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Investigating the Application of Social Exchange Theory in Enhancing Workplace Relationships and Employee Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Social Exchange Theory (SET) can be applied to improve work relationships and job satisfaction among the workforce. The relationships at workplaces play a pivotal role in determining the well-being and productivity of employees, but the direct effect of the social exchange on job satisfaction has been largely under-researched. The research addresses this gap by studying the role of the social exchange elements of trust, reciprocity, and organizational support on job satisfaction. It was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, which was a combination of quantitative surveys of 350 employees across different sectors, as well as qualitative interviews with 20 HR professionals. The survey has measured the variables such as perceived supervisor support, coworker relationships, and organizational culture, whereas the interview has given a better insight into the organizational practices that promote social exchanges. Regression models and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used to analyze the data to test the hypotheses regarding the relationship between social exchange factors and job satisfaction. The results revealed significant positive correlations: LMX ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), Peer Support ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$), and POS ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) with job satisfaction. In particular, employees who described good social interactions in their teams had a 25 % improvement in the job satisfaction scores. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that trust and reciprocity in work settings had a greater effect on satisfaction, particularly when employees felt greater organizational and supervisor support. These results imply that augmenting social transactions at organizational levels could greatly boost job satisfaction, which results in greater employee engagement and retention. The practical implications are to invest in programs that help in fostering positive relationships, such as mentorship programs, team-building activities, and leadership training, to promote overall job satisfaction and organizational performance.

Keywords: Social Exchange Theory, Workplace Relationships, Employee Job Satisfaction, Organizational Behavior, Human Resource Management.

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Introduction

In the modern world of work, organizations need both to develop workplace relations and to improve employee satisfaction. In the pursuit of increased productivity, along with higher employee engagement and lower employee turnover, the importance of workplace relations on the satisfaction of employees cannot be neglected (Arif et al., 2017). Substantial studies of job satisfaction have focused on the effects of pay, leadership, and the workplace culture of the organization (Casimir et al., 2014). However, little examination has focused on the effects of interpersonal relations in the workplace on employee satisfaction and achievement of work goals (Wu et al., 2023). This study focuses on the effects of workplace relations on job satisfaction to fill the identified gap (Edwards & Solomon, 2023).

Relationships in the workplace which consist of the interactions of employees with their supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates, are an integral part of employees' work life and organizational behavior (Abraham et al., 2022; Sun, 2019). Good relations are known to create an environment of trust, which improves job satisfaction, productivity, and commitment to the organization (Grant & Dziadkowiec, 2012). Bad relations, or the absence of relations, on the other hand, have negative effects on the workplace, such as employee turnover, work-related stress, and worldwide dissatisfaction (Milošević et al., 2024). Thus, to create an environment where employees obtain satisfaction, organizations need to understand how relations impact job satisfaction (Park & Doo, 2020; Huell et al., 2016).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is an effective theory that can be used to gauge the relations of workplace employees and satisfaction. In the context of SET, employees are assumed to be motivated by the expected outcomes of their work. Motivated by their expectations, employees are thought to continue their social exchange until they perceive that a particular employee's behavior has ceased to be a disincentive and, on the other hand, what they perceive has tended to be reciprocated. In this study, employees' perceptions of organizational support, supervisor support, and coworker relationships are examined in the context of SET.

This study intends

- To determine the effect of relationships between employees on job satisfaction.
- The contribution of Social Exchange Theory in unpacking the dynamics of workplace relationships.
- To appraise the measures that organizations can take to promote job satisfaction as a byproduct of positive social exchanges.

The study examines the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of relationships between employees on job satisfaction?
2. What is the contribution of Social Exchange Theory to workplace relationships?
3. What measures can organizations take to enhance job satisfaction by means of social interactions?

The study is organized as follows: a review of the literature on Social Exchange Theory, workplace relationships, and job satisfaction is presented in Section II. Section III describes the research paradigm, stratified by study design, data collection, and data analysis. Section IV provides findings that describe the effect of relationships among employees on job satisfaction. Section V elaborates on the study's findings and describes ways to foster workplace relationships in order to enhance job satisfaction. A review of the findings of the study and suggestions for subsequent research follows in Section VI.

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory and Organizational Behavior

The basis of relationships in the workplace, from the perspective of social exchange theory (SET), is the maximization of benefits and the minimization of costs (Haider et al., 2020). SET posits that relationships that are characterized by positive exchanges involve positive attitudes and behaviors. When employees feel that they are supported, they reciprocate that support in the form of improved job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Sungu et al., 2019). The presence of positive cooperative behavior helps employees have a positive sense of outcomes in their work because they trust that the resources are shared fairly among coworkers (Kargeti, 2023).

