Brendan Kirwin
Comm Theory and Frameworks
Theory Application Paper

Banking on Theories:
Improving Time Banks through the Study of Communication

Introduction

Though the informal exchange of time and energy between individuals has occurred throughout human history, only recently have organized groups formed around a person's time as an alternative currency. These organizations, known as time banks, allow members to earn a *time dollar*, based on one hour of a person's time, to be exchanged for another hour of someone else's time. Time banks are focused on fostering the social rather than conventional economy by strengthening neighborhood support networks and rewarding individuals for taking part in voluntary activities throughout the community (Seyfang, 2004). Because of the deeply social nature of individuals forming networks to collaborate with and assist one another, a number of communication theories can offer rich explications on this topic area. Social Exchange Theory and Relational Dialectics Theory are two distinct but complementary theories that offer insight into the practice of time banking.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET), a body of work developed by Homans (1961), Blau (1964), and Thibaut and Kelley (1959), involves the application of economic theory to the behavioral sciences (Nord, 1969). Social exchange theorists argue that relationships are assessed by individuals in terms of costs and rewards (Stafford, 2008). Thus, a series of interactions lead to obligations or responsibilities (Emerson, 1976). Social exchange theories are post-positivist in

orientation, because people are seen as rational creatures, who to a certain extent, engage in a cost-benefit analysis of their interpersonal relationships (Stafford, 2008). SET has been used to examine among other things, trust of e-commerce (Luo, 2002), the effects of psychological contact breach and cynicism within organizations (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003), and the coercive power of social exchange (Molm, 1997). Because SET deals with the relationships between people in terms of economic exchange, it is an excellent lens through which to examine the topic of time banking.

Time Banking as Social Exchange

One of the basic tenets of SET is that relationships develop into mutual commitments when each individual abides by certain rules of exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). One of these rules is also one of the key concepts in the philosophy behind time banking: reciprocity. Social theorists see reciprocity, or being paid in kind, as an interdependent exchange where "one person's actions are contingent on the other's behavior" (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 876). Because of this interdependent exchange, Molm (2000, 2003) argues that risk is reduced and cooperation is encouraged (as cited in Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Furthermore, Gouldner (1960) uses Malinowski's (1932) study of the reciprocal trading of fish and vegetables between inland communities and fishing villages to show how reciprocity is a "folk belief" involving the cultural expectation that an individual gets what he or she deserves, and where over time exchanges will reach a balanced fairness.

By exploring the basic assumptions of SET it becomes clear that these very concepts play into the viability of time banks. As Edgar Cahn, the law professor at the Antioch School of Law who developed time banking described the system: "Help a neighbour and then, when you need it, a neighbour – most likely a different one – will help you. The system is based on equality: one

hour of help means one time dollar, whether the task is grocery shopping or making out a tax return" (New Economics Foundation, 2001). Here we see how much the idea of SET and reciprocity plays into time banking. Furthermore, Cahn is describing what is referred to in SET as a generalized exchange. This is the idea of indirect reciprocity, where one person gives to the other and the recipient responds by giving to someone else (West & Turner, 2010). These exchanges involve the community or social network, which in our case is the time bank.

Improving Time Banking through Social Exchange Theory

By examining the research of social exchange theorists, we can develop strategies for improving the functionality of time banks. Konovsky and Pugh (1994) used SET as a model to examine organizational citizen behavior, the type of activity that goes above and beyond role prescriptions. They examined how employee superiors utilized procedural justice, the idea of fairness in the processes that resolve disputes and allocate resources, and found that it was related to organizational citizenship behavior (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). Assuming individuals act similarly in the rewarded volunteering roles of time banking as they do at a paid job, time banks could explore their own forms of procedural justice. Conflict resolution systems are currently not in place in many time banks. This is an area of focus that could help improve the overall experience of time bank members.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Thoery (RDT), originated by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), emphasizes that relationships are constantly evolving processes involving contradictory motivations that are negotiated by relational partners (as cited in Kim & Yun, 2007). Because RDT looks at communication and relationships in terms of constant change, it is something that

cannot necessarily be predicted. It is therefore most often approached from an interpretive

ontology.

Similar to SET, one of the key elements of dialectics is totality, meaning that individuals

in a relationship are interdependent (Rawlins, 1992). Furthermore, not only is one individual

affected by the other individual in the relationship, but they are also affected by the

"interconnection and reciprocal influence" of their social networks and the larger social factors

of society (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). While Rawlins (1992) was looking at the context of close

friendships in his study, it is clear that the assumptions and elements of RDT can be applied to

the context of time banking.

