



## Social Exchange in Work Settings: Content, Process, and Mixed Models

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**ABSTRACT** Social exchange theory has provided the dominant basis for understanding exchange relationships in organizational settings. Despite its predominance within the management field, there are a number of unaddressed issues. This special issue seeks to further social exchange research in work settings. We differentiate social from economic exchange and highlight the moderating role of cultural and individual differences in explaining the outcomes associated with social exchange relationships. We introduce the ideas of content, process, and mixed models of exchange to reflect the different emphases given to the amount and type of resources exchanged, the quality of the relationship, and a combination of both. The five papers in this special issue illustrate these models. We discuss the applicability of social exchange theory across cultural contexts and present suggestions for future research.

**KEYWORDS** culture, employment relationships, exchange relationships, reciprocity, social exchange

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### INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been written about the importance of relationships in organizations over the last 20 years (for a good review of this literature, see Coyle-Shapiro, Shore, Taylor, & Tetrick, 2004; Shore et al., 2004). Social exchange theory has gained prominence as a framework for understanding the employee–organization relationship (EOR) and is arguably one of the most influential frameworks for understanding exchange behaviour in organizations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Although there are a number of contributors to the theoretical foundation of the social exchange literature, Blau (1964) and Gouldner (1960) have been particularly influential in providing the key tenets that have been applied to the EOR literature.

In this special issue on social exchange, we have five papers exploring new ideas within the social exchange domain in Chinese and broader research contexts. In this article, we provide an introduction and organizational framework for the special issue. The main part of the paper is divided into four sub-sections: (i) a brief review of current social exchange theory and research, (ii) an introduction of content versus process models of social exchange, (iii) contributions of the papers in this special issue to illustrate each model, and (iv) suggestions for international and cross-cultural research on social exchange in organizations.

## **SOCIAL EXCHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS**

### **Current Social Exchange Theory and Research**

Blau (1964: 93) defines a social exchange relationship as involving unspecified obligations in which there are 'favors that create diffuse future obligations, not precisely defined ones, and the nature of the return cannot be bargained about but must be left to the discretion of the one who makes it'. Social exchange can be differentiated from an economic exchange along the following dimensions: resources exchanged, type and strength of obligations, reciprocity and the quality of the relationship that develops over time. Both social and economic exchange involve the exchange of economic resources, but social exchange also involves socio-emotional resources (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006), indicating a broader investment in the relationship. This broader investment and the resulting trust between exchange partners facilitate the exchange of unspecified resources. For social exchange to develop, Blau (1964) argued that it is important for the donor to trust the recipient to discharge his/her obligation, but for trust to develop, the recipient should not reciprocate hastily. Gouldner (1960), on the other hand, focused on the value of the investment as important in creating a felt obligation to reciprocate, and over the course of time, social exchange develops when both parties reciprocate the receipt of valued resources. Therefore, social exchange differs from economic exchange in terms of the range of resources exchanged.

In economic exchanges, the respective obligations are specified, and the parties are confident that each party will fulfil his/her obligations based on societal norms of economic exchange between employee and employer (e.g., a fair day's work for a fair day's pay), a verbally negotiated arrangement, or a formal contract, which also dictates the duration of the relationship (Blau, 1964). In brief, economic exchange reflects the exchange of tangible resources over a finite period or a discrete transaction. The fulfilment of an economic exchange is vital to the continuation of the EOR. For example, if employees are not paid for performing their duties, they will likely sever the relationship. On the other hand, social exchange relationships are characterized by a long-term orientation, the exchange of both

tangible and intangible resources, as well as trust, commitment, and attachment (Emerson, 1981). In relationships involving social exchange, the beneficial exchanges between parties are not negotiated (Molm, 2003), and consequently, the nature and timing of the return remains unspecified (Blau, 1964). Both social exchange partners invest in the other party knowing there is some risk that the investment will not be returned, requiring trust that the other party will reciprocate and an ongoing cycle of beneficial exchanges will occur (Blau, 1964; Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992; Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987). This requires a long-term orientation, since the exchange is ongoing, and necessitates time for the investment in the relationship to yield valuable returns. As such, both social and economic exchanges are critical elements of the EOR with somewhat different roles, underlying mechanisms and outcomes.

