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Social Exchange Theory and the Christian Faith:

Is A Satisfactory Marriage Possible?

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Abstract

Theories serve as "spectacles" through which we examine various interpersonal phenomena, providing the basis for our research activity and intervention strategies. This paper will examine one theory frequently used in the social sciences -- social exchange theory. The paper begins by reviewing the major theoretical assertions and concepts of social exchange theory (e.g., costs, rewards, comparison levels, distributive justice) and progresses into a consideration of social exchange theory's "fit" with basic tenets of the Christian faith. Although social exchange theory principles seem antithetical to teachings of Christ, the theory is capable of provoking thoughtful insights relative to relationships among Christians.
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In the world of science, theory plays an integral part in shaping the way we view various phenomena. The Behavioral Sciences are replete with sociological and individual theories which direct the questions we ask and the way in which we approach problems. It is theory which provides us with the "spectacles" through which we examine various interpersonal phenomena, serving as the basis for our research activity, intervention strategies, and the like. While several theories (e.g., family systems, family development, symbolic interaction) are important to the field, social exchange theory seems to have the ability to create the most dissonance for Christians; it is for this reason that I choose it. In this paper I will (1) offer a brief overview of social exchange theory and (2) share my own attempts at wrestling with how this theory relates to my Christian faith.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958, 1961; Levi-Straus, 1969; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), a combination of economics and behaviorism, is frequently used to explain the development, maintenance, and dissolution of human relationships. It has been employed by social scientists in considering courtship (Goffman, 1952), developing relationships (Burgess & Huson, 1979), mate selection and love relationships (Scanzoni, 1979, 1982), abusive relationships (Gelles & Cornell, 1990), racial disparity in prerelational sexual behavior (Cortese, 1989), intergenerational support activities in later life (Muzara & Reitzes, 1984), and other family issues such as maternal employment, sexual behavior, communication, violence, and intergenerational relationships (Nye, 1979).

Social exchange theory incorporates a number of concepts and sets forth several propositions about human behavior. First, interpersonal relationships are evaluated by those involved in terms of the costs and rewards they experience in the relationship. Rewards are anything that satisfies or meets a person's needs and vary from person to person or family to family. The greater the exchange of rewards, the more likely it is that behaviors will be repeated, that relationships will be pursued and/or maintained. People seek out those who possess those resources or currencies which they desire or value. Intimate currencies (e.g., touch, sexuality, affect displays) shape one's physical and psychological self and involve self-disclosure. Economic currencies include money, access rights, time, favors, and gifts and involve the sharing of physical resources and time (Galvin & Brommel, 1982). Scanzoni (1982, p. 53) asserts that "during the premarital love period women provide the rewards of physical appearance, social skills, and cooperativeness." After marriage women continue to provide expressive and nurturant benefits of "beauty, charm, and fidelity" and, in return, expect from their husbands status characteristics indicative of a "good provider" and "a successful or up-and-coming man." Once the relationship is established, reward abilities or resources affect power distribution and relationship maintenance and longevity. Balswick and Balswick (1985) argue that authority and decision-making power belong to the spouse who has more to offer in terms of money, nurturance, love, sex, security or whatever else is valued. Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) go so far as to say that it is emotional gratification rather than economic dependence or moral conviction that is the glue or the reward which now holds marriages together in the United States.

In addition to being reward-seeking, humans are cost-avoiding creatures. Costs are factors that deter repetition of a particular behavior because they are statuses, interactions, relationships, feelings, or milieux distillate by the person. Costs present themselves in the form of punishments or rewards forgone. For instance, costly behavior is experienced when a person says, "I can no longer tolerate the mental abuse I receive in this relationship. The price is too high." A person's perceptions of rewards and costs may change with time, and like rewards, are affected by values, beliefs, expectations and previous experiences.

