

**The Importance of Fairness and Equity for the Marital Satisfaction of
Older Women**

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Abstract

In all societies, people are concerned with social justice. “It’s just not right,” is a fairly common lament. In these two studies, we interviewed 240 older women, who ranged in age from 50 to 82. We found that: Most older women (85%) considered their marriages to be fair and equitable. Older women were less concerned about existing inequities than their younger peers. Nonetheless, they were *somewhat* concerned with how rewarding and how fair and equitable their relationships were perceived to be. Those who felt over-benefited, for example, felt more guilty than did their less advantaged peers; those who felt under-benefited felt far more angry than did their privileged peers. Stressful life events—such as the arrival of children, retirement, serious illness, or the awareness impending death—often brought to awareness long simmering resentments over issues of fairness.

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The Importance of Fairness and Equity for the Marital Satisfaction of Older Women

In the 11th century, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1998) argued that the will possesses two competing inclinations: an affection for what is to a person's own advantage and an affection for justice. 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 and equitable are those relationships? According to Hatfield, Walster, and Berscheid (1978), people consider a relationship as equitable when the rewards they reap from a relationship are commiserate with their contributions to that relationship. According to the theory, couples feel most comfortable when their relationships are rewarding and they are getting exactly what they deserve from their relationships—no more and certainly no less. (Of the two, profit is generally thought to be a more important determinant of relationship satisfaction than are fairness and equity.)

Psychometricians have developed a variety of complex measures to assess how fair and equitable people perceive a given relationship to be. Scholars have found that a relationship's fairness and equity can be reliably and validly assessed with the use of a simple, one-item measure—the *Equity Global Measure*. This simple measure has been translated into a variety of languages and used in a variety of romantic, marital, altruistic, friendship, and work settings. Also in common use is a 25-item multi-item scale—*A Multifactor Measure of*

Equity (See Hatfield, Rapson, & Aumer-Ryan, 2007; and Traupmann, et al., 1981, for a discussion of the reliability and validity of these scales).

I. Equity in Love Relationships

A. The Importance of Equity for Dating and Newlywed Couples

Theorists are in general agreement that in dating and casual relationships, considerations of reward and equity loom large. There is, for example, considerable evidence that dating couples (be they gay, lesbian, or heterosexual) are more likely to date, to fall in love with, and to get emotionally and sexually involved with those similar to themselves in overall social desirability (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Buunk & van Yperen, 1989; Byers & Wang, 2004; Dubner & Levitt, 2005; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Hatfield, et al., 2007; Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978; Martin, 1985; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996; Sprecher, 1998; van Yperen & Buunk, 1990; Winn, Crawford, & Fischer, 1991).

B. The Importance of Equity in Well-Established Relationships.

Theorists are sharply divided as to the importance of fairness and equity in longer-term relationships. Hatfield and her colleagues (2007), argued that equity becomes more (or less) important at different stages in the life cycle. Specifically, they argue that while dating is a “marriage marketplace,” in which considerations of reward, fairness, and equity loom large, once couples have committed themselves to a close, intimate relationship, they become less concerned about day-to-day equity. When relationships begin to deteriorate, troubled couples once again begin to worry about “What’s in it for me?” and ask:

“Do I deserve better?” The authors propose, then, that the degree to which people worry about reward and fairness and equity will vary during the course of a love relationship.

A number of other scholars have argued that couples' concerns with reward or fairness and equity tend to fade into insignificance as time passes and commitments deepen (see Chadwick-Jones, 1976; Clark & Grote, 1998; Deutsch, 1974; Ekeh, 1974; Mills, 1976; Murstein, 1980; Rubin, 1973). They point out that married couples—who assume they will be together for a lifetime—may be sanguine about momentary injustices, confident that “it will all work out in the end.” Given the complexity of love relationships, it may be difficult for couples in well-established relationships to calculate whether or not relationships are fair. Love might also affect how people caught up in inequitable relationships go about trying to set things right.

