

— A FIRST LOOK AT —
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Social Exchange Theory of John Thibaut & Harold Kelley

In 1959 Perry Smith and Dick Hickock invaded a Kansas farmhouse in a senseless robbery that netted under \$50. After tying up the four family members in separate rooms, they blasted them with a shotgun to eliminate all witnesses. Two months later the men were captured and placed in separate interrogation rooms. The police had enough evidence to convict them for parole violation and passing bad checks, but the evidence for murder was thin. The prosecutor needed a confession.

Truman Capote's book *In Cold Blood* describes the dilemma faced by Smith and Hickock. Shortly after the crime, they had agreed to stick together so that they could back up their planned alibi if arrested. Yet held in isolation, each doubted the other's will or ability to hold out. Smith saw Hickock as a convincing liar, but thought his "guts were unreliable." Similarly, Hickock feared dying on the gallows because he thought Smith would lose his nerve.

Often in jointly committed homicides, the suspect who turns state's evidence gains immunity while the other one, who feigns innocence, gets the death penalty. This differential treatment provides a strong temptation to cop out. But admitting guilt doesn't always achieve leniency. If both suspects confess, the government has more evidence than it needs to convict for murder, and both killers get a life sentence. Yet if both stonewall, the prosecutor can get a conviction only on a lesser charge. This is the classic prisoner's dilemma: Confess the crime or maintain innocence?

THE OUTCOME MATRIX AS A MIRROR OF LIFE

Figure 16.1 diagrams the interdependence of Smith and Hickock. This 2 x 2 matrix is the central analytical device of John Thibaut and Harold Kelley's social exchange theory. Thibaut was professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina until his death in 1986; Kelley continues to use the outcome matrix at UCLA to examine how people decide what to do in their relationships. I urge you to work through the potential outcome values shown in each matrix presented in the chapter. The placement of the numbers at the

		SMITH	
		Stonewall	Confess
HICKOCK	Stonewall	Short jail term (6)	Goes free (9)
	Confess	Short jail term (6)	Goes to gallows (0)
		Stonewall	Confess
HICKOCK	Stonewall	Goes to gallows (0)	Life sentence (3)
	Confess	Goes free (9)	Life sentence (3)

FIGURE 16.1
The Prisoner's Dilemma

intersection of two behaviors reflects Thibaut and Kelley's conviction that our relational outcomes are always linked with the actions of others.

The column headings show the two choices open to Smith; the row labels describe Hickock's same options. The four cells inside the box reveal the consequences of the various behavioral combinations. Smith's outcomes are in the upper right corner of each cell. Hickock's are in the lower left portion. For example, if Smith confesses while his partner stands mute, he goes free and Hickock dies.

The numbers in parentheses are attempts to quantify the values of different outcomes. Thibaut and Kelley let a single number represent the rewards minus the costs of a given course of action. For example, Smith might mentally sum up the benefits of a life sentence as a +14. He'd have the relief of escaping execution, a chance for human contact, plenty of time to watch TV, and perhaps a shot at parole later on. Of course the downside of a life term in jail would cancel out most of those benefits. Smith's costs, which he might mentally rate as a -11, would include permanent loss of freedom, guards' continually telling him what to do, boredom, and fear of violence from other prisoners. Since the outcome of an interaction equals rewards (+14) minus costs (-11), Smith would regard the consequence of a mutual confession as a bleak +3.

The idea of totaling potential benefits and losses to determine behavior isn't new. Since philosopher John Stuart Mill stated his philosophy of utilitarianism,¹ there's been a compelling logic to the minimax principle of human behavior. The minimax principle claims that people seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. So the higher the number in an outcome matrix, the more attractive the behavior that might make it happen.

It would be nice if every interaction offered both parties a chance to get their optimum outcome at the same time. Unfortunately, the world's not set up that way. As with the prisoner's dilemma, there's the potential for one person's gain to come at the other's expense. Thibaut and Kelley describe the prisoner's dilemma matrix as "bilaterally discordant" and believe it offers a good way to study conflict between people.