Third, human beings seek to maximize personal profits. Costs minus rewards equals profit. The most profitable outcome is one that provides the most favorable ratio of rewards to costs. Within the context of marital relationships, Scanzoni (1982) proposes a link between the cost-reward ratio and
marital stability. Marital instability and even divorce occur when the balance between costs and rewards becomes skewed toward costs. Given that couples marrying today have a 50-55% chance of divorcing (Glick, 1983), exchange theory ideas of fairness, reciprocity, dominance, control and power are often perceived as helpful in trying to better understand stability of relationships over time (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

Fourth, being concerned about relational profit, people evaluate interpersonal relationships using two different criteria: Comparison Level (CL) and Comparison Level of Alternatives (CLAlt). "CL is a standard by which the person evaluates the rewards and costs of a given relationship in terms of what he feels he deserves" and/or what is realistically obtainable: it is the lowest level of reward a person will accept in order to maintain the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 21). Expectations and past experiences frequently determine the standard by which people evaluate relationships (Galvin & Brommel, 1982, Sabatelli & Sheehan, 1993). For instance, one might better understand why a woman remains in an abusive marital relationship if her history of witnessing abuse within her family-of-origin and her poor self-concept are taken into consideration. Given her own family background and experience, as a child as well as current messages she is likely to be receiving from her husband ("You shouldn’t make me mad enough that I hit you," etc.), she may believe that she does not deserve a better situation.

The Comparison Level of Alternatives is "the lowest level of outcomes a member will accept in the light of alternative opportunities" (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959, 21). It represents the breaking point at which the reward-cost ratio is considered too unfavorable to continue in the relationship (Scanzoni, 1982). In other words, the theory predicts that when individuals perceive that they have a better alternative to the relationship in which they currently exist, they will leave their present relationship. It is assumed, however, that this new relationship will be rewarding enough to compensate for all the costs involved in leaving the old relationship for the new one. We assume that Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a famous child developmentalist whose works include The Social Contract and Emile, in placing all five of his children in foundling homes must have been able to overcome the costs of such behavior for the rewards gained.

Fifth, a normative prescription for social exchange is that of reciprocity. People should reciprocate favors received from those with whom they are in relationship. According to Gouldner (1960), people should assist those who help them and avoid hurting those who have helped them. The quid pro quo notion of getting "this for that" is in operation. Spouses and persons involved in other types of love relationships are "less likely to expect a constant balance of rewards and costs because they anticipate that the favors given and received will average out during the course of their relationship" (Knapp, 1978, p. 30). Consequently, long-term relationships are not in immediate danger of dissolution if rewards and costs don’t equal out at any one point in time since mutual obligation is implied, accounting for marital stability (Scanzoni, 1982). In lasting relationships, such as those found within the family, members may forgo immediate rewards in favor of some long-term gain; however, it is assumed that costs and rewards will balance over time. Nonetheless, it is partly the moral obligation to reciprocate benefits to those from whom one has received them that contributes to relationship stability (Scanzoni, 1982).

Sixth, distributive justice is essential for relationships. Social exchange theorists purport that relationships ought to be fair. Rewards should be proportional to costs and profits should be proportional to investments (Homans, 1961). In other words, the harder one works on a relationship, the more rewarding it should be. Conflict is likely to occur in the course of ongoing reciprocities and exchanges if spouses feel they are being exploited by unfair demands (Scanzoni, 1982). In contrast, the perception and experience of equity in a relationship facilitates satisfaction and the development of trust in one’s partner and commitment to the relationship (Blau, 1964).
Social exchange and related utilitarian theories have been criticized for a variety of reasons. Klein and White (1996) are concerned about the theory’s “methodological individualism, the assumption that the individual is the appropriate unit to study to gain an understanding of the family” (p. 81). Sabatelli and Sheehan (1993) also believe that social exchange theory inadequately addresses the highly interdependent exchange relationships characterized by families. They agree that family relationships are unique social structures, not always best understood via social exchange. Other problems they identified include social exchange explanations for social order and altruistic behavior, as well as its assumptions that humans are always rational actors, weighing costs and rewards (Klein & White, 1996). Winton (1995) also accuses social exchange of being too narrow in scope, suggesting that when making real life choices people often consider factors beyond costs and rewards. For instance, some decisions may be based on emotional responses rather than rational thought. Offering a feminist critique, England (1989) suggests that social exchange theory suffers from a masculine bias. She asserts that the theory assumes a “separative self” which is characteristic of male values of independence and autonomy rather than a “connected self,” which incorporates a feminine concern for affiliation. Winton (1995) believes that this emphasis on individuation and autonomy reflects a cultural bias as well. More extensive critiques of social exchange theory are available elsewhere (England, 1989; Klein & White, 1996; Sabatelli & Sheehan, 1993; Winton, 1995).

