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## Equity Theory and Helping Relationships

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Equity theory is intended to be a general theory, useful for predicting human behavior in a wide array of social interactions (Berkowitz & Walster, 1976). To date, Equity theory has been applied to predict people's responses in such diverse areas as exploiter-victim relationships, industrial relationships, and intimate relationships. In this chapter, we shall explore the possibility that Equity theory can provide an orderly framework for the understanding of philanthropist-recipient relationships as well. In the first section we shall briefly review Equity theory. In the second section we shall consider some possible applications of Equity theory in three different types of helping relationships: (a) relationships that might best be labeled *exploitative* or *excessively profitable* relationships; (b) reciprocal relationships; and (c) true "altruistic-

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tic" relationships. In the second section we shall take the *helper's* point of view in probing these three relationships; in the third section we shall take the *recipient's* point of view.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE EQUITY FORMULATION<sup>2</sup>

Equity theory is a strikingly simple theory. Essentially it consists of four propositions:

Proposition I: *Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcome equals rewards minus costs).*

Proposition II: *Groups can maximize collective reward by evolving accepted systems for "equitably" apportioning rewards and costs among members. Thus, members will evolve such systems of equity and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.*

*Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish (increase the costs for) members who treat others inequitably.*

Equity theorists define an "equitable relationship" to exist when the person scrutinizing the relationship (i.e., the scrutineer—who could be Participant A, Participant B, or an outside observer) perceives that all participants are receiving equal relative gains from the relationship:

$$\frac{\text{Outcomes}_A - \text{Inputs}_A}{(\text{Inputs}_A)^{k_A}} = \frac{\text{Outcomes}_B - \text{Inputs}_B}{(\text{Inputs}_B)^{k_B}}$$

### Definition of Terms

*Inputs (Is)* are defined as "the participant's contributions to the exchange, which are seen (by a scrutineer) as entitling him to rewards or costs." The inputs that a participant contributes to a relationship can be either assets—entitling him to rewards—or liabilities—entitling him to costs.<sup>3</sup>

In different settings, different inputs are seen as entitling one to rewards or costs. In industrial settings, assets such as capital or manual

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed explication of Equity theory, a review of the wide-ranging and voluminous Equity research, and a more detailed discussion of equity and helping relationships, see Walster, E., Walster, G. W., and Berscheid, E., *Equity: Theory and research*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> The restriction to this formula is that Inputs cannot equal zero.

labor are seen as relevant inputs—inputs that legitimately entitle the contributor to reward. In social settings, qualities such as physical beauty, a dependable character, or kindness are generally seen as assets entitling the possessor to social reward. Social liabilities such as boorishness or cruelty are seen as entitling him to costs.

*Outcomes (Os)* are defined as "the positive and negative consequences that a scrutineer perceives a participant has incurred as a consequence of his relationship with another." The participant's total outcomes, then, are equal to the rewards he obtains from the relationship minus the costs he incurs.

The exponents  $k_A$  and  $k_B$  are defined as follows:

$$k_A = \text{sign}(I_A) \times \text{sign}(O_A - I_A),$$

and

$$k_B = \text{sign}(I_B) \times \text{sign}(O_B - I_B).$$

[The exponents are simply a computational device to make the Equity formula "work." The exponents  $k_A$  and  $k_B$  take on the value +1 or -1, depending on the sign (+ or -) of A and B's Inputs and the sign (+ or -) of their Profits (Outcomes - Inputs). The exponents' effect is simply to change the way Relative gains are computed; if  $k = +1$ , then we have  $(O - I)/(I)$ , but if  $k = -1$ , then we have  $(O - I) \times (I)$ . (Without the exponent  $k$ , the formula would yield meaningless results when a participant's Inputs and Profits have opposite signs (i.e., when a participant's Inputs are less than zero and his Profits are greater than zero, or when his Inputs are greater than zero and his Profits are less than zero.) For a complete description of the assumptions underlying Equity theory and its derivation, see Walster et al., 1978.]

### Who Decides Whether a Relationship Is Equitable?

In Proposition II, we argued that societies develop norms of equity and teach these systems to their members. Thus, within any society there will be a consensus as to what constitutes an equitable relationship. However, the Equity formulation makes it clear that, ultimately, equity is in the eye of the beholder. An individual's perception of how equitable a relationship is will depend on *his* assessment of the value and relevance of the various participants' inputs and outcomes. Participants themselves, even after prolonged negotiation with one another, often do not agree completely as to the *value* and *relevance* of various inputs and outcomes. For example, a wife—focusing on the fact that she is trapped in the house with toddlers all day, works long hours, and is constantly engulfed by noise, mess, and confusion—may feel that her

relative outcomes are extremely low. Her husband—focusing on the fact that she can get out of bed whenever she pleases in the morning and can see whom she wants, when she wants—may disagree.

