

Equity and sexual satisfaction in dating couples

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This study was designed to determine whether or not equity considerations are important in dating couples' most intimate of relationships—their sexual relations. To answer this question, we interviewed 189 college men and women. We proposed: Men and women who feel their relationships are equitable (1) should be more content, and (2) should have more satisfying sexual relations than those who feel either overbenefited or underbenefited. We found strong support for the first hypothesis and some, far weaker support, for the second hypothesis.

Theoretical background

Equity theory consists of four interlocking propositions (see Hatfield *et al.*, 1979c). Theorists argue that individuals try to maximize their outcomes (Proposition I). Groups can maximize collective outcomes by devising an equitable system for sharing resources. Thus, groups try to induce members to behave equitably. They can do this in only one way—by making it more profitable to be 'generous' than to be greedy. They reward those who behave equitably and punish those who do not (Proposition II). When socialized persons find themselves enmeshed in inequitable relationships, they experience distress (Proposition III) and are moved to reduce such distress, by restoring either actual equity or psychological equity to their relationships (Proposition IV).

There is a great deal of evidence that equity theory considerations are critically important in determining how people act in relatively superficial encounters. Equity considerations have been found to be important in such diverse areas as employer/employee relationships, exploiter/victim relationships, and philanthropist/recipient relationships (see Walster *et al.*, 1978). Recently, equity theory has been applied to intimate relationships—to dating couples' encounters (Hatfield *et al.*, 1979b), to married couples' interactions (Traupmann *et al.*, 1981; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1983), and even to extramarital liaisons (Hatfield *et al.*, 1979a). There is accumulating evidence that the same equity considerations that shape relatively superficial encounters shape intimate relationships too. As yet, however, theorists have not explored the extent to which equity considerations are related to what goes on in a couple's *most* intimate of relations, their sexual relations. The present correlational study was designed to do just that.

According to Proposition III, 'When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they will feel.' Thus couples in equitable relationships should feel fairly comfortable about their relationships; couples in inequitable relationships should not.

It is obvious why 'underbenefited' men and women (who feel they are getting far less than they deserve) would feel uncomfortable—they have every reason to feel resentful and angry; but, at first consideration, it is not obvious that their overbenefited mates should feel uneasy too. According to equity theorists, however, they should. The 'overbenefited' may delight in their good fortune, but their delight is likely to be tempered by their guilt and their fear that they might lose it all. Waller (1937) would agree. Citing the epigram that 'in every love affair there is one who loves and one who permits himself to be loved', he pointed out that inequitable relationships are costly to both partners: the less dependent person feels guilty about exploiting his or her mate; the more dependent partner

is exploited and insecure. Waller concluded that such lopsided affairs soon come to a sad end. In studies of more casual encounters, and in a few studies of intimate affairs, researchers have found that equity and distress are typically related as depicted in Fig. 1.

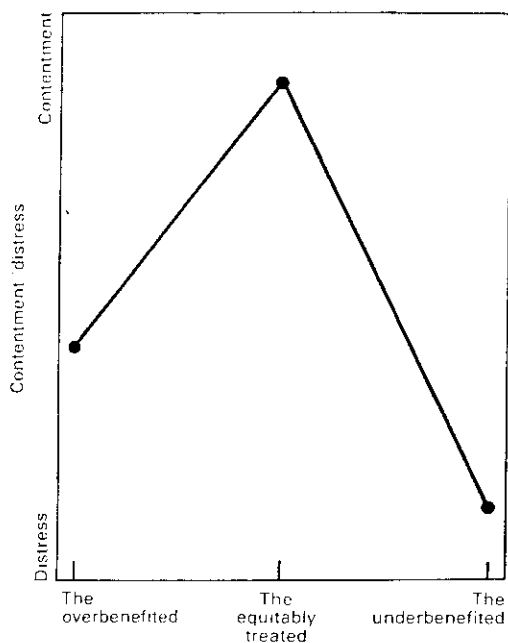


Figure 1. The relationship between equity and contentment/distress.

But how does this relate to sexuality? Social psychologists have argued that marital satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are inexorably linked.

(1) *Sexual satisfaction generates marital satisfaction.* Sociologists argue that sex is critically important to couples. Intensely passionate or companionate feelings contribute to marital happiness. Routine, dismal, frustrating sex can threaten the best of relationships (see Kinsey *et al.*, 1948, 1953; Bell, 1966; Hunt, 1974; DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979).