The Relational Dialectics of Time Banking

Exploring the relational dialectics of time banks can offer many insights into how

individuals negotiate the formalized exchange of one another's time. For instance, Kramer

(2004) developed a series of dialectic tensions through an ethnographic study of a community

theater group. Both time banks and community theater groups rely on amateurs and the

occasional professional to provide the talent and resources needed to function. Additionally, both

involve individuals organizing into a group to accomplish a number of varied tasks. Because of

these similarities, translating community theater dialectic tensions to the context of time banks

may offer useful insights. For example, one of the most prominent interactional dialectics that

Kramer (2004) found was an individual's commitment to the group versus their commitment to

other life activities. Members of the community theater minimized this tension by

communicating that while there were sometimes life events that took precedence over the group,

members expected a high level of commitment from everyone who participated (Kramer, 2004).

Another theme that emerged was acceptable versus unacceptable behavior, with a subcategory of

tolerance versus judgment (Kramer, 2004). These themes were manifested in how individuals tolerated actions and language that may be deemed "inappropriate," such as sexual innuendo and discussion of alcohol use (Kramer, 2004). Because members' tolerance for this type of behavior varied, people managed the tension differently: some decided not to participate, some left early and did not participate in after-hours socializing, and some opted to discuss the issues with other, usually like-minded individuals. Again, because individuals from all backgrounds are invited to participate in time banking, similar relational dialectics will most likely occur.

Fostering Community through Relational Dialectics

Research in relational dialectics can be utilized to develop best practices for optimizing an individual's time banking experience. As discussed above, the characteristics of individual involvement is similar in time banking as it is in community theater. Based on Kramer's (2004) findings, a time bank's formal organizers could work to ensure that all expectations of time bank members be communicated to them before they can participate. And similar to the social exchange discussion above, a system enhancing procedural justice could be used to assist individuals with negotiating group dialectic tensions in a productive manner. This might be best approached by a conflict resolution department within the time bank itself.

To aid in the development of a conflict resolution department, time bank organizers could look to Barge's (1996) study of group leadership through the lens of relational dialectics. They found that being a strong group leader was contingent on these two key dialectics: (1) *universal-situational*, where leaders either perform in a uniform manner with all people and in all situations or adapt their behavior to the specificity of a situation, and (2) *internal-external*, where leaders are aware that they are part of a unique group of people with specific skill sets and beliefs but at the same time are part of a larger whole that affects the group in various ways (Barge, 1996).

Being cognizant of these dialectics and studying examples of leaders successfully navigating these dynamics would give time bank organizers additional resources for building the success of their organization.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Improving Time Banks

Social Exchange Theory and Relational Dialectics Theory offer a well-rounded understanding of communication within the context of time banks; the former's approach to knowing is post-positive, while the latter is interpretive. Additionally, there are a number of areas where the two theories overlap. For instance, the concept of interdependence plays a substantial role in both of the theories. Furthermore, because Thiabut and Kelly (1959) see relational life as a process that changes over time (as cited in West & Turner, 2010), relational dialectics play a major part in social exchange. SCT's comparison level (CL) and comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) could be viewed in the form of dialectic tensions, where the flux between the two must be negotiated.

With these similarities in mind, researchers could develop an interdisciplinary, mixed methods approach to studying time banks. Researchers could begin with a study similar to Bishop, Dow, Goldsby, and Cropanzano (2005), where SCT principles of interdependence and direct exchange structures were used to investigate employees' commitment to their jobs, using instead a population of time bank members. In-depth interviews could be used to explore themes of relational dialectics from individuals with very high commitment or very low commitment. The two studies could then be combined to examine what relational dialectics are most strongly related to employee commitment. By using two theories with two different ontological and epistemological approaches, we can promote a deeper understanding of time banking.

Future Directions for Time Bank Research

The practice of time banking in its current form is a relatively new phenomena. During the research phase of this paper no communication studies were found that use time banks as an area of research. But because of the combination of interpersonal, small group, organizational, and cultural communication processes involved with time banks, the possibilities for further research are immense. One key area that Social Exchange Theory and Relational Dialectics Theory were not able to address was the issue of adoption. It remains to be seen whether this new cultural organization will become widespread. By studying time banks in the context of Rogers (1983) theory of Diffusion of Innovations, researchers could begin to explain how and why time banks may become widely used and accepted over time. This type of research would be extremely useful to those wishing to expand time banking throughout communities.

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