Others have argued that in well-established relationships concerns fairness and equity still play a role in shaping marital satisfaction and happiness. Social scientists have found that most couples—be they single, living together, or married; affluent or poor; dating for a few weeks or married for 20 years—do seem to care to some extent about the fairness and equity of their implicit “marriage contracts.” In all of these groups, degree of reward *and* fairness and equity have been found to be linked to sexual satisfaction, marital happiness, contentment, satisfaction, and marital stability (Aumer-Ryan, Hatfield, & Frey, 2006; Bernard, 1972; Blau, 1964; Buunk & van Yperen, 1989; Byers & Wang, 2004; Hatfield, et al., 1978 and 1979; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Lederer &

Jackson, 1968; Martin, 1985; Mc Call, 1966; Mikula, 1998; Mikula, et al., 1998; Patterson & Reed, 1970; Scanzoni, 1972; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996; Storer, 1966; van Yperen & Buunk, 1990.) Theorists have also confirmed that in committed intimate relationships, reward is more important to most couples than is fairness (Cate, et al., 1988; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Rusbult, et al., 1986).

C. The Importance of Equity for Aging Women

What about the people with whom we are most concerned—elderly women? What does the evidence indicate? Here, the facts are disappointingly sparse. Scholars have long complained that the elderly are an under-researched group (Parker, 2002). There are very few studies that even include aging couples in their samples. There are a few exceptions, of course: Schafer and Keith (1980a and b), for example, surveyed more than 300 married couples, who ranged in age from 19 to 88, and various stages of the family life cycle. Equity was measured within the context of performance in the family roles of cook, housekeeper, provider, companion, and parent. The authors found that: (1) older couples were more likely to feel their relationships were equitable than were their younger peers. (2) Nonetheless, when inequities existed, all couples (regardless of age) were likely to experience distress.

We would argue that although the concern with fairness may wax and wane during the course of a marriage, such concerns always remain just beneath the surface—guiding women's attitudes, emotional reactions, and marital and life satisfaction. In Studies 1 and 2, we set out to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Older women will generally consider their close relationships to be fair and equitable.

Hypothesis 2. Older women who feel equitably treated in their intimate relationships will feel more content and happy (and less angry or guilty) than do those who feel inequitably treated. Those who are over-benefited will tend to feel guilty. Those who are under-benefited will tend to feel angry.

Hypothesis 3. Older women who feel equitably treated will be more satisfied and happy with their relationships than will their inequitably treated peers.

Hypothesis 4. Older women who feel equitably treated will be more satisfied and happy with their lives (in general) than will their inequitably treated peers.

In Study 1, we asked older women to complete a traditional survey, designed to assess attitudes, emotions and behavior. In Study 2, conducted a year later, we conducted in-depth interviews with a random sample of our original participants, using semi-structured questions, and utilizing qualitative techniques to classify women's comments. By utilizing a combination of traditional and grounded theory, and utilizing qualitative and quantitative techniques in analyzing our data, we hoped to gaining an understanding of the role that equity/inequity play in older women's lives.

Study 1

Method

Participants

As part of a multidisciplinary study conducted by the Faye McBeth Institute on Aging and Adult Life at the University of Wisconsin, we interviewed a random sample of older women living in Madison, Wisconsin. The McBeth sample was selected this way: Firstly, a random sample of 240 women, age 50 and older, was drawn from five Madison census tracts. The Chair of the Faye McBeath Institute sent potential participants an introductory letter, asking them to participate in a study of older women's political, social, mental and physical health, and day-to-day concerns. A week or so later, interviewers telephoned the women (or visited them in their homes) and arranged an appointment. If the older women proved unavailable on the first try, a second (and if necessary) third attempt to arrange an appointment was made. Women who agreed to participate were interviewed by well-trained interviewers in the women's homes. The 135 women, who were in an intimate relationship, constituted our final sample. The women represented a range of ages, marital statuses, living situations, incomes, and educational backgrounds. For almost all of these women, their "partner" was their husband. For a very few, it was a spouse equivalent.