So what do we do with this keenly devised set of theoretical ideas which may be more reflective of human experience than we care to admit? Do we attempt to test it in order to substantiate or refute its propositions, as is the function of theory, or do we dismiss it as secularistic and unworthy? Despite its shortcomings, social exchange theory has guided much social science research in the last couple of decades. As Christians, I suggest that in addition to subjecting the theory to empirical scrutiny, we examine its concurrence with the Christian faith. More specifically, are social exchange theory principles and assertions consonant with the tenets and beliefs of the Christian faith? Is a satisfactory marriage between social exchange theory and the Christian faith likely?

A few of the basic assumptions of social exchange are disconcerting for many Christians. The core assumption—that humans are rational beings and within limits of information they possess, make choices that bring the most profit (Nye, 1979)—often creates the most discomfort. Most would like to repudiate the notion that people are calculative in determining which relationships will bring them the most rewarding outcomes. From a Christian perspective, there are several possible responses to this assertion. First, one might say that this assumption merely highlights the fullness of humankind. Despite our desire to think better of ourselves, social exchange theory strikes hard because of the truth that it holds. For some reason humans do tend to seek out and maintain those relationships which they find most rewarding and avoid those relationships in which they incur significant costs. One could frame this in different ways; one way is to suggest that humans are basically self-centered, and that this self-centeredness is an outgrowth of sin. In an imperfect world, a world in which people need to be concerned about not being taken advantage of while in relationship, even human relationships are a type of economic transaction. Calculations about what relationships are most profitable are a consequence of a world scarred by sin.

A different and more positive reframing of this proposition from a Christian perspective is also possible. One might also acknowledge that the freedom to choose and make choices is a gift from God. Humans were created with the capacity to direct their own lives. The theory assumes that humans are rational in the choices they make. Given the world in which we live it almost seems to be a gift for self-preservation and fulfillment that humans will choose those alternatives which are most profitable to them. These rational capacities are valuable in making choices. The key for Christians is that choices need to be guided by an appropriate value system, a value system as modeled by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The ability to inject Christian values, attitudes, and beliefs into this economic way of
thinking, therefore, becomes paramount. When this integration occurs, social exchange theory has the potential to serve as an aid for continual self-assessment in terms of meeting Christian standards.

A second assumption — the greater the exchange of rewards, the more likely it is that behaviors will be repeated, that relationships will be pursued and/or maintained (Nye, 1979) — can also be problematic. Why is it that the wealthier, the more powerful, and the better looking partner is often more desirable in our culture? Certainly, the rewards we seek are often influenced by the culture in which we live and perhaps it is therein that lies the problem. I get the impression that reward-seeking behavior is "normal" and even "acceptable" for Christians. I think that God recognizes the human tendency to place a "market value" (Winton, 1995) on others, based upon their physical appearance, career potential and so on. In James 2:1-13, Jesus warns of displaying personal favoritism, especially in regard to people of position or wealth in the congregation. This passage delineates four reasons why partiality to the rich is wrong: it reflects poorly on one's value system; it fails to regard the poor with as much honor as God does; it favors a class of people who often oppress others; and it is a sin (Nryic Study Bible, 1978). While Christians may seek some of the same statuses, relationships, feelings and positions that non-Christians seek, Christians are expected to find alternative things rewarding as well. The Christian sub-culture should value things that might not make sense to the secular world. Knowing that certain choices are made because they would be pleasing to God is reward enough or plenty of reward in many instances and make sense from a Christian point of view.

