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## The Affect Theory of Social Exchange

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# The Affect Theory of Social Exchange

## Abstract

[Excerpt] The affect theory of social exchange places emotion and feelings at the center of social exchange theorizing (Lawler 2001). It posits that exchange generates emotions and that emotions are internal responses that reward and punish actors. Emotions that occur regularly in exchange processes include feeling good about successful exchange, feeling shame about the terms accepted, feeling gratitude toward a conciliatory exchange partner, and feeling anger at a difficult or hostile exchange partner. The theory argues that such emotions and feelings have important consequences for the relations, networks, and groups within which they occur.

## Keywords

affect theory, social exchange, emotion and feelings, reward, punishment

## Disciplines

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## Comments

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The Affect Theory of Social Exchange

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The affect theory of social exchange places emotion and feelings at the center of social exchange theorizing (Lawler 2001). It posits that exchange generates emotions and that emotions are internal responses that reward and punish actors. Emotions that occur regularly in exchange processes include feeling good about successful exchange, feeling shame about the terms accepted, feeling gratitude toward a conciliatory exchange partner, and feeling anger at a difficult or hostile exchange partner. The theory argues that such emotions and feelings have important consequences for the relations, networks, and groups within which they occur.

The affect theory of social exchange asks how and when social exchange gives rise to or sustains a stable social order. Emotions are an integral part of the answer. A stable order occurs to the degree that the emotions and feelings are attributed to relevant social units—relations, groups, networks, organizations. This occurs in part because of the jointness of social exchange tasks or activities. Social exchange is a quintessential joint task, because it succeeds only with the consent and collaboration of one or more other actors. If a joint task (exchange) is accomplished, individual actors generally feel uplifted or good; when it is not accomplished, they feel downcast or bad. The affect theory of social exchange analyzes structural conditions that generate variations in the *jointness* of the exchange task and shows how the simple, everyday emotional effects of social exchange lay the foundation for stronger or weaker affective ties to social units (e.g., a relation, network, or group). Person- to-unit ties are fundamental to the larger problem of social order, as Parsons (1951) and others (Kanter 1968) have theorized.

In broader terms, the theory connects a fundamental idea about order from Durkheim (1915) with a fundamental idea from Emerson (1972b). Durkheim (1915) argued, in his examination of preliterate societies, that joint activities among a group of people give rise to and sustain a social order. This occurs because the emotions of uplift and excitement from such

activities are objectified in the group or society (see also Collins 1975). The idea from Emerson's (1972b) exchange theory is that mutual dependencies or interdependencies are the structural foundation of cohesion in exchange relations. This occurs because mutual interests are stronger and cooperation more prevalent under high levels of mutual dependence. My theory assumes that structural interdependencies are the foundation for ongoing interactions and group affiliations but argues that joint activities and emotional consequences mediate the effects of structural interdependencies on social order.

The terms *emotion* and *feeling* are used interchangeably. Emotions are defined as a positive or negative evaluative state with physiological and cognitive components (Kemper 1978; Izard 1991; Clore and Parrott 1994). They have a visceral, nonvoluntary foundation and the potential to generate a consciousness of the connection between self and an object (Damasio 1999). A key idea adopted from psychology is that emotions are both a response to stimuli (i.e., others' behavior, nature of exchange) and a stimulus that generates cognitive or interpretive processes (Izard 1991). This suggests an internal, self-reinforcement dynamic (see Bandura 1997). The implication is that social exchange produces a primary emotional response, and this emotional response in turn generates further responses, cognitive and emotional. These internal dynamics contain the mediating mechanisms through which social structures (interdependencies) strengthen or weaken affective attachments to social units.

In brief, the affect theory of social exchange connects different structures of social exchange with the joint tasks involved, the common emotions felt, and the strength of person-to-unit ties. Person-to-unit attachments are interpreted as a dimension of micro order and solidarity, and behaviorally these are reflected in commitment, trust, and group formation. The following

section overviews the intellectual context in which the affect theory of social exchange was formulated.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Social Exchange Tradition**

Social exchange theory articulates a transactional view of social interaction and an instrumental view of human behavior (e.g., Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Homans 1961; Blau 1964; Emerson 1972a; Molm and Cook 1995). Two or more actors interact with each other to the extent that they receive valued rewards or profits that are not available from others or by acting alone. They form social relations, i.e., patterns of regular, repeated interaction, with those from whom they expect and receive repeated flows of reward over time. The transactional quality of social interactions is based on the fact that individual actors are self-interested and instrumental. Actors are motivated to enhance their own rewards, and their concern about others' rewards is contingent on whether that concern serves their own self-interest. The confluence of an instrumental view of actors and a transactional view of social relations gives social exchange theory a distinctive place in sociological theorizing and important ties to rational choice theory and economic sociology.

The central phenomena to be explained in social exchange theorizing is who gets what at what price or cost and what implications does this have for social relations and networks. The central explanatory constructs are social structural dimensions such as power and dependence. Sociological exchange theory has spawned traditions of research on the fairness, equity, or

justice in exchange (Homans 1961; Hegtvedt and Markovsky 1995; Jasso 1980); on how structures of power dependence shape negotiation processes or reciprocal exchanges (Bacharach and Lawler 1981; Molm 1997); and on how network structures affect the division of profits and the accumulation of resources across network positions (Molm and Cook 1995; Willer 1999). Beyond theory testing in the laboratory, exchange-theory notions have brought to light important transactional elements of parent-child relationships, coworker relationships, and person-organization relations.

Any theory requires simplifying assumptions and principles that direct attention to some phenomena and away from others; extant social exchange theories are no exception. The focus on the instrumental and transactional has a firm theoretical foundation in both reinforcement theory from psychology (see Emerson 1972a) and rational choice theory from economics (see Coleman 1990). Reinforcement and rational choice theories constitute the two primary microfoundations of social exchange. In both these perspectives, however, emotions and emotional processes play little or no role. From reinforcement theories, emotional responses are epiphenomal; they correspond so closely with the experience of reinforcement or punishment that they add little or no explanatory value beyond operant reinforcement and punishment (Skinner 1938; Homans 1961). In rational choice theories, there has been some growth in attention to emotions but the focus is limited to when emotions distort information processing and account for departures from rational-choice predictions (Hechter 1987).

