

Social Exchange Theory as a Framework for Understanding Ceasing Participation in Organized Leisure Activities

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INTRODUCTION

Ceasing participation in leisure activities has only recently become a focus in leisure research. Only two studies have explicitly examined the concept (Boothby, Tungatt, and Townsend, 1981; Jackson and Dunn, 1988), and little has been done to distinguish between people who continue involvement and those who cease participation. As in leisure constraints research generally (Jackson, 1988), researchers have not attempted to assess any models with respect to ceasing leisure participation. Future research should be used inductively to build a conceptual model which can be tested and used in theory construction, or conceptualized within the framework of existing theories.

One such model which may help in understanding ceasing participation in organized leisure services (i.e. those operated by public, not-for-profit, or commercial organizations) is *social exchange*.

The purposes of this paper are to demonstrate how social exchange theory can be used as a foundation for research into ceasing participation in organized leisure activities, and to discuss methodological implications that emerge from such an approach.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY DEFINED

Social exchange theory evolved from Thorndike's (1932, 1935) work on the development of reinforcement theory and Mill's (1923) marginal utility theory. Modern-day influences have been derived from the work of sociologists such as Homans (1950, 1961), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1972). The model that emerges to explain social exchange theory is comprised of five central elements:

1. *Behaviour is predicated upon the notion of rationality.* That is, the more a behaviour results in a reward, the more individuals will behave that way. However, the more an individual receives a reward, the less valued it becomes, and the individual seeks alternative rewards through other behaviours or from other sources.
2. *The relationship is based on reciprocation.* That is, each individual in the relationship will provide benefits to the other so long as the exchange is equitable and the units of exchange are important to the respective parties. An exchange between two individuals must be seen as fair by both for the relation to continue, or at least to continue as strongly. This points out that it is not only important to respond fairly, but also with an item (not necessarily material) deemed to be important by the other person.
3. *Social exchange is based on a justice principle.* In each exchange, there should be a norm of fairness governing behaviour. That is, the exchange must be viewed as fair when compared in the context of a wider network or to third and fourth parties. This notion of distributive justice goes beyond the equity between the two principals' contribution. It involves each person comparing his or her reward to that of others who have dealt with this individual

and what they received for the same or a similar contribution.

4. *Individuals will seek to maximize their gains and minimize their costs in the exchange relation.* It is important to understand that the notion of costs does not relate exclusively to financial issues; rather, costs can be incurred through the time and energy invested in a relationship.
5. *Individuals participate in a relationship out of a sense of mutual benefit rather than coercion.* Thus, coercion should be minimized.

APPLICATION OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY TO RESEARCH IN CEASING PARTICIPATION

Social exchange theory can be used to understand some of the variance in ceasing participation in organized leisure activities that may be due to social-psychological factors. Furthermore, the model of social exchange can provide direction with respect to data collection processes used and the measurement of the variables.

Individuals engage in organized leisure pursuits to satisfy a need. Usually, the need has emerged as important, albeit sometimes on a transient basis, and thus serves to be of sufficient motivation for the individual to pursue involvement in a particular activity. However, following from the five constructs described above, certain exchanges must occur in order for an individual to sustain involvement:

1. Participants will seek to maintain their involvement if they continue to receive the need satisfaction that they sought initially and as it evolved through participation. While this is consistent with the need for individuals to have a match between their skill-level and the experience, as suggested in research on perceived competence (Iso-Ahola, 1980), this may not be the only need they seek to satisfy. For example, social interaction needs may be high and may have served as the initial motivation for involvement. Thus, performing well or having feelings of performing well in the activity may be irrelevant. Whatever the need, individuals will continue only so long as they perceive it to be satisfied.
2. Participants seek to experience a sense of reciprocation through their involvement in the leisure pursuit; that is, they seek to receive something for their involvement that is approximately equal to their contribution to the activity. This may be an improvement in skill level, expansion of a social network, or even the perception by others that they are involved with this activity (i.e. status).
3. Participants want to ensure that they receive reasonably equal returns for their involvement as compared to others who are participating in the same or similar events. This is particularly crucial for organized leisure services and, in particular, instructional programmes. For example, if the instructor is seen as spending too much time with one individual, this can lead to feelings that the situation is unfair and that the norm of distributive justice has been violated. Thus, the individual may discontinue participation in the programme, or believe he or she is insufficiently trained to participate once the programme ends.

4. Participants seek to minimize their costs while maximizing their returns; thus, ceasing participation could result from the financial cost being disproportionate to the return. This is quite different from the variable "it costs too much" which appears in most studies of barriers to participation. Furthermore, previous research has failed to integrate the issue of "not enough time" or "work or family commitments" into the notion of cost. If participants include a valuation of their time and/or energy in their assessment of the cost and benefits of involvements in organized leisure experiences, then they will inevitably be making different decisions from those inferred from existing measurement devices.
5. The issue of coercion seems to have little bearing on ceasing participation except in one circumstance. If individuals perceive that family or friends forced them into the activity, then they will be more likely to cease participation (as their motivation will be extrinsic and as a result unstable; Iso-Ahola, 1980) than those who chose the activity freely.

The social exchange model suggests that in order to understand why individuals cease participation in organized leisure services, the following must be discerned:

- the need(s) they sought to satisfy and their relative priority;
- their perception of the degree to which these needs were satisfied (i.e. reciprocation);
- their perception of the degree to which their needs were being addressed fairly, relative to others involved in the same or similar programme;
- their definition of the costs they incurred in participation and whether they were in proportion to the benefits they perceived themselves receiving;
- the source of their motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic).

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The types of data specified in the social exchange model suggest that research could be conducted in either the naturalistic paradigm or the positivistic paradigm. In the former case, the integration and synthesis of the complex of variables would be done through techniques such as content analysis to discover consistencies in profiles between those continuing and those discontinuing participation. Data would best be collected through semi-structured interviews.

Using quantitative techniques requires multivariate analysis to accommodate the various, but inter-related, effects of the variables on the decision to cease or continue participation. Instrumentation in quantitative research would require the development of a taxonomy of needs (or the use of existing instruments), a scale to measure their importance and rank, measures of source of motivation, perception of relative benefits vis-a-vis the costs of participating, and a measure of satisfaction with the programme (integrating the concepts of reciprocity and distributive justice). The development of indicators for each of these variables, coupled with information on the objectives set out in the publicity for organized programmes, would make it possible to assess programme effectiveness and assist sponsors in recognizing the diversity of participants they may attract with one type of programme. Moreover, using the social exchange model may increase the sensitivity of programme sponsors to the demands of the marketplace and, therefore, improve their services.