

Equity Theory and Intimate Relationships¹

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I. Introduction

Social psychologists have always been painfully aware that their field is in desperate need of a general theory of social behavior. Until recently, it was assumed that it was far too early to try to develop one. A number of optimistic, or foolhardy, social psychologists, however, have begun to challenge this assumption (see Moscovici, 1972). For example, equity theory (see Walster et al., 1978 and Walster, 1973) was developed in the hope of providing the glimmerings of the general theory that social psychologists so badly need. It attempts to integrate the insights of reinforcement theory, cognitive theory, psychoanalytic theory, and exchange theory.

Adams and Freedman (1976) argued that equity theory's integrative attempt has been strikingly successful. They observed,

The theory in its present form (Walster et al., 1973) strikes us as having a well articulated structure, being parsimoniously elegant, and having an increased predictive range. These are characteristics that bode well for progress, for as Kuhn

¹ This research was supported in part by National Institutes of Mental Health Grant MH 26681.

(1962) and Rosenberg (1972) have noted, the growth of a discipline, scientific or technological, is intimately tied to the existence and quality of theory (p. 44).

Equity theory has been applied to predict people's reactions in such diverse interactions as industrial relations, exploiter-victim relations, and philanthropist-recipient relations.² It has proved to be surprisingly successful in predicting people's reactions in such casual interactions. Would it be equally successful in predicting their reactions in deeply intimate interactions? Surprisingly, we do not know, for it has not been applied to the most profoundly important of human interactions: intimate relationships. No one has determined whether equity principles guide the interactions of lovers, married couples, or parents and children. In this chapter, we will explore the insights that formal equity theory gives us into intimate romantic and marital relationships. In Section II, we will briefly review equity theory. (Those who are already familiar with equity theory can skip ahead to Sections III and IV.) In Section III, we will review theorists' sharp disagreements as to whether or not equity considerations operate in romantic, mating, and marital relationships. In Section IV, we will review current research which may provide the glimmerings of a resolution to this controversy.

II. The Equity Formulation

Equity theory is a strikingly simple theory. It is composed of four interlocking propositions:

A. The Equity Propositions

PROPOSITION I: Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes equal rewards minus punishments).

PROPOSITION II A: Groups (or rather the individuals comprising these groups) can maximize collective reward by evolving accepted systems for equitably apportioning resources among members. Thus, groups will evolve such systems of equity, and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.

PROPOSITION II B: Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably, and generally punish members who treat others inequitably.

² E. Walster, G. W. Walster, and E. Berscheid review this wide ranging and voluminous Equity research in *Equity: Theory and Research*, New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1978.

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.

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

B. Definitional Formula³

Equity theorists define an equitable relationship to exist when the person scrutinizing the relationship—who could be Participant A, Participant B, or an outside observer—concludes that all participants are receiving equal relative gains from the relationship; that is, when

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

where I_A and I_B designate a scrutineer's perception of Person A's and Person B's inputs, O_A and O_B designate his perception of Person A's and Person B's outcomes, and $|I_A|$ and $|I_B|$ designate the absolute value of their inputs (i.e., the perceived value of their inputs, disregarding sign).⁴

C. Definition of Terms

Inputs (I_A or I_B) are defined as "the scrutineer's perception of the participant's contributions to the exchange, which are seen as entitling the participant to reward or punishment." The inputs that a participant contributes to a relationship can be either assets (entitling him to rewards) or liabilities (entitling him to punishment).

In different settings people consider different inputs to be relevant. For example, in industrial settings businessmen assume that such hard assets as capital or manual labor entitle one to rewards. Such liabilities as incompetence or disloyalty entitle one to punishment. In social settings, friends may assume that such social assets as beauty or kindness entitle one to reward, whereas such liabilities as drunkenness or cruelty entitle one to punishment.

In addition to assessing what participants have put into their rela-

³ For a detailed explanation of the logic underlying this definition of Equity, see Walster et al., 1978.

⁴ There is one restriction on inputs: The smallest absolute input must be ≥ 1 , that is, $|I_A|$ and $|I_B|$ must both be ≥ 1 .

relationship, the scrutineer must also assess whether or not participants are getting the outcomes they deserve from the relationship.

Outcomes (O_A or O_B) are defined as "the scrutineer's perception of the rewards and punishments that participants have received in the course of their relationship with one another." The participants' total outcomes, then, are equal to the rewards they obtain from the relationship minus the punishments that they incur.

The exponents k_A and k_B take on the value of +1 or -1 depending on the sign of A and B's inputs and the sign of A and B's gains (outputs - inputs). [$k_A = \text{sign}(I_A) \times \text{sign}(O_A - I_A)$ and $k_B = \text{sign}(I_B) \times \text{sign}(O_B - I_B)$]⁵

D. Who Decides Whether a Relationship Is Equitable?

According to equity theory, equity is in the eye of the beholder. An observer's perception of how equitable a relationship is will depend on his assessment of the value and relevance of the participants' inputs and outcomes. If different observers assess participants' inputs and outcomes differently—and it is likely that they will—it is inevitable that they will show disagreements as to whether or not a given relationship is equitable. For example, a wife, focusing on the fact that she works long hours, is trapped with no one over 5 to talk to all day, and is constantly engulfed by noise, mess, and confusion, may feel that her relative gains are extremely low. Her husband, focusing on the fact that she gets up in the morning whenever she pleases, and can see whom she wants when she wants may disagree. Moreover, an "objective" observer may calculate the participants' relative gains still differently.

E. The Psychological Consequences of Inequity

According to Proposition III, when individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they feel distress regardless of whether they are the beneficiaries or the victims of the inequity. The overbenefited may label their distress guilt, dissonance, empathy, fear of retaliation, or conditioned anxiety. The underbenefiteds' feelings can be labeled anger or resentment. Essentially, however, both the overbenefited

⁵ The exponent's effect is simply to change the way relative outcomes are computed: If

$k = +1$, then we have $\frac{O-I}{|I|}$, but if $k = -1$ then we have $(|I|) \cdot (O - I)$. Without the exponent k , the formula would yield meaningless results when $I < 0$ and $O - I > 0$, or $I > 0$ and $O - I < 0$.

and the underbenefited share certain feelings—they both experience subjective distress accompanied by physiological arousal (see Austin & Walter [1974]).