The affect theory of social exchange is a response to the relative neglect of emotional and affective processes in the social exchange tradition but also to the growing evidence from neuroscience (see Damasio 1999; Turner 2000), psychology (Forgas 2000), and sociology (Kemper 1978; Hochschild 1983; Lawler and Thye 1999) that emotions are fundamental to and

mediate many rational and cognitive processes. Damasio (1999), for example, suggests that human consciousness occurs when visceral internal nonvoluntary feelings are sensed by actors, i.e., when actors feel feelings. Rational and cognitive processes start here and, in this sense, inherently have an emotional basis. Jonathan Turner (2000) provides an evolutionary argument for the centrality and foundational nature of emotions to the human species. He argues that visual emotional cues were prelinguistic, adaptive mechanisms of solidarity. The evolution of human capacity to communicate and read such cues was critical to the development of strong communities. Lawler and Yoon (1996) experimentally demonstrate that, whereas actors enter exchange situations for instrumental purposes, repetitive exchange with the same others generates positive feelings that enhance the cohesion of and commitment to the resulting exchange relation. An important implication is that the emotional process transforms exchange relations from purely instrumental to partly expressive (Lawler and Yoon 1996; Lawler and Thye 1999).

The affect theory of social exchange specifies structural conditions under which the emotions unleashed by social exchange give rise to enduring affective attachment or detachment (sentiments) to relevant social objects, such as a relation, group, network, or organization. As currently formulated, the theory analyzes two structural dimensions central to the social exchange tradition: (1) How the *form of exchange* interconnects the behaviors of the parties to exchange. Exchange theorists have distinguished four forms of social exchange—reciprocal, negotiated, productive, and generalized (Ekeh 1974; Emerson 1981; Molm 1994; Molm and Cook 1995)—and these are a key focus of the affect theory of exchange. (2) How the *type of network connection* links possible exchanges or exchange relations. The theory contrasts positively connected networks, where one exchange or relation promotes others, with negatively



connected networks, where one exchange or relation precludes others (Emerson 1981). These structural dimensions bear on the cohesion and solidarity of social units.

In the affect theory of social exchange, solidarity is defined as “the strength and durability of person-to-group and person-to-person relations” (Parsons 1951; Hechter 1987). Solidarity is manifest in the degree that behaviors take account of and weigh the interests and welfare of others and the group itself. Examples include unilateral gift giving, expanding areas of collaboration, forgiving periodic instances of opportunism, and remaining in an existing relation despite equal or better benefits elsewhere (Lawler 2001). The affect theory of social exchange aims to explain person-to-unit ties and theorize how these develop from person-to-person interactions.

### **Relation Cohesion Theory**

Emerson (1981) defined an exchange relation as a pattern of repetitive exchange among the same actors over time. Thus if actors repeatedly exchange with each other, they are presumed to have some sort of relationship. That relationship, however, varies in resilience or strength and this will be particularly evident when actors have viable alternatives to one another. Because of the transactional nature of exchange relations, one would expect significant instability, as actors continually pursue better alternatives. This raises an important question: what conditions or processes generate stability within or among a set of relations? The answers of exchange theorists focus on commitment, defined broadly as the proclivity to continue exchanging with those exchanged with in the past. Exchange relations, as Emerson (1981) defined them, are essentially self-reproducing.

Answering the commitment question gives us information on why and when actors in exchange relations may be prepared to sacrifice individual rewards to maintain or strengthen the exchange relation or a larger unit in which it is nested (see Cook and Emerson 1984; Lawler 1992). The standard exchange-theory explanation for commitment is uncertainty reduction—namely, that commitment between two actors in repeated exchange is most likely to develop under conditions of high uncertainty. Commitment enables actors to reduce uncertainty and produce more predictable and stable results for themselves (Cook and Emerson 1984; Kollock 1994). The underlying mechanism or process here is quite simple: as two actors exchange more frequently, they learn more about each other and become more confident they can anticipate each other's behavior and predict more accurately the terms of exchange.

In an innovative study of this process, Kollock (1994) did an experiment in which multiple parties were involved in a spot market for one of two products (rice or rubber). With one of the products, the quality was standardized and therefore prospective buyers faced low uncertainty about what exactly they were buying; with the other product, the quality was unknown and unknowable until after a buy had been made. Comparing these two conditions, Kollock found that commitments were more likely to form in the high-uncertainty condition than in the low-uncertainty condition. The explanation is that by exchanging with the same others, the quality and value of what was being bought would be more predictable. The Kollock (1994) study is a basic demonstration of the uncertainty-reduction explanation for commitment.

The theory of relational cohesion was developed to provide an alternative, yet complementary, emotional and affective explanation for commitment. This theory interweaves some basic ideas of exchange theory (Emerson 1972b, 1981) with ideas from Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction theory and Randall Collins's theory of interaction-ritual

chains (1981, 1989). From Emerson (1972), relational cohesion theory is built on a passing reference he made suggesting that actors who are more dependent on each other develop more cohesive exchange relations. That is, cohesion is a function of mutual dependence. From Berger and Luckmann (1966), relational cohesion theory adopts the principle that it does not take many repetitions of exchange for a relation to begin to emerge. In fact, Berger and Luckmann argue that “all actions repeated once or more tend to be habitualized to some degree” (p. 57). The reason for this is that actors give meaning to their repeated interaction by inferring a relationship. Through habitualization (repetition, recurrence), the relation or other social unit becomes a third force in the situation, i.e., it becomes an object distinct from self and other. Actors, therefore, orient themselves in part to the social unit.

Collins’s (1981, 1989) theory of interaction-ritual chains explicitly argues that recurrent interaction is the microfoundation for social order (cohesion, commitment, solidarity) and that emotions play a central role. Social interactions (conversations) create the feelings of uplift and confidence that people carry from one interaction episode to another. A successful, uplifting conversation at time 1 with person A will carry over to a subsequent conversation at time 2 with person B. Through such emotional dynamics, group affiliations or memberships become more salient (Collins 1989).