(2) *Marital satisfaction generates sexual satisfaction.* Sex is a delicate interaction. If couples like or love one another, if they feel equitably treated, if they feel comfortable with one another, sex may go well. If couples dislike or hate one another, feel trapped in inequitable relationships, feel uncomfortable in one another's presence, their deep-seated resentment or guilt may corrode their sexual encounters (see Kinsey *et al.*, 1948, 1953; Berne, 1964; Masters & Johnson, 1966, 1970, 1976; Hunt, 1974; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977.) So *our* argument goes. Are there any data in support of the contention that equitable relationships are better sexually?

Hatfield *et al.* (1979b) interviewed dating men and women. They found that couples in equitable relationships had the most intensely sexual relationships. Most couples in equitable relationships were having sexual intercourse. Most couples in inequitable relationships were not—both the greatly overbenefited and the greatly underbenefited generally stopped before 'going all the way'. Unfortunately, for our purposes, they did not ask daters anything about the *quality* of their sexual experiences. Did the equity/inequity couples felt in their relationship enhance or dampen their sexual experiences with each other? We do not know.

The present study was designed to determine if couples who feel equitably treated have more satisfying, fulfilling, sexual lives than do couples in inequitable relationships.

Method

Subjects

Respondents were 70 men and 119 women enrolled in an introductory human sexuality class. The average student was 20 years old; 96 per cent of the men and 98 per cent of the women were dating someone 'casually'. These students were chosen for our study. (We must emphasize here that our sample consisted entirely of dating couples; it is hoped that in subsequent research, men and women of a variety of ages, and from a variety of cultures, can be studied.)

During the eighth week of the semester, we asked the students to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their current romantic relationships. We assessed the equity/inequity of the dating relationship via *The Hatfield (1978) Global Measure* (see Appendix 1). We assessed contentment/distress via the Austin (1974) measure of contentment/distress and via measures of men and women's contentment with their relationships and with their lives (see Appendix 1). Then we assessed sexual satisfaction in two ways—we assessed overall sexual satisfaction and how satisfied respondents were with the specifics of sex, and how satisfied they thought their partners were (see Appendix 1).

Results and discussion

According to equity theory (see Austin & Walster, 1974*a, b*), although inequity is disturbing to everyone, it is far easier for the overbenefited to accept inequity than for the deprived to do so. Previous research has always found that while the overbenefited are slightly upset by a given inequity, the underbenefited are generally extremely upset by the same magnitude of inequity (see Fig. 1). We embodied these expectations in our statistical analyses by predicting, *a priori*, that our independent variable should be scaled as follows: overbenefited group (+1); equitably treated group (+2); underbenefited group (+4). In the following analyses, we used unequal interval linear and quadratic contrasts (see Hays, 1963).

Equity and contentment/distress

Hypothesis 1 is that casually or steadily dating men and women, who feel their relationships are equitable, will be more content, satisfied and happy with their relationships than will those who feel inequitably treated. The overbenefited should be slightly distressed by the existing inequities; the underbenefited should be extremely distressed (again, see Fig. 1). As in previous studies, the data strongly support this prediction.

We assessed men and women's contentment/distress with their relationships in two ways: via Austin's (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress, and via the measures of contentment with the *relationship*. Men and women in equitable relationships are more content (and less distressed), more satisfied, and more happy with their relationships than are the men and women in inequitable relationships. Overbenefited men and women seem to be somewhat upset by inequity; underbenefited men and women are extremely upset by it. These findings replicate those of a number of earlier studies (see Austin, 1974*a, b*; Hatfield *et al.*, 1979*c*; Traupmann *et al.*, 1981). It appears that how fairly treated people feel is strongly linked to how contented/distressed they feel with their *love relationships*.

Is there any evidence that equity/inequity colours not just one's satisfaction and happiness with one's intimate relationships, but one's satisfaction and happiness with one's entire life? Are intimate relationships so critical that if one is satisfied with *them*, one tends to be satisfied with everything? In this college sample, the answer is Yes. The perceived

fairness of one's dating relationship has a significant effect on one's overall life satisfaction.

Table 1. Relationship between equity of an intimate relationship and contentment/distress (d.f. = 5, 179)

| How equitable is the romantic relationship? | Austin's Total Flood Index ^a | Measures of contentment with relationship ^a | Measures of contentment with life ^a |
|---|---|--|--|
| <i>Men</i> | | | |
| Overbenefited (15) | 2.93 | 6.60 | 6.93 |
| Equitably treated (33) | 3.91 | 7.00 | 7.18 |
| Underbenefited (22) | 1.91 | 5.18 | 6.68 |
| <i>Women</i> | | | |
| Overbenefited (13) | 3.00 | 6.54 | 6.46 |
| Equitably treated (66) | 4.64 | 7.41 | 7.09 |
| Underbenefited (40) | 1.52 | 4.70 | 6.25 |
| Pooled within-cell SD | (1.99) | (1.53) | (1.36) |
| <i>First tests: source</i> | | | |
| Respondents' sex (A) | 1.29 | 0.07 | 1.28 |
| Linear (B) | 42.40*** | 70.00*** | 5.44* |
| Quadratic B* | 27.30*** | 21.60*** | 5.37* |
| A × linear B | 3.97* | 4.01* | 0.48 |
| A × quadratic B* | 1.42 | 1.35 | 0.62 |

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$.

