



The role of exchange and emotion on commitment: A study of teachers

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ABSTRACT

Recent experimental work in social exchange offers keen insight into factors that enhance commitment to individuals, groups, and relationships. In this article we explore the relevance of this work to school settings. Specifically, we use structural equation modeling and data from the 2004 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to test whether the commitment-enhancing processes laid out in Lawler's affect theory of social exchange might reduce teacher turnover, an issue plaguing school districts across the country. Our results support such a model and demonstrate the importance of interdependence for fostering commitment among teachers, with interaction, affect, and cohesion as intervening factors.

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1. Introduction

Schools today face a number of challenges, not the least of which is teacher turnover. While there is no shortage of new teachers graduating from colleges and universities, the schools that hire these graduates face difficulty retaining them. In fact, approximately 20% of all new teachers leave their positions in the first 3 years (NCTAF, 2007). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in low-performing schools in urban settings, where 50% of teachers leave within the first 5 years (NCTAF, 2007). These trends negatively affect both students and schools, and are costly to districts, pulling funds from other priorities to recruit and train replacement teachers.

In this paper we draw on insight from recent experimental research in social psychology to both better understand this phenomenon and explore potential solutions. As recent work suggests (e.g., Correll et al., 2007; Taylor and Pillemer, 2009; Tinkler et al., 2007), the benefits of such bridging are twofold. Insight from social psychological theory originally developed in the laboratory not only adds to our understanding of social phenomena outside the laboratory, but the incorporation of social psychology in sociology's substantive areas increases social psychology's visibility and substantiates its importance for sociology in general. In other words, the relationship between experimental social psychology and specific areas (e.g. family, education, and religion) is symbiotic. By examining teacher turnover, an important problem in the sociology of education (Ingersoll, 2001, 2007), through the lens of the affect theory of social exchange (Lawler, 2001), we not only enhance our understanding of teacher attrition, but also illustrate the potential of experimental social psychology to those outside the tradition.

Education is not new terrain for the application of experimental research. Elizabeth Cohen, a Stanford sociologist and professor of education, devoted much of her career to using insights from the experimental research program on status characteristics and expectation states (Berger et al., 1972) to design interventions for teachers to use to ensure student success across racial, ethnic, and gender groups (e.g. Cohen, 1982, 1991; Cohen et al., 1988). Claude Steele's work on stereotype threat (e.g., Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1995) and the tremendous amount of research it motivated made a similar connection between laboratory research and schools settings. Despite these important examples, such synergistic efforts

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are rare. This is particularly disappointing given what experimental social psychology has to offer, including well-developed, cumulative research programs like Lawler and his colleagues' work on commitment to exchange relations (Lizardo, 2007).

Lawler's (2001) affect theory of social exchange builds on and extends previous work on relational cohesion theory (Lawler and Yoon, 1993, 1996, 1998; Lawler et al., 2000, 2006) as it explores when, and how, individuals become committed to particular relationships. In this paper we test whether the affect theory's model holds true in school settings. Specifically we ask whether the endogenous processes laid out in the theory (frequent interaction, positive emotion, and relational cohesion) is enhanced by interdependence and, if so, can it help to explain teachers' commitment behaviors (including professional investment and desire to stay at the school)? Our finding – that the model indeed holds for teachers in schools – not only addresses an important question and offers insight into reducing teacher turnover, but reveals the natural links between the simplistic theoretical models of the laboratory and the “messier” world outside.

2. The problem of teacher turnover

Given the state of education in the United States and the significant number of teachers who leave after just a few years of teaching, it is pragmatically important to investigate both the causes of teacher attrition and strategies for retention.

Difficulty retaining new, energized teachers negatively affects student learning in two ways. Firstly, new teachers come to the profession with updated, research-based pedagogies intended to maximize student learning. However, many students are unable to profit from these innovative teaching methods because teachers leave the profession or particular schools so early in their careers (Carpenter, 2006; Kardos and Johnson, 2007). Secondly, when teacher turnover is unexpectedly high, large proportions of school and district resources drain away from classroom and student learning. A pilot study by The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that it costs approximately \$13,000 to recruit, hire, and train a ‘replacement teacher’ for each one who leaves a medium sized district (Barnes et al., 2008). For a large and disproportionately poor district (e.g., Chicago Public Schools) the cost is close to \$18,000 per teacher lost, for an total annual cost of \$86 million to the district (Barnes et al., 2008, p. 3).

Research suggests that, contrary to media reports, teachers are unlikely to leave teaching or specific schools due to dissatisfaction with pay or for family reasons (e.g. pregnancy). In fact, the most frequently cited reasons for leaving include feelings of isolation, overwhelming expectations, and unsupportive work environments (Brooks et al., 2008; Ingersoll, 2001, 2007; Kardos and Johnson, 2007; NCTAF, 2007). In other words, the problem appears to be about the connections made (or lack thereof) at work and the workplace and not about the specific requirements of being an educator. Interestingly, Brooks et al. (2008, p. 45) find that most teachers cite alienation (a measure of “five sub-constructs: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and estrangement”) as the main problem with teaching. In light of these issues, professional development and teacher mentoring have been suggested as preferred approaches to increase teacher retention (NAEd, 2009). However, we believe that experimental social psychology would suggest another solution. Drawing on the affect theory of social exchange (Lawler, 2001), we expect that enhancing teachers' sense of connection to their colleagues and schools should also foster commitment to work settings. In the next section we briefly introduce the affect theory, including its insight on how such attachments are formed and why they should be beneficial in schools.

3. The affect theory of social exchange

While previous research in sociological social exchange centered on power processes and the distribution of resources, recent developments largely concentrate on integrative outcomes such as trust, affective ties, and commitment (Molm, 2006). The affect theory of social exchange (Lawler, 2001) is representative of this affective turn in social exchange. The theory, as well as Lawler and colleagues earlier relational cohesion theory (Lawler and Yoon, 1993, 1996, 1998; Lawler et al., 2000, 2006), moves beyond previous work in exchange on commitment (Cook and Emerson, 1978; Kollock, 1994) as it considers emotion's role generating loyalty to relations (Collins, 1989, 2004). More specifically, the affect theory offers insight into how exchange processes influence individuals' commitment to particular groups and relationships.

The affect theory is based in large part on earlier work on relational cohesion (Lawler and Yoon, 1993, 1996, 1998; Lawler et al., 2000) which focused on commitment in dyads (for a review see Thye et al., 2002). Relational cohesion theory (RCT) argues that frequent exchanges produce positive emotions that are attributed to the relation and ultimately enhance commitment. This sense of the relationship as the source of positive emotion encourages actors to not only remain in the relationship, but to invest in it. RCT argues that structural power, and specifically high total power and equal relative power, increase exchange frequency and set this endogenous process in motion (Lawler and Yoon, 1996). Relational cohesion's theoretical model is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Several scope conditions (Lawler and Yoon, 1996, p. 91) limit the contexts where the relational cohesion model might apply. First, the theory focuses on dyads, specifically dyads embedded in the context of a larger network structure that offers them alternative exchange partners yet limits them to one. Second, the expected benefits in these relations must be high enough to provide an incentive to choose to exchange in this relation over those with other potential exchange partners. Finally, in relational cohesion theory, exchanges must be negotiated. Later work (Lawler et al., 2000), focusing on productive exchange, demonstrated the endogenous process's utility in larger groups and with other types of exchange. This led to the development of the affect theory of social exchange.

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