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## Equity Theory

### I. The Nature of Equity

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, St. Anselm of Canterbury argued that the will possesses two competing inclinations: an affection for what is to a person's own advantage *and* an affection for justice; the first inclination is stronger, but the second matters, too. Equity theory, too, posits that in personal relationships, two concerns stand out: firstly, how rewarding are people's societal, family, and work relationships? Secondly, how fair, just, and equitable are those relationships? According to Equity theory (as postulated by Elaine Hatfield, G. William Walster, and Ellen Berscheid), people define a relationship as equitable when "the rewards they reap from a relationship are commiserate with their contributions to that relationship." (In contrasting profit versus equity, profit (i.e., rewards minus costs) is generally found to be a more important determinant of satisfaction than is equity.) According to the theory, couples feel most comfortable when their relationships are maximally profitable and they are getting exactly what they deserve from their relationships—no more and certainly no less. In this entry, we will discuss the logic behind Equity theory, discuss techniques for assessing how equitable a relationship is, and discuss the consequences of fairness (or unfairness) in dating, newlywed, and long-term marital relationships.

In the past 25 years or so, social psychologists have become interested in the cognitive and emotional underpinnings of humanity's concern with social justice, fairness, and equity. Evolutionary theorists, for example, argue that for at least several million years, our ancestors engaged in complex social exchange. Thus, they contend, a concern with both reward and fairness are ancient and universal concerns—"wired in" as part of the architecture of the human mind. Currently, most cross-cultural investigators, neuroscientists, primatologists, ethologists, and evolutionary psychologists generally agree that although social definitions of equity may vary, a concern with profit, fairness and equity may, indeed, be common in the animal kingdom.

### II. Equity Theory

Equity theory (as articulated by Hatfield and her colleagues) consists of four propositions: *Proposition 1*: Men and women are "wired up" to try to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. (No surprise, then, that people are concerned with the rewards and punishments they receive in their close

relationships.) *Proposition II:* Society, however, has a vested interest in persuading people to behave fairly and equitably. Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and punish those who treat others inequitably. *Proposition III:* Given societal pressures, people are most comfortable when they perceive that they are getting roughly what they deserve from life and love. If people feel over-benefited, they may experience pity, guilt, and shame; if under-benefited, they may experience anger, sadness, and resentment. *Proposition IV:* People in inequitable relationships will attempt to reduce their distress *via* a variety of techniques—by restoring psychological equity (convincing themselves that an inequitable relationship is indeed fair), by restoring actual equity, or by abandoning the relationship. A wife who feels guilty about “cheating” on her husband may, for example, restore *psychological equity* by convincing herself that her husband has probably been cheating on her for years; her wayward behavior is simply a case of “tit for tat.” A woman who feels guilty about the fact that convention dictates that her poverty-stricken date ought to pay for dinner, concerts, and transportation may attempt to set things right by inviting him to dinner or pretending someone has given her free tickets to a play—thus restoring *actual equity*. Finally, a husband who feels with his wife it’s all give (on his part) and all take (on hers) may elect to leave the marriage.

Historically, of course, different cultures and societies have possessed very different visions as to what constitutes social justice, fairness, and equity. Equity is in the eye of the beholder, of course. Participants may not always agree about the equity of their relationships; outsider observers might have yet another view as to who is getting more from a given relationship. In defining equity, people may focus on a wide variety of decision rules and inputs and outcomes. Some dominant views: “All men are created equal” (Equality). “The more people invest in a project, the more profit they deserve to reap” (Capitalism). “To each according to his need” (Communism). “Winner take all” (Dog-eat-dog capitalism). “It’s a man’s world” (Traditional hierarchy). Nonetheless—whatever the cultural rules—in all cultures, social justice, fairness, and equity are deemed important.

Social psychologists have developed a variety of measures to assess how fair and equitable people perceive a given relationship to be. In practice, however, people’s perceptions are often assessed by asking: “Considering what you put into your dating relationship or marriage (compared to what you get out of it) and what your partner puts in (compared to what he or she gets out of it), how does your dating relationship or marriage ‘stack up’?” On the basis of their answers, persons are classified as perceiving themselves as over-benefited (receiving more than they deserve), equitably treated (receiving exactly what they deserve), or under-benefited (receiving less than they deserve) from their close relationships. Other measures of equity exist. In one detailed measure, Hatfield and her colleagues asked men and women who were dating, living together, and married to indicate how fair and equitable they considered their relationships to be via a 22 item scale: The areas of interest included such *personal qualities* as

appearance, intelligence, and social grace; *emotional concerns*, such as physical affection and understanding and concern, and *day-to-day concerns*, such as contributing to household expenses and helping around the house.

Some researchers, such as Susan Sprecher, have developed “Exchange Orientation” scales, designed to assess the concern of individuals with justice, fairness, and equity. She argues that some people are especially concerned about giving their partners all that they deserve, whereas others are primarily concerned with “Am I getting my fair share?”

Regardless of societal definitions or one’s own concern with equity, considerations of equity has been found to be important in a wide variety of cultures and relationships—social relationships, romantic and family relationships, friendships, helping relationships, and work relationships.

### III. Equity in Love Relationships

Scholars have discovered that that how concerned couples are with reward and equity depends on relationship stage. When couples are first dating, they participate in a kind of “dating and marriage marketplace,” in which considerations of reward, fairness, and equity loom large. Once men and women are deeply committed, however, they become less concerned about day-to-day reward and equity. Should a relationship deteriorate, however, couples—knowing (perhaps) that they will soon be back on the market—may begin to worry about “What’s in it for me?” and ask: “Do I deserve better?”