F. Techniques by Which Individuals Reduce Their Distress

Proposition IV states that individuals who are distressed by their inequitable relations will try to eliminate their distress by restoring equity to their relationship. There are only two ways by which participants can restore equity to a relationship: They can either restore actual equity or restore psychological equity to it. A participant can restore actual equity by altering his own or his partner's relative gains. For example, imagine that an unskilled laborer discovers that the contractor has been paying him less than the minimum wage. He can reestablish actual equity in four different ways: He can neglect his work (thus lowering his inputs), start to steal equipment from the company (thus raising his own outcomes), make mistakes so that the contractor will have to work far into the night undoing what he has done (thus raising his employer's inputs), or damage company equipment (thus lowering the contractor's outcomes). The ingenious ways people contrive to bring equity to inequitable relationships are documented by Adams (1963).

A participant can restore psychological equity to a relationship by changing his perceptions of the situation. He can try to convince himself that the inequitable relationship is, in fact, equitable. For example, suppose that the exploitative contractor starts to feel guilty about underpaying his unskilled laborers. He can try to convince himself that his relationship with his underpaid and overworked employees is equitable in four ways: He can restore psychological equity by minimizing their inputs ("You wouldn't believe how useless they are"), by exaggerating his own inputs ("Without my creative genius the company would fall apart"), by exaggerating their outcomes ("They really work for the variety it provides"), or by minimizing his outcomes ("The tension on this job is giving me an ulcer").

G. Actual versus Psychological Equity Restoration

At this point, equity theorists confront a crucial question: Can we specify when a person will try to restore actual equity to his relationship, versus when he will settle for restoring psychological equity? From equity theory's Propositions I and IV, we can make a straightforward derivation:

A person may be expected to 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 derive from each strategy. (See, for example, Berscheid & Walster, 1967; Berscheid *et al.*, 1969; and Weick & Nessel, 1968.)

H. Summary

Equity theorists agree that people try to maximize their outcomes (Proposition I). A group of individuals can maximize its collective outcome by devising an equitable system for sharing resources. Thus, groups try to induce members to behave equitably: That is, they try to ensure that all participants receive equal relative outcomes:

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

They can do this in only one way: by making it more profitable to be good than to be greedy. They reward members who behave equitably and punish members who behave inequitably (Proposition II). When socialized persons find themselves enmeshed in inequitable relationships, they experience distress and are moved to reduce such distress either by restoring actual equity or by restoring psychological equity to their relationship (Proposition IV).

III. The Theorists' Debate: Is Equity Theory Applicable to Intimate Relationships?

A. The Theorists' Debate

When equity theorists point out that equity considerations have a profound impact on a wide variety of casual encounters (i.e., business relationships, philanthropist-recipient relationships, and exploiter-victim relationships), few demur. However, when equity theorists proceed a step further, and begin to suggest that equity considerations shape romantic and marital relationships as well, objections are quickly raised.

It is easy to see why people find the suggestion that in intimate relationships there is *quid pro quo* distinctly unsettling. On the one hand, we all long to believe that love relationships are special—that they tran-

scend social exchange. The longing for unconditional love is an immemorial one. We would like to believe that even if we lost our looks, openly expressed our most unacceptable feelings, and could no longer work, our family and friends would continue to love us. On the other hand, we suspect that such love is not to be had. We suspect that if we become incapable (or unwilling) to give anyone anything, we would soon cease to receive much of anything in return.

This uncertainty over whether love transcends or embodies market principles is reflected in the conflicting pronouncements of psychologists. Fromm (1956) is probably the most well-known proponent of the notion that true love goes beyond exchange. In *The Art of Loving*, he grants that most flawed "human love relations follow the same pattern of exchange which governs the commodity and labor market [p. 3].” But, he contends, unconditional love—love given without expectation or desire for anything in return—is the truest, strongest, and best type of love.⁶

Rubin (1973), too, argues that romantic relations are special relations:

The principles of the interpersonal marketplace are most likely to prevail in encounters between strangers and casual acquaintances and in the early stages of the development of relationships. As an interpersonal bond becomes more firmly established, however, it begins to go beyond exchange. In close relationships one becomes increasingly concerned with what he can get from the other person and increasingly concerned with what he can do for the other [pp. 86-87].

A number of other theorists agree with the contention that love transcends equity. See, for example, Douvan (1977), May (1953), Mills (1975), and Murstein *et al.* (1977).

An equally prominent group of theorists insists that equity considerations do apply in intimate relationships.

Marriage is an interlocking, self-contained system. The behavior and the attitudes of one partner *always* stimulate some sort of reaction from the other. . . . We call this system of behavioral responses the *quid pro quo* (or "something for something"). . . . The *quid pro quo* process is an unconscious effort of both partners to assure themselves that they are equals, that they are peers. It is a technique enabling each to preserve his dignity and self-esteem. Their equality may not be apparent to the world at large; it may be based upon values meaningless to anyone else, yet serve to maintain the relationship because the people involved perceive their behavioral balance as fair and mutually satisfying [Lederer & Jackson, 1968, pp. 177-179].

Patterson (1971) adds:

⁶ Even this champion of unconditional love, however, inadvertently finds himself in the equity camp. Although Fromm claims that equity considerations demean love relations, he is moved to promise his readers that if they love truly they will reap a handsome return. "[In] truly giving, he cannot help receiving that which is given back to him. Giving implies to make the other a giver also . . . [p. 21]."

There is an odd kind of equity which holds when people interact with each other. In effect, we get what we give, both in amount and in kind. Each of us seems to have his own bookkeeping system for love, and for pain. Over time, the books are balanced [p. 26].

Other theorists agree that in love relationships—as in all other relationships—considerations of equity and the marketplace prevail (see, for example, Bernard, 1964; Blau, 1964; McCall, 1966; Scanzoni, 1972; and Storer, 1966). Walster *et al.* (1978) argue that the equity principles which operate so relentlessly in casual relations operate in intimate relations as well. They agree that casual and intimate relationships differ in a number of ways.⁷ At the very least, they differ in the intensity of liking (or loving); the depth and breadth of information exchange; the duration of the relationship; the value of the resources exchanged; the variety of the resources exchanged; the substitutability of resources; and the unit of analysis (from “you” and “me” to “we”). However, they insist that the fact that casual and intimate relations differ in so many important ways should simply affect (a) how easy or how difficult it is to calculate equity in a casual versus an intimate relationship and (b) how the participants in the respective relationships choose to restore equity. However, the same equity processes, they assert, operate in both kinds of relationships.