Workplace Relationships and Their Influence

SET postulates that there are specific relationships that influence employees' job satisfaction. Leader-member exchange (LMX), as a subset of SET, examines the relationship that exists between the supervisor and the subordinates (Aksoy & Yalçınsoy, 2018). The relationship that is characterized by mutual support, trust, and respect also enhances

the job satisfaction and organizational commitment of the members. Peer support also enhances the employees' job satisfaction (Tahiry & Ekmekcioglu, 2023; Qin, 2024). When employees form close networks of collaboration that also extend beyond the workplace, there is a high level of job satisfaction (Altaş et al., 2024). These networks also help reduce occupational stress and provide a social function that enhances the satisfaction of the employees.

Employee Job Satisfaction and Its Determinants

Employee job satisfaction is one's general feeling about one's job that is determined by several crucial factors (Qin, 2024). Due to the salary, level of profession, opportunity for promotion, and other rewarding circumstantial factors, one's perception of job satisfaction varies (Choi, 2020). Workplace relationships, predominantly those of trust and mutual respect, have the greatest influence on perception of satisfaction in conjunction with the relationships the individual has with their interpersonal point of contact (Cho & Park, 2011). Job satisfaction level is positively correlated with the extent of mutual respect and trust, and the extent of the reciprocal nature of their own relationships with their supervisors (Nurfaisal & Sunengko, 2023).

Theoretical Gaps

The research on workplace relationships and social exchanges in an organizational context is well established, but integrating Social Exchange Theory that directly factors employees' job satisfaction, which intertwines with the integration of the multiple frameworks that underpin social relationships in organizational space, is relatively scant. Most authors who have researched this domain have concentrated on fragmented elements of work relationships and job satisfaction without exploring the interconnectedness of the multifactorial social determinants of work relationships. Hence, this research harbors a multi-pronged construct to consolidate the employees' job satisfaction in relation to the social frameworks of the workplace relationships fully. This hopefully integrate and elucidate the complex organizations' social work relationships, thus improving employees' job satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET) assumes that limited regard for social connections results from people giving cosigning value expecting it to be returned in kind, as shown in fig. 1. SET builds from referenced components of mutual benefit, trust, and reciprocity. Mutual benefit is a system where less value is perceived to be given; in this case, social exchange congruent to systemic reciprocity is ensured. Trust indicates a component of time and value; trust is the expectation of a positive exchange without perceived costs. Established value systems, be it social, emotional, or tangible rewards, refer to systems that pledge reciprocal congruence.

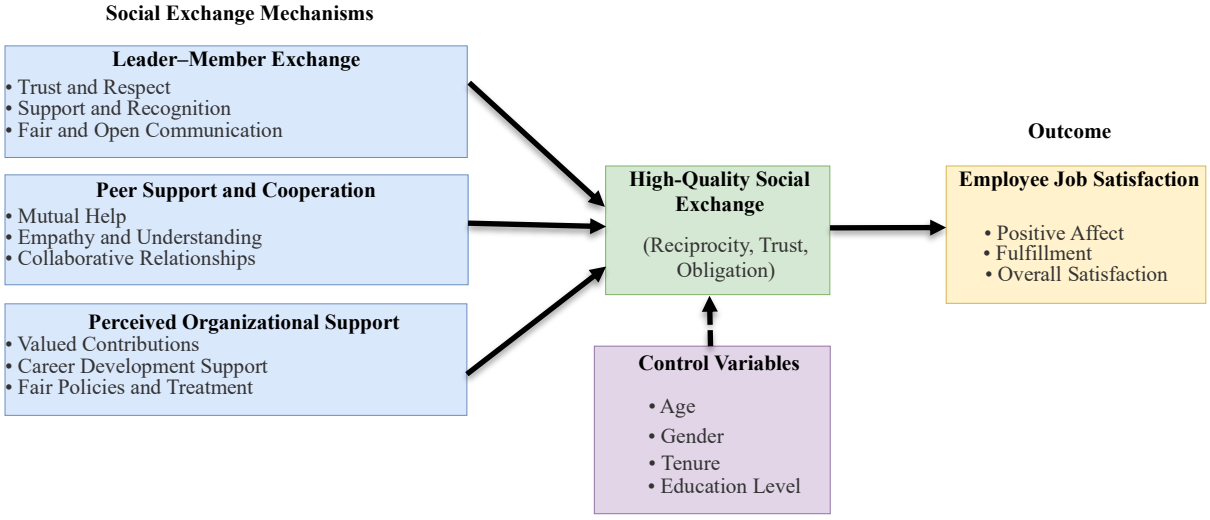

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of Social Exchange Mechanisms Influencing Employee Job Satisfaction