The application of social exchange theory to the employee–organization relationship has focused on the relationship an individual develops with his/her manager (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), the organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rousseau, 1989; Shore et al., 2006) or both (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 2008; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Tekleab, Takeuchi, & Taylor, 2005) in addition to the relationship between groups of employees and the organization (Song, Tsui, & Law, 2009; Takeuchi, Lepak, Heli, & Takeuchi, 2007; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). A robust finding across levels and types of relationships is that greater social exchange is associated with stronger employee contributions in the form of higher commitment, lower intention to quit, higher organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), and better performance. At the same time, studies of cultural and individual differences suggest that these relationships are stronger for some employees than others (cf. Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007; Kamdar, McAllister, & Turban, 2006; Shore, Bommer, Rao, & Seo, 2009). Farh et al. (2007) demonstrated in a sample of Chinese supervisor–subordinate dyads the effect of power distance and Chinese traditionalism on the relationship between perceived organizational support and work outcomes (commitment, performance, and OCBs). Specifically, these relationships were stronger for individuals low on power distance or traditionalism. Likewise, in a sample of engineers working in India, Kamdar et al. (2006) showed that individual differences, such as perspective taking and reciprocity wariness (fear of exploitation in exchange relations), moderated relationships between procedural justice perceptions and OCB role definitions. Finally, Shore et al. (2009) found that reciprocity wariness moderated relations that social exchange had with commitment, turnover intentions, and trust and that economic exchange had with turnover intentions among a sample of Korean employees.

The varied national settings of these studies on moderating effects suggest the broad interest in and applicability of social exchange and also the increasing recognition of the need to develop more nuanced models that reflect differences in

individuals and societal cultural contexts. The five papers in this special issue highlight the value of social exchange research for varied settings, cultures, and relationships. However, given the different ways in which social exchange relationships are operationalized and the conceptually different emphases placed on dimensions of social exchange relationships, these articles also underscore the necessity of developing ways to categorize the exchange concepts that are emerging within the social exchange domain. In the following section, we propose content, mixed, and process models of exchange as a way to categorize social exchange research and highlight how the five articles in the special issue are related to these models.

### **Content and Process Models of Exchange Relationships**

Most empirical attention has been given to the content of what is exchanged between employee(s) and employers – the resources that each party contributes to the relationship. For example, organizational fulfilment of promises is positively associated with citizenship behaviour (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007) while perceived organizational support is positively related to affective commitment and performance and negatively related to withdrawal (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The mutual investment employment relationship is related to higher commitment, lower turnover intentions, higher job performance, and OCBs (Hom et al., 2009; Song et al., 2009). However, exchange relationships are more complex than the resources exchanged, and this has stimulated studies that have focused more on the process. As stated by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005: 876) when describing exchange processes, ‘The process begins when at least one participant makes a “move,” and if the other reciprocates, new rounds of exchange initiate. Once the process is in motion, each consequence can create a self-reinforcing cycle. The sequence is likely to be continuous, making it difficult to organize into discrete steps.’

While content models assume an antecedent and outcome in exchange – typically organizational inducements for employee contributions – process models assume an ongoing and interdependent exchange in which both parties make contributions in a non-sequential manner that reflects the tenor of the relationship. An example of a process model is research on social and economic exchange conducted by Shore et al. (2006: 844), who argue that ‘employees consider both the actions of the organization . . . and their own responses to those actions . . . when forming their perceptions of social and economic exchanges with the employer.’ Sparrowe and Liden (1997) developed another process model, specifying different types of reciprocity that underpin leader–member exchange (LMX) based on the work of Sahlins. Sahlins (1972) outlined three types of reciprocity (generalized, balanced, and negative) based on the dimensions of immediacy and equivalence of returns and the degree and interest of each party

in the exchange. Together, these works direct attention to exchange processes underlying relationships in terms of balance, nature, and reciprocity and how these are associated with relationship quality, rather than focusing on the content of the exchange per se.

Table 1 describes some of the distinctions between content, process, and mixed models of exchange as well as constructs that fall within these three model categories. Content models focus on how much of a contribution is exchanged (e.g., the extent to which promises are fulfilled) – the quantity and types of the resources exchanged by each exchange partner. On the other hand, process models tap the quality of the exchange (e.g., the extent of mutual trust in the relationship). Mixed models incorporate both quantity and quality. For example, research on LMX (Liden et al., 1997) has shown that these relationships vary in terms of the quantity and quality of resources provided by exchange partners. The greater the perceived value of both tangible and intangible resources exchanged between the manager and employee, the higher the quality of relationship.