If participants do calculate inputs and outcomes differently—and it is likely that they will—it is inevitable that they will differ in their perceptions of whether or not a given relationship is equitable. Moreover, "objective" outside observers are likely to evaluate the equitableness of a relationship quite differently than do participants.

*Proposition III: When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress individuals feel.*

According to Equity theory, both the person who gets too much and the person who gets too little feel distressed. Theorists have labeled their distress reactions in various ways. The exploiter's distress may be labeled "guilt," "shame," "dissonance," "empathy," "conditioned anxiety," or "fear of retaliation." The victim's distress may be labeled "anger," "shame," "humiliation," "dissonance," or "conditioned anxiety." (Austin and Walster [1974] review the evidence that exists in support of Proposition III.)

*Proposition IV: Individuals who discover they are in an inequitable relationship attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity that exists, the more distress they feel and the harder they try to restore equity.*

There are two techniques by which individuals can reduce their distress:

1. *Restoration of actual equity.* One way participants can restore equity to their unjust relationship is by allowing the exploiter to compensate his victim. Many studies indicate that a harmdoer will often exert considerable effort to make restitution. (See, for example, Berscheid & Walster, 1967; Schmitt & Marwell, 1972; Walster & Prestholdt, 1966.) Parallel evidence indicates that a victim's first response to exploitation is to seek restitution (Leventhal & Bergman, 1969; Marwell, Schmitt, & Shotola, 1971). If the exploiter refuses to make restitution, the victim may settle for "getting even" by retaliating against the exploiter (Ross *et al.*, 1971; Thibaut, 1950).

2. *Restoration of psychological equity.* Participants can reduce their distress in a second way. They can distort reality and convince themselves (and perhaps others) that their ostensibly inequitable relationship is in fact perfectly fair. Individuals use several techniques to rationalize exploitation. A number of studies demonstrate that harmdoers may rationalize their harming by derogating their victim, by denying responsibility for the act, or by minimizing the victim's suffering (Brock &

Buss, 1962; Glass, 1964; Sykes & Matza, 1957). There is even some sparse experimental evidence that, under the right circumstances, victims will even justify their own exploitation (Austin & Walster, 1974; Leventhal & Bergman, 1969).

At this point, Equity theorists confront a crucial question. Can we specify when a person will try to restore actual equity to his relationship or when he will settle for restoring psychological equity instead? From Equity theory's Propositions I and IV, we can make a straightforward derivation: A person should follow a cost-benefit strategy in deciding how he will respond to perceived inequity. Whether an individual responds to injustice by attempting to restore actual equity, by distorting reality, or by doing a little of both has been found to depend on the costs and benefits a participant thinks will be associated with each strategy. (For example, see Berscheid & Walster, 1967; Berscheid *et al.*, 1968; Weick & Nessel, 1968.)

#### THE APPLICATION OF EQUITY THEORY: THE HELPER'S RESPONSE TO EXPLOITATIVE, RECIPROCAL, AND ALTRUISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Equity theorists would begin an analysis of helping behavior by classifying the relationship between the giver and the receiver of help into one of three categories:

1. *Exploitative or excessively profitable relationships.* There are two types of relationships here, and we will discuss them in order. Professional "philanthropists" are often fully aware that the best way to help themselves is to "help" others. For example, the Foundation president may know that his charitable donations will increase his relative gains (via tax write-offs) more than the recipient's. The professional fundraiser may know that his charitable solicitations will benefit him. This is an *exploitative relationship*.

Sometimes a person becomes aware that in the past he has received far more, and his fellow man has received far less, than deserved. The person helps in an effort to *partially* remedy the inequity; his recipient accepts it as such. In such situations, the helper is not a helper in the usual sense; a helper-recipient relationship of this type is probably best labeled an *excessively profitable relationship*.

2. *Reciprocal relationships.* Sometimes, participants alternate between being a donor and a recipient. In such relationships, equity is maintained over the long run, and helper-recipient relationships of this type are best labeled *reciprocal relationships*.

3. *Truly altruistic relationships.* Sometimes, the helper is truly a helper. He offers the recipient greater benefits than the recipient can ever hope to return. We will label relationships of this type *altruistic relationships*.

Although in day-to-day conversation all three are commonly labeled "helping" relationships, they are, in fact, strikingly different.

From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that if Equity theory is to make predictions about a potential helper's response to a helping opportunity, two facts are important: (a) Does the potential helper perceive that he is in a relationship with the recipient? (b) At the start of the helper-recipient interaction, does the potential helper perceive that he is overbenefited, equitably benefited, or underbenefited relative to the recipient?