According to Collins’s theory, the sense of a group and its solidarity increase, especially under certain conditions: (1) actors have a common focus, (2) they are aware of their common focus, and (3) they experience common emotions that (4) grow stronger as they are shared and regenerated over time. Under these conditions, group memberships become more real as objects to actors, along the lines suggested by Berger and Luckmann, and actors come to develop moral obligations to one another. Collins’s theory suggests that the moral or normative impact of a

group affiliation can be traced to fundamental emotions generated repeatedly in social interaction.

By integrating ideas from these different theoretical perspectives, relational cohesion theory aims to connect structural power to commitment through a mediating emotional and affective process. Figure 11.1 presents the theory in the form of a theoretical model (Lawler and Yoon 1996). The theory contends that the frequency of exchange between two actors is greatest to the degree that their relationship entails greater mutual dependence, because here the incentives to exchange are stronger. Frequencies of exchange also are greater under equal power than they are under unequal power, primarily because equity or justice issues tend not to complicate the exchange agenda. Structural power (dependence) generates relational commitment through a series of indirect steps. More repetitive or frequent exchange generates stronger emotional responses (positive or negative) and these emotional responses promote perceptions that the relation is a unifying third force in the situation (Lawler and Yoon 1996). Relational cohesion, in turn, promotes various forms of commitment behavior: unilateral token gifts, staying in the relation despite alternatives, and cooperating with another despite risk of exploitation (i.e., in a social dilemma). The heart of relational cohesion theory is the endogenous process—*exchange to emotion to cohesion*. This is the mechanism linking exchange structure to commitment behavior.

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Insert Figure 1 Here

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The evidence for relational cohesion theory is quite strong (for a review see Thye, Yoon, and Lawler 2002). In fact, all links in the theoretical model shown in Figure 11.1 have received significant support across several studies (see Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1996, 1998; Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000; Lawler and Thye 1999; Thye, Yoon, and Lawler 2002). The following summarizes these points: (1) Power-dependence conditions have the predicted, indirect effects on commitment behavior through the endogenous mechanism. Equal and high total power generates more commitment by fostering more frequent exchange, stronger positive emotions, and greater perceived cohesion (Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1996; Lawler et al. 1995). (2) If a network produces both equal- and unequal-power relations with similar frequencies of exchanges, stronger commitments develop in the equal-power relation than in the unequal-power relation (Lawler and Yoon 1998). This indicates that the emotional impact of exchange is stronger under equal power than it is under unequal power. (3) If the exchange relation is structurally induced, rather than structurally enabled (i.e., promoted), the commitment process is weaker (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon, 2006). (4) In multiactor, productive exchange, group formation develops through the relational cohesion process, but our research also revealed a role for uncertainty reduction. The emotional and affective process operated to generate more stay behavior and gift giving, and the uncertainty reduction process explained cooperation rates in an N-person social dilemma (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000). Overall, research on relational cohesion confirms the important role of emotions. The endogenous process—exchange to emotion to cohesion— is strongly established. When it operates, commitment is stronger and more resilient.

## **THE AFFECT THEORY**

The affect theory of social exchange takes off from the theory of relational cohesion, without displacing or superseding it. Relational cohesion theory is dyad-focused, whereas the affect theory is network-focused. The endogenous process previously described is assumed and incorporated into the affect theory, but the emphasis is structures of exchange and effects on solidarity. The theory argues that structural dimensions create variations in the jointness of exchange; the jointness of exchange takes precedence over repetitive or frequent exchange as a source of order and solidarity. The theory distinguishes the primary social objects in exchange contexts—task, self, other, social unit—and specifies the conditions under which positive or negative emotions are attributed to social units rather than to self or other.

The affect theory consists of five elements: (1) Scope conditions that identify the general properties of the social context to which the theory applies; (2) assumptions about the role of emotions, based primarily on relational cohesion theory; (3) a conceptual framework for linking different emotions to different social objects; (4) two core principles on the sources of jointness in the exchange task or activity; and (5) a series of testable propositions derived from these principles (Lawler 2001). This section provides a synopsis of the theory organized around these five elements.

### **Scope of the Theory**

The affect theory of social exchange applies to social contexts with the following properties: (1) a network of three or more actors; (2) actors have the opportunity to engage in

exchange with one or more other actors in the network; (3) there are repeated opportunities for exchange in the same structure; (4) actors make decisions about whether to exchange, with whom, and with what terms; (5) actors are motivated to improve their rewards or profits, which may or may not involve maximization (Molm and Cook 1995); and (6) exchanges are dyadic but (7) the dyads are interconnected such that exchange in one dyad has an effect on exchange in other dyads (Emerson 1981).

These conditions all stem from the exchange-network tradition of research, initiated in the 1970s by Emerson and Cook (e.g., Cook and Emerson 1978). The first condition, requiring three or more actors, reflects Emerson's (1972a, 1972b) assumption that dyads do not exist alone but always are connected in some way to other dyads in a network. This was a departure from the dyadic focus of earlier exchange theories (Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Homans 1961; Blau 1964). A fixed, unchanging network structure is the basis for repeated opportunities for exchange with the same others. This repetition, however, raises the possibility that cohesive relations or groups may develop endogenously and thereby transform particular relations or the network into a recognized unit, a third force in the situation. Overall, the scope conditions indicate that the theory can apply to a wide variety of social contexts.

### **Theoretical Assumptions**

Five assumptions of the theory are the following (Lawler 2001, 327):

1. That social exchange generates global emotions and feelings (along a positive or negative dimension)

2. That such global emotions constitute internal self-reinforcing or punishing stimuli
3. That actors strive to reproduce global positive emotions and avoid global negative emotions
4. That global emotions from exchange trigger cognitive efforts to understand the sources or causes of global emotion or feelings
5. That actors interpret and explain their global emotions with reference to social units (e.g., relations, groups, networks) within which they experience the emotions

To summarize, assumptions 1 and 2 of the affect theory indicate that social exchange generates global feelings and that these are special classes of reinforcement and punishment. Global emotions are immediate, internal, involuntary events generated by exchange. They take the general form of “feeling good or pleasant” or “feeling bad or unpleasant” (Lawler 2001; Russell, Weiss, and Mendelsohn 1989). Assumptions 3 and 4 portray global emotions as motivational forces (Izard 1991). When activated, they organize action or interaction and unleash cognitive efforts to interpret where they come from. Following Weiner (1986), these interpretations lead to specific emotions directed at objects in the situation. Specific emotions result from the interpretation and attribution of sources or causes of global or primitive emotions to social objects. The fifth assumption indicates that, in the context of joint tasks, actors interpret global emotions as produced in part by social units. This leads to stronger or weaker affective attachments to relations, networks, groups, or organizations. The affect theory of social exchange is the first effort to theorize the structural conditions under which actors make social-unit attributions of emotion and thereby strengthen (or weaken) affective attachments.