Again, the life and teachings of Christ offer us insight as to what we should find rewarding. For instance, in Matthew 6, Jesus differentiates between desirable and undesirable rewards:

Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in Heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-7,16-18)

The basic point here seems to be summed up in Matthew 6:19-21:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Thus, it appears that while humans may have the tendency to seek praise, recognition, status, respect and the like from others, such things may be less appropriate for Christians to pursue in their relationships. While associating with people who are attractive, popular, and powerful is rewarding in that it increases the likelihood of our being perceived as attractive, popular and powerful in the society in which we live, we would expect Christians to be engaged in behaviors and relationships which do not necessarily make sense from a secular perspective. Our commitment to be more like Christ should affect the rewards we seek and thus, the way we relate to people. The Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-49) identifies some of the desirable behaviors for which Christians will receive reward: return
love for hate, give generously to those who may not be able to return the favor, bless those who curse you, and do good to all, even those who have not been that good to you. Jesus bids his followers to allow a different set of rewards to govern their relationships.

Just as Christians might pursue and develop relationships for different reasons than non-Christians, different variables should come into play when commitment to human relationships is considered. Wintou (1995) describes American culture as a “disposable society” (p. 121), one in which people keep things only as long as they are useful to them. He suggests that this absence of loyalty or appreciation for things done in the past is evident by a present-oriented preoccupation with the question: “What have you done for me lately?” He believes that this continuous appraisal of costs and rewards in the here and now has seeped into the relationship realm so that we are now as willing to discard people (e.g., employees, parents, spouses) as we are to discard things (e.g., automobiles, clothes). For social exchange theory, commitment to a relationship is maintained as long as the rewards for staying (including costs of leaving forgone by staying) outweigh the rewards for leaving (including exit costs). Some (Balswick & Balswick, 1989) propose that in contemporary marriages, continued commitment is frequently contingent on self-fulfillment, as evidenced by the fact that one of the main criteria employed to measure marital success is happiness. When Christian values and biblical injunctions are entered into the commitment equation, however, we might expect different things to happen. The commitment of Yahweh to Israel as portrayed in Hosea illustrates commitment that “endures, renews, forgives, and restores” (Balswick & Balswick, 1989, p. 82). Certainly, we only hope that Christ’s teachings which discourage divorce, offer prescriptions for intergenerational relationships, and provide examples of perfect commitment influence one’s perception of the situation. Conversely, the costs for not keeping commitments to friends, children, parents, and marriage partners are high for Christians. Biblical injunctions, guilt, the Christian community, and the sense of what is right increase exit costs.

Christians are likely to think differently about reciprocity as well. Certainly, the Golden Rule—“Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12)—is beautifully illustrative of the type of behavior required when interacting with others. The interesting element of this passage however is that one’s behavior is not necessarily dependent upon the other’s treatment of you. One gets the message that regardless of how another treats you, you should treat them as you would want to be treated. This is very different than the “quid pro quo” notion of social exchange. While our worldly tendency is to invest in those relationships in which we anticipate good returns, Christians are instructed to travel the extra mile (Matthew 5:41), forgive “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22), “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43-45), and go beyond what might be normally prescribed by social custom or some other standard. This may be most evident in Jesus’ teachings concerning believers’ treatment of their enemies (Matthew 5:38-42). The usual prescriptions of the law, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” are abolished in favor of a higher standard, a standard in which believers are required to give to their enemies much more than they “deserve” or could possibly give in return.

