

Human Math: Examining the Cost of All Relationships

Introduction

So many songs, movies, and poems attempt to convey the pain of a dearly valued relationship falling apart. As these artistic works tell us, a separation or even a confrontation almost always comes from a place of emotional anguish. So, what drives people to choose this uncomfortable option instead of keeping things the same? Social Exchange Theory posits that every individual subconsciously judges the worth of a relationship based on what it requires of them compared to what it provides. “The central concept of social exchange theories is that interpersonal interactions are guided by weighing costs and rewards.” (Braithwaite et al., 2022, p.379) In this paper, we will explore how SET applies to both personal and professional relationships.

There are two trends right now that hold particular interest when viewed through the lens of SET. First, an increasing number of adults choose estrangement over continued contact with harmful family dynamics. Social Exchange Theory would suggest that the cost of continuing these painful relationships is higher than the cost of cutting off contact. Secondly, the auto workers’ strike, a rise in unions at Starbucks, a UPS strike, all of these labor uprisings can also speak to SET. The economic exchange in an employment situation includes pay and benefits in trade for labor. But when inflation rises faster than wages, when aging equipment presents safety issues, and when policy changes remove workplace enjoyment, all of these costs reduce the value that workers receive for their time and effort. That employment relationship might not meet the level of value employees require to be satisfied in their position, but they like the work, their coworkers, the location, or whatever else holds a level of value for them. So, they are willing to unify with other workers and strike to achieve a better trade for everyone.

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory originally started coming into view through the works of psychologists Thibaut and Kelly in 1959. Sociologists Homans and Blau built on the theory in the 1960's. This was developed further to explore *self-interests and interdependence* by Rusbult et al. in 1994 and *costs, rewards, and resources* by Foa and Foa in 1976 and 2012. Roloff brought the theory into the world of communications by examining how *social exchanges* compare to economic exchanges in 1981. (Braithwaite et al, 2022) Let's look into these key concepts of Social Exchange Theory:

Self-Interests and Interdependence

So much of what we know about human behavior is predicated on an assumption of self-interest. Self-interest can be defined as "Acting so as to maximize positive emotions (e.g., pride) or minimize negative emotions (e.g., guilt)." (Miller, 1999) We can recognize the pull of this force in our daily lives, even if self-interest manifests differently for everyone. A salad is chosen for lunch over a hamburger because a healthier option fits an interest in physical health or staying alert through the afternoon. Conversely, a hamburger might be chosen over a salad because a teenager needs to keep their weight up to stay on a wrestling team. In relationships, though, we can pursue this self-interest in a mutually beneficial way through interdependence. Dependence happens when you fully rely on outside assistance, such as in a medical emergency. Independence is when you only rely on yourself to meet your own needs. Interdependence is where two or more people depend on each other to meet certain needs. "In long-term relationships, interdependence is one's reliance on a partner to fulfill their needs, needs one believes cannot be acceptably met elsewhere." (Braithwaite et al., 2022)

Costs, Rewards, and Resources

In an economic exchange, the terms are generally black and white. You pay an amount of money (cost) and receive goods or services (reward). There might be negotiations, but both parties agree upon the final transaction. Social exchanges are far less easy to define. You might enjoy the company of a friend with an annoying laugh (cost) if they make you laugh, too (reward). A favorite crush (reward) might lose appeal when you learn they hate the movies you love (cost). To help explain this, Psychologists Edna and Uriel Foa developed resource theory, where six types of 'currency' are utilized within relationships. These resource classes are love, services, goods, money, information, and status. (Mitchell et al., 2012) Getting more of the resources makes a relationship more valuable while receiving less or having these resources taken can make a relationship more expensive. The value of what an individual receives against the cost of that relationship is wholly defined only by that individual.

Social Exchange

Thinking of these resource classes as currency still does not fully encapsulate what it means to be part of society. In addition to the exchanges and negotiations of the resource classes brought to us by the Foas, we also have social norms that must be factored in. Financial transactions require no relationship beyond exchanging money for goods or services. However, social exchanges require a connection to another human being with all the cultural norms that connection entails. (Braithwaite et al, 2022) This is where obligations enter the equation. You might offer pizza and beer as an incentive to get your friends to help you move, but if one of those friends demands to know how much pizza and what type of beer, it becomes a bit offensive because that friend values the material goods more than the value of helping you out. You may expect them to be less helpful with the moving, making the value of the pizza and beer higher comparable to their effort spent hefting boxes. If you are just graduating from beauty school, you

might look to your friends and family to become your first clients, expecting them to want to help launch your career because of their social connection to you.

Discussion

With these concepts in mind, it is apparent how Social Exchange Theory manifests in our day-to-day lives. But let's look at SET through two recent phenomena: familial estrangement and labor strikes.

Personal Application

The family bond is presumed to be one of the strongest ties a human can know, but that is not the case in every family. Sometimes, familial relationships become so strained that they cease to exist in any functional form. When a family is healthy and interdependent, staying close to family members appears to be an obvious act of self-interest, so why do these relationships ever fall apart?

The deterioration of a relationship hardly ever happens overnight. In a 2017 study, communication researchers Scharp and Hall found that estrangement was a distancing process more than a single event. It is often predicated by an offensive separation from the established family culture, such as a change of religion, a different political affiliation or worldview, or an unapproved life choice, which is seen as a threat to the family culture. "To be placed on the estrangement continuum, at least one family member must intentionally and voluntarily seek distance from another family member because of a negative relationship." (Scharp & Hall, 2017) Referring back to the resources theory developed by Foa & Foa, we can think of this process as one or both parties turning the dial down on love, services, goods, money, information, or status until there are not enough rewards left to merit the continuation of the relationship.