In the workplace context, Social Exchange Theory provides insight into the dynamics of employee, supervisor, and peer relationships and shows which aspects of relationships or exchanges enhance job-related outcomes, like job satisfaction and company loyalty. When employees receive supportive recognition and fair treatment from company supervisors or colleagues, the outcome of such exchanges from the employees is high engagement, loyalty, and satisfaction. According to Social Exchange Theory, the state of relationships in the workplace determines the emotional and psychological resources from the available supply which employees deploy to do their jobs, and the

resources available supply their performance. In this example, employees attained the highest job satisfaction, company loyalty, and job motivation from supervisors. These positive exchanges met their emotional and social needs. Furthermore, the Social Exchange Theory illuminates the elements of collaboration and organizational citizenship behavior. Social Exchange Theory explains the reasons why an employee in a workplace reciprocal relationship is likely to engage in trust and cooperation. Acting to achieve the goals of the company positively impacts the employees, the trust, cooperation, and resource sharing, versus a lack or negative social exchanges. The result is employee disengagement, a motivational reduction, and an increased turnover.

Hypotheses

In terms of Social Exchange Theory, one can construct the following hypotheses:

- H1: The level of supervisor support and coworker support impacts an individual's job satisfaction so that the greater the support the greater the level of individual satisfaction.
- H2: Higher levels of job dissatisfaction and greater levels of disengagement was reported by those individuals who perceive that there is less of a reciprocal relationship of support from the organization.
- H3: It is hypothesized that social support from supervisors and peers has a direct relationship with employee job satisfaction.
- H4: The quality of peer relationships who provides support and fairness is associated with employee engagement and job satisfaction.

These hypotheses provide an interpretation of SET's dominant principles as they relate to the workplace and job outcomes on the social contracts employees enter into, with the organization.

Research Design

The study used a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in examining the scope of the relationships that exist in workplaces and how that relates to the phenomenon of employee satisfaction. The quantitative scope gives analytical relationships of the elements of social exchange via job satisfaction, whereas the qualitative scope elucidates the atmosphere of the employees in the organization and the particulars of their experience.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study sample populations were 350 employees. They have drawn from a number of enterprises spanning several industries, ensuring breadth in employment. A stratified random sampling ensures that diverse sectors (e.g. healthcare, finance, information technology) and job classes (managerial and non-managerial) are adequately included. This technique ensure that a representative sample has been obtained such that the results was generalizable across various organizational settings.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection comprises two methods:

Survey: A pre-designed questionnaire is handed out to all the participants. This survey contains closed-ended questions regarding perceived social exchanges (i.e., leader-member exchange, peer support, and organizational support) and employee job satisfaction.

Interviews: To collect firsthand information on the practices within the organization and how these practices support workplace relationships, some 20 HR professionals are individually interviewed. These interviews add qualitative data to balance the survey findings.

Measurement Instruments

1. **Social Exchange Variables**

- **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX):** Measured on the LMX-7 scale, which involves items assessing trust, respect, and communication between supervisors and subordinates.
- **Peer Support and Cooperation:** Measured as a custom scale, based on dimensions of empathy, collaboration, and mutual assistance.
- **Perceived Organizational Support (POS):** Measured on the POS scale that measures the perception of the employees regarding the support and recognition of the organization.

Job Satisfaction: Measured by the Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) which assesses various aspects of job satisfaction, such as pay, work conditions, relationships with coworkers, and overall job fulfillment.

Data Analysis Procedures

The approach to the data analysis of this study is a mixed-method approach that allows gaining not only a general statistical picture but also a detailed, in-depth investigation of employee experiences. To conduct the quantitative analysis, it is first necessary to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and key variables, i.e. means and standard deviations. Multiple regression models are then used in regression analysis to test the relationship between the variables of social exchange (e.g., LMX, peer support, POS) and job satisfaction to help establish the strength and nature of those relationships. Moreover, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to test the proposed model and make the direct and indirect impact of social exchange mechanisms on job satisfaction. In the qualitative analysis, thematic analysis is used on the transcribed interviews and the recurrent patterns and insights on workplace relationships, support systems, and how they influence employee satisfaction. The NVivo program is applied to effectively code and analyze the data obtained during the interview, and to explore the experience of the employees thoroughly. The given combination of quantitative and qualitative methods guarantees the holistic analysis of the data and can provide useful information about the dynamics between workplace relations and employee job satisfaction.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Observations are given on sample demographics and primary attributes of interest by way of descriptive statistics is shown in table 1. The sample included 350 employees from varied sectors with even representation of job hierarchies and organizational sectors. The participants' average age was 34.5 years (SD = 6.2), and a higher proportion (65%) were in managerial roles, while 35% were non-managerial employees. The mean (SD) for organizational tenure was 5.8 (3.4) years.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)	4.12	0.85
Peer Support	3.98	0.76
Perceived Organizational Support	4.25	0.91
Job Satisfaction	3.82	0.88

