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Generalized Social Exchange and Its Relevance to New Era Workplace Relationships

Katsuhiko Yoshikawa
Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Chia-Huei Wu
Durham University

Hyun-Jung Lee
London School of Economics and Political Science

To critically evaluate the relevance of social exchange theory (SET) to the contemporary workplace, Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) point out a number of factors that reshape work relationships and suggest how to apply and extend social exchange theory to understand the new era work relationships. However, in their discussion, they focus mainly on reciprocal exchange (RE) in dyadic relationships. The discussion completely overlooks another important form of social exchange, namely, generalized exchange

Katsuhiko Yoshikawa, Antai College of Economics and Management, Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Chia-Huei Wu, Durham University Business School, Durham University; Hyun-Jung Lee, Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katsuhiko Yoshikawa, Antai College of Economics and Management, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 1954 Hua Shan Road, Shanghai, People's Republic of China. E-mail: katsu_y@sjtu.edu.cn

(GE), which is increasingly relevant to contemporary organizations exactly because of the changes indicated by Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu. In this commentary, we briefly review prior investigations into GE across various social science disciplines and then point out its increasing relevance to organizations. Finally, we will discuss implications for future research in the industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology literature.

Generalized Exchange

SET (e.g., Blau, 1964) conceptualizes human behaviors as exchanges of resources among actors. Individuals exchange resources, such as help, recognition, approval, and rewards, with one another, and they seek to balance the value and quality of the resources they exchange. GE is a collective and indirect form of social exchange that takes place in a social group with three or more members. A participant gives resources to other participants without receiving direct reciprocation from the recipients; however, as others also engage in the same behavior, one eventually receives reciprocation indirectly from someone in the group (Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). This form of exchange is distinct from the other two forms of social exchange, RE and negotiated exchange (NE), which take place in dyadic relationships and involve direct exchange between two actors following negotiated rules (for NE) or acting contingently upon the partners' behaviors, following the norm of reciprocity (for RE; Flynn, 2005; Molm, 2000). We further highlight the distinctive regulatory principle of GE, *the rule of collective reciprocity*. In contrast to the norm of reciprocity, which involves two individuals who directly reciprocate resources to each other (Gouldner, 1960), the rule of collective reciprocation includes three or more individuals in the equation. For instance, if person A receives resources from person B, person B might give resources to person C (i.e., paying it forward). Alternatively, if person A observes that person B gives resources to person C, person A provides resources to person B (i.e., rewarding reputation; Baker & Bulkley, 2014). The key differences between RE and GE thus lie in their structures (i.e., dyadic and direct versus collective and indirect) and the underlying principles that regulate individuals' behaviors (i.e., the norm of reciprocity versus the rule of collective reciprocity).

Recognizing GE as one of the basic forms of social exchange goes back to the early days of social exchange research in social science. GE was originally found in primitive societies by anthropologists such as Malinowski (1922) and Lévi-Strauss (1949). Although Homans (1958) almost solely focused on social exchange in dyadic relationships, Ekeh (1974) emphasized the distinction between GE and dyadic forms of exchange and argued for the importance of GE in bonding individuals in human groups. Emerson (1972) also recognized GE, which he interpreted as a network of dyadic

relationships. Furthermore, Blau (1964) recognized the relevance of GE to organizations; he stated: “Long chains of social transactions occur in complex organizations, in which the work of some members contributes to the performance of others, and which typically do not involve reciprocal exchanges” (p. 260). The concept of GE is adopted and further developed in various disciplines, including sociology, social psychology, economics, and evolutionary biology.

Despite these developments, the I-O psychology literature and organizational/management research overall continued to focus on RE by applying it to various workplace relationships, such as employee–organization (e.g., perceived organizational support), supervisor–subordinate (e.g., LMX), and individuals–team members (TMX; see Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, for a review). Hence, it is not surprising that Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) discussed only RE. However, there is an emerging body of literature that empirically suggests that individuals engage in GE within an organization (e.g., Baker & Bulkley, 2014) and across organizations (e.g., Westphal, Park, McDonald, & Hayward, 2012).

Why Is Generalized Exchange Relevant to Contemporary Organizations?

GE is critical for organizations to utilize organizational social capital—“the goodwill available to individuals or groups”—and to make its effects “flow from the information, influence and solidarity it makes available to the actor” (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 25). First, GE facilitates a flexible flow of resources (e.g., knowledge, help) among organization members compared to NE and RE (Levine & Prietula, 2012) because NE requires prior agreement between actors on terms of exchange, and RE relies on higher quality of interpersonal relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Second, GE promotes a psychological bond between the members and the collective entity in which GE takes place, manifested as high trust, solidarity, and identification toward the group (Molm, Collett, & Schaefer, 2007), which in turn serves as a psychological foundation that facilitates exchange among members who may not know each other personally within the collective entity.

Due to these characteristics, GE is important to contemporary organizations, considering the background of technological, political, globalization, and economical changes indicated by Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018). For example, today, companies increasingly depend on knowledge workers, and they conduct activities beyond national borders. In other words, it is critical for many organizations to facilitate the flexible exchange of resources (e.g., knowledge) among workers beyond organizational/geographical boundaries and preexisting interpersonal ties. In addition, the trend toward less hierarchical and more autonomous work practices implies that individuals’ work relationships are less restricted by bureaucratic structure, and thus,

horizontal exchange relationships (rather than vertical relationships) across work groups (rather than within the group) play key roles in organizations. As indicated by Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu, for knowledge workers with considerable expertise in their professional domains, it would be more useful to interact with other experts than to interact with the manager, who does not necessarily have deep expertise in the domain. Digital technologies are likely to further facilitate such changes by enabling workers to access individuals beyond the immediate workplace more easily through virtual spaces.