### Attributing Emotions to Social Objects

The affect theory offers a classificatory scheme that identifies a key emotion for each of four social objects relevant to social exchange: task, self, other, and social unit (Table 11.1). This scheme borrows heavily from Weiner's (1986) attribution theory, Izard's (1991) differentiated emotions theory, and Russell, Weiss, and Mendelsohn's (1989) affect grid. The global emotions, resulting from the task activity, are termed *pleasantness* or *unpleasantness*. This object-to-emotion connection captures the immediate, involuntary response to success or failure at consummating an exchange. Examples of such global emotions and feelings from the psychological literature are interest (i.e., excitement, uplift) and joy (i.e., comfort, satisfaction; Izard 1991), and sadness or stress (Russell et al. 1989).

The remaining emotions are specific. They are directed at a particular social object, and they arise from an actor's interpretation of pleasant or unpleasant feelings from exchange. If positive global feelings are attributed to self, the specific emotion is *pride*; if attributed to the other, the specific emotion is *gratitude*. If negative emotions are attributed to self, the specific emotion is *shame*; if attributed to the other, the result is *anger* toward the other. If the emotions are attributed to the social unit, the specific emotions are *affective attachment* or *affective detachment*. Such relational or group attributions of emotion are the central mechanism by which emotions, experienced individually, strengthen or weaken order and solidarity at the group level.

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Insert Table 1 Here

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The attribution process, assumed by the affect theory, differs in important ways from theory and research on attribution in psychology. In psychology the focus is on inferences about individuals from their individual behavior (Kelley 1967; Weiner 1986); the standard contrast is between dispositional (internal to the person) attributions and situational (external to person) attributions. A behavior, therefore, may be perceived as caused by a quality of the person or by an aspect of the situation. In these terms, social-unit attributions are a type of situational attribution. However, the rubric *situational attributions* is a catch-all category for most anything that falls outside the individual. The affect theory of social exchange contends that the dispositional-situational contrast breaks down in group or interaction settings, especially where the group or interaction entails joint tasks and individual contributions are difficult to distinguish.

From extant attribution theory and research, however, it is well-known that individuals tend to make self-serving attributions for success or failure at a task, i.e., giving credit to self for success and blaming the situation (or others) for failure. If self-serving attributions are dominant in social exchange, each actor credits self for the success at exchange and blames the other for failures. Pride in self and anger toward the other would occur more frequently than shame or gratitude, and social unit attributions would be weak or nonexistent (Lawler 2001). The main principles and propositions of the theory specify the conditions under which social-unit attributions of emotion can override self-serving attributions. We now turn to these principles and propositions.

## Core Theoretical Principles

The core question for the affect theory of social exchange boils down to the following: under what conditions do actors perceive the social unit as the primary source of global emotions? This depends on the *jointness of the exchange task or activity*. Greater task jointness generates a greater propensity to attribute individual emotions or feelings to the social unit. Examples of highly joint tasks include child rearing by a couple, a work group on an assembly line, and an organizational merger. These tasks can be structured and defined in a variety of ways by actors, and the theory identifies structural and perceptual dimensions to address this.

The structural dimension is the degree that each actor's contributions to task success (or failure) are separable (distinguishable) or nonseparable (indistinguishable). This contrast is adopted from Oliver Williamson's (1985, 245-47) analysis of governance structures. He argues that, in a work setting, when contributions are nonseparable, workers cannot assign individual credit or blame to each other for work-group success or failure, and this generates relational teams as a governance mechanism. Relational teams become important structures of control to the degree that collective responsibility for group success is more salient to actors than their individual responsibility.

However, the structure of tasks is often complicated as is the capacity to trace success or failure to individual effort and performance. Child-rearing in a family may be a joint task, yet the degree that the contributions of mother and father are separable or nonseparable vary with how they distribute the subtasks involved and how they define and perceive the allocation of these tasks. Child rearing can be undertaken with clearly separable contributions (i.e., with a well-defined and understood division of labor) or with nonseparable contributions (i.e., overlapping,

rotating, substitutable responsibilities). Thus the meaning and implications of task separability or nonseparability are subject to interpretation by the actors, making the subjective or perceptual dimension of jointness important.

The key perceptual dimension of jointness is the degree that the task fosters a sense of shared responsibility for its success or failure and for the emotions produced as a result. The argument of the theory is that if exchange produces a sense of shared responsibility, actors are more likely to interpret their individual feelings also as jointly produced (Lawler 2001, 2002) and therefore more likely to attribute those feelings to their relationship or group. For example, a high-performing work group generates greater cohesion and solidarity than otherwise if they perceive responsibilities for the group performance as shared rather than individually based. Similarly, if the child-rearing activities of parents foster a sense of shared responsibility, their child-rearing activities ostensibly strengthen their relationship more than otherwise. Thus the core principles are as follows (Lawler 2001, 334):

**Core Principle 1:** *The greater the nonseparability of individuals' impact on task success or failure, the greater the perception of shared responsibility.*

**Core Principle 2:** *The greater the perception of shared responsibility for success or failure at a joint task, the more inclined individuals are to attribute resulting global and specific feelings to social units.*

Self-serving attributions in either the work-group or family context have the potential to weaken or even tear apart those relationships. If members of the high-performing work group

attribute their positive feelings to their own individual contributions, they will feel pride in self but little gratitude toward others, reducing solidarity effects, e.g., “I did most of the work and made this happen.” If they fail at a group task, they may direct anger toward others and little shame toward self, e.g., “I did my part; they didn’t do theirs.” These processes may help to explain why some marriages are strengthened by children and some are weakened.

A sense of shared responsibility has positive consequences in the case of both success and failure at the task. Shared responsibility for success generates social-unit attributions of positive emotion but also specific emotions of pride in self and gratitude toward the other. Failure generates both shame directed at self and anger directed at others. Sharing blame entails a social-unit attribution of emotion that could mobilize joint efforts to succeed in the future, though it also could lead actors to seek other partners with whom they might succeed at exchange.

