



# **Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application**

Fourth Edition

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# Social Exchange Theory

## *Chapter Overview*

- SET at a Glance
- Introduction
- Assumptions of SET
- Evaluation of a Relationship
- Exchange Patterns
- Exchange Structures
- Integration and Critique

# SET at a Glance

- Major force in interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of both people's self-interest
- Self-interest can enhance relationships
- Interpersonal relationships are similar to economic exchanges

# Introduction

- People evaluate their relationships in terms of costs and rewards
- $\text{Rewards} - \text{Costs} = \text{Value of a relationship}$
- Context indicates whether something is a reward or cost

# Introduction

- All relationships require some time and effort from the parties involved
- Worth of a relationship predicts its outcome
- Marketplace metaphor and social exchange (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993)

# Assumptions of SET

- Assumptions about human nature
  - Humans seek rewards and avoid punishments
  - Humans are rational beings
  - The standards that humans use to evaluate costs and rewards vary over time and from person to person

# Assumptions of SET

- Assumptions about the nature of relationships
  - Relationships are interdependent
    - Game Theory
    - The Prisoner's Dilemma
  - Relational life is a process

# Evaluation of a Relationship

Types of comparisons for evaluating relationships:

- **Comparison level (CL)** represents what a people think they should get in a relationship
- **Comparison level for alternatives (CLalt)** is how people evaluate a relationship based on what their alternatives to the relationship are

# How Outcome, CL, and CLalt Affect the State of a Relationship

## Relative Value: O, CL, CLalt

- Outcome > CL > CLalt
- Outcome > CLalt > CL
- CLalt > CL > Outcome
- CLalt > Outcome > CL
- CL > CLalt > Outcome
- CL > Outcome > CLalt

## State of the Relationship

- Satisfying and stable
- Satisfying and stable
- Unsatisfying and unstable
- Satisfying and unstable
- Unsatisfying and unstable
- Unsatisfying and stable

# Exchange Patterns

- People adjust their behaviors in a relationship
  - Assume people are driven to achieve goals in their interactions with others
  - Behavioral sequences

# Exchange Patterns

- Patterns of exchange allow individuals to cope with
  - Power differentials
  - Costs associated with exercising power

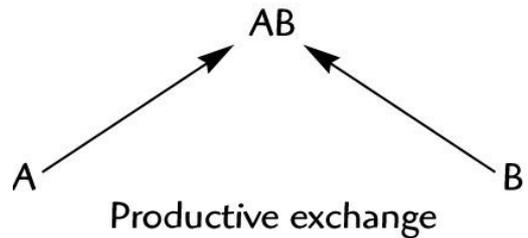
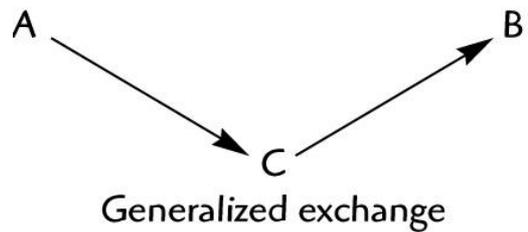
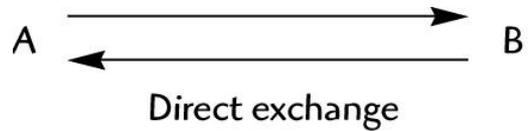
# Exchange Patterns

- Types of matrices describe exchange patterns
  - Given matrix
  - Effective matrix
  - Dispositional matrix

# Exchange Structures

- Forms of exchanges within the matrices
  - Direct exchange
  - Generalized exchange
  - Productive exchange

# Exchange Structures



**Figure 11.2**  
Exchange Structures

# Integration

- Communication tradition
  - Socio-psychological
- Communication context
  - Interpersonal
- Approach to knowing
  - Positivist/empirical

# Evaluating SET

- Scope
  - Failure to focus on the importance of group solidarity
- Utility
  - View of humans as rational calculators of relationships has been questioned
  - People may not be as self-interested as SET implies

# Evaluating SET

- Testability
  - Costs and rewards are not clearly defined
- Heurism
  - Generated a great deal of diverse research