

**Burgess
Huston**

Social Exchange in Developing Relationships



SOCIAL EXCHANGE IN DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

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Foreword

In the chapters of this book certain words recur, such as *behavioral*, *exchange*, *relationship*, and *development*. I would like to open the book by commenting on these words, without trying to impose my own views on anyone else.

Speaking, then, for myself, I do not like to use *behavioral science*, as it is so often used now, to refer to all studies that purport to be concerned with human behavior. For me, behavioral science means something more specific than that. It constitutes a particular way of studying human behavior. It starts from the assumption that the object of study should be the actions of persons—and their actions include their words—insofar as their actions have consequences for their future behavior. This assumption implies that behavioral science is much less interested in actions, such as the answers people give to questionnaires, that may make little difference to their future behavior.

Behavioral science further assumes—but this I think is more than an assumption—that people's actions are functions of the consequences of those actions. Behaviorally, a person is a feedback mechanism, in the sense that, if he or she performs an action that has favorable consequences, the probability that the person will repeat that action increases. If the action has unfavorable consequences, the probability of repeating it decreases. Behavioral science further assumes that the circumstances

accompanying an action and its consequences also affect the probability that the action will be repeated: If one or more of the circumstances accompanying a successful action recur, then the action is more likely to be repeated than if none of the circumstances recur. Finally behavioral science assumes, even more clearly now that Herrnstein has formulated the "matching law,"¹ that a person is seldom in such straits as to have only one course of action. Instead, alternatives are weighed in such a way that, other circumstances remaining unchanged, a person tends over time to choose alternatives that will maximize probable payoffs.

These assumptions have further implications. First, since all the so-called social sciences—history, government, economics, sociology, anthropology—have to do with human behavior, they must all, in fundamentals, be one science. Indeed, I think it can be shown that they all share the same assumptions about human behavior, though it is often impossible to get their practitioners to admit it. Second, since the general assumptions made about human behavior also apply to the behavior of other higher animals, there is a continuity between the behavior of these animals and man. This statement does not imply that behavior of animals is, in detail, identical with that of man, nor that the behaviors of different animal species are identical. Third, since behavioral science implies that a person's past experiences determine in part present behavior, behavioral science is inherently historical (evolutionary, developmental—call it what you will) not only for individuals but for the groups they belong to. This does not mean that the history need always be salient in explaining particular findings. For example, if we want to explain what a seaman does when handling a vessel under sail, the laws of physics are more relevant than individual past history. The seaman doubtless learned how to sail according to behavioral principles, but if the learned actions were not compatible with the laws of physics the seaman would not be sailing now.

In trying to explain human behavior, we behaviorists begin and end with the directly observable environment of the actor—with the stimulus features of the environment and with the environmental conditions that allow or prevent the rewarding of actions. But I always thought it unfair that we should be accused of treating what happens in between, interior to the acting person, as a "black box," as if we were wholly ignorant of, or uninterested in, what happens inside the box. Like everyone else, we are ignorant to a great degree, but we are certainly interested in what happens there, if only to understand what allows the behavioral connections we observe between the initial and final environmental conditions to have the features they do. What, for instance, are the characteristics of the human

¹ See, for instance, R. J. Herrnstein, "Quantitative Hedonism," *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Vol. 8 (1971), pp. 399–412.

nervous system that allow the recurrence of the stimuli under which an action was rewarded in the distant past to resume their control over much later behavior?

Let me mention one other feature of the internal constitution of an actor that has recently received increasing attention. The genetic differences between individuals and between species may include, for instance, differences in their capacity to be rewarded by certain kinds of actions of others, that is, to be rewarded by social behavior. Such genetic variations may not affect behavior directly, which was believed to be true of what used to be called instincts, but only indirectly, by changing the contingencies that affect the learning process. Thus a person or a species with a low capacity for being rewarded socially might, when faced with the same kinds of social conditions as others differently constituted were faced with, learn and maintain rather different kinds of overt behavior. The effort to understand genetic and other biological differences will start some of us studying behavioral evolution, and, accordingly, I am glad that Richard Alexander has a chapter in this volume entitled "Natural Selection and Social Exchange."

Another feature I deplore in the current intellectual climate of psychology is the habit of drawing a sharp line between "behavioral" and "cognitive" psychology, as if they were contrasting or even competing psychologies. My difficulty here is that I cannot help viewing cognition itself as an active process—a type of action, if you will, which seems to exemplify some of the same kinds of laws as other actions do. Thus, if seeing a configuration of objects in a certain way allows a person to take successful action on the environment, that way of seeing it will be learned and will tend to persist. Even when the configuration has changed in some respect, cognition will still try to make sense of it in terms of the old learning. This phenomenon can be observed when we look at an aerial photograph of a terrain instead of the terrain itself, and turn the photograph at an inappropriate angle with respect to the direction from which the original terrain was lighted. Thus when we look from an inappropriate angle at photographs of the surface of the moon, we see what are actually craters as mounds.

