



Tracing the Roots of Utilitarianism and Rationality in Social Exchange Theory to Develop a Sustainable Organizational Behavior Model

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menelusuri akar filosofis utilitarianisme dan rasionalitas dalam Teori Pertukaran Sosial (SET) dan mengkonseptualisasikannya kembali untuk mengembangkan model perilaku organisasi yang berkelanjutan dalam manajemen sumber daya manusia. Menggunakan pendekatan penelitian perpustakaan dengan analisis teoretis literatur terindeks Scopus dan Web of Science, temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa SET telah diperlakukan sebagai mandiri, sedangkan secara historis dan filosofis berasal dari utilitarianisme (Bentham, Mill), behaviorisme (Skinner), dan teori pilihan rasional (Coleman). Pengurangan kompleksitas utilitarianisme, khususnya konsep Mill tentang kesenangan yang lebih tinggi dan ambiguitas konseptual antara pendekatan Homans dan Blau telah menyebabkan keterbatasan dalam menjelaskan perilaku organisasi yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini mengkonseptualisasikan ulang SET melalui model tiga tingkat yang mengintegrasikan tingkat filosofis (utilitarianisme, pendekatan kapabilitas), tingkat teori teoritis (SET, teori penentuan nasib sendiri, teori identitas sosial), dan tingkat praktis (HRM hijau, keseimbangan kehidupan kerja, kesejahteraan karyawan). Model ini mengalihkan fokus dari mengelola transaksi untuk menumbuhkan hubungan, mengenali peran kongruensi nilai, pemenuhan kebutuhan psikologis dasar, dan timbal balik umum dalam menumbuhkan perilaku berkelanjutan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa SET perlu rekonseptualisasi sebagai teori penciptaan nilai bersama yang melampaui maksimalisasi utilitas individu, sambil mengidentifikasi agenda penelitian masa depan untuk mengembangkan beasiswa HRM yang lebih humanistik dan relevan dalam menanggapi tuntutan keberlanjutan.

ABSTRACT

Keywords

Social Exchange Theory

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Sustainable Human Resource

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This study traces the philosophical roots of utilitarianism and rationality in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and reconceptualizes it to develop a sustainable organizational behavior model in human resource management. Employing a library research approach with theoretical analysis of Scopus and Web of Science-indexed literature, the findings reveal that SET has been treated as self-contained, whereas historically and philosophically it derives from utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill), behaviorism (Skinner), and rational choice theory (Coleman). The



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reduction of utilitarianism's complexity, particularly Mill's concept of higher pleasures and the conceptual ambiguity between Homans' and Blau's approaches have led to limitations in explaining sustainable organizational behavior. This study reconceptualizes SET through a three-level model integrating philosophical level (utilitarianism, capability approach), theoretical level (SET, self-determination theory, social identity theory), and practical level (green HRM, work-life balance, employee well-being). This model shifts focus from managing transactions to cultivating relationships, recognizing the roles of value congruence, basic psychological need fulfillment, and generalized reciprocity in fostering sustainable behavior. The study concludes that SET needs reconceptualization as a theory of co-creation of value transcending individual utility maximization, while identifying future research agendas for developing more humanistic and relevant HRM scholarship in response to sustainability demands.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary era marks a fundamental change in the landscape of industrial relations and organizational dynamics. Globalization, technological disruption, and shifting values among Millennial and Gen Z generations have created new complexities in human resource management. Phenomena such as the Great Resignation, quiet quitting, and increasing demands for work-life balance and meaningful work indicate a fundamental shift in the psychological contract between individuals and organizations. In this context, understanding what truly motivates individuals to contribute and commit becomes increasingly crucial.

In the field of HRM, Social Exchange Theory (SET) has become the dominant theoretical framework for explaining the dynamics of work relationships. Since its introduction by Homans (1958), Thibaut and Kelley (1959), and Blau (1964), SET has provided a foundation for understanding how employee-organization relationships form through processes of reciprocity. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) affirm SET as "one of the most influential frameworks for understanding behavior in the workplace." The basic principle of SET regarding cost-benefit analysis has given rise to important constructs such as Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), and Psychological Contract.

