on which society is built. Also, that social exchange embraces all the possible transactions between human beings, from the largest material business transaction to the exchange of love and affection. (p. 59)

The purpose of this theoretical article is to examine marital relationships within the context of social exchange theory. Space does not permit a comprehensive survey here of the marital literature vis-a-vis social exchange theory. Thus, the ideas that have been selected for exposition are only part of a grand scheme of social exchange in relation to marital relationships (with an emphasis on the classical school of thought in social exchange theory). The article commences with a brief dialogue of marital solidarity and marital power from a social exchange theory perspective. The article then addresses the differences between social exchange and economic exchange as an attempt to provide insight in delineating marital relationships in a social exchange context. Clinical aspects of considering marital relationships from a social exchange perspective are next considered. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of the deficiencies of social exchange theory so as to delimit the scope of treating marital relationships as a social exchange system.

FOCUSING ON MARRIAGE

There are many types of committed, intimate dyadic relationships of which marriage is only one. Some committed partners choose not to pursue marriage and, for others, marriage is not an option. While much of what we present here is applicable to a wide range of committed relationships, we have intentionally retained a focus on the marital relationship as there are aspects of marriage that are distinct from other forms of relationship (Leiblum, 2004) and which have particular relevance to the concepts presented here (discussed below). Marriage has been an enduring institution which shows little signs of disappearing. Indeed, while many decide to leave marriage, many others continue to enter into it or seek to at least have that right (Clarke & Finlay, 2004; Kreider, 2005).
Marital solidarity and social exchange

Social exchange theory portends that individuals in relationships are motivated by the goodness of outcomes they are expected to bring (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). Marital partners yield goodness of outcomes based on rewards and costs, but each partner must value the mutual activity above a comparison level in order for relational solidarity to be sustained. The comparison level is a standard which represents the accumulation of past experiences weighted by its salience (i.e., past-salient central memory) and reward/cost comparisons. Thus, the outcome of marital exchange is evaluated on the basis of past experience, which in turn leads to a partner's perception of his or her goodness of outcome—a cognitive evaluation of costs and rewards (Edwards & Saunders, 1981).

Marital couples who receive favorable reward/cost outcomes from each other—the proportion of rewards and costs are distributed in a fair ratio to each other—are more likely to be satisfied with their marriage (Homans, 1974). Couples satisfied with their marriage are less likely to dissolve the marriage through divorce or separation (Levinger, 1979). This axiom of social exchange theory suggests that when profits (rewards minus costs) from marital exchange are perceived as equitable, there tends to be a development of solidarity within the marital relationship. Durkheim (1893/1933, p. 202) wrote that “the integration of a social aggregate can only reflect the intensity of the collective life circulating in it” and that group or marital solidarity encourages strong bonds between individuals based upon collective standards of equitable behavior deriving from historical group or shared tradition. The solidarity of a marital relationship, however, is dependent not only upon reward and cost experiences (outcomes) in the past, but also upon the expectations of rewards and costs (outcomes) in future exchanges (Levinger & Snoek, 1972).

The level of outcomes received relative to the comparison level defines in part the partners’ degree of attraction to the marital relationship. That is, from a social exchange theory perspective, each partner’s attraction to the relationship is assumed to vary directly with the perceived rewards of the marital relationship and inversely with the perceived costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Hence, marital partners evaluate the attractiveness of their relationship via a subjective calculus in which the perceived rewards and costs experienced in the relationship are weighted and then combined to determine the net profit yielded by participation in the marital relationship. Thus, the partner’s attraction to the relationship depends on the assessed profit of the relationship relative to the partner’s comparison level. A marital relationship is more likely to embody a greater degree of solidarity if both partners’ outcomes or assessed profits are above their comparison level. Thus, ceteris paribus, the greater the degree of attraction to the marital relationship, the greater the marital solidarity (Adams, 1968).
Although a partner’s attraction to a marital relationship depends on the assessed profit received from the relationship relative to the partner’s comparison level, attraction does not mediate a partner’s dependence on the marital relationship. Rather, a partner’s dependence on a marital relationship is an inverse function of a partner’s comparison level alternative (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). A comparison level alternative refers to the lowest level of outcomes that is equal to or greater than what a partner could obtain from some alternative relationship. Thus, the more rewarding a partner’s alternatives (e.g., another man or woman, a career), the less is a partner’s dependence (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Hence, a major risk factor of relationship instability is at least one partner’s low level of dependence on the marital relationship (Kurdek, 1993). Marital partners who vary in their levels of interdependence may experience distress, because one or both of them lack the commitment to the relationship. “Commitment thus denotes the degree to which the self is identified with the marital relationship” (Edwards & Saunders, 1981, p. 384).