When faced with the compelling arguments on both sides on the issue of whether intimate relationships transcend or embody equity principles, there is only one thing to do: gather systematic research. Let us begin by defining what we mean by intimacy. What are the characteristic features of an intimate relationship? Why are these relationships so hotly defended as special? Why are they so difficult to systematically examine and understand? What implications should the differences between casual and intimate relationships have for perceptions of and reactions to equity or inequity?

B. Definition: What Do We Mean by “Intimate Relationships”?

Intimate / 'int-a-mat / adj. (alter. of obs. intimate, fr. L. *intimatus*) 1: a: intrinsically ESSENTIAL b: belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature 2: marked by a warm friendship developing through long association 3: a: marked by very close association contact, or familiarity b: suggesting informal warmth or privacy 4: of a very personal or private nature [Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 444].

Supreme Court Justice Stewart once said of pornography that he couldn't define it, “But I know it when I see it.” Most of us would second

⁷ We will provide a lengthy discussion of these differences in Section III B.

his statement with regard to intimate relationships. We begin with a provisional definition: Intimates are loving persons whose lives are deeply entwined. When we reflect upon such relationships—relationships between best friends, lovers, spouses, and parents and children—it appears that they are generally marked by a number of characteristics, among them the following:

1. INTENSITY OF LIKING (LOVING)

Intimate relationships are carried on by people who like or love each other. Of course, human relationships are complex. Sometimes intimates feel unadulterated liking or love for each other. More often, their affection is veined with occasional feelings of dislike or even hatred. However, if an intimate relationship is to remain intimate, participants must basically like or love each other (see Walster & Walster, 1978).

2. DEPTH AND BREADTH OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE

In casual relationships, individuals usually exchange only the sketchiest of information. Intimates generally share profound information about each other's personal histories, values, strengths and weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, hopes, fears, etc.

Altman and Taylor (1973) provide a painstaking analysis of the social-penetration process. Their comparison of the extremes of intimacy provides a vivid example of the difference between casual and intimate relationships in the amount and kind of information exchanged. Altman and Taylor (1973) conclude that, with few exceptions, as intimacy progresses “interpersonal exchange gradually progresses from superficial, nonintimate areas to more intimate, deeper layers of the selves of the social actors [p. 6].” The more intimate we are with someone, the more information we are willing to reveal to him, and the more we expect him to reveal to us (see Altman & Taylor, 1973; Huesmann & Levinger, 1976; Jourard, 1971; & Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1968).

3. LENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP

Casual relationships are usually short-term. Intimate relationships are expected to endure, and generally do endure, over a long period of time. For example, Toffler (1970) cites husband-wife relationships and parent-child relationships as the most enduring of all relationships. “‘Til death do us part’ is still our cultural ideal for marriage. This fact has two important consequences for the way equity principles operate in intimate relationships.

Perception of Inequity. It should be easier to calculate equity in casual relationships than in intimate ones, for over a short span it is easy to assess who owes whom what. Strangers in a bar, for example, need only remember who bought the last drink to determine who should pick up the tab for the next. In intimate relationships it is far more difficult to calculate equity: Should the drinks I served my husband when we were dating count when determining who should pay for the case of Scotch we bought today? How far back in a relationship is it fair to go in making such calculations? In the short-term relationships equity theorists have studied heretofore, participants could usually distinguish what was equitable from what was not with some ease. We suspect, however, that participants in intimate relationships may have a far harder time defining equity-inequity.

Tolerance of Perceived Inequity. Participants in casual and intimate relationships are likely to differ in regard to when perceived inequities should be redressed. Those in casual relationships are more likely to feel that unless existing imbalances are redressed soon they will probably never be redressed at all. Intimates, committed to long-range interaction, are more likely to be tolerant of imbalances, since they know that they will have ample time to set things right.

4. VALUE OF RESOURCES EXCHANGED

A number of exchange theorists (Aronson, 1970; Huesmann & Levinger, 1976; and Levinger & Snolk, 1972) have observed that as a relationship grows in intimacy, the value of the rewards and punishments a pair can give one another increases.

a. Value of rewards. Many theorists have observed that intimates' rewards are especially potent. For example, Huesmann and Levinger's (1976) elegant incremental exchange model of dyadic interaction has as its fundamental assumption: "that the expected value of a dyad's rewards increases as the depth of the relationship increases . . . [p. 196]." Levinger, Senn, and Jorgensen (1970) point out that a reward such as the compliment "I'm glad I met you" is far more potent when it comes from an intimate than when it comes from a casual acquaintance. Moreover, intimates possess a bigger storehouse of rewards than acquaintances do. People are usually willing to invest far more of their resources in an intimate relationship than in a casual one. Thus, intimates are able to provide their partners with more valuable rewards (time, effort, intimate information, money, etc.) than acquaintances are.

b. Value of punishments. The punishments intimates can inflict on

each other are as potent as the rewards they can exchange. For example, if a stranger at a party loudly announces that I am a selfish bore, I lose little; I can dismiss his words as those of a boor who doesn't really know what kind of a person I am. But if my best friend were to tell me the same thing, I would be crushed—she knows me, and thinks that of me! Aronson (1970) put it succinctly: "Familiarity may breed reward, but it also breeds the capacity to hurt."

5. VARIETY OF RESOURCES EXCHANGED

As a relationship grows in intensity, the variety of rewards and punishments a pair can exchange increases. Recent theoretical and empirical work by Uriel Foa and his associates provide a useful framework for discussing this point. Foa and others (see Donnenworth & Foa, 1974; Foa, 1971; Teichman, 1971; and Turner, Foa, & Foa, 1971) have argued that the resources of interpersonal exchange fall into six classes: (a) love, (b) status, (c) information, (d) money, (e) goods, and (f) services. We suspect that casual as compared with intimate relationships differ markedly in both the types and the variety of resources exchanged. In casual exchanges, participants exchange only a few types of resources. Furthermore, since casual relationships are such short-term relationships, participants probably feel lucky if they can manage to negotiate an exchange only of those resources whose value is commonly understood—such as money, goods, and services. They simply are not in business long enough to work out any very complicated exchanges. Thus, their exchanges may be expected to be focused primarily on money and goods.