^a The higher the number, the more content, satisfied and happy a respondent feels.

Equity and sexual satisfaction

Earlier, we speculated that people who feel equitably treated should have better sex lives than those who do not (Masters & Johnson, 1970; Kaplan, 1974; Barbach, 1975; Heiman *et al.*, 1976; Zilbergeld, 1978). Thus, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 2) that men and women in equitable relationships would have more satisfying sexual experiences than would the underbenefited or overbenefited.

We assessed sexual satisfaction in two ways: (1) respondents' *overall* estimate of sexual satisfaction; (2) respondents' report as to how satisfied *they* felt immediately after a sexual encounter. As Table 2 indicates, there is *some* weak support for our hypothesis.

When we examine overall sexual satisfaction, we find that there is no evidence that equitably treated men and women are more sexually satisfied than are their peers. The predicted quadratic B effect is *not* significant. In fact, overbenefited men *seem more* sexually satisfied than are equitably treated men, who, in turn, are more satisfied than the underbenefited. It is true that equitably treated *women* are more sexually satisfied than their overbenefited or underbenefited peers. However, the sex × equity interaction is not significant here, nor is it significant in any case. The evidence points to a straight linear effect. The more one is getting out of a relationship, relative to one's partner, the more sexually satisfied one is, *overall*.

Surprisingly, when we turn to some of the more detailed measures—measures of how men and women feel immediately after a sexual encounter—we find that there is reasonable support for Hypothesis 2. When we examine the summary measure, we find

Table 2. Relationship between equity/inequity of an intimate relationship and sexual satisfaction (d.f. = 5,179)

| How equitable is the relationship? | Overall sexual satisfaction ^a | How subject feels after sex | | | How subject thinks partner feels | | |
|------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| | | Loving and close ^a | Satisfied ^a | Σ ^a | Loving and close ^a | Satisfied ^a | Σ ^a |
| <i>Men</i> | | | | | | | |
| Overbenefited (15) | 6.13 | 5.93 | 6.60 | 12.53 | 6.47 | 6.07 | 12.53 |
| Equitably treated (33) | 5.88 | 6.45 | 6.09 | 12.55 | 6.39 | 5.97 | 12.36 |
| Underbenefited (22) | 4.82 | 5.64 | 5.18 | 10.82 | 5.36 | 5.45 | 10.82 |
| <i>Women</i> | | | | | | | |
| Overbenefited (13) | 6.38 | 6.23 | 5.62 | 11.85 | 6.54 | 6.69 | 13.23 |
| Equitably treated (66) | 6.56 | 7.02 | 6.56 | 13.58 | 7.06 | 6.82 | 13.88 |
| Underbenefited (44) | 5.27 | 5.62 | 5.08 | 10.70 | 5.52 | 5.85 | 11.38 |
| Pooled within-cell SD | (2.03) | (2.05) | (2.03) | (3.92) | (2.01) | (2.17) | (3.94) |
| <i>F tests: source</i> | | | | | | | |
| Respondents' sex (A) | 2.77 | 1.49 | 0.02 | 0.51 | 1.76 | 3.94* | 3.15 |
| Linear (B) | 13.60*** | 7.00** | 12.60*** | 10.42** | 14.50** | 4.99* | 10.11*** |
| Quadratic B* | 1.24 | 5.59* | 3.10 | 4.62* | 3.17 | 0.54 | 1.74 |
| A × linear B | 0.04 | 1.02 | 0.00 | 0.32 | 0.35 | 0.34 | 0.39 |
| A × quadratic B | 0.27 | 0.27 | 2.79 | 1.30 | 0.67 | 0.16 | 0.41 |

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$.

^a The higher the number, the more generally satisfied, loving and close, and sexually satisfied the respondent feels and assumes the partner feels.

that both men and women feel slightly better when they are in equitable relationships than when they feel either overbenefited or underbenefited. Once again, equity seems to be slightly more important for women than for men. They are most comfortable in equitable relations, are less so when they are overbenefited or underbenefited. In fact, once again, men seem quite content to be overbenefited. There really is no difference between overbenefited and equitably treated men's scores. (As before, however, the sex × equity interactions are non-significant.)