We categorize mixed models as containing some elements of both content and process. An examination of exchange constructs from the perspective of content and process suggest that there are some important differences. First, content models measure the contributions of exchange partners separately, mixed models

Table 1. A typology of social exchange models

<i>Content models</i>	<i>Mixed models</i>	<i>Process models</i>
<b>Measurement of exchange:</b>		
Quantity	Quantity and quality	Quality
<b>Contributions of exchange partners:</b>		
Separated	Partly integrated	Mutual/integrated
<b>Examples of exchange constructs from the literature:</b>		
Psychological contracts	LMX	Social and economic exchange
Perceived organizational support	Employment modes	Reciprocity
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	Membership profiles	Informal contract
	Fulfilment-based exchange relationship	Supervisor–subordinate <i>guanxi</i>
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Studies in this special issue:	Stamper, Masterson, and Knapp	Zhang, Wan, Jia, and Gu
	De Jong, Schalk, and De Cuyper	Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, and Lu
		Loi, Mao, and Ngo

*Note:* New exchange constructs in the special issue articles are listed below the dashed lines.

combine the contributions to reflect the type of relationship, and process models focus on mutual contributions that make up the nature of the exchange processes that underlie the relationship. An example of a mixed model is Tsui, Pearce, Porter, and Tripoli's (1997) work on employment modes, which focuses on the dimension of balance in exchanges of organizational inducements and employee contributions. Each of their four employment modes is a combination of inducements and contributions. Another mixed model is Shore and Barksdale's (1998) exchange relationship typology in which the four types are defined by two dimensions (balance in employee/employer obligations and level of obligation).

Table 1 also displays several exchange constructs that have appeared in the EOR literature along the continuum from content to process. Psychological contracts and perceived organizational support have typically examined the content of the exchange, capturing what is exchanged and how much is exchanged. Social and economic exchange and reciprocity have focused on the process of the exchange by examining how both parties contribute to the exchange relationship through the quality and nature of resources provided. LMX and employment modes have incorporated elements of both content and process and are, thus, categorized as mixed models. A number of new constructs are presented in this special issue, which are depicted in Table 1 below the dashed lines and explained in the next section.

Even though reciprocity is considered a process model in Table 1, it is also a term that is used more broadly in the social exchange literature as the underlying mechanism for exchange relationships based on Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity. Specifically, the constructs in all three types of models depend on reciprocity. Empirical evidence is consistent with reciprocity being the underlying mechanism that explains the relationship between perceived organizational support, psychological contract breach/fulfilment and employee contributions (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Zhao et al., 2007). Likewise, both mixed models such as LMX (Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007) and employment modes (Song et al., 2009; Tsui et al., 1997; Wang, Tsui, Zhang, & Ma, 2003) and process models of social and economic exchange (Shore et al., 2006, 2009) have been linked to employee attitudes and behaviours. In these studies, the norm of reciprocity was implicitly captured. It is an explicit focus in studies by Uhl-Bien and Maslyn (2003) and Wu et al. (2006), who found that the types of reciprocity were differentially related to relationship quality.

A limitation of the content models is that the cause and effect relations between partner contributions have rarely been studied longitudinally (some exceptions are Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2006; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). Also, the use of experimental studies to examine the development of reciprocity is largely absent. Therefore, several gaps exist in our knowledge regarding the role of timing, value, frequency, and stability of reciproc-

cation and whether particular exchange partners have more or less influence in exchanges. How does the timing of resource giving and its value lend to the development of generalized and balanced reciprocity? Does the type of reciprocity remain stable over time, or if it changes, is it communicated by a change in the timing and value of the resources exchanged? What are the implications of this for trust in the relationship? To what extent does relative influence between partners dictate the 'what, how, and when' of resource exchange? These are content-oriented questions about social exchange that future research can explore.

Mixed models of the EOR have evolved to address the limitations of the content models in which the actions of the two parties are treated as completely separate. The mixed models have shown the value of examining exchanges holistically by combining the contributions of both parties to better understand the employee–organization relationship. For example, research on LMX has examined how the relationship develops between new employee and supervisor dyads, including both content (what is exchanged) and process (relational similarity; cf. Bauer & Green, 1996). Mixed models have also demonstrated their utility in explaining cross-level and group-level EOR relationships. Tsui et al.'s (1997) employment modes model has proven to be very meaningful at both job and organizational levels (Song et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2003), and LMX has been established as a dyadic and cross-level model (Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008; Liden et al., 1997). This raises questions as to whether content and process models also have value for understanding multiple levels of the employment relationship or if such studies are more appropriate for a mixed model approach. Other questions need to be addressed, including whether the employment modes model is a cross-level model such that different employees in the same group have substantially different exchange relationships. Likewise, is LMX merely a dyadic and within group phenomenon, or does LMX have trickle down effects throughout the organization as found with perceived organizational support (Erdogan & Enders, 2007)?