Measures

1. Assessing Equity/Inequity

Women were asked to indicate how fair and equitable they considered their relationship to be on the *Equity Global Measure*, which asks: "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 (s)he gets out

of it . . . how does your dating relationship or marriage ‘stack up’?” Possible answers were:

- +3: I am getting a much better deal than my partner.
- +2: I am getting a somewhat better deal.
- +1: I am getting a slightly better deal.
- 0: We are both getting an equally good, or bad, deal.
- 1: My partner is getting a slightly better deal.
- 2: My partner is getting a somewhat better deal.
- 3: My partner is getting a much better deal than I am.

Women’s responses determined whether they were classified as over-benefited (those scoring +3 to +1), equitably treated (those scoring 0), or under-benefited (those scoring -3 to -1) in their relationships.

Despite its brevity, this widely used equity measure has been found to possess reasonable reliability and validity (see Canary & Stafford, 1992; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Hatfield, et al, 2007; Sprecher, 1986, 1988; Traupmann, 1978; Traupmann et al., 1981; Utne, 1978; VanYperen & Buunk, 1990.)

2. Equity and Contentment/Distress:

Women’s feelings of contentment and distress were measured via Austin’s (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress. Women were asked: “When you think about your relationship—what *you* put into it and what you get out of it and what *your partner* puts into it and what he gets out of it—how does that make you feel? Participants indicated how “content,” “happy,” “angry,” and “guilty” they felt on a four point scale ranging from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “very much.” This measure

has traditionally been employed in equity research (see Austin & Hatfield, 1974 a and b, 1975; Traupmann, 1978; Hatfield, et al, 2007; and Utne, 1978.)

3. Equity and Satisfaction/Happiness with the Relationship

Women were asked two questions: (1) How satisfied are you with your relationship? (Possible answers ranged from (1) Very dissatisfied; I am often not satisfied with my relationship, to (5) Completely satisfied; I could not be more satisfied with my relationship). 2. How happy are you with your relationship? (Possible answers ranged from (1) Very unhappy; I am often not happy with my relationship, to (5) Completely happy; I could not be more happy with my relationship.)

An Index of Total Satisfaction with the Relationship was calculated by summing the respondents' replies to the two questions. (For information on the reliability and validity of the three measures, see Traupmann, 1978, and Utne, 1978.)

Although fine measures of Marital Satisfaction exist (see, for example, Hendrick's [1988] measure of *Relationship Satisfaction*) we choose to stay with the older Satisfaction/Happiness Index for two reasons: Firstly, we wished to be able to compare the findings from this study with those from previous research conducted with dating couples and newlyweds, and secondly (and most importantly) because, in order to acquire access to the Faye McBeath sample of elderly women, we were forced to severely limit the number of questions we asked. We thought this was such a unique opportunity that we agreed to limit our questions to a very few.

4. Satisfaction/Happiness With Life

Finally, the women were asked how satisfied and happy they were with life, in general: (1) How satisfied are you with your life? (Possible answers ranged from (1) Very dissatisfied; I am often not satisfied with my life, to (5) Completely satisfied; I could not be more satisfied with my life). (2) How happy are you with your life? (Possible answers ranged from (1) Very unhappy; I am often not happy with my life, to (5) Completely happy; I could not be more happy with my life). (Once again, for information on the reliability and validity of the three measures, see Traupmann, 1978, and Utne, 1978.)

Again, an Index of Total Satisfaction with Life was calculated by summing the respondents' replies to the two questions. (Once again, better and far longer scales of Life Satisfaction are available, but alas, it was not possible to administer the scales we wished in this study.)