To conclude, these core principles indicate when self-serving or social-unit attributions dominate interpretations of emotions and feelings: (1) Self-serving attributions dominate when the exchange task entails low nonseparability and little sense of shared responsibility. (2) Social-unit attributions dominate when the exchange task entails high nonseparability and generates a strong sense of shared responsibility. An important implication is that when social-unit attributions are made, exchange generates *both* pride in self *and* gratitude toward the other; actors can feel gratitude toward the other without diminishing pride in self, and vice versa. Self-serving attributions would lead these feelings to be inversely related, i.e., to take a zero-sum form. Social-unit attributions not only strengthen person-to-unit ties but also indirectly strengthen person-to-person ties by promoting mutual feelings of pride and gratitude. In this

manner, the affect theory suggests a particular way that affective ties to groups influence interpersonal affective ties between exchange partners (see Lawler 2002, 2003).

### **Structures of Social Exchange**

The core principles provide explanatory propositions for understanding how and when different social exchange structures generate different degrees of cohesion and solidarity at relational or group levels. As noted earlier, the theory addresses two basic dimensions of exchange structure: the *form of exchange* (Molm 1994; Molm and Cook 1995) and the *type of network connection* among three or more exchange relations. The form of exchange treats the link between actors' behaviors in exchange, whereas network connections deal with the link between different exchange relations in a network. The theory predicts that the strength of global emotional responses to an exchange is stronger under some structures than others, as is the tendency to attribute these emotions to the social unit. Under such conditions, specific emotions are positively correlated, i.e., actors feel both pride in self and gratitude toward the other.

*Forms of Social Exchange.* Sociological theories of exchange contrast four structural forms of exchange: productive, negotiated, reciprocal, and generalized (Ekeh 1974; Emerson 1981; Molm 1994; Molm and Cook 1995). In *productive exchange*, actors coordinate their behaviors to produce a joint private good; in *negotiated exchange*, actors make an explicit agreement specifying the terms of a trade or the division of a fixed pool of profit; in *reciprocal exchange*, actors sequentially provide to each other valued goods or services; in *generalized exchange*, an actor provides benefits to one member of a group or network and receives benefits from another member, rather than from the one given to. A productive form of exchange is

essentially a person-group exchange; negotiated and reciprocal forms involve direct person-person exchange; and a generalized form involves indirect exchanges between persons, e.g., *A* gives to *B*, *B* gives to *C*, and *C* gives to *A*.

To illustrate, apply the four forms to intellectual exchanges among three graduate students, *A*, *B*, and *C*. A joint research project is an example of productive exchange; each contributes to the joint effort and receives something in return from that joint effort. A negotiated exchange occurs if *A* and *B* are working on different projects but get together to give each other comments on their work. The terms of the trade are the time and attention to each others' work. The form of exchange would be reciprocal if *A* asks for and receives statistical advice on a project from *B*, without expectations that *A* will provide assistance to *B* in the future; but later *B* asks for and receives feedback from *A*. Generalized exchange occurs if *A*, *B*, and *C* each receive helpful comments on their work but whom they give comments to and whom they receive comments from are different. The affect theory of social exchange is unique in its effort to analyze and compare the emotional dynamics of the four forms of social exchange.

*Network Connections.* Sociological theories of social exchange also distinguish various types of connection among pairs in a network—for example, in a fully connected three-actor network, how does an exchange between *A* and *B* affect prospective exchanges between *A* and *C* and *B* and *C*? Emerson (1972b, 1981) was the first to address this issue, and he distinguished two types of network connection: positive and negative. If a three actor network is positively connected, an *A-B* exchange increases the probability that *A-C* and *B-C* exchanges will occur; if the network is negatively connected, an *A-B* exchange reduces the probability that *A-C* or *B-C* exchanges will occur. The affect theory of social exchange draws out the group formation implications of these network connections.

To understand network connections, it is important to examine the incentives actors have to exchange with one or more partners in the network. Willer (1999) elaborates and refines Emerson's (1972b) approach by distinguishing inclusive, exclusive, and null connections. Inclusive and null can be considered different varieties of a positive connection. An inclusive connection is one where all relations must form for any given relation to receive benefit. With null connections, all exchanges do not have to occur, but each exchange produces benefit and these benefits accumulate across relations. Thus actors have an incentive to exchange with as many others as they can, given the network structure. In a negatively or exclusively connected network, actors have an incentive to exchange with only one other at a time. The original formulation of the affect theory focused on the simple contrast of positively and negatively connected networks, but it can be extended to address the tripartite contrast offered by Willer (1999).

### **Theoretical Propositions**

The theoretical propositions of the affect theory are derived by applying the core principles to forms of social exchange and to positive or negative types of network connection. This section offers a synopsis of these propositions.

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Insert Table 2 Here

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*Forms of Social Exchange.* The four forms of social exchange involve different degrees of nonseparability and separability and, therefore, are likely to generate different degrees of



shared responsibility. These effects are summarized in Table 11.2 and discussed in the following for each form of exchange.

In productive exchange there is a single, jointly produced, private good, a good shared only by members of the group. The main problems are how to coordinate behaviors to produce that good and how to share or allocate the resulting benefits. There is higher structural interdependence here than in other forms of exchange, and the exchange processes are likely to make this interdependence salient to actors. Prototypes include a business partnership, coauthoring scholars, and a home-owner association working to solve a community problem that individual members cannot solve alone or in smaller groups. Productive exchange generates higher nonseparability than other forms of exchange, given cooperative incentives and a joint good. Individuals indeed may make distinguishable contributions, but these are so interwoven in the result that the sense of shared responsibility also should be high. Thus global emotions are stronger here and they are attributed to the social unit, thereby producing increases or decreases of cohesion and solidarity, contingent on the valence of the emotions.

In negotiated exchange, actors seek to arrive at a contractual agreement on the terms of a trade. This typically develops from a negotiation process in which each makes offers or counteroffers reflecting their own individual interests. Actors' contributions to exchange (i.e., their explicit offers) are distinguishable, yet there is a joint result produced by the negotiation. The joint outcomes are essentially the average of negotiators' offers. In negotiated exchange the jointness of the exchange task is salient, and the sense of shared responsibility should be relatively high. Overall, nonseparability and shared responsibility should result in global emotions being attributed in part to the social unit, though not to the degree found in productive exchange.