Does the potential helper perceive that he is in a relationship with the recipient? Equity theory deals with the behavior of individuals enmeshed in equitable or inequitable relationships. To calculate Equity, we must know what inputs participants perceive they and their partners are contributing to their relationship and how much profit they are deriving from it. Unfortunately, in much of the research that is available researchers did not ascertain whether or not participants perceived themselves to be in a relationship. This problem is especially acute in the research on innocent bystanders and victims. We simply do not know if, when a bystander observes someone in a burning building, he thinks of himself as being in a relationship with the victim. One could well argue that he does not. However, for purposes of this discussion, let us assume that the participants in helping situations do see themselves as participants in a relationship with their fellow man, since the assumption is necessary for equity theory to be applied at all.

Does the helper perceive that he is overbenefited, equitably treated, or underbenefited? Most of the time, when we consider others' research, we will feel fairly confident that we can guess how the potential helper and recipient felt. We can guess whether they would classify their relationship as an exploitative, reciprocal, or altruistic one. Sometimes, however, we will not be so sure. For example, in the multifaceted bystander situation, we will often find it impossible to guess how the bystander felt about things. When the bystanders compared their relative gains to the victim's, they might have concluded that they were overbenefited and that he was underbenefited. On the other hand, they might also have felt that things were perfectly fair as they stood. Under these conditions, if the bystander were to volunteer to help, his would be a truly altruistic act.

Let us now consider the three different types of so-called "helping" relationships in greater detail.

### Exploitative and Excessively Profitable Relationships

These two types of relationships can be diagrammed as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{(Philanthropist)} & & \text{(Recipient)} \\ \frac{(O_A - I_A)}{(I_A)^k} & > & \frac{(O_n - I_n)}{(I_n)^k} \end{array}$$

Earlier we pointed out that, in an exploitative relation, although the public may label it "philanthropic," the participants in the relationship may see things quite differently. In some situations, both the "philanthropist" and the benefactor may correctly perceive that the philanthropist is using the recipient. Since such exploiter-victim relationships have been fully discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Walster *et al.*, 1978), we will not consider them further in this chapter.

In some settings, potential helpers are uncomfortably aware that—by design or accident—they are partially responsible for the initial or continued suffering. For example, the night watchman who sneaked out for an unauthorized smoke may feel he is at least partially responsible for the theft of equipment from his employer's factory. Or the Kew Gardens residents who neglected to call the police while Kitty Genovese was stabbed may to this day feel they are responsible for her death.

What does Equity theory have to say about such relationships? In analyzing the bystander-victim relationship, we will organize our discussion chronologically, in the way an emergency unfolds. First, we will discuss variables that seem to determine how distressed the bystander will become by the emergency. Then, we will discuss the determinants of how the bystander responds to the emergency, by helping, derogating the victim, or fleeing.

### Sources of a Bystander's Distress on Observing an Emergency

The bystander who observes a victim's suffering may feel emotionally and physiologically aroused for two entirely different reasons, empathy reasons and equity reasons.

When the bystander is forced to see another person suffer, he may empathize and become emotionally and physiologically upset (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1971, 1973; Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969).

If the bystander feels that he and the victim are in an inequitable relationship, he should experience distress. There are at least three variables that should intensify the not-quite-innocent bystander's concern on observing an emergency. They are (a) his perceived responsibility for the emergency; (b) the severity of the emergency; and (c) the bystander's personality characteristics.

*Responsibility.* According to Equity theory, the more responsible a participant is for an inequity, the more distress he should feel. A not-quite-innocent bystander may well experience both self-concept distress ("I am a bad person") and fear-of-retaliation distress ("I will be punished").

There is some evidence that the more responsible the bystander feels for the victim's plight, the more likely he is to help. Schwartz and Ben David (1977) recruited men from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to participate in a "biofeedback" study. Ostensibly, the men had two jobs, to train rats to modify their heart rate by administering carefully regulated shocks and to train themselves to control *their own* heart rates. While describing the dual training procedure, the experimenter casually warned the men that the rat they had been asked to train was wild and uncontrollable and was terrified of the procedures. When the experiment was well under way, an "emergency" occurred. There was a crash, followed by a single cry from the experimenter; the content of this cry was systematically varied: (a) Sometimes the experimenter blamed the bystander for her plight (She cried: "What did you do? The rat escaped! What did you do? . . ."); (b) Sometimes she attributed the plight to chance ("What happened? The rat escaped! What happened? . . ."); and (c) Sometimes she exonerated the bystander and blamed herself ("What did I do? The rat escaped! What did I do? . . ."). As predicted, the student was most eager to help when he had been blamed for the emergency. He was slowest to help when the experimenter had blamed herself. Similar effects on likelihood of intervention were obtained by Tilker (1970) in a Milgrain obedience paradigm study.