Marital commitment tends to build up through reciprocated marital trust and marital trust tends to build up gradually through cumulative marital commitment to the relationship. Thus, marital commitment and marital trust tend to mediate marital solidarity by increasing the experience of dyadic cohesion and by curtailing the level of alternatives (McDonald, 1981). As a marital relationship advances toward greater solidarity, the partners’ payoffs are weighted into one’s own payoff; thus, marital involvement implies increasing mutual identification.

MARITAL POWER AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Social exchange within a marital relationship involves the transference of resources. Emerson (1976) defined a resource in a social exchange as “an ability, possession, or other attribute of an actor [partner] giving him [or her] the capacity to reward or punish another specified actor [partner]” (p. 347). The rewards and punishments that actors (partners) administer to each other is a principal source of marital power. Thus, reward power is based on partner A’s ability to reward partner B. The magnitude of partner A’s reward power depends on the extent to which partner A is able to produce positive affective events for partner B or to facilitate the goal achievement of partner B (Kelley, 1983). In contrast, coercive power is based on partner A’s ability to mediate punishments for partner B. Coercive power depends on partner A’s facility to incite negative affective events for partner B or to impede partner B’s goal achievement (Kelley, 1983). A further source of marital power is derived from the level of commitment to the relationship or to the extent that the self is identified with the marital relationship. That is, as partner A’s level of commitment increases relative to partner B’s, partner B gains power.
relative to partner A. This is consistent with the old clinical axiom that the partner with the least commitment has the greatest power.

Marital power is a dynamic process that varies by situation and that changes over time. Nonetheless, the balance of power generally belongs to that partner who contributes the greater resources to the marriage. Resource differential, thus, produces relationship asymmetry. The asymmetrical nature of the relationship allows for the emergence of exploitation in the marital relationship (Blau, 1964). Such exploitation is often used in dysfunctional couples to maintain the power imbalance between each partner and to increase the bargaining power of one partner relative to the other partner.

A paradox of social exchange theory is that it serves not only to establish bonds between actors (partners), but also to generate status differences between actors (partners). Levi-Strauss (1957) best captured the subtlety of asymmetry in social exchange relationships: “to surpass a rival in generosity, to crush him if possible under future obligations which it is hoped he cannot meet, thus taking from him privileges, titles, rank, authority, and prestige” (p. 85). Buber (1970) argued, however, that “man’s will to profit and will to power are natural and legitimate as long as they are tied to the will to relationships and carried by it: there is no evil drive until the drive detaches itself from the relationship” (p. 97). Durkheim (1893/1933) further wrote that decreased relational solidarity results in a “fragmented [marriage] in which individuals are cut loose from their [marital] moorings” (p.148). This detachment is, thus, a determinant in marital dissolution. A basic hypothesis is that the course of dissolution of a marital relationship is systematic and is the reverse of the growth of the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). That is, barriers to exit the relationship, which serve to alleviate the effect of fluctuations in interpersonal attraction and which serve to maintain the marital relationship, erode. Thus, interpersonal exchange within the marriage becomes less interdependent; there is less mutual involvement; there is less mutual identification; there is less liking; there is less shared level of compatibility; there is less solidarity; and there is progressive withdrawal of love and affection, and the centering of affect on the self and an expanded egocentrism. The dissolution of a marital relationship, thus, means a return to the single, individual person as the unit, rather than the dyad. Altman and Taylor (1973) argued that there is not a direct accrual of costs in the dissolving marital relationship, but, rather, a loss of rewards and a breakdown of barriers to exit.