In reciprocal exchange, tacit understandings replace explicit agreements or trades. Rewards are sequential and given unilaterally, i.e., without explicit expectations of reciprocity. Yet patterns of reciprocity emerge over time, because if *A* receives a unilateral benefit from *B*, *A* feels obligated to provide benefits to *B* sometime in the future. Giving advice, providing a favor, and invitations to dinner exemplify behaviors that may give rise to or be a part of reciprocal exchanges. Each exchange behavior (giving) is distinct and separated in time from the reciprocal behavior. Thus the degree of nonseparability is low. A sense of shared responsibility develops from repeated exchange over time, but it should be lower than in the case of negotiated or productive exchange where the jointness of the exchange is more explicit and salient.

The notion that reciprocal exchange contains less potential for cohesion and solidarity than negotiated exchange seems counterintuitive. In fact, research by Molm indicates that reciprocal exchange generates more positive feelings about and commitment to the exchange partner than negotiated exchange (Molm 2003). The affect theory resolves this apparent contradiction by indicating that reciprocal exchange fosters cohesion primarily through an interpersonal process in which the social objects of greatest import are self and other, rather than the social unit as such. This is consistent with Molm's interpretation of her research (see Molm 2003). Negotiated exchange, on the other hand, renders the person- to-unit tie most salient. Thus actors involved in recurrent negotiated exchange with each other may become committed to their relation or common group affiliation without directing much affect (e.g., liking or disliking) toward one another (See Lawler 2001, 338; 2002, 10-11, for relevant discussion). Social identity theory and research takes a similar position, distinguishing interpersonal from intergroup identities or interactions and demonstrating that interpersonal attraction is not necessary for group formation (Hogg and Turner 1985; Brewer and Gardner 1996).

Unlike negotiated and reciprocal exchange, generalized exchange is indirect and impersonal. Everybody presumably receives and everybody presumably gives, but actors do not give to those they receive from. In an academic department, a structure of generalized exchange produces a collegial environment in which everybody receives feedback on their research, but dyadic or pairwise relations remain weak. The person-to-group ties are stronger here than the relational ties. Similar to the productive form, generalized exchange fosters high levels of interdependence among the actors, and coordination is a key problem. The prime difference is that the individual giving or contributions are highly separable, and the exchange behaviors are unlikely to generate much sense of shared responsibility.

Five interrelated propositions capture the logic and implications of Table 11.2 and the surrounding discussion:<sup>1</sup>

**PROPOSITION 1.** *Productive exchange generates stronger perceptions of shared responsibility and stronger global emotions than direct or indirect (generalized) exchange relations.*

**PROPOSITION 2.** *Direct exchange produces stronger perceptions of shared responsibility and stronger global emotions than indirect (generalized) exchange.*

**PROPOSITION 3.** *Stronger perceptions of shared responsibility produce stronger relational or group attributions for emotions felt.*

**PROPOSITION 4.** *Stronger relational and group attributions produce stronger affective attachments to the social unit.*

The theory treats person-to-group affective attachments as the fundamental solidarity effect of relational and group attributions. Thus the main prediction is the following:

**PROPOSITION 5.** *The strength of person-to-group affective attachments (solidarity) should be ordered as follows across forms of social exchange:*

*Productive > Negotiated > Reciprocal > Generalized*

The theory argues further that enduring sentiments (attachment or detachment) about the relations or groups tend to form if (1) the relation or group is perceived as a *stable* source of the particular emotions or feelings and (2) the relation or group also enables actors to *exercise control* over the events that produce positive or negative emotions (see Weiner 1986). The first condition obtains if actors expect the relation or group to continue to provide exchange opportunities to actors, and the second obtains as long as the relation or group promotes voluntary giving and a sense of control or efficacy. Relations and groups can be stable, controllable sources of positive experiences and emotions, and if so, the differences in solidarity across the four forms of social exchange will be greater than otherwise (see Lawler 2001, 342-43 for more detail).

Most any social context includes multiple social units, some nested within others. Academic departments are nested within colleges, companies within corporations, and neighborhoods within communities. Interacting or exchanging within multiple, nested social

units is a universal human experience. Lawler (1992) argues in a choice-process theory of commitment that actors form stronger affective attachments to social units perceived by actors as giving them a greater sense of control. More proximal units tend to receive more credit for positive feelings and less blame for negative feelings, because these are the context for actors' immediate experience. Local or proximal units have a social interaction advantage, and thus we should expect a bias toward relational (local) attributions in social exchange. Collins's (1981, 1989) theory of interaction-ritual chains adds theoretical weight to this argument.

The affect theory of social exchange indicates that this local bias is contingent on the form of exchange. In direct exchange—negotiated or reciprocal—the immediate experience is with a particular other and it is not clear that the larger group or network is sufficiently salient to be perceived as a cause of their local experiences. Generalized and productive exchange make salient a larger social unit, though in different ways. Generalized exchange does so, *structurally*, by virtue of the fact that benefit flows at the dyadic level are all one way and the form of exchange transcends any particular dyadic (direct) relation. Productive exchange does so, *cognitively*, by revealing benefits of collaboration and coordination. The theory offers the following proposition:

**PROPOSITION 6.** *Direct-exchange structures—negotiated and reciprocal— generate relational rather than group attributions of emotions; whereas productive or generalized (indirect) exchange structures generate group rather than relational attributions of emotion.*

The logic of this inference is tied to both Lawler's (1992) choice-process theory of commitment and Collins's (1981) theory of interaction-ritual chains.

*Network Connections.* Group attributions of emotion presuppose that actors perceive a group or grouplike unit, i.e., that a unit exists cognitively as a third force in the social situation (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In social identity theory, a group is said to exist if actors "share a conception of themselves as belonging to the same unit" (Brown 2000, 4). Perception or cognition is sufficient, and it leads group members to treat each other more favorably than those outside the group (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Brown 2000). Group formation, in this cognitive sense, can be produced exogenously by common group affiliations or meaningful social categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity) or it can be produced endogenously by interaction processes unleashed by a social structure (Gaertner et al. 1990). The affect theory of social exchange suggests that network connections are a structural basis for such an endogenous process.