*Severity.* Piliavin and Piliavin (1971) proposed that a bystander's arousal will increase as the perceived severity and danger of the emergency increases. The louder and more numerous the screams, the more the blood, the higher the flames, the more aroused the bystander will become. Piliavin and Piliavin (1972) provide some support for this contention. These authors staged an emergency in the Philadelphia subway. On each run a male confederate, who pretended to be an invalid with a cane, collapsed. In half of the trials, the victim simply collapsed in the moving subway car; in the other half of the trials, he produced a thin trickle of very real-looking fake blood from the corner of his mouth as

he fell. If the emergency was not too severe (i.e., the man merely collapsed), panicky behavior did not occur. On several of the "blood" trials, however, quite emotional and panicky behavior did occur. Other evidence (Lazarus, Opton, Nomikos, & Rankin, 1965) indicates that the heart rate of observers of a film depicting several industrial accidents accelerates more to the sight of a man being impaled by a flying board and dying than to a man losing a finger.

Severity of emergency in Equity theory terms would be equated with the size of the disparity between the gains and losses of the participants. A factory worker who learns that a co-worker doing comparable work makes 10% less than he does should experience less distress than one who discovers a 50% differential. Similarly, a bystander who observes that a person much like himself is being mildly harassed should experience less distress than a bystander who watches a victim being tortured or mutilated. Evidence exists to support the contention that the greater the inequity that exists, the more distress participants will feel (Leventhal, Allen, & Kenelgor, 1969; Leventhal & Bergman, 1969). Parallel evidence also exists to support the contention that the more a victim suffers, the more a bystander will derogate him (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

*Personality Factors.* Finally, the bystander's personality should combine with the situational factors just discussed to determine the degree to which he becomes distressed when he encounters a suffering human being. The individual who has a strong self-concept should experience more distress when he causes or contributes to another's suffering than should a person who thinks little of himself (see Glaes, 1964). The person who has been taught that exploitative behavior brings swift retaliation from Man and God should experience more distress when he contributes to another's suffering than would the more leniently reared child (see Aronfreed, 1961).

#### *Responding to the Inequity*

Once a participant faces the fact that his relationship with another is inequitable, Equity theory makes specific predictions as to how he will respond to the injustice. The bystander can restore *actual* equity to the unfair relationship (he can make reparation to the victim) or he can restore *psychological* equity (he can distort his perceptions of the emergency situation).

The Equity paradigm's conceptual alternatives are essentially that the person gets, or tries to get, help for the victim, reevaluates the situation as one not requiring action, or leaves the scene (see Piliavin *et al.*, 1969).

A bystander cannot, of course, eliminate inequity by leaving the scene. The bystander knows that he was once in a relationship and that it was an unfair one. However, "out of sight is out of mind," and, in fleeing, a bystander can reduce the salience of an inequity. Equity theorists have observed that avoidance does occur when it is more costly to restore equity to a relationship than to abandon it.

Equity theorists and students of bystander behavior seem to agree on how individuals can respond to inequity. What determines which of these many potential responses an observer will make? Equity theory proposes two principles for predicting how a person will respond to a needy victim: How a bystander responds will depend on the cost for the alternative techniques available, and their adequacy.

*The Cost of Helping.* A derivation from Proposition I of Equity theory states that: *Other things being equal, the more costly a person perceives an available equity-restoring technique to be, the less likely he will be to use this technique to restore equity.* Piliavin and Piliavin (1971) wrote that:

An observer is motivated to reduce his arousal state as rapidly as possible, incurring in the course of his actions as few costs and as many rewards as possible. That is, his response will be determined by the outcome of a more or less rational decision process in which he weighs the costs and rewards attendant upon each of his possible courses of action [p. 6].

There is considerable evidence in support of the contention that rewards and costs are important in determining how a bystander will respond to an emergency. What are the potential rewards for helping in an emergency situation? They include the feeling of competence, self-congratulations, thanks from the victim, praise and admiration from bystanders, money, and fame. The potential costs include the following: personal danger, effort, expenditure, time lost, embarrassment, exposure to disgusting or sickening experiences (such as the sight of or contact with blood or other body fluids, wounds, deformities, seizures), and feelings of inadequacy or failure if help is ineffective. Rewards for not helping consist of the rewards associated with maintaining personal freedom, freedom to continue doing what you like without "getting involved," and lack of "involvement." Potential costs for not helping include: self-blame, public censure, and—in some situations—criminal prosecution (Radcliffe, 1966).