We suspect that in intimate exchanges, however, participants exchange resources from all six of the aforementioned classes. Like participants in a casual relationship, intimates can exchange money, goods, and services. But they also negotiate exchanges involving love, status, and information—it may even be that they are primarily concerned with such exchanges.

The contrast between the two kinds of relationships in regard to exchange suggests a second reason why it is easier for acquaintances than for intimates to calculate equity. The former exchange resources of set value. The latter exchange set-value commodities plus commodities of indeterminate value. It is no wonder, then, that intimates may find the calculation of equity—inequity a mind-boggling task.

6. SUBSTITUTABILITY OF RESOURCES

Within a particular exchange, participants in a casual relationship, we would venture, tend to be limited to exchanging resources from the same class, whereas intimates have far more freedom to exchange re-

sources from entirely different classes. Casual relationships usually exist in a single context where like is exchanged for like. Consider, for example, an academic context: If I lend my notes to the classmate I see three times a week, I expect to be repaid in kind the next time I miss a lecture. If I invite my neighbor to a dinner party, I expect to be invited to one. In contrast, intimate relationships exist in a variety of contexts. Participants have at their disposal the whole range of interpersonal resources, and freely exchange one type of resource for another. Thus, the wife who owes her husband money can pay him back in a number of ways: She can defer to his wish to go golfing on Sunday (status), or bake him a special dinner (services), or tell him how much she loves him and how grateful she is for his generosity (love). These responses may be less satisfactory to her husband than direct monetary repayment, but not necessarily so. Intimates spend much of their time negotiating the values and exchangeability of various behaviors—the terms, so to speak, of their relationship. This is what much of getting acquainted is all about (see Scanzoni, 1972).

Once again, our comparison of the variety of resources involved in casual and intimate relationships leads us to the conclusion that it is easier to calculate equity in casual relationships than in intimate ones.

7. THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS: FROM YOU AND ME TO WE

Intimates, through identification with and empathy for their partners, come to define themselves as a unit—as one couple. They see themselves not merely as individuals interacting with others but also as part of a partnership, interacting with other individuals, partnerships, and groups. This characteristic may have a dramatic impact on intimates' perceptions of what is and what is not equitable.

Just what do we mean when we say that intimates see themselves as a unit? Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying the unit is a we. Manifestations of this we-ness are the joy and pride parents feel at the success and happiness of their child ("That's our boy!"), the distress a wife experiences when her husband has been denied a hoped-for opportunity; the intense pleasure a lover feels while striving to make his beloved happy (see Boulding, 1973). Now, of course, parents, the wife, and the lover are directly affected by what happens to their partners. The parents may be supported in their old age by a successful son; the wife's household allowance as well as the husband's suffers when the husband is denied his hoped-for promotion; the lover may receive affection for his labors. But intimates' identification with their partners may cause them to experience genuine, first-hand emotions aside from such returns. A number of theorists have noted that intimates' outcomes often become hopelessly intertwined. Blau (1964), for instance, speculates, "The repeated experience of being rewarded by the increased at-

tachment of a loved one after having done a variety of things to please him may have the effect that giving pleasure to loved ones becomes intrinsically gratifying [p. 77]."

What implications does the we-ness phenomenon have for the application of equity theory to intimate relationships? There is one very important implication. Equity theorists have always known that to explain and predict the behavior of individuals in a relationship, one must first be able to define the relationship—one must know who is interacting or relating with whom. The student of intimate relationships must constantly ask what is happening in the intimate relationship at the moment of observation. Are the individuals relating to each other as individuals? Or are they relating as a couple to others? If the intimates are relating as a couple to others, then the individual members are no longer the appropriate unit of analysis. It is the couple's inputs and outcomes which are important, and which form the basis for a prediction of the behavior of the individual members as a twosome.

C. Summary

In this section, we have maintained that the same equity processes operate in both casual and intimate relationships. We have acknowledged that casual and intimate relationships differ in a number of ways: (a) in the intensity of liking (loving), (b) in the depth and breadth of information exchange, (c) in the time span of the relationship, (d) in the value of resources exchanged, (e) in the variety of resources exchanged, (f) in the substitutability of resources, (g) in the unit of analysis (from You and Me to We). The fact that the casual and intimate relations differ in so many important ways should affect (a) how easy or how difficult it is to calculate equity in a relationship and (b) how casual acquaintances and how intimates choose to restore equity.

We can now return to our original question: Is there any evidence that equity considerations shape not only casual interactions but intimate ones as well? There is some. In Section IV we will describe the NIMH project which pinpoints the equity hypotheses that need to be tested, and review the sparse experimental evidence that has already been collected in an effort to determine whether or not equity theory does provide some fresh insights into intimate relations.

IV. The Accumulating Evidence

Recently, we began a project designed to address the question of whether equity applies to intimate relationships.

A. Developing Scales to Measure the Equity-Inequity of a Relationship

Surprisingly, in spite of all the speculation about whether equity is, or is not, important in a relationship, theorists had never taken the trouble to develop any measures to assess how equitable relationships are. Thus, our first step was to develop such scales.

Marriage and family researchers⁸—as well as such social psychologists as Levinger, Murstein, Olson, Rubin, and Susman—have accumulated an abundance of scattered information about what couples think they ought to contribute to their relationships and what they think they have a right to expect from them. Equity researchers have now taken the next step and have developed scales that measure what couples believe they are both contributing to their relationships, what rewards and frustrations they are reaping from them, and, thus, how equitable their relationships are. These scales are the following:

1. THE HATFIELD (1978) GLOBAL MEASURE OF EQUITY-INEQUITY

This measure asks men and women's general impressions about the fairness of their relationship.

Considering what you put into your 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 would you say your relationship "stacks 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.

2. THE TRAUPMANN, UTNE, HATFIELD (1978) SCALES: PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY-INEQUITY⁹

This measure is designed to give us a fine-grained analysis of the romantic give and take.

