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THE GENERALIZED EXCHANGE OF PUNISHMENTS IN ADULT RECREATIONAL SOFTBALL: THE CASE OF "GOING MIDDLE"

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ABSTRACT

Exchange theory has a long tradition of systematic theory development and testing using experimental methodology. Webster and Whitmeyer (2001) argue that the application of a theory can be used to demonstrate its usefulness. The purpose of this paper is to apply well-developed theoretical concepts from exchange theory to explain interactional processes that occur in adult recreational softball. In particular, the interactions that center around "going middle" (hitting at an opposing team's pitcher) are explained with generalized exchange principles.

INTRODUCTION

As with other theories of group processes, exchange theory has been systematically developed and tested for several decades. The classical roots of exchange theory are found in the work of Homans (1974), Blau (1964), Thibaut and Kelley (1959) and others. From the work of these theorists, exchange theory has grown in both breadth and precision. Webster and Whitmeyer (2001) argue that theorists in recent decades have produced theories that are abstract, general, explicitly formulated, and tested experimentally. The usefulness of these well-developed theories can be shown through the process of application. Of the five types of application described by Webster and Whitmeyer, the explanation and interpretation type was the type most often conducted. This type of application involves utilizing theoretical concepts to explain specific phenomena.

The specific phenomena used in this application are interactions that occur during adult recreational softball games. This type of sporting event provides a setting where exchange theory concepts can be applied to specific interactions. Because of the high level of involvement across the country (and even growing internationally), the arena of adult recreational softball provides a recurrent setting for applying exchange concepts. In terms of the number of people involved in the sport, the Amateur Softball Association of America estimates that there are over 2.5 million players involved in its programs each year (ASA 2010). This association is just one of several softball associations, so the actual number of participants when other associations and local league participants are included, would be many millions more.

Beyond the high rates of participation in adult recreational softball, sporting events generally provide fertile ground for applying the theoretical principles of social exchange. The core assumptions of social exchange are: actors will seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs, actors are mutually dependent upon one another and exchanges occur over time (Molm and Cook 1995). Actors involved in softball games meet these core assumptions for a social exchange since they are mutually dependent upon one another (you cannot play without someone to play against), the relationship recurs over a period of time (whether just in the context of one game, over multiple games in an ongoing league, or across multiple tournaments) and actors seek to maximize benefits (winning) and minimize costs (losing). While softball games meet the core assumptions for an exchange setting, the particular interactions of interest for this application of exchange theory are instances of “going middle”.

"GOING MIDDLE"

In recent years, a new type of interaction has arisen in adult recreational softball. This process, called "going middle," refers to a batter in slow-pitch softball hitting at an opposing team's pitcher. Unlike baseball or fast-pitch softball where the batter must respond quickly to hit the ball, slow-pitch softball is characterized by pitches delivered with a certain amount of arc so that a skilled batter can adjust where they hit the ball. While many players argue that the middle of the field is an open area of the field and an easy place to get hits, there is a greater risk of injury to players who pitch because of the proximity to the batter and the high batted ball speeds. As the technology of bats and balls has improved, the time that a pitcher has to react to a ball hit at them has decreased. At current bat performance standards, a pitcher has typically .33 seconds to react to a ball hit directly at them (ASA 2010). Thus, hitting the ball through the middle of the field (and, in

particular, at the pitcher) can lead to substantial injury. When players refer to “going middle” in softball, there is a presumption of intentionality to the action. Thus, when softball players refer to someone “going middle”, they are implying that the batter intended to hit the ball at or very close to the opposing team’s pitcher.