Additional note. It is difficult to predict just how men and women's equity or inequity of relationships should affect their perception of how their *partners* feel about their sexual relationships. Our best guess is that, if anything, respondents in equitable relationships should see themselves *and* their partners as feeling both more loving and close and more satisfied after sex. When we examine results for overall sexual satisfaction, we find that this speculation does not seem to be correct (quadratic B is not significant).

Conclusion

What can we conclude from these data? The data are not totally consistent. When we look at men and women's estimates of their *overall* sexual satisfaction, there is no evidence that equity considerations are related to how satisfied couples are with their sexual relationships. It is only when we begin to ask about the specifics of sexuality—and ask how psychologically satisfied they are by a given sexual encounter (how close and loving they feel) immediately after a sexual encounter and how physically satisfied they are with sex—that we secure any evidence that men and women care about equity.

These results provide some support for the contention that equity considerations do

have some impact on men and women's sexual satisfaction in a close relationship. These latter results are buttressed by earlier research. Walster *et al.* (1978) found that couples in equitable relationships had the most intensely sexual relations, i.e. most couples in equitable relationships were having sexual intercourse. Couples in inequitable relations were not. Taken together these results provide considerable support for the contention that equity considerations *might* be an important determinant of whether or not people engage in sexual behaviour at all and, if they do, how satisfied they will be with their sexual encounters. The data, however, are *not* conclusive.

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Appendix I

1. Assessing the equity/inequity of the dating relationship

Students were asked to complete *The Hatfield (1978) Global Measure*. Recently, psychologists have become interested in the contracts that people form with others that they are close to. Sometimes these 'contracts' are carefully spelled out. For example, many engaged couples are writing their own marriage contracts. More often, the contracts are simply 'understandings' that people hold about the exchange in the relationship.

Considering your relationship as a whole, what you put into your dating relationship 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 total relationship 'stack up'?

- +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.

As in previous studies, men and women scoring +3 to +1 were considered to be 'overbenefited'. Those scoring 0 were 'equitably treated', and those scoring -3 to -1 were 'underbenefited'.

2. Assessing contentment/distress

As in other equity studies (see Traubmann & Hatfield, 1983), we assessed men's and women's satisfaction with their relationships in three ways:

(a) *The Austin (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress* (reported in Walster *et al.*, 1978). Students 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 (s)he gets out of it—how does that make you feel?' They then indicated how 'content', 'happy', 'angry' and 'guilty' they felt. (Possible answers ranged from: 1='not at all', to 4='very much'.) A *total mood index* was calculated by summing the respondents' 'content' and 'happy' scores and subtracting their 'angry' and 'guilty' scores. The higher the score, the more content (and the less distressed) respondents are.

(b) *Men and women's contentment with their relationships*. Men and women's satisfaction and happiness with their relationships was assessed via two questions: How satisfied are you with your relationship? and How happy are you with your relationship? [Possible answers ranged from: 1=very dissatisfied (unhappy), to 5=completely satisfied (happy).] A *total index* of 'contentment with the relationship' was calculated by summing respondents' replies to these two questions.

(c) *Men and women's contentment with their lives*. Again, men and women's satisfaction and happiness with their lives was assessed via two questions: How satisfied are you with your life in general? and How happy are you with your life in general? Again, a *total index* of 'contentment with life' was calculated by summing respondents' replies to these two questions.

3. Assessing sexual satisfaction

We measured respondents' sexual satisfaction in two ways:

(a) *Overall sexual satisfaction*. We asked: How satisfied are you with your sexual relationship with

your partner? (Possible answers ranged from: 8=extremely satisfied, to 1=extremely dissatisfied.)

(b) *How subject feels after sex.* We assessed how satisfied men and women were immediately after a sexual encounter via two questions. After sex with my partner, *I* usually feel . . . (possible answers ranged from: 8 = extremely loving and close, to 1 = extremely distant and angry). After sex with my partner, *I* usually feel . . . (this time, possible answers ranged from: 8 = extremely sexually satisfied, to 1 = extremely sexually frustrated). A *total index* was calculated by summing respondents' answers to these two questions.

(c) *How subject thinks partner feels after sex.* It is not easy to say how men and women's perceptions of the equity of their relationships should affect their perceptions of *their partners'* sexual satisfaction. However, since intimacy is a two-person affair, we were interested in this question. Thus, we included two questions designed to assess respondents' perceptions as to how satisfied *their partners* were after sex. After sex, I think *my partner* usually feels . . . (as before, possible answers ranged from: 8 = extremely loving and close, to 1 = extremely distant and angry). After sex, I think *my partner* usually feels . . . (again, possible answers ranged from: 8 = extremely sexually satisfied, to 1 = extremely sexually frustrated). Once again, a *total index* was calculated by summing respondents' estimates of their partners' feelings in these two areas.