A good example to illustrate the importance of GE is the case of on-line platforms. GE has been found to facilitate exchange on Internet online platforms (Faraj & Johnson, 2011) and online platforms within an organization (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Such platforms provide a virtual space in which individuals without prior interaction history can exchange knowledge with one another, thus increasing their chances of accessing nonredundant knowledge (Granovetter, 1973). In such a setting, RE is not likely to facilitate interactions, as it requires high-quality preexisting interpersonal relationships, particularly for the exchange of resources with significant value (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Furthermore, freeriding (one acquires knowledge but does not contribute) is rife in online knowledge exchange platforms, making it less appealing for those who expect direct reciprocity (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). This example indicates that GE is important when resources such as information and knowledge should be exchanged beyond preexisting interpersonal relationships and direct reciprocity.

It is important to note that whereas some of the observed changes in the contemporary workplace relationship indicated by Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) will promote the relevance of GE in contemporary organizations, other changes will likely pose barriers for GE. Individuals are more likely to engage in GE when they consider other individuals as members of the same social group (Westphal et al., 2012), as strong identification with a social group facilitates engagement in GE with members of the social group (Willer, Flynn, & Zak, 2012). Drawing on this, we argue that contemporary organizations should be aware of the factors that can create fault lines among their members and thus hinder GE. For example, increased use of freelancers, contract workers, and outsourcing might create salient status differences among those working in an organization, which might promote the “us and them” distinction between groups of individuals with different contract/employment statuses and thus prevent individuals from engaging in GE across the organization. In addition, cultural and other diversities, including generational differences in work values, might lead to the formation of subgroups in an organization based on demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, cultural background, gender, and age. Geographic dispersion of activities might also provide barriers to GE, as individuals often identify

more strongly with immediate sub-units (i.e., subsidiaries) than the entire organization. Hence, changes in work relationships not only promote the relevance of GE but also create barriers against it functioning as a facilitating device for the organization-wide exchange of resources beyond boundaries.

Research Opportunities

To date, only a limited number of studies have investigated GE in workplace settings. We repeat the decade-old call by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) and Flynn (2005) for researchers to move beyond the narrow assumptions of RE in dyadic relationships. In the following, we highlight some major issues that I-O psychology scholarship can further investigate.

First, the extant literature provides little knowledge about individual differences in GE (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Research on RE has revealed that individuals' engagement in RE is shaped by personality traits such as conscientiousness (Orvis, Dudley, & Cortina, 2008), extraversion (Bauer, Erdogan, Liden, & Wayne, 2006), and individualism–collectivism (Zhong, Wayne, & Liden, 2016). Furthermore, individuals' orientations to exchange relationships, such as exchange ideology (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001), reciprocity wariness, and creditor ideology (Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987) are also found to shape individuals' engagement in RE. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that individuals might also vary in their tendencies to engage in GE. Moreover, some theorists have suggested individuals' tendencies to engage in GE are likely to be shaped by various factors such as their previous experiences, organizational climate, and norms and dispositional tendencies in interacting with people (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Flynn, 2005), which lead to a research question regarding how individuals develop different tendencies in engaging in GE.

Second, scholars might also investigate how contextual factors shape individuals' engagement in GE. As we noted above, individuals are more likely to engage in GE when they consider other individuals as members of the same social group. The high levels of diversity in individual demographics, location, and contract status in contemporary organizations provide an ideal situation for researchers to examine how such organizational contexts affect one's engagement in GE. In addition, many organizations try to maintain positive relationships with alumni, as Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) point out, referring to HP-Indigo. Such efforts might create an extended social group, including current and former employees beyond the company's "formal" boundary and thus facilitate GE among them. In a similar vein, individuals develop identifications not only in their organizations and their subunits, but also in their outside social groups, such as occupational groups. In sum, blurred boundaries of contemporary organizations provide

interesting opportunities for researchers to investigate the impact of social structures on individuals' engagement in GE.

Third, there are opportunities to investigate the impact of organizational practices on individuals' willingness to engage in GE. Although GE can be beneficial for individuals and organizations, its participants are likely to face a stronger risk of nonreciprocation than participants of other forms of exchange (Molm et al., 2007) because the exchange does not involve explicit negotiations among actors, and the process of reciprocation involves unspecified multiple individuals. Some conceptual studies have proposed that human resources and other organizational practices might reduce such perceived risks and motivate individuals to engage in GE (Baker & Dutton, 2007; Evans & Davis, 2005); however, to our best knowledge, there is no study that has empirically investigated the impact of organizational practices on individuals' engagement in GE.

Finally, we mention methodological challenges to investigating GE. Research on RE largely depends on survey methods: Typically, researchers use self-report surveys to collect information about individuals' perceptions of their exchange partners (e.g., POS, LMX) and supervisor-report surveys to collect information about individuals' attitudes and behaviors (e.g., task performance, OCB). Such approaches might not be very useful for the investigation of GE because GE involves three or more individuals, and resources can flow from any one of them to any other individuals. Moreover, individuals might engage in GE along with RE (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Hence, the analysis of GE involves the detailed flow of resources among individuals (e.g., A → B → C → ...: person A provides resources to person B, and then the person B gives resources to person C, and so on). These methodological requirements will push researchers to develop a much more fine-grained way of capturing individual interactions than the common survey-based approaches in existing social exchange research. For example, researchers who investigated GE in online platforms used detailed records of individual interactions on those platforms to capture individual behaviors (Baker & Bulkley, 2014; Faraj & Johnson, 2011). We expect more innovative methodological approaches to emerge from investigations of GE in organizations.

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