"GOING MIDDLE" AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Can we therefore examine "going middle" as a type of exchange to better understand the interaction and its consequences? Identifying the type of exchange represented by "going middle" is made difficult because it straddles the line distinguishing direct and indirect reciprocity. Direct reciprocity occurs when two actors engage in an exchange with one another whereas indirect reciprocity occurs when the recipient of an exchange exchanges with another actor in a network or group (Molm, Collett, and Schaefer 2007). When someone hits middle in softball, the recipient of the exchange is always the opposing team's pitcher so there is only one actor on each team who can serve as the recipient of the exchange. However, any batter on a team can serve as an initiator of the exchange so there are multiple actors involved in the exchange process. Because of this, it is possible for a direct, reciprocal exchange to occur when two pitchers on opposing teams exchange hits up the middle with one another, but there is also indirect reciprocity when other players hit middle and exchange with the opposing pitcher.

Generalized exchange is a type of indirect exchange and as such requires three or more actors to complete (Molm and Cook 1995). In generalized exchange, a benefit is not reciprocated directly from an exchange partner but is reciprocated from another actor within the exchange network. In the classic example of the Kula ring (Malinowski 1922), the exchange passes through specific actors and resembles a circular flow of benefits through the network. This generalized exchange results from A giving resources to B, B exchanging with C, and then C exchanging with A.

Bearman (1997) distinguishes between two forms of generalized exchange: chain generalized and net generalized. In chain generalized exchange, benefits must flow through all actors in the exchange network in order for a giver to become a recipient. This is the type of exchange described above in the Kula ring. This is distinct from net generalized exchange in which individual actors exchange with a group. Actors in net generalized exchange essentially take turns as givers and recipients. Schaefer and Kornienko (2009) characterize generalized exchange as a context of positive connections where exchange in one relation facilitates exchange

in the connected relation. In the case of hitting middle, this is demonstrated since it is the act of one batter that prompts reciprocation by the other team. Thus, an initial exchange (hit up the middle) is necessary for the subsequent exchange (retaliatory hits up the middle) to occur. This reciprocation is not generally direct since it is a batter on one team who hits at the pitcher of the other team while a different actor on that pitcher's team will then hit at the pitcher from the first team. Thus, the interaction involves the type of positive connections that Schaefer and Kornienko (2009) argue characterizes generalized exchange.

In adult recreational softball, we can conceptualize "going middle" as a modified type of generalized exchange. The resource involved in the exchange is hitting up the middle or at the opposing team's pitcher. The exchange is initiated when the first person hits the ball up the middle at the pitcher. Even if the pitcher fields the ball cleanly and gets the player out, members of the other team will generally respond by saying "middle's open". The exchange continues as members of the second team then hit the ball at the pitcher of the first team thus creating a net generalized exchange. The pitcher expects that his teammates will hit at the opposing pitcher if the opposing team has hit the ball at him. Different members of the teams will be involved in the exchange at various points in time thus creating a type of net generalized exchange where one exchange act facilitates the next exchange act.

Another factor that complicates this analysis of hitting middle as a type of exchange is that the exchange involves punishments rather than rewards. Even when a pitcher is not actually injured by a ball being hit up the middle, the risk of injury connotes this action as a type of punishment. Molm (1997) elucidates the differences between reward power and punishment power through a series of experiments that illustrated that punishment power can be particularly effective when both the probability and magnitude of punishment is high. The case of going middle in recreational softball fits both of these scenarios since normative expectations dictate a high probability of punishment and technological changes have made the possibility of injury high when a ball is hit at a pitcher. The delivery of punishments becomes the responsibility of many actors within each team. Thus this exchange is not purely based on individuals as actors or even the team as an actor, but is based on a mixture of individual and team. The exchange of punishments seen in recreational softball can be equated to a mixed sanction as described by Heckathorn (1990) where the sanction is levied against a group member who serves to represent the individual violator who initially hit middle. In this case, the sanction or punishment is carried out against a different member of the group and not the group as a whole.

Lawler, Thye, and Yoon (2008) found that generalized exchange produced the lowest rates of exchange, the lowest feelings of pleasure, the lowest sense of network level cohesion, and the lowest affective attachment to the network as a group when compared to productive, negotiated, and reciprocal forms of exchange. However, they only tested chain-generalized exchange in their study where one actor could give to one other actor and could only receive from a different actor as opposed to the type of net-generalized exchange found in this setting.