Process models of the EOR suggest the importance of viewing reciprocation as a building block for relationship development and maintenance through mechanisms such as trust building (Shore et al., 2009) and balance in exchange (Song et al., 2009). Interestingly, research has focused on the effects of these mechanisms and has yet to explore how trust and balance in social exchange evolve through the reciprocation of resources. Since process models are the most recent development in the EOR literature, there are many questions that need to be addressed. Does balance and timing define the relationship in process models, particularly during relationship formation? Once a relationship is established, how much monitoring of the process occurs, especially with social exchange where the nature and timing of beneficial returns for favors is unclear? To what extent do process models apply to groups and organizations? Recent research by Takeuchi et al. (2007) has established that social exchange aggregates to the

establishment level and contributes to establishment performance, suggesting that social exchange processes may also apply to groups of employees. This highlights the need for additional research exploring if and when process models of exchange have the type of explanatory power that content and mixed models of the EOR have shown.

### **Contributions of the Articles in this Special Issue**

There are five articles in this special issue on social exchange that were carefully selected from the submissions. These papers include one conceptual paper and four empirical studies. Of the empirical studies, one utilizes a Dutch sample, one is a scale development, and two test hypotheses about social exchange using Chinese samples. These papers go beyond the Chinese context and cover a broad range of important issues relating to social exchange in work settings. However, they also reflect the types of distinctions in social exchange models already discussed by including the content, mixed, and process approaches to social exchange. In this section, we discuss the various types of models presented and tested in the special issue articles by first using the content/process distinction as well as subsequently highlighting other themes covered in each of the articles.

In this special issue, there are no pure ‘content’ papers, perhaps because this body of literature in the social exchange domain is extensive enough to merit less attention. Alternatively, there is increasing interest in integrating contributions of both parties to the exchange to better understand the relationship itself. The two papers by all Western authors (North American and European) focus on the content and mixed models approaches, whereas the latter three papers by primarily Chinese authors spotlight mixed and process approaches.

Stamper, Masterson, and Knapp (2009) develop a conceptual model of *membership profiles* that integrates content and mixed model approaches. They argue that various levels and types of rights and responsibilities are the exchange currency utilized by the employer and employee (a content approach) and that these exchanges determine the membership profiles which incorporate employee and employer contributions (a mixed model). Their conceptual model also hints at process by incorporating the degree of social and economic exchange as important determinants of their member profiles. The paper by De Jong, Schalk, and De Cuyper (2009), which builds on Shore and Barksdale (1998), focuses on *fulfilment-based exchange relationships* in which two types of employer and employee exchanges (promises and obligations) are differentially meaningful. In this mixed model approach, they find balance in exchange is important for both temporary and permanent Dutch workers. However, exchanges with temporary workers are narrower, involving fewer promises but easier to fulfil. In contrast, exchanges with permanent workers are broader, as shown by more promises, but are more difficult



to fulfil. Both of these articles highlight the importance of balance, types of resources exchanged, and scope of the resources exchanged, helping to further understanding of how a mixed model approach can facilitate relationship quality in the EOR.

Two of the process model studies in this special issue focus on the role of *guanxi* processes in the EOR. Zhang, Wan, Jia, and Gu (2009) expand the study of reciprocity by examining *informal contracts* in the context of public-private partnerships. They find that prior ties and shared values among partners are positively related to cooperation and that the effect is mediated by formal and informal contracts. This study highlights the role of *guanxi* (reflected in prior relationship quality) on influencing how formal and informal contracts mediate the type and quality of exchange that partners contribute to the relationship. Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, and Lu (2009) extend this attention to the Chinese context and expand the work of Zhang et al. on relational ties. They develop a measure to capture *supervisor–subordinate guanxi*, providing a more comprehensive and inclusive basis for understanding this dyadic relationship in Chinese society. The authors argue that LMX focuses on work-related exchanges following an equity principle whereas *guanxi* taps strong personal obligations based on communal sharing and deference to authority figures in Chinese society. Finally, Loi, Mao, and Ngo (2009) find that both social exchange and economic exchange processes mediate the relationships LMX has with affective commitment and turnover intentions. While social exchange is associated with enhanced outcomes, economic exchange appears to detract from these same outcomes. All three studies suggest the value of including exchange processes when seeking to explain relational outcomes.