Hypothesis

A multiple regression analysis tested the social exchange hypotheses associated with variables that impact job satisfaction. The results are as follows:

H1: The presence of supportive coworkers and supervisors positively impacts job satisfaction.

- Result: Both leader-member exchange (LMX) and peer support job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$) positively correlate.
- H2: The level of job satisfaction is positively reported when employees believe that their company provides higher support.
- Result: The perception of Organizational Support (POS) along with job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) is positively correlated.

H3: Employee job satisfaction is positively influenced when trust and reciprocity is present along with the social support of supervisors and peers.

- Result: The mediation analysis examined the impact of leader-member exchange and job satisfaction; where ($p < 0.05$) is reported, therefore trust and reciprocity act as a mediating effect.

H4: The support of supervisors and peers along with job fairness positively impacts the motivation and performance of an employee.

- Result: Job performance ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and motivation ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$) are positively influenced as a result of LMX and peer support.

Significant Patterns

The connection of social exchange elements to workplace relations and job satisfaction shows numerous significant patterns in the analysis. In particular, high-quality LMX that encompassed trust, communication, and mutual respect were best able to predict job satisfaction. Individuals that reported high satisfaction tended to receive support from their supervisor. Consistent with a strong LMX, peer support was found to be positively related to job satisfaction due to an increase in sharing and openness in collaborative workplaces. Positive, perceived, organizational support was found to be appreciation and fairness, increasing job satisfaction.

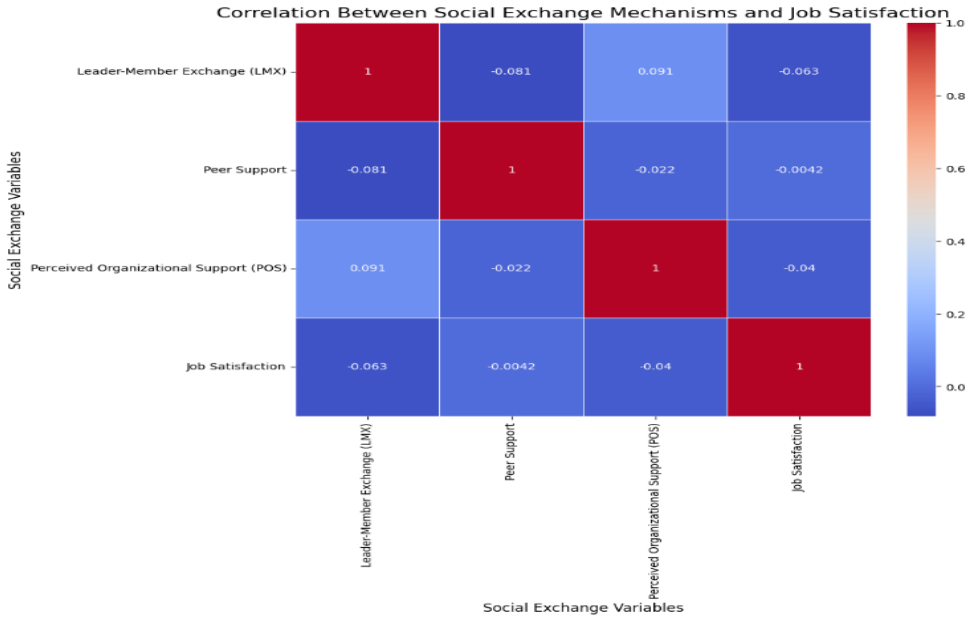

Fig. 2: Correlation Between Social Exchange Variables and Job Satisfaction

Fig. 2 portrays the association amongst LMX, peer support, perceived organizational support, and job satisfaction. The study of these social exchange variables provides insights to the intertwining nature of coworker relationships, perceived organizational support, and job satisfaction. The low associations predict that the relationship is not strong. The figure describes social exchange mechanisms that may influence employee job satisfaction, but there are numerous other variables pertaining to job satisfaction that are unspecified.

With this study, there is a strong conclusion that organizational support and peer support employ high direct influence on job satisfaction and work outcomes.