Piliavin and Piliavin (1972) provide suggestive evidence that cost is an important determinant of whether or not bystanders will come to the aid

of victims. In the study referred to above, an "invalid" with a cane collapsed. In some cases, he was not bleeding from the mouth. In others he was. The "invalid" lay there until someone came to his aid. The assumption was that it is less costly to approach an unbloody person than a bloody one. And, as predicted, bystanders were more likely to help the "sanitary" victim than the bloody one. Piliavin, Piliavin, and Rodin (1975) studied bystanders' willingness to help a "normal" victim versus a "costly-to-approach" victim (i.e., a victim who was made up to have an unattractive "port wine stain" birthmark). Again, bystanders were slower and less likely to help the victim with the disfiguring birthmark. In the case of both blood and birthmarks, the presumed costs are psychological; there is revulsion or at least distaste on the part of many individuals toward both blood and disfigurement.

Finally, Darley and Batson (1973) found that people are more reluctant to assist a person slumped by the side of the road when they are in a hurry (and "time is money") than when they have "time to kill."

*The Adequacy of Available Equity-Restoring Techniques.* A second derivation, from Proposition IV of Equity theory, states that a bystander's reaction to an emergency should depend on how adequate he perceives the alternate available techniques for restoring actual or psychological equity to be: *Other things being equal, the more adequate an individual perceives an available equity-restoring technique to be, the more likely he is to use this technique to restore equity.*

Compelling anecdotal evidence that bystanders take the costs and adequacy of help into account when deciding whether or not to help others comes from Lerner (1971a). In public demonstrations, Lerner has a simple technique for graphically illustrating why bystanders are often insensitive to even the most intense suffering of others. First, Lerner reminds his audience that many Americans and Canadians are suffering and desperately need help. He then hands each member of the audience a folder containing a single case history from the active file of the University Hospital. Each case history describes an American or Canadian family—in serious need of help—who for one reason or another cannot be helped by any official welfare agency. Each of the families lives under degrading conditions. The family needs money for food, clothes, soap, medicine to eliminate intestinal worms and heal sores, etc. The family is starving. Lerner points out that if the person will donate \$100 a month he can help this family avoid this primitive kind of human suffering; all that will be required of the affluent members of the audience is to give up a significant part of the money they spend each month on entertainment,

liquor, movies, dining out, etc. As we might anticipate, few members of the audience agree to help.

With great sensitivity, Lerner explains why it is that individuals are so unwilling to help: (a) The potential cost of such help is high; if the audience member contributes money this time, where can he stop? Can he and his own family enjoy their lives only when their lot is not better than that of the rest of mankind? (b) The potential adequacy of such help is low. By paying \$100 a month, the audience member can only help one family. Millions of victims remain. He cannot help them all. Perhaps if he were offered the chance to vote for an equitable tax system that, using his \$100 a month, would alleviate the suffering of *all* people, he might be far more willing to help.

### Reciprocal Relationships

$$\frac{(O_A - I_A)}{(I|A|)^{k_A}} = \frac{(O_B - I_B)}{(I|B|)^{k_B}}$$

Any relationship that endures for very long soon evolves into a reciprocal relationship. Neighbors take turns manning car pools, college students take notes for one another, colleagues exchange advice. In such stable relationships, participants alternate between helping others and being helped themselves.

In *The Gift*, Mauss (1954) analyzes the impact of such reciprocal gift-giving in primitive societies. His observations are equally applicable to our semiprimitive society.

Mauss uses the Melanesian institution of ritual gift exchange—the *kula ring*—as a framework for discussing reciprocal relationships. In the Massim area of the Pacific, tribal chiefs are linked in the *kula*, in which participants travel from island to island doling out and receiving gifts. By custom, a tribal chief is assumed to be a donor on one occasion and a recipient on the next.

Dillon (1968) observes that in the *kula*—as in our own society—“People who receive, want to give something in return. Both are involved in the quest for reciprocity [p. 15].” He points out that the reciprocal exchanges are a source of social stability—they breed good feeling, liking, and cooperation. Experimental evidence supports Dillon’s contention that *kula*-type reciprocal exchanges solidify social bonds. For example, Nemeth (1970), Berkowitz (1972a,b), and Gross and Latané (1973) provide evidence that reciprocal helping relations stimulate friendly feelings. Other experiments suggest that kindness generates

not only liking, but also a desire to reciprocate (Greenberg, 1968; Gross & Latané, 1973; Pruitt, 1968). The responses of participants in a reciprocal relationship will be dealt with in our section dealing with the recipient’s response to the various types of relationships.

### Altruistic Relationships

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{(Philanthropist)} & \text{(Recipient)} \\ \frac{(O_A - I_A)}{(I|A|)^{k_A}} & < \frac{(O_B - I_B)}{(I|B|)^{k_B}} \end{array}$$

For most people, the “true” altruistic relationship—the relationship in which the philanthropist gives more to his fellow man than his fellow man is entitled to or can ever hope to return—is evidence of Man at his best. Yet, when we consider the social pressures that propel people to action and the social rewards and punishments they encounter once they have acted, it seems evident that—as Equity theory suggests—“altruists” must have mixed feelings about their sacrifices, and mixed reactions to them. Why should this be?

