

Exploring Workplace Friendship Through Social Exchange Theory to Reduce Job Stress

Jennifer Ptacek, School of Communication
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI

Background & Purpose



Stress experienced at work over time can lead to a number of negative outcomes for employees and organizations, including decreased work performance and morale, absenteeism, burnout, and turnover (Jones & Elliott, 2004; Pines, 2002).

Positive, socially supportive workplace communication has been found to enhance quality of work life and aid in coping with stress (Sias, 2009). Social exchange theory (SET) offers helpful insight into explaining how work friendships provide social support in ways that mitigate stress and enhance coping ability (Buunk & Hoorens, 1992).

However, many gaps exist in the research literature regarding social support among work peer friends and stress management:

- Many studies focus on employer/employee relationships and do not consider the powerful effects of peer social support.
- There is limited qualitative data collection to balance out the self-report data used in most of the extant research (Saks, 2006).
- While reciprocity has been most often used to explain social exchange, other assumptions of the theory have not been explored in conjunction with each other (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

This research examines social exchange theory as a way to understand how people cope with stress at work and proposes suggestions for a future study to address the current gaps in the literature.



Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the most influential models for explaining friendship behavior in the workplace (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This approach views social situations economically, as people compare alternatives and choose that which they perceive to have the most value (Emerson, 1976). Social exchange involves behaviors that are dependent on rewards from others, and results in mutually beneficial relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell). The exchanges that people have at work connect to the positive or negative feelings they have about their organization (Taylor & Pillemer, 2009). This may help to explain why people decide to leave an organization, as they attribute the stress of the job to their workplace. Reciprocity, among other tenets of SET, are useful in explaining how people experience and cope with stress at work.

Assumptions of SET

Assumption	Example
Reciprocity	Helping someone who has helped you previously
Negotiated rules	Making a verbal agreement to share tasks
Rationality	Understanding that others have different values
Altruism	Helping someone else, even putting one's own needs after the other's
Group gain	Contributing to the group when you can, not "keeping track" of everyone's contributions
Status consistency	Being promoted based on seniority
Competition	Obtaining more rewards than others/seeking revenge

Research Design

Qualitative research is an ideal approach to studying organizational stress communication because it offers an in-depth understanding of a culture, which would not be obtained through surveys or experimental methods (Tracy, 2013). A multi-method approach, consisting of on-the-job observations and interviews, could be the most effective method of data collection in exploring supportive communication among friends at work. Direct observation offers the most precise way of understanding behaviors in the workplace when explaining stress and burnout, and when analyzed in conjunction with interviews the data can establish invaluable explanations into this line of study (Handy, 1988).



Nursing is a high stress profession that is lacking research within social exchange and support in work friendships (Sias, 2009).

Research Questions

- **Using principles of social exchange theory, what work friendship communication behaviors do people enact to cope with stress and burnout?**
- **How do socially supportive workplace friendships develop over time?**

Contributions of the Research

This research can help scholars and organizational employers to understand peer friendship communication that may help employees cope with stress at work. It will extend existing research and explain how people view stress at work in an economic way that determines their future behavior and intent to stay within an organization. Possible implications of research can include increases in job satisfaction, productivity, and organizational retention.