Ironically, although SET is widely applied, most research treats SET as a taken-for-granted theory. Ahmad et al. (2023) revealed that out of 3,649 articles reviewed, only a few explored the philosophical and psychological foundations of this theory. In fact, a deep understanding of SET's theoretical roots is essential to adapt it within constantly changing organizational contexts.

SET is built upon two grand theory foundations: utilitarianism in moral philosophy and rational choice theory in social science. Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism assumes humans are hedonistic creatures motivated to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This assumption was adopted by Homans (1961) when integrating Skinner's behaviorist principles into his sociological framework. Blau (1964) brought a more economic influence of utilitarianism, emphasizing that social exchange is based on expectations of future benefits, aligning with rational choice theory developed by Coleman and Becker.

Although the roots of utilitarianism and rationality have contributed significantly to building a strong analytical framework for SET, their application in contemporary HRM faces fundamental problems. First, the assumption of homo economicus ignores the moral dimensions, altruism, and collective values that influence organizational behavior. Second, SET's focus on reciprocity tends to overlook the complexity of modern work relationships involving multiple stakeholders. As expressed by Coyle-Shapiro et al. (2019), research on psychological contracts has begun moving beyond the reciprocity paradigm towards ideological currency, psychological needs, and polycontextual approaches. Third, the greatest challenge is building sustainable organizational behavior, where the utilitarian-rationality framework needs reconceptualization to accommodate sustainability values that often conflict with the logic of short-term profit maximization.

Based on the identification of these problems, there is a significant research gap: the absence of systematic efforts to trace the philosophical roots of utilitarianism and rationality in SET, and to reintegrate them to build a sustainable organizational behavior model. As suggested by Ahmad et al. (2023), "there is a need to view SET through the lens of psychological transaction to further advance its evolution."

This study aims to conduct a critical tracing of the roots of utilitarianism and rationality in SET, and to integrate them within a conceptual framework capable of explaining and building sustainable organizational behavior. Specifically, this study addresses: (1) How have utilitarianism and rational choice theory influenced the formation and evolution of SET? (2) What are the implications of these philosophical roots for assumptions in HRM research? (3) How can SET be reconceptualized to address the challenges of organizational sustainability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SET as a Foundation for Understanding Work Relationships

SET has been the most influential theoretical framework since the late 1950s, born from efforts to bridge sociology, economics, and psychology in explaining human social behavior. The development of SET is inseparable from the contributions of Homans, Blau, Thibaut, and Kelley. Homans used a reductionist approach by basing his theory on reinforcement mechanisms, rooted in Skinner's behaviorist psychology. Blau developed SET with a technical-economic perspective, rooted in utilitarian principles where rationality is seen as the result of anticipating future benefits. Thibaut and Kelley applied theoretical concepts to decision-making in social groups using exchange outcome matrices.

Philosophical Foundations of Utilitarianism and Behaviorism

Tracing the philosophical roots of SET leads to utilitarianism and behaviorism. Utilitarianism views humans as tending to consider choices and select actions with minimal costs and maximum rewards. Homans adopted utilitarian principles with modifications: humans do not always pursue maximum profit but in interactions always seek to gain benefits; they are not always rational but consider costs and benefits; they do not have complete information but evaluate based on available information; economic exchange is only a special case; and humans exchange non-material things such as emotions.

Skinner's behaviorism also had a significant influence. Homans adopted the propositions: in any situation, organisms produce behavior that obtains maximum reward and minimum punishment; organisms repeat behavior that has been reinforced in the past; in similar situations, organisms repeat the same behavior; the higher the reward, the less valuable that behavior becomes.

Theoretical Framework of SET

There are four main constituents of SET. First, reinforcement tools in the form of rewards and exchange resources. Rewards are outcomes of relationships with positive connotations, while resources are attributes that enable rewards. Resources can include love, status, money, information, services, goods (Foa & Foa, 1980), classified in a two-dimensional matrix: particularism and concreteness. Resources enable two types of rewards: socioemotional and economic.