Jesus’ parable about the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) also suggests that Christians need to move beyond the expectation of reciprocity in dealing with others. In contrast to the priest and Levite, the Samaritan felt compassion for the man victimized by robbers, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own beast, took him to an inn, paid for his care, and promised to return in order to offer additional money or services. We get the sense that the man who has been beaten and robbed will not be able to repay the Samaritan for his acts of kindness. Certainly, the Samaritan could have gotten a better return on his investment if he would have utilized his resources of time, money, and energy in a different way. However, I think it is for this and other reasons that Jesus shares this parable; Jesus challenges us, via the example of a despised Samaritan, to exhibit a unique kind of love, one that is not dependent upon mutuality and expectation. Luke 124:12-14 summarizes Jesus’ teaching on the matter: “When you
give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Another insight this theory offers Christians in terms of reciprocity is our obligation to receive in relationships, as well as to give. For many reasons, Christians frequently find it more comfortable to give than receive, be the helper rather than the helped. Perhaps because it is through giving that we earn stars for our crown or ingrati ate others, we avoid being the one in need of assistance. Receiving is also a humbling experience. It is an experience which is no better depicted than in the realization of the magnitude of God’s gift of life to us through his son Jesus Christ. Such an investment is more than humans can ever expect to repay. For the Christian, equal exchanges may not always be crucial, possible or desirable.

Christians should also think differently about distributive justice. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) keenly illustrates our human tendency to empathize with the faithful son as he angrily watched his father “kill the fatted calf” and throw a huge party upon the return of the wayward son. Certainly, such celebration did not seem fair given that the older son had remained faithful to his father and received no such festivity. Similarly, the parable of the laborers who arrive at the vineyard at different times of day yet receive the same denarius for their work (Matthew 20: 1-16), while illustrative of the reward for willingness to serve, suggests that Jesus is not teaching about how to view the world economically. The point is that God’s grace and generosity are limitless, and human ideas of merit and earned rewards are irrelevant (Ryrie Study Bible, 1978). Parables and other teachings such as this illustrate the deeper commitment Christians should have in their relationships. Christians need to recognize that family members are not always going to measure up to the expectations held for them. There are even likely to be those years which we think we are not getting what we deserve from the relationship. During times like these, however, we need to transcend the quid pro quo mentality and call upon those commitments and beliefs that are distinctively Christian; God’s intention is for humans to love each other without a concern for rewards.

Another area in which social exchange theory propositions diverge dramatically from Christ’s teachings is relative to the principle of least interest. The theory suggests that the person who cares the least about the relationship has the most power in the relationship. Therefore, the person with least interest does not need to be concerned about being responsive to the partner’s wishes or desires. In contrast to this view, Christians have a moral obligation to seek equality and justice in interaction. Christians ought to challenge the notion that power has a limited supply (Balswick & Balswick, 1989) and is desirable. Instead of usurping power in an effort to suppress and control others, Christians need to empower those with whom they are in relationship. For instance, in responding to the request of James and John to sit on his right and left hand in glory, Jesus indicates that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:35-45). Jesus’ teachings and life redefined power in such a way that power bases and resources become less important. Those who want to be powerful must become the servant. Thus, social structures, including those found in the family, which are built on classism, racism, and sexism must be abolished in favor of a situation in which members mutually enable each other.

In conclusion, a satisfactory marriage between the Christian faith and social exchange theory is probably unlikely. Many of the propositions of this theory are in direct opposition to the teachings of Christ. Despite the incongruity of the two ways of thinking, however, this potentially disturbing theory can be quite instructive for Christians and is useful for provoking introspection, especially in terms of our relationships. Social exchange theory reminds me of the falleness of humankind, supplies an effective yardstick against which we can determine how our relationships measure up to God’s standards. Its reactive propositions prompt me to think differently in terms of relationships, particularly
in ways in which Christian relationships should contrast or be distinctive. The challenge awaits to
develop a Christian theory of human relationships.

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