As just explained, the exchange of hits going middle in adult recreational softball represents a type of generalized exchange so this setting can be used to apply exchange theory concepts to interactions outside the laboratory. Further, the focus on the exchange of punishments, instead of rewards, presents a new avenue for furthering our understanding of generalized exchange.

METHODS

Data for this application of exchange theory to softball interactions comes from both participant observation and survey methodologies. The participant observation was conducted from September 2006 through January 2008. I was a complete participant in softball leagues and tournaments in the greater Los Angeles area. In this area, leagues run throughout the year and tournaments are played every weekend at various locations. Data was collected from time as a participant in coed and women's games and as an observer of men's games. To supplement the data collected through participant observation, an online survey was also conducted. Advertisements for the survey were placed on softball message boards for areas across the country and were sent via email. The sample of respondents resulting from this open advertisement, online survey is not representative, but does include respondents from across the country. Thus, the survey data supplements the rich participant observation data collected in Southern California. A total of 1727 respondents accessed the online survey although not every respondent answered every question. The resulting sample of survey respondents was 90.6% male and 83.8% White, non-Hispanic. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 55 with the majority (45.8%) in the 25-34 age range. For this paper, responses to an open-ended question from the survey are also analyzed. The question asked, "Describe your most recent experience with a ball being hit at the pitcher (whether it was yourself, someone on your team, or someone on the other team that did so). What happened?"

RESULTS

In the online survey, 51.2% of 961 current or former pitchers indicated they had been injured by a ball being hit up the middle. As the risk of injuries to pitchers has increased, players and softball organizations have shown an increased interest in maintaining a safe environment for players. As described earlier, the phenomenon of “going middle” does not simply involve hitting a ball back up the middle of the field. Attributions of intentionality often accompany this process and a player is deemed to have “gone middle” when other players believe the batter hit the ball AT the pitcher (as opposed to simply up the middle of the field). When a batter hits middle, players on the fielding team can be heard to say, “Middle’s Open!” This signifies the intention of the fielding team to reciprocate the hit at their pitcher by hitting intentionally at the opposing team’s pitcher. One survey respondent described an example of this reciprocity in commenting, “The other team kept hitting at my pitcher so I put a ball off their pitcher’s foot my next at bat.”

Another survey respondent described middle wars: “Middle wars start with a batter with known bat control attempting to hit at a pitcher. The middle war escalates into retaliation on both sides. In some cases, the other team has no bat control...it was done accidentally. Experienced tournament players usually like to send a message to the inexperienced teams to stay out of the middle. It is an unwritten rule during league play to stay out of the middle. The rule does not apply in tournaments. The worst case scenario I have experienced was a brawl on the field between both teams.”

As one player described, “other team hit our pitcher, everybody got riled up, almost had a fight, we hit middle back at them.” This is just one example of many where players discussed retaliation for balls hit at their pitchers. Among the survey respondents, 63.6% of players indicated they would be somewhat likely, likely or very likely to try and hit at another team’s pitcher when a player from the other team had hit at their pitcher. This indicates a general norm of retaliation among players.

As these players describe, hitting at an opposing pitcher is an act that initiates an exchange and requires a response. The exchange is reciprocal and takes the form of the positive connections described by Schaefer and Kornienko (2009) where one batter hits middle and the opposing team responds. There is an expectation that teammates will reciprocate hits going middle at one’s pitcher.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND TRUST

With such a generalized exchange as we see in recreational softball, we see reciprocity/retaliation is expected among the participants. As one player described, “we have a middle’s open rule in my area. My teams do not hit at the opposing pitcher until our pitcher is hit at. Then the middle is open.” Bearman (1997) emphasizes how generalized exchanges contribute to social solidarity within tribal societies. The same situation occurs within softball teams. As one pitcher described in their comments, “I was pitching and I got a ball hit to me. I admit I got a little pissed, but it’s part of the game. Now if he hit it on purpose, I know the guys on my team would back me up and go box!”. (Box refers to the pitching area in slow-pitch softball often outlined in chalk as a box on the field.) Another pitcher describes, “when I am pitching and the ball is hit at me, a couple of my teammates will hit the middle next time at bat.” When the exchange is reciprocated and the norm of retaliation is upheld, teammates develop feelings of social solidarity and trust.