### **International and Cross-Cultural Applicability of Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory, and, more specifically, the norm of reciprocity, was posited to be a universal phenomenon (Blau, 1964), having wide applicability in explaining interpersonal interaction processes in social and organizational life, including reciprocating behaviour (Flynn, 2005), intergroup interactions (Goren & Bornstein, 1999), concession making in bargaining (Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977), the quality of LMX (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003), and the nature of relationships between individuals and organizations (Tsui et al., 1997). It has been demonstrated to be a central theoretical perspective that accounts for relationship development universally. In the Chinese context, social exchange is used to explain the process of Chinese *guanxi* development (Chen & Chen, 2004) and the *guanxi* quality shift between work colleagues (Chen & Peng, 2008). It is also used to predict reciprocity involved in Chinese employment relationships (Wu et al., 2006) and the different reciprocal behavioural patterns between Chinese and Americans (Chen, Chen, & Portnoy, 2009). Despite the apparent generalizability of social exchange, there

have been noticeable differences in applying social exchange theory in cultures with different value orientations, especially regarding the view of one's relationship with others. In the Chinese culture where long-term orientation, collectivism and human relationships are highly valued (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1995), social exchange has been particularly suited to explain Chinese relationship building and maintenance. In this issue, studies demonstrate the strength of the relationship in individual dyads (Y. Chen et al., 2009; Loi et al., 2009) and between two organizations (Zhang et al., 2009), all of which involved Chinese samples. On the other hand, in a culture that is less long-term oriented and more individualistic, such as the Dutch culture (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), more emphasis is put on the calculation of promises made versus promises fulfilled – a shorter term focus and precise calculation – in determining the feeling of fairness and job satisfaction (De Jong et al., 2009). The differences between the temporary (shorter-term) and permanent (longer-term) workers speak further to this point.

Accumulated research on cross-cultural psychology has shown consistent differences between cultures valuing individualism (or self-interest) and cultures valuing collectivism (or collective interests) in the human interaction processes, indicating that, while economic exchange (an instrumental approach) may be more widely applicable in explaining behaviours in individualistic societies, social exchange (a relational approach) may be more broadly applicable in explaining behaviours in relational societies such as China (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998; Y-R. Chen et al. 2009; Yang 1967). The most significant manifestation of valuing social exchange in human interaction in China has been demonstrated in business or work settings where economic exchange might be considered to be the implicit norm or dominant principle in the Western organizations (Chen & Peng, 2008). The findings from studies (Y. Chen et al., 2009; Loi et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2009) reported in this special issue provide further evidence to substantiate the social exchange characteristic of Chinese human interaction behaviour in work settings. The emphasis in all three Chinese studies on exchange processes, combined with the Western studies of content and mixed models (De Jong et al., 2009; Stamper et al., 2009), suggests the importance of exploring the value of varied social exchange models in different cultural settings. This special issue also raises new and different questions about the universality of social exchange across different types of relationships, including the continued development of new concepts and models to understand supervisor–subordinate, employee–organization, and alliance partner relationships. Many new questions arise from the special issue that we hope inspire future research. Applying the lens of model type, including process, mixed, and content, not only creates new ways of understanding the large body of literature on social exchange, but also opens new avenues of research that combine approaches or that address which models are most effective for explaining different types of relationships in various cultural and organizational settings.

## CONCLUSION

The articles in this special issue suggest that EOR research is alive and well. New ideas and models that will serve to move the literature forward in several very important areas are in development by Eastern and Western scholars alike. First, a great deal of literature is building knowledge about the role of process in the EOR. This process focus is generating new concepts, which appear to be providing a greater understanding of the EOR domain. Second, the focus on process provides an opportunity to study culture in the EOR as relationships inevitably are influenced by cultural elements. Content, mixed, and process models may differ in the extent to which they generalize across cultures and may also vary in terms of how they are influenced by culture. Thus, efforts to expand the social exchange concept to include content, mixed, and process models will likely also contribute to new and different ways of understanding the impact of culture on the social exchange relationship within and between organizations.

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