⁸ See Blood and Wolfe (1960), Burgess and Wallin (1953), Goode (1956), Hops, Wills, Weiss, and Patterson (1972), Hudson and Henzi (1969), Komarovsky (1971), Locke (1951), and Waller (1938).

⁹ For detailed description of the administration procedure for these scales, a complete

Couples are asked to assess the fairness of their relationship in four different areas:

1. Personal concerns.
2. Emotional concerns.
3. Day-to-day concerns.
4. Opportunities gained and lost.

The personal area includes such characteristics as how attractive spouses are, how sociable, how intelligent. The emotional area touches such matters as how much spouses like each other, how much they love each other, their understanding of each others needs, their sexual relationship, and their commitment to the total relationship. Day-to-day change is concerned with the money they both bring in, the day-to-day maintenance of the house, being easy to live with, fitting in with each other's friends and relatives, and the like.

Another area assessed, opportunities gained or lost, includes such things as the opportunity to be married, the opportunity to have children, and such losses as the chance to have married someone else.

As in the Hatfield (1978) Global Measures, respondents are asked how their relationship "stacks up" in each of these areas. A total Equity score is calculated by simply summing up a person's responses to each of the 25 items that constitute the index.

Now that equity theorists are able to measure couples' inputs and outcomes and the equity-inequity of their relationships, we are able to move on to some fundamental questions.

B. Determining Whether or Not Equity Theory Provides Some Fresh Insights into Intimate Relations

According to equity theorists, participants in equitable as opposed to inequitable relationships should react in markedly different ways:

1. Men and women in equitable relationships should be fairly content. Men and women who feel they've received either far more, or far less, than they deserve, should be uncomfortable. The more inequitable their relationship, the more distressed they should be.
2. Since inequities are disturbing, couples may be expected to keep chipping away at them over the course of their marriages. Underbenefited men and women, who feel they are contributing far more than their fair share to the relationship, should be motivated to demand more from their partners. Their guilty partners may well agree to cede such rewards. Thus

description of the scales themselves, and reliability and validity information, see Traupmann (1978) or contact the authors.

(all things being equal) relationships should become more and more equitable over time.

3. In all marriages, there are certain crises periods, for example, when the dating couple marries, moves in together, and begins to discover what marriage is really like; when the first child arrives; when the children leave home; when the husband loses his job or retires. At such times of precipitous change, a couple may find that their once-equitable relationship is now woefully unbalanced. We would expect that if we contacted couples before such crises, in the midst of such crises, and then again after they had endured them for some time, we would find that the couples had conceived of effective ways to reestablish the equitableness of their relationship, or that their relationship had floundered.

4. When people find themselves enmeshed in markedly inequitable relationships, they may be expected either to work to change them, or to abandon the relationship for a more satisfying one. Thus, we would expect that if we examined equitable versus inequitable couples' marital satisfaction and happiness, their love versus hate, their perceptions of their marriages' permanence, and their divorce rates, we should find that equitable relationships are sturdy relationships, whereas inequitable relationships are fragile ones.

In our forthcoming research, we plan to test these Equity hypotheses.

Let us, then, review the evidence which does exist for each of these hypotheses:

HYPOTHESIS I: The Impact of Equity on Contentment—Distress

According to equity theory's Proposition III, couples in equitable relationships should be reasonably content; couples in inequitable relationships should be deeply distressed. Thus, we predict that the more equitable a couple's relationship, the more satisfied they will be.¹⁰

One additional question that anyone interested in the development of relationships would wish to ask is: What happens when inequity persists for a prolonged period—say, for example, when an individual knows full well that he or she is being shabbily treated, but is unable to do anything about it, and is unable to leave (perhaps because of religious sanctions or responsibility to children). Does he or she continue to experience underlying feelings of distress, as equity theory predicts he or she should? Or

¹⁰ In pretesting, we found that most couples agree as to who is contributing more, and who is contributing less, to the relationship. Now and then, of course, there is disagreement. Both participants may insist they are the over-contributing partner—or the under-contributing one. When this happens, we would expect both participants to act as if they were the over-contributing (or under-contributing) partner—both insisting they are entitled to more (or less).

does injustice, somehow, become something he or she is emotionally resigned to? It is hoped that our data will help us to answer this question.

Previous researchers provide some support for Hypothesis I. Some examples: Berscheid et al. (1973) posed an intriguing question which is related to our analysis. What happens to a couple that is markedly mismatched—when one partner is clearly superior to the other? The authors predicted that both partners in an inappropriate match would be unhappy. It is obvious why the underbenefited partner should be dissatisfied. Every time he looks around, he realizes that he is sacrificing rewards to which he believes he is entitled. But, they argued, the lucky mate is not really so lucky, after all. The overbenefited mate is confronted with a wrenching dilemma. On the one hand, he is eager to keep his prestigious prize; he is well aware that he has little chance of again attracting so desirable a partner. On the other hand, he is also painfully aware that his partner has little reason to stay with him. For these reasons, Berscheid et al. predicted that both partners in an inequitable relationship would feel uneasy about their relationship; they would both suspect that their alliance might be an unstable one (see also Blau, 1964; Waller, 1937).

Berscheid et al. (1973) tested Hypothesis I in the following way: The authors requested *Psychology Today* readers to fill out a questionnaire concerning their current dating, mating, or marital relations. They measured readers' perceptions of the equitableness—inequitableness by means of a single question.¹¹

Describe your partner's desirability:

- Much more desirable than I.
- Slightly more desirable than I.
- As desirable as I.
- Slightly less desirable than I.
- Much less desirable than I.

Then, they asked readers how satisfied they were with their marital relationships. As predicted, readers who were matched with "appropriate" partners were more satisfied with their relationships than were individuals whose partners were far more, or far less desirable, than themselves.

Walster, Walster, and Traupmann (1978) interviewed 500 University of Wisconsin men and women, who were dating casually or steadily. First, they asked students to consider all the things a man or woman could put into and get out of a relationship, and then to estimate how their relationship "stacked up": Did they feel overbenefited?, Equitably treated?, Underbenefited?

¹¹ When Berscheid et al. (1973) did their early research, appropriate measures of Equity—Inequity did not yet exist.