Data Analyses

According to Equity theory, although inequity is disturbing to everyone, it is far easier for the over-benefited to accept than for the deprived to do so. This is not surprising—the over-benefited, after all, are gaining by the inequity; the under-benefited are losing. Since people are assumed to care about reward *and* fairness, the under-benefited are losing in two ways (see Aumer-Ryan, 2007; Hatfield, et al, 1978, for a full discussion of this point). We attempted to embody these expectations in our statistical analyses in the following way: we predicted *a priori* that our independent variable should be scaled as follows: Over-benefited group (+1), equitably treated group (+2), under-benefited group (+4). In the

analysis, we used unequal interval linear and quadratic contrasts (see Hays, 1963) to test our three hypotheses.

Results

As we proposed in Hypothesis 1, the great majority of older women did consider their relationships to be fair and equitable. A modest 10% claimed to be over-benefited, a full 85% felt equitably treated, and only 5% felt under-benefited in their relationships.

The question is: “How to women who feel inequitably treated react to this state of affairs?”

A. *Equity and Contentment/Distress*

In a wide array of studies, scholars have documented that dating and newly married couples who feel equitably treated express more contentment and happiness (and less guilt and anger) than do their inequitably treated peers. Thus, in Hypothesis 2, we proposed that older women would react in the same way. We found only partial support for this hypothesis, however (see Table 1). Older women who felt equitably treated were *not* significantly more content and happy than were their peers. Nonetheless, women who felt inequitably treated *did* express some distress: those who felt over-benefited felt significantly more guilty than did their peers ($p < .05$), while women who felt under-benefited were far more angry than were their peers ($p < .05$). Given the difference in younger and older women’s reactions, we would tend to speculate that older women may indeed be less concerned about existing inequities than are their younger peers.

Insert Table 1 about here

B. Equity and Relationship Satisfaction/Happiness

Our second prediction concerned the relationship between women's perceptions of equity/inequity and their satisfaction and happiness with their intimate relationships *as a whole*. In studies with dating and newlywed couples, researchers have generally found a curvilinear relationship between equity and satisfaction. Thus, in Hypothesis 3 we proposed that both under-benefited and over-benefited women would be less satisfied with their intimate relationships than would those in more equitable relationships. When we consider older women's reports, however, a very different picture emerges. It is the over-benefited women (rather than the equitably treated women) who judge their marriages to be the most satisfying and happy (see Table 2). Both linear F 's were significant at $p = .001$. Neither of the curvilinear F 's was significant. It appears that for older women, over-benefit is the best reward. We do not know why this is so. Perhaps there is simply gratitude at having a marriage survive for so long . . . and fewer worries that the "exploited" partner is harboring secret resentments and contemplating relationship dissolution. Perhaps these well-benefited women feel that their husbands might make the same claim—they might both feel that a happy marriage is "too good to be true." Perhaps over-benefited women have simply learned to "look on the bright side" in marriage and "count their blessings." Only subsequent research can tell.

Insert Table 2 about here

Equity and Life Satisfaction/Happiness

Does the fairness of one's intimate relationships color the rest of one's life? Are intimate relationships so critical that discontent with one's mate makes one's whole life seem bleak? (Or is the opposite true—does a sad life take a terrible toll on intimate relationships?) In Hypothesis 4, we proposed that older women who felt equitably treated would be more satisfied and happy with their lives, overall, than would those who felt inequitably treated. In previous studies with both college students (who are dating) and newlyweds this has been found to be true. Once again, however, the older women appear to differ from younger samples in their reactions. We found virtually no differences between the equitably and inequitably treated women in life satisfaction. All reported feeling very satisfied and happy with their lives (again, see Table 2).

Study 2

Study 1 raised a series of questions: Were today's older women *always* relatively unconcerned with equity? When they were in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, were they as concerned with the fairness of their lives as today's young couples (interviewed in other studies) claim to be? Or did these aging women grow up in an era when it was taboo to think about marriages in contractual terms? Do all older women insist that equity is relatively unimportant? Or are there some women who admit to caring deeply about the fairness or unfairness of their relationships?

To get some rough indications of how older women felt about these issues, we conducted a second interview with our sample of older women, one year later.