*Society Tells People They Should Behave Altruistically . . . Sometimes*

One of society’s most perplexing problems is to decide how the “needy” should be treated. On the one hand, the U.S. Government defines need as a legitimate input that entitles a citizen to the minimum outcomes necessary for survival. We collectively acknowledge that if our fellow human being is so young, so disabled, so sick, or so old that he is unable to care for himself, society should care for him. We feel we *should* give to a plethora of deserving causes—The United Way, Save the Children Fund, Planned Parenthood, Committee for Voter Registration, etc. (see Berkowitz, 1972a; Berkowitz & Daniels, 1963; Gouldner, 1960; Lerner, 1971b; Leventhal, Weiss, & Buttrick, 1973; Pruitt, 1972).

On the other hand, people do not consider “need” to be an *entirely* legitimate input. They often complain that they should not be obligated to help *everyone* who finds himself in sad straits. At best, many beleaguered givers feel that any help they do cede should be considered not a gift, but a loan. Most of us feel that we are at least entitled to the recipient’s gratitude when we provide help. Thus, societal norms provide competing pressures: They say people should behave altruistically toward those in “need”—but that they are entitled to some recognition and thanks for doing so.

*Society Rewards People for Behaving Altruistically . . . Sometimes*

Generally, society encourages altruistic behavior. The altruist and the hero who have internalized society's norms may reward themselves for their "unselfish behavior." (See Rosenhan, Chapter 5 in this volume.) Their fellows may reward them with love, praise, their names in the paper, medals, and/or flowery epitaphs. Yet, there is often a thin line between being an "altruist" and being a "sap." Sometimes people respond to altruistic acts with ridicule and disdain. For example, Brown (1968, 1970) found that if people believed others would never know they had been slighted and exploited they were often quite willing to settle for less than they deserved. However, if they knew that others might discover their "largess," they felt they must "get theirs" lest they be thought "less of a man," or become a target for subsequent exploitation. The competitive nature of our society undoubtedly contributes to this.

Since society's reactions to altruism are mixed, we might expect that altruists would have similarly mixed feelings about their altruism. They may end up feeling good and distressed about themselves at the same time.

*Psychologists Believe That True Altruism Does Exist . . . at Least a Few Do*

A few scientists believe that man does act unselfishly under very special circumstances. For example, Aronfreed (1970) contends that any time a person's behavior is controlled by empathetic processes, his behavior should be labeled "altruistic." Aronfreed and Paskal (1966) point out that sometimes people place themselves in the shoes of a person needing assistance. They vicariously experience the other's disappointment at not getting what he desires. In such circumstances, a person may sacrifice his own interests for another. Hornstein (Chapter 3 in this volume), using a Lewinian framework, suggests essentially the same thing. Under conditions in which a person perceives a "we-ness" between himself and the victim, he will act to complete an act not completed by the other. Other theorists observe that, under some highly arousing, unambiguous emergency situations, bystanders often perform literally death-defying acts of rescue that could not possibly follow a cost-reward calculus (see, for example, London, 1970).

On the other hand, the majority of scientists—Equity theorists included—are fairly cynical. They interpret apparent altruism in cost-benefit terms, assuming that individuals, altruists included, learn to perform those acts that are rewarded . . . and to avoid those acts that are

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not. Either self-congratulation or external reward, then, must support apparently altruistic behavior. As Blau (1968) observes:

To be sure, there are men who selflessly work for others without thought of reward and even without expecting gratitude, but these are virtually saints, and saints are rare. Other men also act unselfishly sometimes, but they require a more direct incentive for doing so, if it is only . . . social approval [p. 453].

Sometimes, then, psychologists view altruism in a favorable light; most often, however, scientists attribute apparent altruism to more selfish motives.

In view of the conflicting pressures on the altruist, it is not surprising that the person who voluntarily contributes more than his share to a relationship often feels pride—mixed with distress. And it is no wonder that altruists are often tempted to reduce that distress by restoring actual or psychological equity.

**THE RECIPIENT'S RESPONSE TO EXPLOITATIVE, RECIPROCAL, AND ALTRUISTIC RELATIONSHIPS****Exploitative or Excessively Profitable Relationships**

We noted earlier that philanthropic acts may be less generous than they appear on the surface. Sometimes the wily philanthropist is, in fact, cheating the recipient—or returning only a portion of the benefits he owes him. Although the public may label such relationships *helping* relationships, the participants know better. Such relationships are probably best labeled *exploitative* or *excessively profitable* relationships. Since such exploiter-victim relationships have been fully discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Walster *et al.*, 1978), we will not consider them further in this paper. (The category has merely been presented for the sake of completeness.)