Then they asked the men and women:

When you think about your relationship—what you put into it, and what you get out of it—how does that make you feel? How content do you feel? How happy do you feel? How angry do you feel? How guilty do you feel?

They found that the more equitable a couple's relationship, the more content and the happier they were.

As Table 4.1 indicates, those men and women who feel they are getting far more than they really deserve from their partners feel uncomfortable. They are less content, less happy, and a lot more guilty than their peers. Of course, those men and women who feel they deserve a lot more than they are getting are understandably upset too. They are a lot less content, less happy, and a lot angrier than their peers.

Recently, Jane Traupman (1978) and Mary Utne (1978) asked a random sample of newlyweds—couples who had been married between 3 and 8 months—to participate in an interview study of marriage. They asked couples how fair and equitable they considered their marriages to be. They measured Equity by two different scales:¹² (a) *The Hatfield (1978) Global Measures of Equity-Inequity*, and (b) *The Traupmann, Utne, Walster (1977) Scales: Participants' Perceptions of Equity-Inequity*.

From these estimates, the authors were able to calculate whether men and women considered themselves to be overbenefited, equitably treated, or underbenefited. Couples also completed a series of questionnaires that assessed their level of contentment or distress:

1. Austin's (1974) *Contentment-Distress Measure*.
2. The Locke-Wallace (1959) *Marital Adjustment Test* (modified version).
3. Hatfield's *Measures of Passionate and Companionate Love*.

Traupmann and Utne proposed that spouses who feel equitably treated will feel happier, more content, less angry, and less guilty than will spouses who feel underbenefited or overbenefited.

As Figure 4.1 illustrates, their hypothesis was confirmed with qualifications. Women in equitable marriages were more content than women who felt overbenefited or underbenefited. [$T-U-W: F_{4227}(\text{quadratic}) = 3.89, p < .5$.] They were also less happy. (But in this case, the F (quadratic) was not significant.) The men's results were similar, except that this time the "content" variable was not quite significant, whereas the "happy" variable was. Equitably treated men were significantly more happy than were their inequitably treated counterparts [$F_{4227}(\text{quadratic}) = 5.79, p < .01$.] Turning to negative affect, they found a significant curvilinear trend for

¹² These scales are available in Walster, Walster and Berscheid (1978).

TABLE 4.1
The Effect of Equity-Inequity on Contentment-Distress

How equitable-inequitable is the relationship?	How content ^a	How happy ^a	How angry ^a	How guilty ^a
Person is getting far more than he feels he deserves.	2.91	3.06	1.54	1.83
Person is getting somewhat more than he feels he deserves.	3.51	3.69	1.36	1.51
Person is getting just what he feels he deserves.	3.51	3.61	1.36	1.31
Person is getting somewhat less than he feels he deserves.	3.26	3.42	1.75	1.44
Person is getting far less than he feels he deserves.	2.70	2.98	1.98	1.39

^a The higher the number, the more content, happy, angry, or guilty the person feels.

anger—both underbenefited and overbenefited women were more angry than the equitably treated women [$T-U-W: F_{4227}(\text{quadratic}) = 7.08, p < .01$]. Overbenefited women were slightly, but not significantly, more guilty than the equitably treated and underbenefited women. The men were remarkably unmoved to guilt or anger. There were no significant differences between the three groups for either anger or guilt. The curve for guilt is virtually a straight line! The results for anger and guilt for women and men are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Austin's (1978) *Total Mood Index* (reported in Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), an overall index of affect, was calculated by summing the respondents' "content" and "happy" scores and subtracting their "anger" and "guilt" scores: $\text{AFFECT} = \text{content} + \text{happy} - \text{guilty} - \text{angry}$. The higher the total score, the more content (and the less distressed) they are.

These results are also found in Figure 4.1. The curve for women is precisely what was predicted: Equitably treated women are significantly more content (and less distressed) than underbenefited and overbenefited women [$T-U-W: F_{4227}(\text{quadratic}) = 9.38, p < .01$]. The results for men were not significant but did fall into the same pattern as that for women. The means were Underbenefited = 3.65; Equity = 4.53 and Overbenefited = 4.33.

In combination, then, the results for the four "affect" variables lend support to Hypothesis I. Equitably treated, as compared with inequitably

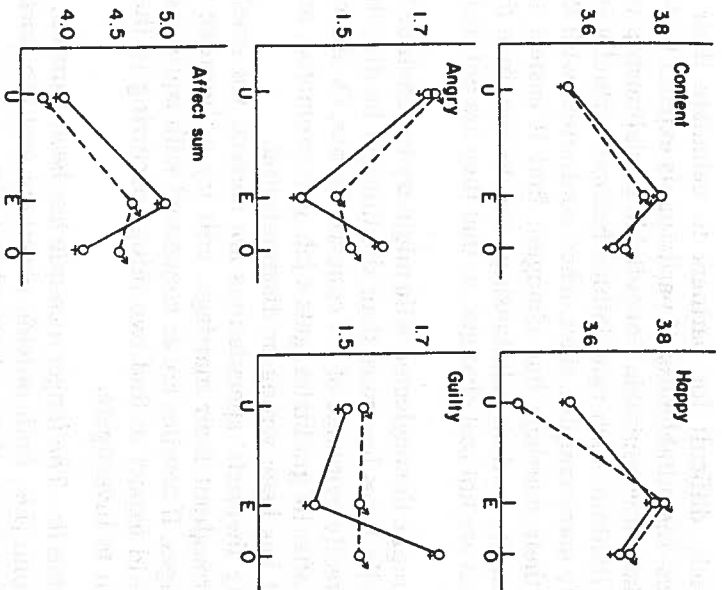


Figure 4.1 The affect variables of content, happy, angry, and guilty and the Austin Total Mood Measure as a function of the perceived equity-inequity in the marriage. $\delta =$ men; $\square =$ women; U = Underbenefited; E = Equitably treated; O = Overbenefited.

treated women, show more positive and less negative affect. Equitably treated, as compared with inequitably treated, men report more positive affect. This pattern of results is especially convincing when one considers that the sample consists of newlyweds. According to cultural lore, for most couples the first year of marriage is blissfully happy—the disagreements are minor, the motivation to please is great. Nevertheless, in this fairly stringent test of the extent to which equity-inequity affects happiness, we see that perceptions that the marital exchange is unfair are related to discontent. We see that feeling underbenefited is damaging. We see that, to a lesser extent, feeling overbenefited is distressing. Equity is the most pleasant state for men and women.