Second, exchange mechanisms based on subjective cost-benefit analysis (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), depending on two conditions: the extent to which similar performance has been rewarded in the past, and the extent to which exchange outcomes are valued. Cost and benefit factors in social exchange differ from economic exchange because conditions and obligations are not clearly specified.

Third, social exchange relationships are stimulated by social structure and social capital (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social capital represents social entities such as norms, rules, information channels, expectations, and obligations, embedded within social organizational structures. Fourth, the underlying mechanism of social exchange is reciprocity, creating obligations between parties (Molm, 1997; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity represents norms that define beliefs about exchange outcomes and motivate behavior. The social exchange process begins with positive or negative treatment toward the exchange target, after which the target responds to achieve fairness.

Psychological Development: Psychological Contract

Coyle-Shapiro et al. (2019) provide a mapping of the evolution of psychological contract research moving beyond the traditional reciprocity framework. The expansion of resources includes ideological currency; exchange based on values, beliefs, and commitment to a larger purpose. They emphasize the need for approaches "moving beyond reciprocity as the underlying explanation."

Alternative Perspectives: Self-Determination Theory and Capability Approach

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan argues for a focus on the quality of worker motivation (Gagné, 2014). SDT identifies three universal basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Work environments that support the fulfillment of these three needs produce more sustainable intrinsic motivation. Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach views capabilities as "substantive freedoms" or opportunities to choose and act. This approach shifts focus from utility to the ability to do things of value.

Sustainable HRM and Green HRM

Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) integrates the triple bottom line: people, planet, and profit (Elkington, 1997). This approach seeks to balance these three different aspects. Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) serves as a strategic lever for organizational sustainability, encompassing environmentally friendly recruitment, sustainability-oriented training, performance management, compensation, and employee participation.

METHOD

This study is designed as a library research study with a qualitative approach based on theoretical analysis, adopting the framework of theoretical synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) which aims to integrate, expand, or reconceptualize existing theories. Data sources come from relevant primary and secondary scientific literature. Literature searches were conducted systematically on Scopus and Web of Science databases using structured keywords. Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis combined with critical discourse analysis, following the steps of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Jaakkola's (2020) theoretical integration technique was used to construct new theoretical propositions.

DISCUSSION

Reconstruction of the Relationship Between Grand Theory and SET

This study identifies a fundamental epistemological misunderstanding in HRM literature: SET is treated as an independent theory without critical tracing of its philosophical roots. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) affirm that understanding Homans' behaviorist roots and Blau's sociological roots is an absolute requirement for distinguishing SET as a micro-analytical framework and macro-social structure theory. Homans built his theory on the foundation of Skinner's behaviorist psychology with propositions such as the success proposition, stimulus proposition, and deprivation-satiation proposition. Blau developed SET from sociological traditions, emphasizing emergent properties; how recurring micro-interactions give rise to macro structures such as power, legitimacy, hierarchy, and formal organization.

The failure to distinguish these two traditions leads to conceptual ambiguity in measuring POS and LMX constructs. Some researchers use Homans' homo economicus assumptions, while others use Gouldner's (1960) moral norm of reciprocity assumptions. The difference between viewing reciprocity as instrumental exchange versus moral obligation yields different predictions about employee responses to HRM practices. Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, and Hall (2017) elaborate that the dimensions of economic exchange and social exchange have different antecedents and consequences.

SET is actually a bridging theory, a framework designed to bridge the assumptions of utilitarianism and rationality at the individual level with collective phenomena at the organizational level. Blau (1964) elaborates how the process of social exchange through emergent properties gives rise to complex social structures: differentiation of power, legitimization of authority, and institutionalization of norms. Implications for the development of HRM theory include the need for epistemological clarity, development of multilevel models, and reconnecting SET with the philosophical roots of utilitarianism and rationality.

Utilitarianism, Behaviorism, and Rational Choice Theory

Tracing the philosophical roots of SET cannot be separated from classical utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill. Abdulrahman (2023) explains that utilitarianism laid the foundation for understanding human action driven by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Bentham distinguished dimensions of pleasure: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity. Mill introduced qualitative distinctions between higher pleasures and lower pleasures, stating "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."