And now a word about exchange. I confess that I do not much like phrases such as exchange theory, equity theory, balance theory, and so forth as they are currently used, more often by psychologists than by sociologists. I do not much like these phrases, even though I am given credit for being a founder of both exchange theory and equity theory. (The founder of equity theory was in fact Aristotle.²) I do not like these phrases because they give the impression that the theories are somehow self-contained, without relation to one another or to a more general theory of

² See especially *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V.

human behavior. Indeed, some of the investigators in these fields try to treat them as if they were in fact self-contained. I believe, and have tried to show, that the propositions of these theories all follow, under special given conditions, from the propositions of a more general theory of human behavior.³

Yet whatever one may think of the phrase "exchange theory," exchange itself is a reality, and a vital one, for exchange is what makes human behavior specifically social. When I speak of exchange I mean a situation in which the actions of one person provide the rewards or punishments for the actions of another person and vice versa. Though many features of behavior emerge from exchange that would not have appeared without it, one of the tenets of what it is now fashionable to call my metatheoretical position is that no new general propositions are needed to explain the emergent features. The propositions that hold when a person's actions are rewarded by the nonhuman environment are the same propositions that hold when the actions are rewarded by the actions of another person. What has changed is the situation, not the propositions. This position appears to be unacceptable to some sociologists, though they have been unable to put forward any further propositions that, in their view, might be needed to explain the allegedly unique features of social behavior. That is, there are social scientists who insist on a solution of continuity between individual and social behavior, just as there are those who insist on a solution of continuity between the behavior of men and that of other animals.

Next, the term *relationship*. Exchanges may take place and behavior thus be social without the emergence of anything that I would be prepared to call a relationship between persons. An example is the classical market in economics. In such a market, a buyer is presumed to be able to enter into exchange with one seller on one occasion, with another on another occasion, and so forth, depending on which one demands the lowest price on each occasion. There is no presumption that a buyer will enter into repeated exchanges with a particular seller, although some buyers probably do so. Not until a person enters into repeated exchanges with the same other person may we even begin to speak of a relationship existing between them. Or, to move to a more complex level of social organization, only then can we begin to speak of a relationship between the occupant of a particular office in a formal organization and the occupant of another such office.

Again, no new general propositions are needed to explain these differences between exchange without the development of a relationship and exchange with such a development. The situations to which the

³ G. C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, revised ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

general laws apply change, but not the laws themselves. Still, the different situations help us to distinguish between classical economics and some of the other social sciences. Economics is much less interested in relationships than the others are. Indeed the others are profoundly interested, for relationships—repeated exchanges between particular persons, offices, or groups—are the very stuff of social structures, and the characteristics of enduring social structures are what sociologists, for instance, are most interested in. I have said for years that my chief intellectual aim has been to explain, using propositions about individual behavior, how the interactions (exchanges) between individuals could give rise to such structures.

And, finally, the development of a relationship. When we consider this kind of social elaboration, we should keep our eyes on two different kinds of processes. First, as the relationship between two persons develops, the partners almost inevitably add new kinds of exchanges to the one that brought the relationship into being in the first place; and these new exchanges may further cement the original one or undermine it through conflict. The interaction effects between the different exchanges are what so-called balance theory tries to explain. Again, I think it a mistake to treat balance theory as a distinct theory. The fundamental propositions about human behavior do not change in balance theory, but the given conditions to which they apply do.

Second, a relationship between two persons seldom develops in isolation from the relationships between each of them and other persons; and these latter relationships may interact with the changes that might otherwise have been expected to occur within the original one. Sometimes the new relationships cut down the variety of exchanges that might otherwise have proliferated between the original partners, in such a way that each now seeks one type of reward from the original partner and other types from the other persons. An example is the tendency for so-called instrumental exchanges to occur between persons unequal in status and more purely “social” exchanges, such as going to parties together, to occur between equals.⁴

Especially interesting, at least for me, is what occurs when a number of small groups, such as families, are placed in very similar conditions, so that similar patterns of relationships tend to develop among the members of every group. Then the recurrence of the pattern tends to make it highly visible. And since a relationship that is seen to exist in fact always tends to become one that people believe ought to exist, they begin to say, for instance, that a boy ought to treat his mother’s brother in a particular way. And since in turn norms imply sanctions for their nonfulfillment, the norms tend further to stabilize the pattern. But let us not overdo the

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 229–318.

stability. If the conditions that produced the original similarity of pattern disappear, the norms will sooner or later disappear, too. No regularity of behavior was ever maintained by norms alone. In any event, no student of developing relationships need be ashamed of an interest in complicated kinship systems—and many not so complicated.