Social Exchange Versus Economic Exchange

Exchange theory is an eclectic body of psychological, sociological, and economic axioms. There are, however, differences between social and economic exchange that may provide further insight in delineating marital relationships in a social exchange context. The most basic difference between social and
economic exchange is that economic exchange embodies specified obligations, whereas social exchange embodies unspecified obligations. In economic exchange, the specific obligations of the actors (e.g., terms of sale) are simultaneously agreed upon: a product or service is sold for a specific price (rate of exchange). In social exchange, however, one actor (partner) supplies benefits to another, and although there is a general expectation of reciprocation, the exact nature of the return is not specified. That is, an actor (partner) in a social exchange is not forced by society to repay a social obligation, but an actor in an economic exchange must pay for products or services purchased in the marketplace. A further premise of unspecified social obligation is that the benefits involved in social exchange do not have an exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange. Blau (1964) expressed this by arguing that “it is not just the social scientist who cannot exactly measure how much approval a given helpful action is worth; the actors themselves cannot precisely specify the worth of approval or of help in the absence of a money price” (p. 95). The obligations individuals (partners) incur in social exchange, therefore, are defined in diffuse terms. Thus, one partner in a marital relationship has to trust the other partner to discharge his or her obligations, and the nature of the return is usually not bargained such as that in an economic exchange.

Economic exchanges are based upon belief in the legal system, whereas social exchange is based upon trust. Trust is the essence of a social exchange and as mutual trust evolves so does the extent and commitment to the social and marital relationship. Hence, processes of social exchange, which may originate in self-interest, generate trust in marital relationships through their recurrent and gradually expanding character and solidarity (Blau, 1964). The reverse is also true in that as trust may be lost, commitment to the relationship begins to diminish. One of the hallmarks of couples seen clinically, underlying whatever problem they may present with, is such a loss of trust.

Blau (1964) further argued that economic exchanges are extrinsic—in that the objects are detachable from the exchange relationship—whereas social exchanges are more intrinsic, in that they cannot be detached to the same extent from the relationship. This difference is derived from the personal context and particularistic standards of the social exchange versus the impersonal context and universalistic standards of the economic exchange. Marital relationships that are perceived as ends in themselves by actors are represented by particularistic standards. It is the marital relationship that is perceived as a means to an end that is represented by universalistic standards.

An imperative distinction between economic and social exchange is that the intervening mechanisms in social exchange are the norms of fairness. Blau (1964) argued that normative standards of a fair return for a given service “have their ultimate source in society’s need for this service and in the investment required to supply it” (p. 155). The relationship between the
fair rate and the going rate of social exchange is parallel to that between the normal price and the average price in economic markets: the price at which demand and supply are in a state of equilibrium.

Homans (1950) referred to group norms as “an idea in the minds of the members of a group, an idea that can be put in the form of a statement specifying what the members... should do, ought to do, are expected to do under given circumstances” (p. 123). Group norms in social exchange, thus, define those standards of behavior that govern and mediate familial and marital relations and that help define proper and equitable behaviors regarding the type and degree of marital and filial obligation (Mangen & Westbrook, 1988). One of the differences between the marital relationship and other types of committed, intimate relationships is that the group norms for the marital relationship are more commonly held and agreed on by members of society. These group norms have their ultimate manifestation in the form of laws (marriage laws) which delineate responsibilities of the members of the marriage. Together, these norms of responsibility, or obligations, are thought to exert a stabilizing influence on behavior in the marital relationship (Blau, 1964) and are a primary factor in the maintenance of familial and marital ties (Adams, 1968; Reiss, 1962).

INCREASING REWARDS AND DECREASING COSTS THROUGH COUPLE THERAPY

Distressed couples presenting for couple therapy can be thought of as having a paucity of positive behavior exchanges and an excess of negative exchanges. In fact, it has been documented that in successful marriages the ratio of positive to negative behaviors is approximately 5:1, whereas in unsuccessful marriages the ratio is 1:1 or less (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Thus, it would seem logical that a goal of therapy might be to increase positive exchanges and decrease those that are negative.

The model of therapy which most directly attempts this goal is behavioral marital therapy (BMT, Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Stuart, 1969). BMT explicitly draws upon social exchange theory in conceptualizing relational distress as being due to a low rate of exchange of rewards and/or a high rate of exchange of punishments. Intervention in BMT follows from these assumptions. For example, the first phase of treatment in BMT is referred to as “behavior exchange” and focuses on increasing positive exchanges between partners. The partners, among other strategies, may use a checklist to assign scores to a variety of potential partner behaviors indicating the degree of liking or disliking of that behavior (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Although investigators have been disappointed in the long-term results of BMT (Jacobson et al., 1985; Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987) it remains the model of couple therapy with the greatest empirical support in
Marital Relationships: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective

the acute treatment of relational distress (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998).