Ironically, HRM literature reduces the complexity of utilitarianism to purely material and financial dimensions. Cropanzano et al. (2017) identify that this reduction limits SET's ability to explain organizational citizenship behavior without direct material rewards. The influence of Skinner's behaviorism on Homans provides unique characteristics. Homans developed five propositions: success proposition, stimulus proposition, value proposition,

deprivation-satiation proposition, aggression-approval proposition. This approach is descriptive about actual behavior learned through experience, not prescriptive about rational choice. Criticism by Keshishyan Siraki and Khosravi (2020) highlights extreme reduction, an effort to reduce complex social phenomena to principles of individual psychology.

Coleman built his theory on the foundation of neoclassical economics and rational choice theory. Coleman's significant contribution is the concept of social capital as a social entity embedded within social organizational structures. Coleman developed a typology of social action encompassing six basic forms. Coleman's emphasis on trust as a mechanism of social exchange is relevant to sustainability issues. Implications for HRM are that Mill's utilitarianism encourages practitioners not only to focus on material incentives but also on fulfilling psychological and moral needs; behaviorist characteristics remind of the importance of policy consistency; Coleman's emphasis on trust and social capital provides a framework for building sustainable work relationships.

Critique of Homo Economicus Assumptions and Philosophical Alternatives

Critique of the homo economicus assumptions underlying SET is a fundamental discussion in organizational theory development. ProSocial World (2018) describes homo economicus as a "rational agent who pursues self-interest without regard to social norms." Criticism arises from understanding that humans are not creatures solely motivated by material cost-benefit calculations. Coyle-Shapiro et al. (2019) distinguish three dimensions of psychological contract: transactional contracts, relational contracts, and balanced contracts with ideological currency; exchange based on values, beliefs, and commitment to a larger purpose. This challenges classical utilitarian assumptions.

Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach, applied by Subramanian et al. (2013) in HRM, offers a perspective where human well-being is determined by the ability to do things of value. This approach shifts focus from exchange outcomes to empowerment processes. Deci and Ryan's SDT, elaborated by Gagné (2014) and Corcaci & Potîngă (2025), identifies three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, relatedness. Work environments that support fulfillment of these three needs produce more sustainable intrinsic motivation. Implications for developing sustainable organizational behavior models are that models must acknowledge multidimensional motivation; shift focus from transactional exchange to developmental relationships; acknowledge the role of emotion, solidarity, and moral values; integrate perspectives from various academic traditions.

SET and Sustainability Challenges in Contemporary HRM

Sustainable HRM marks a fundamental paradigm shift. Kramar (2014) defines Sustainable HRM as an approach that enables adaptation of HRM strategies and practices to achieve financial, environmental, and social goals while considering long-term impacts. Ehnert et al. (2016) highlight the gap between rhetoric and implementation. Within the SET framework, the challenge of Sustainable HRM requires a shift from balanced reciprocity to generalized reciprocity. Paillé et al. (2022) found that social exchange processes play a key role in encouraging employee pro-environmental behavior.

Phenomena such as the Great Resignation and quiet quitting prove the failure of transactional exchange models. Brodsky (2023) elaborates that quiet quitting indicates the organization's inability to meet expectations about work meaning and life balance. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report 2023 revealed that only 23% of the global workforce is actively engaged. Donald, Van der Heijden, and Manville (2024) integrated literature on Vocational Behavior, Career Development, and HRM using SET as an integrative lens. Their model places the quality of dynamic exchange relationships as the main determinant of career sustainability.

Reconceptualizing SET for a Sustainable Organizational Behavior Model

Reconceptualization of SET must begin with a clear separation between economic exchange and social exchange. Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, and Barksdale (2006) developed an instrument that empirically distinguishes these two dimensions. In the sustainability context, social exchange must be positioned as a meta-framework encompassing reciprocity norms, communal norms, and moral obligations. Developing a sustainable organizational behavior model requires systematic integration of three levels of analysis. The philosophical level integrates utilitarianism (with recognition of higher pleasures), rational choice theory (with emphasis on trust and social capital), and capability approach (focus on substantive freedoms). The theoretical level integrates SET, SDT, and social identity theory. The practical level integrates GHRM, work-life balance policies, and employee well-being programs.

