

# The Role of Expected Reciprocity in Knowledge Sharing

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## ABSTRACT

*The authors investigated the effects of expected reciprocity on knowledge sharing, as moderated by team and individual variables. Data (n = 84) was collected in an experimental study from undergraduate business student participants. Effects of expected reciprocity on knowledge sharing depended on the levels of individual competence, positive team attitudes, functional diversity and demographic diversity. Implications include that the effectiveness of reciprocity in knowledge sharing depends on several factors relating to the team and individual. Encouraging reciprocity may have positive effects, but these can be overridden by poor team attitudes, low ability perceptions and team diversity. Future research suggestions are offered.*

*Keywords:* Attitudes, Knowledge Sharing, Reciprocity, Social Exchange, Team Diversity, Teamwork

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## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing is recognized as an important facilitator of organizational performance today (Argote, 1999; Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007; Siemsen, Balasubramanian, & Roth, 2007; Yang, 2007). The knowledge sharing process is integral to effective group performance, as well. "Knowledge sharing occurs when an individual is willing to assist as well as to learn from others in the development of new competencies" (Yang, 2007, p. 83).

Given the importance of knowledge sharing, reasons for people to share knowledge becomes a significant question.

The concept of reciprocity is important in understanding why people share knowledge (Chen & Hung, 2010; Cho, Li, & Su, 2007; Di Gangi, Wasko, & Tang, 2012; Lin, H., 2007; Westphal & Clement, 2008). More research is needed to understand the reciprocity construct, however (Wu, Hom, Tetrick, Shore, Jia, Chaoping, & Song, 2006), especially in light of mixed past findings. One explanation for the mixed

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findings is that aspects of the individual, task, and climate interact with expected reciprocity to affect outcomes (e.g., Cho et al., 2007; Di Gangi et al., 2012; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005; Kang, Kim, & Bock, 2010; Zhang, Chen, & Vogel, 2009).

First, we discuss the reciprocity construct in knowledge sharing research. Then, we propose how reciprocity plays a moderating role in affecting knowledge sharing. To test our hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study with 84 participants. We discuss results as well as possible applications to organizations and management education. Finally, we state implications for future researchers based on strengths and limitations of our study.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Expected reciprocity in sharing organizational knowledge has received moderate attention in knowledge sharing literature (Chen & Hung, 2010; Cho et al., 2007; Di Gangi et al., 2012; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Lin, H., 2007; Lin, Lee, & Wang, 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Zhang et al., 2009). Only three studies investigated direct effects of expected reciprocity on knowledge sharing (Chen & Hung, 2010; Lin, H., 2009; Lin et al., 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), while four studied the interaction of expected reciprocity with individual, group and organizational variables to affect knowledge sharing (Cho et al., 2007; Di Gangi et al., 2012; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Kang et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2009). Despite the theoretical proposition that receiving reciprocal knowledge should motivate knowledge sharing, these studies reveal mixed findings.

First, Chen and Hung (2010) found that expected reciprocity did not predict knowledge sharing despite hypothesizing positive effects. The authors found that reciprocity negatively affected individual knowledge collecting, or gathering knowledge, of members in an online community. In contrast, Lin (H., 2007) studied employees in Taiwanese organizations and

discovered that expected reciprocity positively predicted knowledge sharing attitudes, which positively predicted knowledge sharing intentions.

Lin et al. (2009) used fuzzy modeling to establish the relative perceived importance of inputs to knowledge sharing for workers in the Taiwanese shipping industry. Expected reciprocity was perceived as an important input to knowledge sharing, second only pro-sharing work climate. Other variables perceived as less important to knowledge sharing included leadership and information technology.

Wasko and Faraj (2005) found that expected reciprocity negatively affected knowledge sharing. Members of an online community reported decreased knowledge sharing as expected reciprocity was higher. The authors explained this unexpected finding as possibly being due to the online nature of relationships between subjects, versus face-to-face interactions.

Other researchers investigated the interaction of expected reciprocity with individual, group and organizational variables to affect knowledge sharing (Cho et al., 2007; Di Gangi et al., 2012; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Kang et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2009). Consistent with these studies, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggested that individuals share knowledge in organizations when the environment encourages sharing, the individuals have the cognitive capability to share, the interpersonal relationships are strong, and when motivation is provided for sharing.

Cho et al. (2007) studied the moderating effect of type of knowledge on intention to share. Four types of knowledge were included in the study – explicit versus tacit, and external versus internal. Explicit knowledge is numerical, written, or easily codified (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge is personal, experience-based and hard to express in words. Cho et al. (2007) used Parikh's (2001) framework of internal versus external sharing to reflect sharing with others who are organizational members versus outsiders. Cho et al. (2007) found that reciprocity did not affect knowledge sharing intentions except in the case of sharing external/

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