Participants: One year later, we contacted the 135 older women who participated in Study 1 and asked if they would agree to a second interview. One hundred and twelve women (83%) agreed to participate. From this group (given our limited resources), we randomly selected 73 women to participate in Study 2. As before, trained interviewers interviewed the older women in their homes. The interviews generally lasted for one hour.

Measures: In Study 2, the interview was semi-structured and open-ended. We hoped to tap each woman's understanding of the role, if any, that fairness or "balance" had played (and continued to play) in her married life. Thus, after a brief introduction about the nature of equity and marriage, the interviewer—using the Global Equity Measure as a visual aid—said:

I'd like to ask you a few questions about the "give and take" in your marriage. We are interested in understanding how you felt about the BALANCE OF THINGS between you and your husband at various critical points in your married life, like when you first got married, when your first child arrived, when your children went off to school, and so on.

Then participants were asked:

1. Think back to when you were first married. (Pointing to the scale). How has the balance of your marriage changed since then? Does it seem more fair then or now, or about the same.

2. Would you say (pointing to the scale) that you were more concerned about fairness when you were first married . . . or now?

Why?

3. Can you tell us (pointing to the scale) how *you* think sudden illness would affect *your feelings* about your marriage . . . especially those feelings about the balance in the marriage?

As we expected, this technique yielded a very rich data set, one that provided us with insights needed to interpret the perplexing results of our first year study.

Coding Data: Grounded Theory and Qualitative Analyses

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) have argued that scholars should take a “grounded theory” approach to developing and testing theoretical notions. Theorists, they contend, should not *start* with a theory, but should develop a theory based on “emergent categories”—i.e., one should craft theoretical notions *after* categorizing participants’ responses into meaningful categories and studying those categories. Thus, in Study 2, we followed the procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba and Strauss and Corbin. First, we tape-recorded the women’s answers to the three open-ended questions. One professor, two graduate students, and four undergraduates—after repeated collegial sorting and re-sorting—attempted to identify common themes in the women’s answers. We attempted to gain a deep understanding of aging women’s views as to the fairness of their marital relationships over the lifespan, and the impact of current equities/inequities on marital satisfaction and their lives.

Six meta-interpretations of the interview responses will be described, with the accompanying patterns of responses. These observations can only be impressionistic, of course, but hopefully they will add depth to the quantitative observations that we provided before.

1. First, there seemed to be a great deal of ambivalence, inconsistency, and even denial, surrounding the idea that fairness is of any importance in a marriage. Some older women seemed reticent to think in these terms. Yet, they readily used such terms as “deserved” or “owed” in their answers.

Said one 61-year-old woman: “I haven’t ever thought of my marriage like that—in terms of fairness. We each had our jobs to do.” But when asked about her reactions to her husband’s becoming seriously ill and her being forced to become a full-time caretaker, she replied: “I would feel he would *deserve* my care—I would owe him my love and my care. Fairness and balance don’t enter into it, in my mind.”

Livison (1978) observed that older women generally feel they are being disloyal to their husbands and their marriages (“a sacred institution ordained by God”) if they publicly criticize their husbands or evaluate their marriages negatively. We found that when negative material came up during the interview, it was “normalized away” (see Clausen & Yarrow, 1955; Mechanic, 1975). Some of the women—such as those with husbands suffering from Alzheimer’s or other psycho-geriatric illnesses or suffering from stroke, heart disease (or those needing such care)—described appalling marital situations. Yet, when questioned, they

simply accepted the unpleasantness as their lot in life. When asked whether or not their marital relationships were fair and equitable, they said they were.

2. Roughly one-third of the sample claimed their marital relationship had always been fair. They had achieved what seemed to be a fair arrangement at the beginning of their marriage and maintained that equity through 30, 40, and 50 years of married life. Many women claimed they had *never* thought about fairness—that they simply fulfilled their role as “homemaker” while their husband fulfilled his role as “breadwinner.” This agreement about the division of labor was clear from the start and had never changed.