Molm, Collett, and Schaefer (2007) argue that the causal mechanism by which the structure of reciprocity affects social solidarity is through the operation of three mechanisms. These three mechanisms are risk of nonreciprocity, expressive value, and salience of conflict. Greater social solidarity is expected in forms of exchange where the risk of nonreciprocity is higher, the expressive value of the exchange is higher and the salience of conflict is lower. The first two mechanisms apply in the case of hits up the middle in recreational softball. There is very high risk of nonreciprocity since batters do not exert perfect bat control when hitting and since not all players are equally willing to hit at the pitcher. In addition, the expressive value of the exchange is quite high since batters reciprocate hits up the middle in an effort to protect their own pitchers. As one player explains, “a team was hitting middle but not with the intention to hit our pitcher, but they were getting too close so we did it back to them just to let them know they were getting too close.” Another player explains, “our pitcher took a couple of close calls at the ankles, so we came back at their pitcher’s ankles.” These quotes illustrate that the reciprocation of hits up the middle arise in part out of concern for one’s own pitcher and teammate. However, when the exchange is not reciprocated, then anger can develop among some players. One player expressed this when she explained after a game that she was angry at the guys on the team for not having her husband’s back (her husband was the pitcher) and not retaliating middle. She indicated that she would not want to play with that team again because she couldn’t count on them to protect her husband.

Salience of conflict is the one causal mechanism that operates differently in the case of the generalized exchange of softball hits up the middle. This difference

may result since Molm and colleagues (2007) focused specifically on the exchange of benefits/rewards. Conflict is endemic to a softball game and thus some degree of conflict is always present since one team wins and one team loses. This conflict is exacerbated when teams engage in a middle war and this heightened conflict results in greater feelings of solidarity with the team. Thus, while lower salience of conflict may result in greater social solidarity when rewards are exchanged, it may be that higher salience of conflict leads to greater social solidarity when punishments are exchanged. The norm demands that players retaliate hits up the middle and teammates are expected to protect their pitchers. Thus, in this setting of a generalized exchange of punishments where there is high conflict, high levels of social solidarity and trust emerge within the team during the exchange process.

CONCLUSION

The application of exchange theory ideas to the setting of adult recreational softball illustrates the usefulness of the theory in explaining a real-world phenomenon. In his classic article, Zelditch (1969) argues that while you cannot study an actual army in the laboratory, you can replicate the processes that occur and apply those findings to the army outside the laboratory. This paper has demonstrated how principles of generalized exchange and social solidarity developed over the course of a number of laboratory experiments can be used to understand the interactional processes that occur on the softball field. This demonstrates the utility of exchange theory since its concepts can be used to explain specific phenomena.

One result of this application of exchange theory is a possible new direction for laboratory research. Previous experimental work on generalized exchange and solidarity has focused on the exchange of rewards. Three mechanisms have been identified in the work of Molm, Collett, and Schaefer (2007) to explain how the how the structure of reciprocity affects social solidarity. This application of exchange theory to adult softball demonstrated support for two of those mechanisms: the risk of nonreciprocity and expressive value. These mechanisms operate similarly for the generalized exchange of punishments as they do for the generalized exchange of rewards. However, the third mechanism operated differently in this setting. When punishments are exchanged, it appears that the salience of conflict may serve to increase feelings of social solidarity rather than decrease those feelings as when rewards are exchanged. Additional laboratory research is needed to test whether this finding is limited to softball interactions or points more generally to an extension of the theory.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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