**Reciprocal Relationships**

It has been pointed out that reciprocal relations are the most pervasive and the most stable of social relationships. They breed good feelings, liking, and cooperation. Data from the social sciences make it clear that when an acquaintance offers to help "out of the goodness of his heart" our reaction is an immediate one: We feel gratitude and affection; we resolve to return his kindness. If, on the other hand, an acquaintance makes it brutally clear that he expects a return with interest, we are far



less touched by the generosity and less concerned about repaying the "kindness."

Why, in equity terms, should a recipient have different reactions to the giver whose gift was voluntary and spontaneous as opposed to the giver whose gift was involuntary and even "ulterior"? First, the recipient may feel that "goodness" and "unselfishness" in and of themselves are positive inputs to a relationship. Thus, he may feel that a "good" benefactor deserves a bigger return than a "bad" person who performed the same act. Second, the recipient may be more eager to maintain a relationship with a "good" person (who acted out of the goodness of his heart) than with a "bad" person (who acted for selfish reasons). Thus, he may be especially willing to treat the other equitably by repaying his kindness.

Thus there is evidence that recipients' reactions to donors are influenced by their answers to two questions: (a) Was the donor's help intentional? and (b) Was it unselfishly motivated?

Common sense and experimental research suggest that a recipient should have a stronger desire to restore equity by reciprocating if he was intentionally helped than if he had been accidentally or reluctantly helped (Garrett & Libby, 1973; Goldner, 1965; Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Greenberg, 1968; Greenberg & Frisch, 1972; Gross & Latané, 1973; Leventhal, Weiss, & Long, 1969).

Schopler (1970) contends that the helper's motives are also important, that, if a recipient of help believes that the benefactor was genuinely motivated, he will be appreciative and likely to reciprocate. If, however, he believes the person was selfishly motivated, he will be less appreciative and less likely to reciprocate. Data in support of this contention come from Heider (1958), Leeds (1963), Brehm and Cole (1966), Lerner and Lichman (1968), Schopler and Thompson (1968), and Krebs (1970).

### Altruistic Relationships

It is easy to see that an altruist might have mixed feelings about helping others. A little thought, however, makes it clear that his recipient may be equally ambivalent about his benefits. On one hand, the recipient knows that the altruist is showering him with more love and material benefits than he is entitled to; he cannot help feeling grateful. On the other hand, the recipient cannot help feeling uneasy about his undeserved benefits. There are three reasons for this: The helper-recipient relationship is (a) inequitable; (b) potentially exploitative; and (c) potentially humiliating.

When the benefactor bestows benefits on a recipient, he places the

recipient in an inequitable relationship. As indicated in Proposition III, inequitable relationships are unpleasant relationships. As Blau (1968) put it, "Giving is, indeed, more blessed than receiving, for having social credit is preferable to being socially indebted [p. 453]."

When a philanthropist provides benefits that his recipient cannot repay, the recipient may well feel that he has become obligated to reciprocate his benefactor in unspecified ways for an indefinite period. The recipient might reasonably fear that his benefactor may attempt to extract a greater repayment than the recipient would have been willing to give had he been warned of the conditions of the exchange ahead of time. Throughout time and geography, observers have noted that persons often demand repayment at unscrupulous interest.

Dillon (1968) provides a compelling example of how the exploitative gift syndrome works. He describes a French industrialist's (Mr. B) warm relationship with an Arab worker as follows:

In June, 1956, an Arab worker at B's factory asked the *patron* for permission to leave work for two days to attend to problems of burying a brother, Ahmed. . . . B. responded by offering to pay for the burial, by arranging to have an Arabic-speaking French officer *des affaires indigènes* (an ex-colonial officer) notify the kinsmen in Algeria, and by hiring an *imam* (Moslem prayer leader) to conduct the services. On July 16, 1956, the end of Bastille Day demonstrations by Algerians at the Place de la République, B. summoned Kazam and asked: 'If your comrades tell you to go on strike during the vacation, when you are alone guarding the factory, what will you do, Kazam?' The *patron* told him that he was aware he would run the risk of being knifed (*comp de couteau*) by other Algerian members of an Islamic fraternal organization who were organizing sympathy strikes to protest French resistance against Algerian rebellion. . . . The *patron*, in describing this understanding with Kazam, his oldest Algerian worker, said:

'We depend on each other. He has worked for me almost 12 years. Without him I could not count on the work of the other Algerians. He is top man and, being the oldest, I depend on him to control the others. . . . Kazam knows that he can depend on me when he is in trouble.' [p. 6061]

When the industrialist offered his favors, he did not state that the "price" was to risk one's life. Had the Arab known, he may well have concluded that that exchange was not a profitable one. This is the essence of an exploitative relationship.