Based on theoretical synthesis, testable propositions are formulated. First proposition: HRM practices that fulfill basic psychological needs strengthen social exchange relationships more sustainably compared to practices that only provide material incentives. Second proposition: value congruence moderates the relationship between POS and sustainability-oriented organizational citizenship behavior. Third proposition: organizations that implement generalized reciprocity build higher social capital, enhancing organizational resilience. Fourth proposition: employee generation moderates the relationship between exchange form and outcomes such as affective commitment and turnover intention. Fifth proposition: transformational leadership acts as a catalyst that transforms exchange relationships from transactional to relational.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The theoretical implication is the need for revisiting the basic assumptions of SET that have long been treated as unquestionable truths. Tracing the roots of utilitarianism, behaviorism, and rational choice theory shows that SET is not a value-free theory but is laden with philosophical assumptions. Acknowledging philosophical assumptions is important to avoid overgeneralization, the application of theory to contexts that do not align with its original assumptions.

The practical implication is that the design of HRM systems and policies cannot rely solely on instrumental and transactional logic. Practices such as performance-based pay, merit systems, and career ladders are insufficient to build sustainable work relationships. Organizations need to balance practices based on exchange logic with practices that build relational bonds: mentoring programs, employee involvement initiatives, transparent communication, corporate social responsibility activities, and employee well-being programs. The implication for future HRM theory development is a multiparadigmatic approach that acknowledges that organizational phenomena can be understood from various perspectives. Three paradigms need to be integrated: the utilitarian-rational perspective (SET and rational choice theory), the moral-normative perspective (critique of homo economicus), and the developmental-existential perspective (capability approach and SDT).

Future Research Agenda

First, empirical research testing theoretical propositions through quantitative designs using survey or experimental approaches, as well as dyadic or multi-source designs. Second, development of comprehensive measurement instruments capturing dimensions of social exchange in the sustainability context: perceived meaningfulness, perceived value alignment, and perceived social impact. Third, cross-cultural comparative studies to understand the interaction between utilitarian-rational assumptions and different cultural values, using multigroup analysis approaches in SEM.

Fourth, longitudinal research to understand the evolution of social exchange relationships over time, using latent growth curve modeling, cross-lagged panel design, and event history analysis. Fifth, research on the influence of technology (AI, automation, digital work platforms) on the nature of social exchange relationships within organizations. Sixth, research expanding SET's focus from dyadic relationships to more complex relationship networks involving multiple stakeholders, using social network analysis and multilevel designs. Seventh, intervention research testing the effectiveness of practices for building sustainable social exchange through action research or intervention studies with RCT or quasi-experimental approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study has traced the philosophical roots of SET and reconceptualized it to build a sustainable organizational behavior model. SET is not an independent theory but a derivation of utilitarianism, behaviorism, and rational choice theory; it is a bridging theory connecting individual rationality assumptions with collective phenomena. Excessive reduction of utilitarianism's complexity and conceptual ambiguity between Homans' and Blau's approaches have caused limitations in explaining sustainable behavior.

The three-level model developed integrates the philosophical level (utilitarianism, rational choice, capability approach), the theoretical level (SET, SDT, social identity theory), and the practical level (sustainable HRM practices). This model shifts the paradigm from managing transactions to cultivating relationships, recognizing the roles of value congruence, fulfillment of basic psychological needs, and generalized reciprocity.

SET is reconceptualized as a theory of co-creation of value that transcends individual utility accumulation. Future research agendas include empirical testing of propositions, instrument development, cross-cultural studies, longitudinal research, exploration of technology's role, expansion of focus to multi-actor and multi-level exchange, and intervention research. This reconceptualization serves as a foundation for developing HRM scholarship that is more humanistic, reflective, and relevant to sustainability demands.

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