Estrangement itself brings pain, though. This separation process also brings what social work researcher Dr. Kylie Agllias calls 'ambiguous loss.' "Ambiguous loss is described as the

most stressful kind of loss, which results in an inability to resolve the loss as well as long-term confusion around who is in or out of a family system.” (Agllias, 2011) Because family ties are a social connection established at birth, developing a relational gap can illicit feelings of anger, sadness, hurt, and shock at realizing that a family member is no longer what you expected them to be. Finding a path out of these feelings is often the motivator for estrangement. It represents an attempt to reduce the emotional cost of that relationship by setting boundaries and removing the opportunity for future resource costs.

Sadly, estrangement is becoming more frequent in American families. A recent study in 2022 found that 26% of adult respondents were estranged from at least one parent. This is a significant increase from a similar study in 2020, which estimated that only 10% of Americans identified as estranged from a parent or child. (Reczek et al., 2023) Author Joshua Coleman noted: “What I hear from boomer and Gen X parents all the time is, ‘I would never have cut off my parents, and my parents were abusive. Now we’re being cut off for things that are hard even to fathom.’” (De Visé, 2023) This suggests a generational shift between what is and is not acceptable in family relationships. Previous generations were more likely to sacrifice some emotional or material resources to maintain the reward of the family’s social ties.

Professional Application

Recently, we have witnessed several highly publicized labor strikes. From the threat of a railroad strike last fall to the months-long SAG/AFTRA strike that brought Hollywood to a standstill, over 450,000 workers have participated in labor strikes in 2023 as of early October. This number is more than double the number of striking workers in 2022 and over three times the number in 2021. (Dickler, 2023)

It has been established through previous studies that a free market in a capitalist system functions through both employer's and employees' desire to act in their best self-interest. Thus, higher wages spur higher production, and lower wages produce lower production. If workers feel their efforts are being underpaid, they are expected to quit that job and find a more lucrative one. However, a study in 1996 found that relationships of employment are far more complex than merely economic. Placing employers and employees into theoretical situations found if a wage was higher than the minimum expected for the position, the employee felt that this was a 'gift' from the employer, which established trust and kept the worker producing high-quality work. The employee would stay in that position even when other, more lucrative opportunities appeared. The worker wanted to 'do right' by the employer, even at the worker's opportunity cost. This effect eventually eroded over time as more lucrative opportunities presented themselves, proving there are limits to what a worker will endure to stay with a trusted employer. "In conclusion, the results of our experiments suggest that economic theory needs to recognize that human motivation cannot be reduced to the rational pursuit of self-interest." (Kirchler et al., 1996)

This conclusion presumes that only economic valuations can factor into a worker's self-interest, a presumption challenged by another study published in 1996. Researchers found that a strong supervisor/supervisee relationship leads to better production, job satisfaction, and less employee turnover, even apart from pay rates. If an employee felt that the employer was committed to their success, they would produce more and better efforts to benefit the employer. "The more that relationships or exchanges between supervisors and subordinates are based on mutual trust and loyalty, interpersonal affect, and respect for each other, the better the subordinate's performance in terms of expected and "extra" or citizenship behaviors." (Settoon, et al., 1996)

So, what is the tipping point pushing all these workers to strike? Wages and benefits have been largely stagnant since the Great Recession of 2008, which was exacerbated by the pandemic in 2020. High inflation rates mean that paychecks can buy less, and even though corporate profits continue to soar, that corporate income is not translating to better wages or even safer working conditions. “Labor has maybe just had enough,” said Rick Eckstein, a professor and sociology program director at Villanova University. “They had been giving up benefits and wages for 30 to 40 years almost across the board.” (Jay, 2023)

While all corporations have their own goals and strategies, they tend to move as a loosely conglomerated unit regarding general operating policies. Employers have largely counted on employees to value the resources of love, information, and status over the resources of money, services, and goods to avoid employee turnover. Teachers often claim they stay in low-paying, high-stress jobs because of their deep love for teaching kids. If someone is an expert in a niche field like acting or screenwriting, their knowledge isn’t likely to be easily transferable to a better position. Workers who are ‘stuck’ or value parts of their job enough to not want to leave entirely might strike to keep their employment sustainable. Corporations expecting to profit from the status quo are finding that they are miscalculating what workers are now willing to exchange for their paychecks. Dr. Thomas Kochan, an emeritus management professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, notes of corporate executives: “Psychologically, it’s a big shift: They’ve been in control... Now, they have to change their expectations internally.” (Scheiber, 2023)

Conclusion

In many ways, the pandemic provided both the space and motivation for many individuals to do some deep thinking. What truly matters? We have proven to ourselves that we can change absolutely anything; what needs to change next? For some, family dynamics needed to shift. For some others, their workplace needed attention. People questioned what they were getting back from the effort they put into these situations and found the total sum was unacceptable.

The poet Mary Oliver once asked, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (1992) There are only so many hours in a day, so many days in a lifetime. Spending your wild and precious life getting little to nothing in return can feel like a dereliction of duty. It is hard to make change alone or to step away from damaging relationships, but the future becomes brighter when many lives are joined in a firm commitment to justice. Nothing good comes freely; everything has its costs.

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