Social exchange theory assumes that we can accurately anticipate the payoffs of a variety of interactions. Our minds are like computers, and a computer analysis is only as good as the data that are fed in. Garbage in; garbage out. To the authors of the theory, the data we get are remarkably reliable. Not only can Hickock see that twin confessions will result in a life sentence for him, he can also understand that they'll produce the same effect for Smith.

The 2×2 matrix plots either-or decisions, but most human encounters require a much larger map to represent the multiple options of both parties. Despite this complexity, Thibaut and Kelley believe that members of a dyad, as well as outside observers, can realistically grasp the potential outcomes shown across the grid. In addition, the participants have the sense to choose what's best.

The best choice is not always the one associated with the highest number on the board. Take a look at Smith's and Hickock's options. There's no doubt that freedom is the most desirable outcome, yet if each man confesses in the hope of avoiding prison, they will both end up behind bars for the rest of their lives. As is the case when playing a game of checkers, it's not enough to know you want to advance your marker to the far side of the board to gain a king; you also must credit your opponent's desire to do the same. Success requires that you take into account what the other player is likely to do.

The need for a strategy of anticipation leads some to refer to this exchange approach as "game theory." However, Thibaut and Kelley want to avoid the head-butting, win-lose, adversarial tone that goes with seeing the other as an opponent in a game. The internal cost of conflict cuts into the worth of an outcome; its resolution is value added. For this reason, they prefer the term *interdependence theory*. Whatever label we use, successful players learn to synchronize their moves with the actions of others.

COMPARING THE RESULTS: IS EVERYBODY HAPPY?

It may have occurred to you that a life sentence could mean something quite different to Smith than to Hickock. Social exchange theory presents two standards of comparison by which to evaluate a given outcome, whether in prison or under more normal circumstances. The first benchmark deals with relative satisfaction—how happy or sad an interpersonal outcome makes a participant feel. Thibaut and Kelley call it the *comparison level*.

A person's comparison level (CL) is the threshold above which an outcome seems attractive. If your CL for clerical employment is an hourly wage

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of \$8, you would be satisfied working for \$9 an hour but feel exploited if you received only \$7 for your labor.

Satisfaction depends on expectation, which is shaped by prior experience, especially gripping events of the recent past. A run of bad outcomes can make previously distasteful results more palatable. A string of successes whets the appetite for a gourmet feast.

If Smith's memory is filled with killers who either go free or merely get token jail terms, his CL will be at +7 or so, and a life sentence rated at +3 will seem a cruel joke. In spite of his murderous brutality, even a moderate term

in jail will strike him as unfair. Hickock, on the other hand, may see execution as the likely result of committing homicide. As a former convict, he knew men who went to the gallows. With a CL of only +2, a life sentence at +3 might look quite attractive.

COMPARING THE RESULTS: IS EVERYONE GOING TO STICK AROUND?

Thibaut and Kelley suggest that there is a second standard by which we evaluate the outcomes we receive. They call it the *comparison level of alternatives* (CL_{alt}), and the level is pegged by the best payoffs available outside the current relationship. CL_{alt} is the worst outcome a person will accept and still stay in a relationship. As more attractive outside possibilities become available, or as existent outcomes slide below an established CL_{alt} , instability increases. This may sound like a stock market analysis rather than a description of interpersonal relationships. Not surprisingly, some advocates of a social exchange approach refer to it as a "theory of economic behavior."

CL_{alt} doesn't speak to the issue of attraction or satisfaction. A woman could be happy in her job, yet leave for a new position which offers even higher pay, better working conditions, or a more interesting assignment.

Relative Value of Outcome, CL, CL_{alt}	State of the Relationship
Outcome > CL > CL_{alt}	Satisfying Stable Dependent
Outcome > CL_{alt} > CL	Satisfying Stable Nondependent
CL_{alt} > CL > Outcome	Not satisfying Break relationship Happy elsewhere
CL_{alt} > Outcome > CL	Satisfying Unstable Happier elsewhere
CL > CL_{alt} > Outcome	Not satisfying Break relationship Continue unhappy
CL > Outcome > CL_{alt}	Highly unsatisfying Can't break away Dependent and unhappy

FIGURE 16.2

Six Relational Typologies (Adapted from Roloff, *Interpersonal Communication: The Social Exchange Approach*.)