In a positively (inclusively) connected network, actors have incentives to exchange with all or as many others as possible. At the network level, this implies relatively high potential for shared responsibility to develop. In a negatively connected network, actors have an incentive to choose one exchange partner at a time; partners can be different or rotate over time, but they tend to settle into a pattern of exchanging with the same other. Negative connections are not likely to generate a sense of shared responsibility beyond dyadic ties. These structural differences promote *group formation* in positively connected networks and *relation formation* in negatively connected networks. The affect theory of social exchange offers an emotional and affective explanation for group formation.

The theory assumes that emotions spread or diffuse across relations that are interconnected in a network (Markovsky and Lawler 1994). If *A* feels good in an interaction with

*B* and then interacts with *C*, As positive feelings tend to carry over to the *A-C* interaction; if *A* feels bad in an interaction with *B* and then interacts with *C*, *A*'s negative feelings carry over. This is a reasonable assumption because psychological research on emotion and mood indicate that global feelings (good or bad) from one situation (or actor) carry over to other situations (or actors), even if these situations (or actors) have no connection. If positive emotions diffuse from one relation (*A-B*) to another (*A-C*), the result for the *A-C* relation is likely to be greater cooperation, more use of group categories to organize perceptions, more inclusive perceptions of the group, more willingness to take risks, and more use of heuristics in processing information (Isen 1987; Forgas 2000; Bless 2000); the opposite effects occur for negative emotions. Thus in a positively connected network, it is easy to see how positive emotions in each relation would reinforce and strengthen those in other relations.

The valence of the emotions (positive versus negative) has different effects under different types of network connection. In negatively connected networks, positive emotions from repeated exchange in a given relation generates continued exchange and a sense of shared responsibility at the relational level. Such networks therefore create pockets of relational cohesion between pairs of actors who exchange most frequently (Lawler and Yoon 1998). In contrast, negative emotions from a given relation produce a search for better agreements from other possible exchange partners in the network. Affective attachment or affective detachment occurs, as predicted by the affect theory, but the relevant social units are the exchange relations that form. In positively connected networks, both positive emotions (from successful exchange) and negative emotions (from unsuccessful exchange) strengthen group formation, because interdependencies become more apparent and actors make group attributions for both positive and negative emotions. However, the spread of positive emotions promotes unity across

relations, whereas the spread of negative emotions promotes disunity. The general implication of the affect theory of social exchange is as follows.

**PROPOSITION 7.** *In positively connected exchange networks, dyadic exchanges generate group formation and strengthen affective attachments (solidarity) to the network as a group; whereas in negatively connected networks, exchanges in dyads strengthen affective attachments (solidarity) to the relation rather than the network as a group.*

### **Recent Theoretical Developments**

Since the original publication of the affect theory of social exchange, ideas of the theory have been developed in two ways. First, I have shown how the theory could be applied to social interaction in general (Lawler 2002). Second, with this broader interpretation of the theory, I addressed the question of how and when collective identities emerge or become salient, and how they are connected to role identities (Lawler 2003). Each of these theoretical efforts is briefly summarized below.

*Generalizing the Theory.* Underlying the affect theory is an implicit theory about the role of emotion in social interaction (Lawler 2002). The first step in this direction involves substituting the term *social interaction* for *social exchange* in the theory. Nearly all of the principles of the affect theory still apply. Social interaction inherently involves joint activity; there is variation in the degree that the activities are joint; joint activities with others often generate positive (or negative) emotional experiences; individuals tend to interpret the meaning of these feelings in broader terms (Durkheim 1915; Collins 1981); and finally, affective



attachment to (or detachment from) groups, organizations, communities, or societies develops in part from these processes. If the joint activities interweave individual behaviors and foster a sense of shared responsibility for the activities and results, these individual feelings produce affective attachments to the social unit. This emotional process is not the only basis for micro social order but it can be construed as one of several ways that people in repeated social interaction create groups that they value highly and are strongly tied to. In this context, interpersonal relations among members of the group are shaped in part by their person-to-social-unit ties (see Lawler 2002, 11-14, for more discussion). A simple causal chain (Figure 11.2) captures this generalization of the theory.

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Insert Figure 2 Here

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*Collective Identities.* Another paper uses this broader interpretation of the theory to analyze collective and role identities. Collective identities are shared beliefs about a person's group affiliations or ties; these beliefs emerge from social interactions. Role identities are tied to structural positions and associated cultural definitions (Stryker 2000). Collective identities define the "we" in social interaction, whereas role identities define the "me" for each actor (Thoits and Virshup 1995). In accord with the affect theory of social exchange, collective identities are grounded in joint tasks or activities that involve nonseparability and a sense of shared responsibility; role identities distinguish responsibilities and define them in individual terms.

My argument is that in the context of multiple identities, actors enact those identities that are most likely to promote positive emotional experiences (Lawler 2003). When collective identities are salient, the sense of shared responsibility and social-unit attributions of emotion

should be stronger; when role identities are salient, the sense of individual role responsibility and self-other attributions of emotion should be stronger. Thus collective identities strengthen, whereas role identities weaken the propensity of actors to structure and interpret individual contributions in nonseparable ways (see Lawler 2003). The question of how collective and role identities are interrelated is similar to the question of how social-unit and specific self-other emotions are intertwined in the affect theory, and it can be answered in those terms (see Lawler 2001, 2003). If self-efficacy is mediated by collective efficacy, collective identities strengthen social-unit attributions of emotion and role identities foster a positive correlation between pride in self and gratitude toward the other.

## **CONCLUSION**

The affect theory of social exchange builds an emoting actor into social exchange theorizing. The actors of the theory respond emotionally in exchange relations; these emotions are internal, reinforcing or punishing, events; actors interpret these emotions to understand how to reproduce the positive and avoid the negative ones in the future. Central to the theory is the idea that these emotions, while felt individually, are often interpreted in relational or group terms, i.e., as stemming from relations with others or group affiliations. The theory contends that, insofar as this happens, the emotions bear on actors' affective attachments to (or detachments from) relations or groups. Affective attachments are construed as a key component of order and solidarity (Parsons 1951).