A woman in her early 60s had this response to the equity questions:

“We always felt we were equal. We didn’t think about balance. We don’t belong to this generation who analyzes every feeling. I haven’t thought about my marriage in those terms and I still don’t. We’re both not very demonstrative of our feelings so we don’t expect it of each other—we just know it’s here.”

3. Some women reported that it wasn’t until a major change in the marital balance occurred—when mates lost their jobs, retired, became ill, or they realized that death was approaching—that they suddenly realized that they were receiving far more (or far less) than they knew they deserved; *then* they became upset. For example, a surprising number of women reported a shift in the balance of the marriage when a serious illness occurred in the family. As one woman observed: “I suddenly realized that life had dealt me a bad hand.” Many women said they felt over-benefited when their husbands had to care for the

children because they, the wives, became seriously ill . . . and the women didn't like the feelings of guilt the inequity engendered. The illness, by temporarily destroying the role structure of the marriage, seemed to highlight the implicit terms of the marriage contract. To rephrase an old adage—"We never see the balance until the scales are tipped."

4. For some, the fairness issue arose only during the stressful period of child-bearing and child-rearing. These women admitted to feeling under-benefited—overworked and unappreciated—when the children were very young. They felt tied down at home with the children, disappointed in their husband's meager parenting, and restricted in their routes to self-expression. However, when the children left the nest, the relationship returned again to one in which equity prevailed. This group seemed to constitute roughly another third of the total.

A 52-year-old woman's story:

"In my 30s, I was taking care of the kids—he was working. We were married nine years before the kids came—and when they came, it was not that great. Suddenly life had changed completely, and at that age, you're not as flexible. I was *not* easy to live with. Now it's more fair. Kids grow up. When you're first married, you're immature. You have to learn a lot about sharing and giving."

5. What of the others—the women whose lives didn't seem to fit either of these patterns? For the most part, this group was made up of women who did

not get a good deal, either from their marriages or from life. Their misfortunes seemed to trigger some questioning as to the fairness of marriage.

A 60-year-old woman said she was at a major turning point in her marriage. It had started out very happy—like most marriages. “Heck, when you’re in love you’re always happy,” she said. “I just made excuses for his drinking in those days.” As time went on, her dependency on him decreased. She got a part-time job and his drinking got worse. Recently they’d agreed to give it one more try, but she said that if it didn’t work out this time, “that’s it.” When we asked if her concerns about fairness had changed, she answered, “I was just a little concerned in the beginning—now I demand it!” Yet, the equity score she chose to describe her relationship currently was “0” or perfect equity.

A number of women described their attitude toward their marriage as one of acceptance: “That’s just the way it is.” A 58-year-old woman said she had felt they were equal partners in the marriage, but later realized that she had been very naïve.

“I realized I was the stronger of the two of us. I thought that it would change over the years. I didn’t know if he was just unable to give emotionally or just that he didn’t want to. In my 30s, I realized that he wouldn’t change, that he was unable to be giving. I had to decide whether to maintain the relationship or leave. I felt very negative about divorce and so I decided to accept what I had, but it was traumatic. Now I know I must accept the decision I made. I am

peacefully accepting it. I never allow myself to think what if I had done it differently.”

The interviewer noted her that for this woman this was a very difficult and painful part of the interview.

6. Another type of woman, who reported many fluctuations in the balance of the marriage, was the woman who had worked for several years before getting married. She generally was older—in her late 20s or early 30s—when she got married, and believed she was relatively independent within the marriage because of this history. These women calculated into the marriage balance such things as the money and property they possessed prior to the marriage, the salary they earned, and their own and their partner’s physical health. Those who married even later were even more outspoken as to what they expected from marriage. One 68-year-old woman, who has married about six years before the interview, reported that she felt quite under-benefited because she was in good health, while her 78-year-old husband was in poor health.