Conversely, she might remain in a loveless marriage because the high cost of exit lowers the attractiveness of the best outside alternative. Social workers describe the plight of a battered wife as "high cost, low rewards." Yet she often remains with her abusive husband because the option of being alone in the world appears worse. ($\text{Outcome} > \text{CL}_{\text{alt}}$) She'll end the relationship only when she perceives an outside alternative which promises a better life ($\text{CL}_{\text{alt}} > \text{Outcome}$).

Nonvoluntary relationships have an extremely low CL_{alt} . Smith and Hickock each tried to escape from custody and failed. Their only alternative to the unwanted dilemma was suicide, an outcome on a par with execution. Thibaut and Kelley arbitrarily set CL_{alt} at zero in a payoff matrix, so that's why every outcome but hanging is shown as positive in the prisoner's dilemma. Even without the three absolute values of Outcome, CL, and CL_{alt} , the rank order reveals a lot about the state of relational health. Figure 16.2 outlines the six possibilities.

The last row at the bottom of the figure describes the plight of Hickock and Smith during the long months in prison before their trial. The shorthand notation on the left indicates a situation in which their comparison level desires and expectations are greater than the actual outcomes they receive, yet jail is better than the only alternatives available—suicide or execution. Most people in prison find themselves in a hapless and hopeless position.

DEPENDENCE FOSTERS CONTROL

In addition to distinctions in attractiveness and stability, Figure 16.2 separates relationship types on the basis of power. Consider the tie that exists between you and your mother. Her power over you is directly proportional to the amount of dependence you have on her for the benefits of life. If she is your only source for college tuition, wise counsel, emotional support, and fudge brownies, her ability to govern your life is great. If you can easily get the benefits she offers someplace else, you avoid interdependence. When outcomes exceed CL_{alt} by a large margin, dependence is great. Thibaut and Kelley make no claim that this is either good or bad. They merely point out the link between dependence and control. Their discussion of power involves three different forms of control.

1. Reflexive Control. The ability to reward yourself is reflexive control. It's pulling your own strings, taking responsibility for your own outcomes, being your own best friend. This is what Jane has in the first matrix of Figure 16.3. By choosing to do whatever behavior "X" represents, she can give good things to herself regardless of Dick's response. Self-provided rewards are portable. They continue to provide independence when carried into new relationships. These appear nonexistent for Smith and Hickock, since the best outcome each man can achieve on his own is a life sentence.

2. Fate Control. The ability to affect another's outcomes regardless of

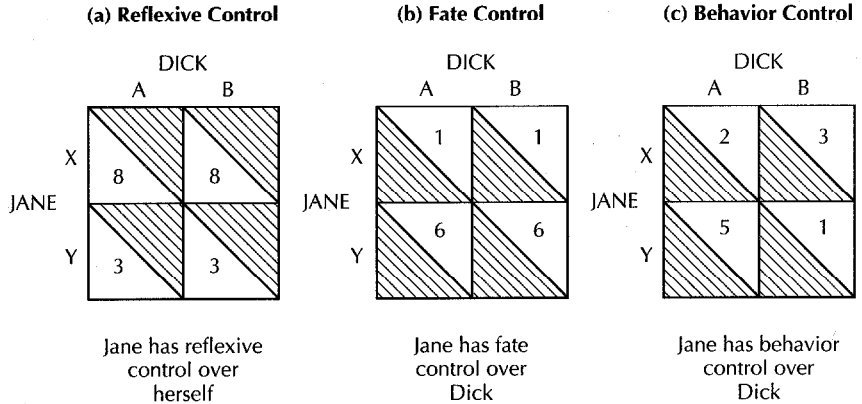


FIGURE 16.3
Illustration of Three Forms of Control

what he or she does is fate control. In the second matrix of Figure 16.3, Jane has fate control over Dick. She can exercise this power with tender, loving care or jerk him around unmercifully. Either way, he can't do a thing about it as long as they're together. His only recourse is the one available in most low-power situations—break off the relationship. Massive environmental fate control has removed even that option for Smith and Hickock. They've got to deal with each other, and each one by confessing can condemn the other to a lifetime in prison—or worse. That's mutual fate control.