The emphases on emotions and social-unit attributions are distinguishing features of the theory. Another distinguishing feature is the explicit emphasis given to conceptualizing

exchange as a joint task or activity. It is jointness that generates a sense of shared responsibility for the global feelings produced in social exchange and that makes social-unit attributions of emotion possible or likely. Jointness is the construct that enables a theoretical link to be made between structural conditions (network connections, forms of exchange) and micro social order in relations, networks, or groups.

The affect theory of social exchange has not yet been subjected to empirical test. Its underlying assumptions are well established in the line of research on relational cohesion theory (e.g., Lawler and Yoon 1993, 1998; Lawler and Thye 1999), and a study of productive exchange has demonstrated group-formation effects that are consistent with the theory (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000). Experiments in the planning stage will comprehensively test the theory, comparing (1) the four forms of social exchange and (2) positive and negative network connections (Lawler and Thye 2003).

To conclude, the fundamental message of the affect theory of social exchange is that while actors enter exchange for instrumental reasons, endogenous emotional and affective processes result in social units taking on expressive value. i.e., becoming valued in themselves. The theory explains group solidarity or micro social order by interrelating the rational and the nonrational. The rational brings actors together in the first place (mutual interest), but their interaction or exchange produces a result that is nonrational (global emotions). This nonrational result (emotion) generates a rational response in the form of cognitive work to interpret the source of the emotions, and under conditions specified by the theory, this leads relations or groups to take on value in themselves, a nonrational result. In this manner, the affect theory of social exchange offers an explanation for micro order, cohesion, and solidarity that bridges rational choice and emotion-based perspectives in sociology.

## NOTES

1. Compared to the original theoretical formulation (Lawler 2001), the propositions are restructured slightly to communicate as clearly and comprehensively as possible in light of space constraints.

Figure 1

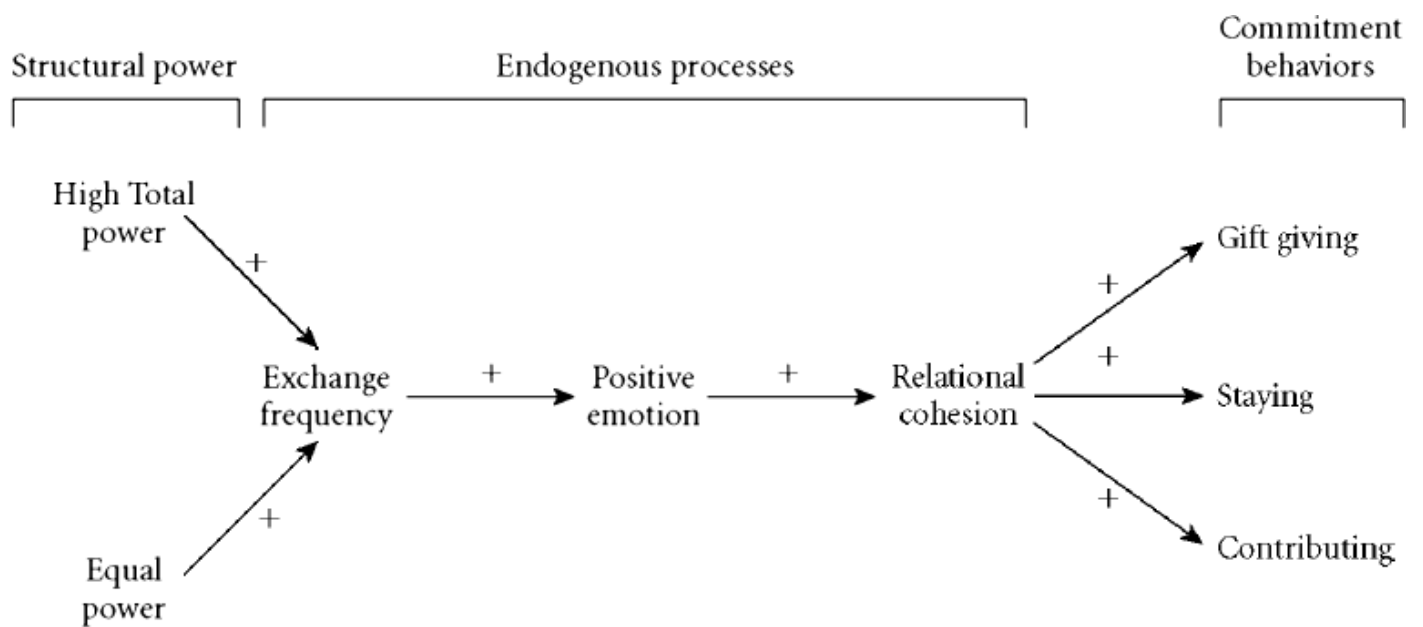
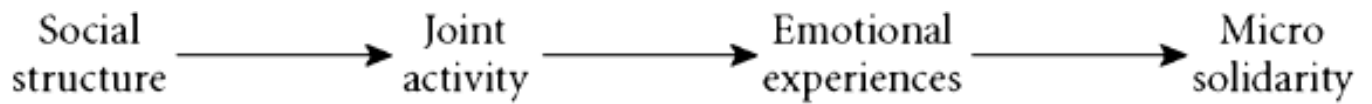


Figure 11.1 Model for the Theory of Relational Cohesion

SOURCE: Reprinted from Lawler and Yoon (1996).

Figure 2



**Figure 11.2** Basic Causal Sequence: Micro Solidarity

SOURCE: Reprinted from Lawler (2002).

Table 1

TABLE 11.1  
*Emotions Directed at Each Object*

Social Object	VALENCE OF EMOTION	
	Positive	Negative
Task	Pleasantness	Unpleasantness
Self	Pride	Shame
Other	Gratitude	Anger
Social unit	Affective attachment	Affective detachment

SOURCE: Reprinted from Lawler (2001).

Table 2

TABLE 11.2  
*Comparison of Effects of Exchange Structures*

	Nonseparability	Perception of Shared Responsibility	Social-Unit Attributions of Global Emotions
Productive	High	High	High
Negotiated	Medium	High	Medium to high
Reciprocal	Low	Medium to high	Medium
Indirect	Low	Low	Low

SOURCE: Reprinted from Lawler (2001).



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