What I have done is to start with some of the most general assumptions of a behavioral psychology, and then to suggest how we might apply these assumptions to increasingly specific and increasingly complex situations, first to exchange, or social behavior, then to repeated exchanges between two persons, which we may call a relationship between them, then to the elaboration of that relationship and finally to the development of patterns of relationships among several persons. I hope that this brief effort to lay out the general field will allow one to appreciate better the particular contributions made by each of the contributors to this volume.

Let me add an epilogue about our own behavior as social scientists. The behavioral psychology, including the social psychology, of mankind is an experimental science, but it certainly cannot be just an experimental science. For one thing, we cannot experimentally manipulate the behavior of human beings by using really powerful means of influencing their motivations. We are not, for instance, allowed to keep them half-starved as we keep experimental pigeons, and we usually cannot afford to offer them big monetary rewards. One result, I suspect, is that there is a large unexplained random element in our findings. The correlations we discover are relatively weak. This does not mean that our results are worthless, but only that we must always remember that their truth may be limited to particular circumstances, and we must beware of extrapolating them without circumspection to large areas of what is called "real life." In real life, the motivations of people are often far stronger than they can be in our experiments. To encourage a certain circumspection, an experimental social psychologist might well spend a part of the time carrying out field research with natural groups, even if the findings cannot be under experimental control. How much has field research on animal behavior told us that we should never have been in a position to discover by experiment! And why should recent field research on lions and baboons have to remind us of the virtues of our own older tradition of field research on human groups? Above all, field research can suggest to us ideas that might be tested experimentally. And if we cannot do fieldwork, let us at least read widely in good novels, memoirs, and history. Finally let us examine critically our own personal experience of social behavior, which is the richest source of data that we, as individuals, possess.

GEORGE C. HOMANS
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Preface

We trust the reader will agree with us that people need to learn more about close, interpersonal relations, yet our emphasis on exchange processes may seem puzzling. The reasons we have decided to concentrate on exchange are several. First, as Homans notes in his Foreword, it is exchange which makes human behavior social. An exchange perspective accepts as fundamental the reciprocal impacts that partners have on one another. Second, by explicitly looking at exchange processes, the stage is set for taking the relationship itself as a unit of analysis in its own right. Third, the exchange process can be examined in terms of (a) the individual biological and psychological characteristics of the actors; (b) the history of their interactions with one another; (c) the nature of the social network each actor maintains; and (d) the larger cultural context within which the relationship is embedded. Indeed, given the focus on reciprocal effects, how those effects take place, and the level of generality of exchange principles, it is possible to bring some order to the jumble of theoretically colliding approaches that have been applied to the analysis of relationships.

Our intent in preparing this book was to encourage the systematic study of the development of relationships. Throughout, several theoretical perspectives are presented, including evolutionary theory, cognitive developmental theory, personality theory, role theory, equity theory, and

attribution theory. In each case, however, the authors address the issue of exchange in developing relations. Their views of the exchange process differ as a function of their own theoretical perspectives. Such is the state of the art.

In Part I, we have provided a conceptual home base of what follows. We deliberately have tried not to produce premature closure by writing a summary chapter. Instead, we have simply discussed some of the major topics that are examined in varying ways throughout the book. In doing this, we may have placed undue emphasis on romantic relationships and we may not have discussed sufficiently a number of important topics such as conflict or the metatheoretical underpinnings of an exchange approach. On the other hand, at least two chapters in Part II deal with the former, and Homans in the Foreword, Wiggins in the Epilogue, and the various chapters in Part III deal with the latter.

Many of the chapters in this book have grown out of a conference sponsored by the Division of Individual and Family Studies in the College of Human Development at The Pennsylvania State University. We wish to express our gratitude to the many people who supported the conference and participated in it. This book has been much longer in the making than we had planned. The major reason for this is that we have worked very hard in trying to ensure that the individual chapters separately and collectively make the strongest case possible. We, thus, would like publicly to thank the authors for their patience but, especially, for their outstanding contributions. We, the editors, are excited about this book. We invite you, the reader, to join us in our attempt to chart and understand the developmental course of human social relationships.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE
IN
DEVELOPING
RELATIONSHIPS

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