3. Behavior Control. The ability people have to change another's behavior through variations of their own is behavior control. It doesn't necessarily generate high outcomes; it's simply the power to move the other person around the matrix. By shifting her choice from behavior X to behavior Y in the third matrix of Figure 16.3, Jane gives Dick a strong inducement to act toward her in option A rather than option B. Hickock was the first to admit guilt in the Kansas murder case. Foreknowledge of his partner's confession would have given Smith a great impetus to abandon his claim of innocence.

People within interdependent relationships juggle the three forms of control, usually in some blend of mutuality. Mutual reflexive control is the power of individuals to make what they want come true in their own lives. Mutual fate control is the power they have to make what they want come true in others' lives. Mutual behavior control is the power they have to resolve the conflict that's generated by the clash of the first two kinds.

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT INTO COOPERATION

Thibaut and Kelley present a number of matrices which stimulate real-life conflicts. As with the prisoner's dilemma, the games come with intriguing titles: Chicken, Battle-of-the-Sexes, Threat, Zero-Sum. Social exchange theory

norms. Norms are the stated and implicit rules of a group that identify the range of acceptable behavior. Often couched in moral terms, these principles provide a basis for action when the situation is confusing. Social exchange theory describes norms as socially rewarded transformations aimed at curbing the use of raw power. The language of prison reveals that there is indeed an enforced honor among thieves. Labels of "cheat," "fink," or "snitch" add to the cost of squealing on a buddy, so the classic prisoner's dilemma looks different from within the walls.

Another set of moral transformations comes into play when people deal with each other over time. For example, parents promote a turn-taking norm as a way to reduce conflict among their children. Children who adopt this stance do so in the hope that it will work to their advantage in the long run. For Smith and Hickock, this was not an option; they had only one chance to resolve their prisoner's dilemma.

CRITIQUE: WEIGHING THE OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory is an ambitious attempt to quantify and calculate the friction of interdependence. Altman and Taylor's wholesale use of the reward-cost analysis for social penetration theory (see Chapter 13) shows the value of the exchange approach. Yet some students regard mathematical models of human interaction as foreign territory. They balk when asked to cross the borders of the outcome matrix and work through the numbers of comparison levels, transformations, and fate control. They could avoid culture shock by first immersing themselves in the theory's rich description of power.

But even those who appreciate Thibaut and Kelley's technical analysis must ask hard questions about the theory's basic assumptions: Can a complex blend of advantages and disadvantages be reliably reduced to a single number? Do individuals respond so selfishly that they always opt to do what they calculate is in their own best interest? Are the suggested transformations testable refinements of a solid theory, or are they just shotgun attempts to salvage faulty hypotheses?

Although negative answers would cast doubt on the theory's validity, the research findings stimulated by the social exchange approach offer helpful insights on conflict resolution. In prisoner's dilemma situations, for example, the chance to communicate increases cooperation dramatically. A single play presents greater temptation to zap a partner than does continual interdependence. Once trust is broken, it's hard to restore joint collaboration.

Research confirms that there are different reasons for noncooperation. People with a competitive mind-set regard the prisoner's dilemma as a chance to take advantage of a weaker opponent. Folks with a high need for affiliation fear that others will exploit them, so they adopt a defensive strategy. The end result is the same—an unwinnable war. The ironic conclusion is that pursuit of selfish interest provides fewer personal benefits than does a concern for the

general welfare. That insight alone makes social exchange theory attractive. For all but the most severe critic, the outcome exceeds the comparison level.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Many people refer to social exchange theory as *game theory*. In what ways does a game metaphor seem to fit the ideas of Thibaut and Kelley?
2. Suppose you are caught using Velcro on the back of your campus parking permit so it can be transferred to other cars. You could get a warning, a \$20 fine, or have your permit revoked. In the end, on what will your *happiness* depend?
3. The theory talks about *reflexive control*, *fate control*, and *behavior control*. If you could have power in only one of these areas, which kind would you want?
4. "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."² Given the *minimax principle* of human behavior, how is such a sacrifice possible?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Harold H. Kelley and John W. Thibaut, *Interpersonal Relationships*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1978.

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1 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1861.

2 From John 15:13, *The New American Bible*, J. P. Kennedy & Sons, New York, 1970.