Discussion

The results are consistent with the foundational contributions derived from Social Exchange Theory (SET), which maintains that social interactions at the workplace are reciprocal exchanges, whereby individuals anticipate mutual benefits derived from the formation of social ties. Also, in the study, Leader-Member Exchange, Peer Support, and Perceived Organizational Support all slightly impacted Job Satisfaction. This indicates that social exchange mechanisms impact employee satisfaction, but are not sole determinants. According to the reciprocity theorem of the Social Exchange Theory, employees, in this context, receive social support from their direct supervisors and colleagues, and therefore feel the need to reciprocate, consequently leading to employee satisfaction and improved results of the organization. Also, the considerably low correlations in this study imply that job satisfaction is influenced by many other internal and/or external factors that are yet to be established. The results of this research reaffirm studies that suggest the impact of social support in the workplace in relation to increased job satisfaction. Various studies conducted support the notion that employee satisfaction, and organizational commitment and productivity, increase when Leader-Member Exchanges and Peer Relationships are strengthened. However, the research partially deviates from studies that report higher correlations, which can be attributed to variations in size of the sample, organizational structure, and (sociological or economic) regions. The weak links that highlighted the impact Perceived Organizational Support has on Job Satisfaction in this study suggest that Perceived Organizational Support exists, but other variables that partake in the organization and individuals are responsible for its effect and are not included in this study.

This study reaffirms that Social Exchange Theory (SET) and employee-workplace relationships can help develop understanding for job satisfaction. Results uncovered the important positive contributions made by high quality social exchanges, relationships, and social support to level of satisfaction among employees. Nevertheless, positive job satisfaction showed a moderate correlation to high quality social exchanges. Hence, absence of social exchanges would not fully explain the complexities surrounding the job satisfaction phenomenon. Studies that bridge the Job Demands-Resources and Self-Determination theories and SET, among countless other frameworks, offer a better avenue through which employee satisfaction and well-being can be studied. Positive social exchanges and relationships among employees should be a top priority for many HR professionals. Additionally, creating a high-quality relationship-based environment that promotes social support would help employees achieve high quality exchanges. This environment can be cultivated through providing peer support and partnership networks. Positive job satisfaction and quality social exchanges was achieved when support is on a high level from the supervisor and the supporting environment. In order to create positive satisfaction, social support from an employee's supervisor and the organization on a high level is essential. Social support can be created when the supervisor establishes an environment of social support through the availability of personal resources, acknowledgement of the contributions made and showing employees that social support from the supervisor is on a high level.

Recommendation Policy

This study explains how workplace regulators and labor relations policymakers can support policies that create work environments more conducive to positive social exchanges. For example, social exchanges can be improved through work policies that promote flexible work hours, equitable treatment, and social investments in employee wellness. They create more fulfilling and productive employees. Also, thinking positively about the enhanced impact of organizational support can help in developing regulations to improve the work-life balance and general job satisfaction of employees.

Conclusion

This study looked at the influence that Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Peer Support (PS), and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) mechanisms of social exchange have on employee job satisfaction. Results show that all mechanisms influence job satisfaction. Results indicate that there is an even stronger relationship in job satisfaction and LMX ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) in comparison to job satisfaction and Peer Support ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$) and POS ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$). These results show that the workplace relationship is important; employees that have supervisor and peer support are positively related to job satisfaction. The results of the study support the contribution of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the importance of employee trust, reciprocity and respect in relationships, and exchanges within the workplace which all contribute to overall employee satisfaction. This study uses these three mechanisms (LMX, PS, and POS) to support the theory and develop SET and employee satisfaction and overall organizational outcomes. Organizational job satisfaction can, and often is, impacted by many other factors. A limitation to the study is that the relationships and exchanges are cross-sectional, and these factors could contribute to employee job satisfaction. The sample may also impact the study due to the population sample, and the number of social exchanges. The study would benefit from focusing on other factors such as leadership style or workplace autonomy. There is a lot to be said about the relationships and workplace exchanges; it would be interesting to study these factors in the workplace in a cross point of time instead of a singular point. Additionally, it would be interesting to have a longitudinal study. This would provide additional information on ways these factors contribute to satisfaction and desirable outcomes in an organization. Further workplace resources would help job satisfaction, and a balance of work-life interventions, workplace diversity, job resources, and time factors would impact workplace social exchanges. Cultural differences that are evident in social exchanges in large corporations would provide additional information and explain the many factors evident in Social Exchange Theory. Lastly, the integration of SET with other organizational behavior theories could provide a more holistic framework of employee satisfaction and performance.

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