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TomKat!: Linking Theory and Practice in Communication Studies Courses Through the Introduction and Application of Social Exchange Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article describes an activity suitable for either high-school or university-level communication courses. Combining outside online research, small group discussion, and class interaction, this exercise uses Social Exchange Theory, applied to examples of celebrity relationships generated by students and discussed in groups, to illustrate the process by which individuals decide whether or not to initiate and sustain interpersonal relationships. Although students should be reminded that the reasons relationships do or do not survive are difficult enough to understand when we are involved in them, let alone when we view them from an outside perspective, the activity proves intriguing and involving for students and serves as a good starting point for a more in-depth discussion of their own relationship challenges and choices.

Objective

The basic objective of the “TomKat!” activity is to give both majors and non-majors in high school or college communication studies courses insight into the value and use of communication theories in everyday life. Specifically, this exercise is intended to capitalize on students’ interests in relationships and popular culture to generate greater enthusiasm for studying interpersonal communication theories. More specifically still, this activity helps students to understand the unique assumptions and concepts that are part of a specific interpersonal communication theory—Social Exchange Theory.

Developed by psychologists John Thibaut and Harold Kelley, Social Exchange Theory focuses on the key concepts of social exchange—relational outcomes, satisfaction, and stability (Griffin, 2006). Basically, the theory suggests that people attempt to predict outcomes of their interactions with others before they take place in order to determine (through an internal cost-benefit analysis of the interaction in question, as well as of the other interpersonal interactions we currently have in our lives) whether or not the relationship in question is worth initiating and/or sustaining. Whereas this perspective is similar to other interpersonal communication theories in that there is a focus on the processual/staged nature of relationships, on prediction (to

some degree), and the concepts of rewards and costs, this activity helps students to observe how Social Exchange Theory offers a unique approach to analyzing relationship rewards and costs and introduces the concepts of ‘ratios’ in relational decision-making.

Intended Courses

This exercise is appropriate for basic/hybrid courses which discuss group and interpersonal communication as well as public speaking, but is adaptable to a wide range of contexts. To date, the activity has been successfully used in introduction to communication theory and services/social marketing courses, as well as at the basic/hybrid course. The activity works well if conducted during two consecutive 40-minute course sessions (for instance, during the second half of one 80-minute T class and the first half of an 80-minute TH class).

Introduction and Rationale

This activity admittedly plays to the secret addiction I share with many of my students—a weakness for celebrity gossip. The exercise also allows us as a group to discuss one of our other favorite shared topics—relationships, their embedded rules, and our own successes and failures in making those rules work for us. Pedagogically speaking, however, “TomKat!” was also designed as a way to begin introducing mini-case studies of communication problem-solving throughout the semester in preparation for similar problems featured on course exams. If the students complete the activity successfully, they should have begun developing the critical thinking skills needed to help them determine effective strategies for change in a difficult communication situation. For a middle-school or high-school class, the exercise can be conducted minus the theory references/discussion in order to demonstrate the useful application of communication skills to real-world situations that are of interest to students.

Preparation for the Activity (Day 1)

Explain that one of the challenges for students in learning communication theories is understanding ‘why there are so many rules.’ Point out that this is a way not only to improve one’s speaking skills, but going a step further, to enhance one’s ability to analyze other people’s communication and also experience personal growth in everything from friendships to romantic relationships. Establish with students that the current and next sessions of class will give everyone a chance to gossip about famous people as well as think about their own relationships, provided they do a little gossip homework between the current session and the next.

Review the basic concepts of Social Exchange Theory with students (see Appendixes A and B; another basic explanation of the theory provided by David Straker and set within the context of audience and interpersonal persuasion can be found at the Changing Minds.org website at http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/social_exchange.htm). Help students

connect the ideas of the theory to the need to improve their ability to present themselves in communicating with others so that they are perceived as people with whom it would be rewarding and desirable to live, work, or play.