#### (A) *In the Beginning*

In fairy tales, Prince Charming often falls in love with the scullery maid. In real life, however, people generally search for “suitable” partners. There is considerable evidence that when people are attempting to decide whether or not to date or mate, potential reward and equity matter. Specifically, researchers find: (1) The more socially desirable men and women are—be they gay, lesbian, or heterosexual—the more social assets they will demand in a “suitable” potential date or mate. (2) Men and women tend to fall in love with partners who possess similar assets and liabilities. Dating couples generally end up with partners similar to themselves in self-esteem, attractiveness, intelligence, education, and mental and physical health (or disability), among other things. (3) Market considerations have been found to affect men and women’s romantic and sexual choices, the amount prostitutes charge for “risky” sex, and the sexual bargains men and women craft in prison. (4) Profitable and equitable dating relationships are satisfying and comfortable relationships; inequity is associated with distress, guilt, anger, and anxiety. (5) Profitable and equitable dating relationships appear to be more stable (and more likely to lead to more serious relationships) than are inequitable relationships.

In conclusion: Research indicates that in the early stages of a dating relationship, considerations of the marketplace prevail. Men and women will attempt to attract a socially attractive partner; they are profoundly concerned with how rewarding and how equitable their budding relationships appear to be.

*(B) In Close, Intimate Relationships*

Theorists agree that casual and intimate relationships are very different. In *Equity: Theory and Research*, Elaine Hatfield and her colleagues pointed out that casual relationships differ in a number of ways from intimate connections. In close, intimate relationships, for example, couples feel more intensely about one another, share more of their lives, have (and expect to have) a longer time to spend together than do couples in fleeting affairs. Married and other committed couples, who assume they will be together for a lifetime, are likely to be sanguine about momentary injustices, confident that “it will all work out in the end.” Then too, it may be difficult for married couples to calculate whether or not relationships are fair and rewarding. (They may settle for a rough and ready definition of “fair outcomes.”) Only the most egregious injustices will be noticed.

Margaret Clark argues that people participate in two kinds of relationships—exchange relationships and communal relationships—and that social norms differ markedly in these relationships. In casual acquaintance or business relationships, exchange norms prevail. People need not feel special responsibility for other’s welfare. They may invest ideas, time, and money, but it is with the expectation of receiving their fair share in return. In close, committed, intimate relationships, on the other hand, communal norms prevail. Ideally, men and women are committed to the other’s welfare. They wish to please their partners, to care for and nurture them, and to reject such crass considerations as “score-keeping” or a concern with *quid pro quo*. Such differences suggest that couples in close, intimate relationships will be less concerned about day-to-day rewards, costs, and equity than they would be in more casual friendships and work relationships.

Yet, in the end, reward (and costs) and equity do seem to matter in even the closest of relationships. This is the case for most couples—be they single, living together, or married; affluent or poor; married for a few weeks or for a half-century or more. As we have said, people are generally far more concerned with how rewarding their relationships are than with how fair and equitable they are. Yet, in all of these groups, the degree of reward, fairness, and equity have been found to be linked to marital happiness, contentment, satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and marital stability. Couples in fair and equitable relationships are also less likely to risk extramarital affairs than are their under-benefited peers. They are also more confident that their marriages will last, and (in fact) their relationships *are* longer lasting than are those of couples who feel less fairly treated.

In recent years, social scientists have begun to explore the perceptions of women and men as to who does the most household work (such as preparing meals, shopping for groceries, cleaning the house, caring for children, and caring for needy or elderly relatives). They have also investigated the impact of “fair” or “unfair” divisions of labor on marital satisfaction and stability. Scholars find that for many couples, perceived fairness (in the division of housework) has a positive impact on psychological well-being and relationship happiness and stability. When there is perceived unfairness, the opposite is of course true.

### (C) *Endings*

Scholars agree that perceived unfairness and misery are linked. They disagree, however, as to the nature of the causal relationship: Does perceived injustice cause dissatisfaction or is the causal order reversed? Equity theorists point out that men and women who are unfairly treated for a prolonged period will begin to wonder: “Does my partner love me? If so, why would he (she) treat me so unfairly?” They begin to ask: “What’s in it for me?” and “Am I getting all I deserve in this relationship?” Margaret Clark takes the opposite view: she argues that in communal relationships, couples do not “keep score”; they simply do not think in terms of reward and justice. Thus, if couples *are* concerned with such issues, it is a sure sign that their marriages are in trouble. Misery, then, is the *cause*, not the consequence of perceived injustice. All would agree that when men and women are at the point of separation or divorce, they sometimes become consumed with issues of fairness and equity.

In a year-long longitudinal study, Nico Van Yperen and Bram Buunk set out to answer this question. They interviewed Dutch couples who had been married for various lengths of time. At Time 1, those who rated their marriages as inequitable were more dissatisfied than their peers. By Time 2 (a year later), these inequitable relationships were often faltering. Thus they concluded that inequity leads to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution—and not the reverse.

It is possible, of course, that in failing marriages appraisal might lead to loss of commitment, separation, and then reappraisal . . . the two spiraling down together. In any case, it is clear that when marriages end, people often become preoccupied with the pain and marital injustices they have endured.

In sum: In recent times, scientists have continued to explore the impact of perceived equity on men and women’s marital happiness and stability. It appears that although the concern with fairness may wax and wane during the course of a marriage, such concerns always remain there, sometimes just beneath the surface, guiding people’s perceptions, happiness, and marital choices.

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**See also:** Exchange Processes, Communal Relationships, Fairness in Relationships, Exchange Orientation, Justice Norms Applied to Relationships.

### Further Readings

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