The authors also expected equitably treated spouses to feel happier and more satisfied with their marriages than spouses who feel underbenefited or spouses who feel overbenefited.

The authors found strong confirmation for this hypothesis, for both men and women. Equitably treated men were significantly more happy with their marriages than overbenefited or underbenefited men [$T-U-W: F_{4,227}(\text{quadratic}) = 14.08, p < .001$] and they were more satisfied with their

marriages [$T-U-W: F_{4,227}(\text{quadratic}) = 6.37, p < .01$]. Equitably treated women were also happier and more satisfied with their marriages than were their deprived or indulged counterparts. For the women, the ($T-U-W$) F s were $7.31, p < .01$ for the “happy with marriage” responses and $4.78, p < .05$ for the “satisfied with marriage” responses. Figure 4.2 plots mean responses to the happiness and satisfaction questions for the underbenefited, equitably treated, and overbenefited men and women.

Hypotheses II-IV: The Restoration of Equity-Inequity

If we find that couples in equitable relationships are content, whereas those in inequitable ones are deeply distressed, what then? According to equity theory's Proposition IV, when couples find themselves enmeshed in an inequitable relationship, they will be motivated to do one of three things to get things right: (a) They will try to make their relationship actually more equitable. Or (b) they will try to convince themselves (and their partner) that their relationship is really more equitable than it seems (they will try to restore psychological equity). Or (c) they will abandon their inequitable relationship.

1. RESTORATION OF ACTUAL EQUITY

One way participants in an inequitable relationship can restore equity is by inaugurating real changes in the relationship. Consider, for example, a marriage in which the husband is the overcontributing partner, the wife the undercontributing one. The overcontributing partner who feels that he is contributing far more than his fair share to the relationship—will naturally be motivated to set things right by demanding better treatment from his partner. The undercontributing partner—who is contributing less than her share—may well reluctantly agree to grant such rewards:

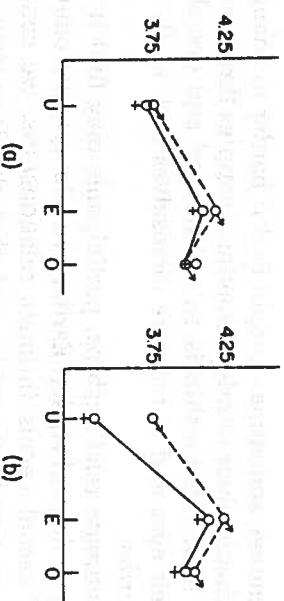


Figure 4.2 Satisfaction (a) and happiness (b) with marriage as a function of perceived equity-inequity in the marriage.

Physical attractiveness: The overcontributing partner can easily slip into becoming careless about the stylishness of his dress, his cleanliness, or his diet.

Conversation: The overcontributing partner might begin to feel that he's entitled to conversation or solitude, whichever is his inclination, and that he's entitled to be as grumpy as he pleases, and so on.

Finances: He might feel a little less pressure to work hard (or to save money) merely so that his partner's wants can be fulfilled.

Expressions of Love and Affection: He might become a little less careful about reassuring his partner of his love and admiration.

Self-sacrifice: He might become especially reluctant to make sacrifices for his partner's benefit. When an argument arises over who should take the car in for servicing, or over whose mother they should visit at Christmas, or over whether they should go to a play or go on a hunting trip, he might be inclined to take a strong stand.

Sex: The person who feels he is already putting too much into the marriage may well feel reluctant to sacrifice himself to make his partner's life fulfilling. He might feel that his partner should be as warm or as aloof as he prefers; that his partner should be willing to explore the sexual practices that he likes; that she should be tolerant of his extramarital affairs, but refrain from making him jealous and insecure.

Of course, the reactions of the undercontributing partner (assumed, in this case, to be the wife) would be quite different. She, believing she's already getting much more than she deserves, might be especially eager to set things right by agreeing to treat the partner better. There are a variety of ways, then, that a mismatched couple can restore actual equity to their relationship.

There are some anecdotal data showing that couples do try to "fine-tune" their relationships in such practical ways. See, for example, Jones (in Palmer [1974]), Komarovsky (1971), and Bakke (1940a,b).

2. RESTORATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUITY

Of course, sometimes people find it harder to change their behavior than to change their minds. Sometimes couples threatened by the discovery that their relationship is an unbalanced and unstable one prefer to close their eyes and to reassure themselves that, really, everything is in perfect order.

In intimate relationships, participants may find it fairly easy to restore psychological equity. Earlier, we attempted to enumerate characteristics of casual versus intimate relationships; we concluded that they differed in numerous ways, and that the long-term, complex nature of intimate relationships means that, even in the best of circumstances,

it is extremely difficult for partners to calculate their relationship's equitableness--inequitableness. If participants expand their horizons and try to calculate how equitable--inequitable a relationship will be over the course of a lifetime, such calculations become virtually impossible.

Probably many couples, then, when confronted with the fact that the balance of their marriage has changed, find it easiest to restore psychological equity to their relationship, and to convince themselves that these changes are not real changes, or that they are not really very important.

For example, the neglected wife might try to convince herself that her husband really loves her more than she thought he did, that working all the time is really evidence of his concern for her. Or she might convince herself that after he graduates, gets a job, gets promoted, or retires he will rectify what has been wrong or disappointing.

If equity theorists' speculations are correct, we would predict that couples, throughout their marriage, will try to improve the balance of their marriages. If couples are as concerned with equity as we think they are, we would expect to find two things occurring in the marriages we have chosen to investigate.

HYPOTHESIS II: The longer a couple has been married, the more equitable everyone (i.e., both outside observers and the participants themselves) will perceive their relationship to be.