Distribute the “TomKat!” handout (see Appendix A) and ask students to complete it before the start of the next class session. Tell students that they can choose another celebrity couple that fits the pattern if they have difficulty finding information on the couples mentioned (this handout can also be updated to reflect the celebrity breakups *du jour*).

Conducting the Activity (Day 2)

Ask students to take out their “TomKat” handouts. Do a quick assessment (by show of hands of who selected which couples) whether it would be better to assign students to groups by celebrity breakup or randomly assign students to small groups. Once the students are in groups, ask them to discuss their findings and come to conclusions as a group.

Have groups report on their findings and ask the students to discuss similarities and differences in the analyses of the celebrity relationships. Help the students apply the terms *outcomes*, *comparison level*, and *comparison level of alternatives* to their findings. After the discussion, ask each student to write down a realization the exercise provided with respect to his/her personal or professional relationships.

Debriefing Post-Activity

The instructor can ask for a few of the realizations students wrote down about their own relationships and point out the connections between learning the theory, observing the theory in action, and applying it to our own lives in order to understand our communication with others. The instructor might also choose to emphasize that this process of critical analysis is not only the foundation for going forward with a major, a degree, or a career in communication, but also a vital part of the life skills that every student has the ability to take away from a course in communication studies.

Appraisal: Limitations and Variations

The activity might be less successful if numerous other popular culture-based exercises have been introduced throughout the course (although I personally have not found students to get tired of popular culture topics). The course size also has an impact on the effectiveness and relative student involvement with the activity.

For a more advanced course in interpersonal communication or research methods, this exercise could be used to preface a deeper analysis of the functions of the various matrices introduced in the theory, or the use of the more familiar ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’ activity. The exercise can also be used in cross-disciplinary courses in marketing communications or

organizational development/human resources, particularly with reference to the application of Social Exchange Theory in a variety of fields and social contexts (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Kramer, 2005; Sierra & McQuitty, 2005).

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Appendix A

Student Handout

TomKat!...Applying Social Exchange Theory

Go online, go to your nearest stack of *People* magazines, or go to your most media-frenzied friends and dig up some background on one of the following celebrity relationships—Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban, K-Fed (Fed-Ex) and Britney, Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston...you get the idea. If nothing else, you should enjoy the gossip! To apply social exchange theory, your challenge is to discover...

1) What are the perceived rewards and costs for your celebrity couple? What do each of them stand to gain/lose/risk?

2) What other options do they have for dating other people?

3) How stable is their relationship?

4) What issues arise in terms of behavior control (what might frustrate them about each other's behavior, and what do you think they would like to change in the other person)?

Will this relationship survive? If it's already been terminated, will it be revived in the future?...as a scholar of Social Exchange Theory, you make the call!

Appendix B

PowerPoint Outline for “TomKat!” Exercise

When used for a basic communication course rather than an introductory communication theory course, only the sections highlighted in bold are to be used.

Chapter 11: Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley)
Or, “So What’s in it For Me?”

Key Concepts of SET

- **Outcomes** are *high* (greater) when relationship has *many rewards/fewer* relative costs
- **Comparison Level (CL)** – Judging relational satisfaction by comparing past relationships
- **Comparison Level of Alternatives (CL_{ALT})** – Perceived chances of future relationships

Key Concepts of SET

- **When CL or CL_{ALT} are better than the ‘status quo,’ relationships become unstable**
- **Optimum situations:**
Outcome > CL_{ALT} > CL or
Outcome > CL > CL_{ALT}
- **If past/possible relationships seem significantly better than current outcomes, relationship may dissolve**

Influences on Costs/Benefits

- **Given** matrix (how your *environment* guides your relationship rewards/costs)
- **Effective** matrix (the ways *you* can make *behavioral changes* to affect your relationship rewards/costs)
- **Dispositional** matrix (how you *believe rewards should work* in relationships)

Problems With Social Exchange Theory

- Hard to test (individuals may define rewards/costs very differently)
- Assumes very rational human behavior... people do not necessarily run relationships like businesses!
- The theory may not pay enough attention to group influence on relationship decisions

Adapted from West, R., & Turner, L.H. (2004). *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.