The recipient may be hesitant to accept "help" for still another reason: He may fear that the gift will establish the benefactor's moral and social superiority. He may be unwilling to accept such mental status. Observational evidence suggests that recipients' fears are probably well-founded. Social observers have noted that gift-giving and humiliation are

linked. Homans (1961) notes that "anyone who accepts from another a service he cannot repay in kind incurs inferiority as a cost of receiving the service. The esteem he gives the other he foregoes himself [p. 320]." In her analysis of beneficence among East European Jews, Joffe (1953) notes:

For a society within the Western cultural tradition, East European Jewish culture exhibits a minimum of reciprocal behavior. Wealth, learning and other tangible and intangible possessions are fluid and are channeled so that in the main they flow from the 'strong,' or 'rich,' or 'learned,' or 'older,' to those who are 'weaker,' 'poorer,' 'ignorant,' or 'younger.' Therefore, all *giving* is downward during one's lifetime. . . . The concept of the good deed, the *Mitzvah*, is not voluntary—it has been enjoined upon every Jew by God. . . . It is shameful. . . . to receive succor of any sort from those who are inferior to you in status. To receive any (return gifts) implies that you are in a position to be controlled, for the reciprocal of the downward giving is deference [pp. 386–387].

These three factors, then, mean that most recipients of help will have serious reservations about having been so "blessed." This analysis sheds new light on the perplexing finding that recipients sometimes come to resent their dependence and/or despise themselves and their benefactor (see also Lenrow, Chapter 13 of this volume).

### Reciprocal Relations versus Altruistic Ones

Benefits are only acceptable so far as they seem capable of being required; beyond that point, they excite hatred instead of gratitude [Tactus, *Annals*, Book IV, sec. 18].

We have focused on two types of helping relationships—reciprocal and altruistic ones. From our comparison of these contrasting types of relationships, it is clear that a single factor seems to have a critical impact on the reaction of recipients to the relationship; namely, the beneficiary's ability to make restitution.

Researchers who have investigated the interactions of Christmas gift givers, members of the *Kula* ring, and the kindness of neighbors have dealt with donors and recipients who knew that eventually their helpful acts would be reciprocated in kind. Researchers who have investigated the interactions in such dyadic relations as welfare workers and their clients, developed and underdeveloped nations, and the medical staff and the physically handicapped have dealt with recipients who know they will never be able to repay their benefactors. The differing reactions of participants in reciprocal and nonreciprocal relations underscores the

importance of the recipient's "ability to repay" in determining how help affects a relationship. Ability to repay seems to determine whether the doing of favors generates pleasant social interactions or resentment and suffering. Research supports the following conclusion: *Undeserved gifts produce inequity in a relationship. If the participants know the recipient can and will reciprocate, the inequity is viewed as temporary, and thus it produces little distress. If the participants know the recipient cannot or will not reciprocate, however, a real inequity is produced; the participants will experience distress* (Proposition IV). Evidence in support of this conclusion comes from three diverse sources: ethnography, the laboratory, and survey research.

On the basis of ethnographic data, Mauss (1954) concluded that three types of obligations are widely distributed in human societies in both time and space: (a) the obligation to give; (b) the obligation to receive; and (c) the obligation to repay. Mauss (1954) and Dillon (1968) agree that, whereas reciprocal exchanges breed cooperation and good feelings, gifts that cannot be reciprocated breed discomfort, distress, and dislike.

In support of their contention, the authors survey a number of societies that have an exchange system in which everyone can be a donor and a receiver. (The *Kula* ring is such an example.) Harmonious stable relations are said to be the result. They contrast these societies with those in which no mechanism for discharging obligations is provided. For example, Dillon (1968) notes:

Instead of the *kula* principle operating in the Marshall Plan, the aid effort unwittingly took on some of the characteristics of the potlatch ceremony of the 19th Century among North Pacific Coast Indians in which property was destroyed in rivalry, and the poor humiliated [p. 15].

Volatile and unpleasant relations are said to be the result of such continuing inequities (see also Blau, 1955; Smith, 1892).

There is evidence that a benefactor is liked more when his beneficiary can reciprocate than when he cannot. Gergen and his associates (Gergen, 1969) investigated American, Swedish, and Japanese citizens' reactions to reciprocal and nonreciprocal exchanges. Students were recruited to participate in an experiment on group competition. Things were arranged so that during the course of the game the student discovered that he was losing badly. At a critical stage (when the student was just about eliminated from the game) one of the "luckier" players in the game sent him an envelope. The envelope contained a supply of chips and a note. For one-third of the students (low obligation subjects), the note explained that the chips were theirs to keep, that the giver did not need them, and that they need not be returned. One-third of the students