In Conclusion: Let us return to the question with which we began: Is equity an important concern in the lives of older women? In Studies 1 and 2, we discovered that aging women appear to differ from their younger peers in a number of ways:

(1) Older women often felt hesitant to talk about fairness and equity in a marriage. They sometimes felt that people shouldn’t think in such “selfish”

ways. Nonetheless, many women did, in fact, seem to care about fairness and equity.

(2) In general, the vast majority of aging women (i.e., 85%) considered their marriages or relationships to be fair and equitable.

(3) Older women appeared to be less concerned about day-to-day inequities than studies indicate dating couples and newlyweds to be. Older women who felt equitably treated, for example, were no more content and happy than were their peers. Yet, in their interviews many women admitted that in the best of marriages, niggling doubts about the fairness of it all did surface. As predicted, women who felt over-benefited felt more guilty about the status quo than were their peers. Women who felt under-benefited were far more angry about the status quo than were their peers.

(4) The more rewarding the older women's relationships, the more satisfied with their relationships they were; (previous studies suggest this would not be true of dating and newlywed couples.) Women seemed to take over-benefit in stride; by old age, it was the deprivations and under-benefits that rankled. This finding lends some credence to theorists' contention that in long-term intimate relationships, couples are more concerned with reward than fairness—perhaps because it is almost impossible to calculate equity day-to-day (Cate, et al., 1985; Lawrence & Byers, 1995; Rusbult, et al., 1986).

(5) The fairness of one's marital relationship also appeared to have little impact on how happy and satisfied women were with their lives *overall*.

Perhaps over the decades women (who feel unfairly treated) find satisfactions outside their marriages that make life worthwhile.

(6) Stressful life events—such as the arrival of children, a serious or lingering illness, a confrontation with death—brought imbalances to light. And, even in the happiest of marriages, some awareness of the balance or fairness was present and had some impact on the overall relationship.

In sum: We close with the common-sense observation that—given current demographic changes—it is now more important than ever to gain an understanding of the changes aging populations confront in the give-and-take of marriage; the impact these changes have on marital contentment, happiness, and satisfaction; and how married couples can best deal with these challenges. Among the myriad questions that still need to be addressed are: Do gender, SES, and educational differences have a critical impact on men and women's definition of a relationships as equitable or inequitable? What is most important—age or length of relationship—in shaping women's perceptions of equity, their emotional reactions to equity/inequity, and the way in which they react to existing inequities? Are women's perceptions and reactions affected by age? childbearing? Economic conditions? Ill health? All this remains to be investigated.

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Table 1

Relationship Between Equity/Inequity and Contentment/Distress

How equitably treated do P feel?	(N)	Content ^a	Happy ^a	Angry ^a	Guilty ^a
Over-benefited	(14)	3.57	3.43	1.64	1.86
Equitably treated	(114)	3.54	3.48	1.45	1.38
Under-benefited	(7)	3.28	3.29	2.14	1.14
F-Tests					
Linear		.65	.15	1.97	5.30*
Quadratic		.14	.28	3.73*	2.31

N = 135.

* $p = \leq .05$

a. The higher the number, the more content, happy, angry, and guilty P feels.

Table 2

*Relationship Between Equity/Inequity and Satisfaction With One's**Relationship and With Life*

How equitably treated Does P Feel?	(N)	Satisfaction with Relationship ^a	Happy with Relationship ^a	Total Index
Over-benefited	(14)	3.93	3.71	7.64
Equitably Treated	(114)	3.57	3.53	7.10
Under-benefited	(7)	2.57	2.57	5.14
Linear		8.19**	7.52**	8.63**
Quad		.15	.81	.43
		Satisfaction with Life ^a	Happy with Life ^a	Total Index
Over-benefited	(14)	3.50	3.64	7.14
Equitably treated	(114)	3.42	3.57	7.00
Under-benefited	(7)	3.28	3.29	6.57
Linear		.23	.91	.63

Quad		.00	.05	.02
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N = 135.

* $p = \leq .05$

** $p = \leq .01$

a. The higher the number, the more satisfied with the relationship and with life the women are.