BMT has now been modified and renamed as Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). While incorporating ideas of promoting emotional acceptance, behavioral exchange remains a part of IBCT. A direct comparison of IBCT and traditional BMT found both treatments equally efficacious after both acute treatment and at two-year follow up (Christensen et al., 2004; Christensen, Atkins, Yi, Baucom, & George, 2006).

Other models of couple therapy do not conceptualize relational distress directly in terms of behavior exchange yet it could be said that increasing positive exchanges and decreasing negative exchanges is inherent in all approaches to intervention with couples. For example, in emotion focused therapy the ultimate goal is to eliminate cycles of behavior which contain “negative exchanges” and foster the emergence of new cycles which will be more characterized by “positive exchanges” (Johnson & Denton, 2002). Similarly, in solution focused therapy (de Shazer, 1988), the goal is to expand the frequency of behaviors already within the behavioral repertoire of the couple which constitute “positive exchanges” and, in the process, decrease the frequency of the “negative exchange.” In the same manner, other approaches to couple therapy will seek to increase the ratio of positive to negative exchanges through a variety of interventions, albeit often with theoretical explanations other than social exchange theory.

DEFICIENCIES OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Marital relationships can be delineated as a social exchange system only within the scope (limitations) of the theory. Thus, in this section we attempt to address the principal deficiencies of social exchange theory. The most basic deficiency is that social exchange theory potentially embodies conceptual confusion. The principal source of potential confusion in social exchange theory is the delineation of rewards and costs. What is rewarding to one person may be punishing to another. What is punishing at a specific juncture in a marital relationship may be rewarding at another, and, indeed, actors in a marital relationship can redefine a situation previously perceived as rewarding or punishing to its opposite (Littlejohn, 1989). Thus, there appears to be a problem of reducing all outcomes to a common standard. Bem (1972) also argued that the calculation of rewards and costs often occur on a post hoc basis and that the actors (partners) may not know their prevailing profit status until they reflect back about previous behaviors. Moreover, social exchange theory ignores the means in which actors (partners) use communication to define rewards and punishments within the marital
relationship. Do all human actions involve calculations? Do actors in marital relationships always assess costs and rewards in all contexts?

In addition to the ambiguity between rewards and costs, there is difficulty in determining the value of rewards. Actors may not be willing or able to delineate the value of the various resources in the marital exchange encounter. A related problem concerns the rate of exchange for the rewards. Since value is difficult to determine, identifying the relative value of resources also is difficult. This kind of dilemma is pervasive with social exchange theory, because it is difficult to measure value before the actual emission of the behavior that value is supposed to explain. As long as it is difficult to measure value, prediction also will prove difficult.

Social exchange theory fails to address the relational and cognitive processes by which rewards and costs are defined. That is, social exchange theory focuses on how actors (partners) weigh rewards relative to costs and, thus, is purported to be individualistic in context; hence, underplaying emotion and failing to explain attitudes of altruism (Littlejohn, 1989). An alternate paradigm which has been increasingly applied to intimate dyadic relationships, and addresses some of these neglected areas, is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). Social exchange theory also fails to appreciate the hermeneutic dimension. That is, when two actions are explained, each by the other, has social exchange theory explained anything, or has social exchange theory simply described a reciprocal social phenomenon (Emerson, 1976)?

CONCLUSION

The central theme of this article has been the treatment of the marital relationship within the context of social exchange theory. The first section of this article attempted to shed light on marital solidarity and marital power from a social exchange perspective. The second section of this article explicates the differences between social exchange and economic exchange so as to provide insight in delineating marital relationships in a social exchange context. The third section described some ways that couple therapy can be conceptualized in terms of social exchange theory. Finally, the article closed with a discussion of the deficiencies of social exchange theory as an attempt to delimit the scope of treating marital relationships as a social exchange system.

Central axioms such as reward, cost, and profit were delineated integrally within this article as an attempt to address marital relationships differing in solidarity and power. Social exchange theory, however, treats a marital relationship as an exchange system not only as a matter of rewards and costs, but also as a matter of reciprocal behavior, of different degrees of reciprocity, trust, unequal power, value, utility, outcome, norms, and the
social conditions for interpersonal behavior: complementary in some situations, competitive in others and, in yet others, altruistic (Chadwick-Jones, 1976; Emerson, 1976). But the ultimate value of this work may lie in its ability to provide a framework for future research in the study of marital and family relationships, and to sharpen the theoretical focus of that research.

REFERENCES