HYPOTHESIS III: Critical Periods in a Relationship

Probably the strongest evidence that couples are profoundly concerned with the equitableness--inequitableness of their relationship might come from the observation of couples whose relationships are in the process of undergoing precipitous change. Marital shifts may be produced by a variety of factors:

a. **Getting Acquainted.** Regardless of how well engaged or newly married couples think they know each other, they are likely to make some marked discoveries about their own and their partner's characteristics once they began living together. Participants may come to realize that the relationship they thought would be so equitable is, in fact, grossly inequitable.

b. **Having Children.** When a couple has their first child, the balance of their relationship may shift markedly.

c. **Day-to-Day Changes.** Over the years, people change. The shy young bride may become less shy and far more witty and compassionate after raising four or five impish children. Her devil-may-care bridegroom

may settle down and become far more dependable, and more irritable, than the man she married. Such mundane changes as these may produce inequities.

d. Dramatic Changes. Sometimes dramatic changes occur in partner's inputs. The ugly-ducking wife may join Weight Watchers and emerge a beautiful swan. Eventually, the impoverished medical student is transformed into an affluent doctor. The once good provider may be laid off. The handsome soldier may become a scarred paraplegic. Such changes may, of course, drastically alter a relationship's balance.

e. Retirement. When a man or woman retires, the perceived equity of his or her relationships may shift markedly.

One exciting question that equity theorists have asked is: What effect do such changes in the equitableness-inequitableness of a relationship have on the dynamic equilibrium of a marriage? Equity theorists have maintained that the smallest of changes in a marriage's balance are likely to send reverberations throughout the entire system.

As an ancillary proposition of Hypothesis III, we maintain that: If we examine marriages at the time of crisis, we may well find them to be markedly inequitable. However, if we reexamine them many months later, we will find that, somehow, participants have found a way to begin to set things right. (See Figure 4.3 for a graphic depiction of this process.)

3. EQUITY THEORY VERSUS THE ALTERNATIVES

In this chapter, we have focused on the equity perspective so exclusively that it might seem as if the equity perspective were obviously the only valid one. We are fully aware, however, that Hypotheses I-III are controversial. Here are just two questions critics might pose:

a. Are happily married couples concerned with equity? We should take a moment here to remind our readers that eminent marriage-and-the-family researchers and social psychologists have argued that (a) happily married couples should not be, and are not, concerned with equity, and (b) thus, there is no necessary connection between a relationship's duration and its equitableness, or, if there is, the relationship is the opposite of what we hypothesize. Moreover, Murstein et al. (1977) and Rubin (1973) argue that the time to calculate whether or not a relationship is equitable is before marriage. After that, it's too late. When one tries to keep tabs on a continuing relationship, the effort is destructive as well as futile. They maintain that equity considerations operate more strongly in dating relationships than in marital ones.

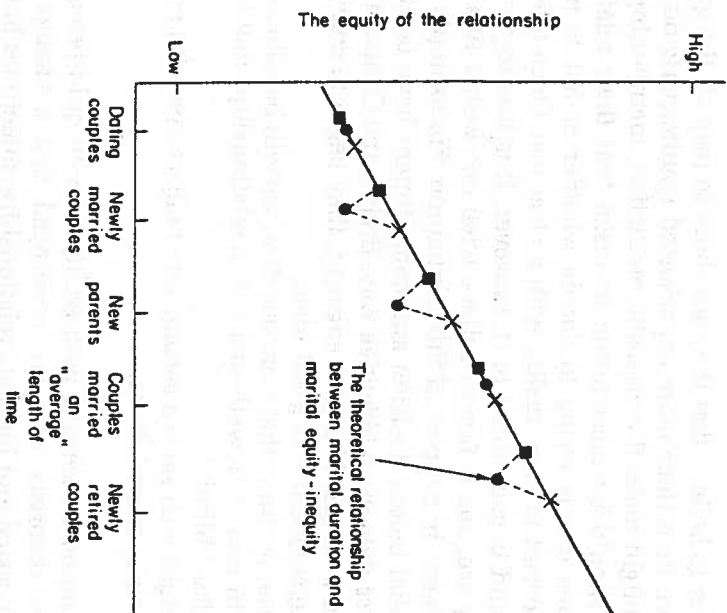


Figure 4.3 The impact of an initial "crisis," followed by the passage of time on marital equity-inequity. ■—theoretical precrisis level of equity-inequity; ●—initial interview; X—second interview (1 year later).

An exchange-orientation . . . [was] . . . hypothesized to be quite appropriate for limited or beginning friendships, and exchange-couples were predicted to develop greater friendship intensity than other combinations. . . . Perceived exchange equity is almost impossible to attain in marriage because of greater sensitivity to self than to others. It was hypothesized that exchange-orientation is inimical to marriage adjustment, with exchange-couples being less happy than other possible exchange combinations (exchange-nonexchange, nonexchange-nonexchange) [p. 1].

Other social psychologists have admitted that there is good reason to argue both ways. They simply cannot predict whether equity considerations will be more important in dating or in marital relationships. On the one hand, one could argue that dating couples would be most prone to believe their relationship was equitable. Dating couples and newlyweds probably have only the sketchiest of ideas of what their partners are really like. Thus, they find it very easy to believe what they would like to believe. Long-married couples, on the other hand, have been forced to expose their illusions to reality. They are likely to have a painfully accurate idea of what their partners are really like. Thus, it may be that newlyweds

find it far easier to believe that they are about to reap all the good things they so deserve than their more experienced counterparts do.

Yet, one might make the opposite prediction, maintaining that married couples should be most prone to insist that their relationship is equitable. When one is trying to decide whether or not to marry, it is critically important to view reality with a clear eye. Once one has made the decision and is committed to it, however, it is less important to see things as they are; one is free to believe what one would like to believe. (There is evidence in support of this contention. For example, Festinger, 1964, found that before decision and commitment have occurred, individuals process data in an objective way. Brehm and Cohen, 1962, found that soon after a couple becomes engaged, they begin to convince themselves that engagement is a good idea.)

In any case, we hope that from our data, we will be able to determine whether it is in new or in well-established relationships that love is most equitable and/or "blind."

Critics might well raise a second set of objections with regard to the preceding equity speculations.

b. Are couples concerned with equity or with quid-pro-quo or with power? Even theorists who are convinced that exchange principles apply in both casual and intimate relationships sometimes have radically different ideas of what exchange principles really count in relationships. They have proffered three radically different suggestions as to what factors count. Two groups of theorists—whose who support the equity formulation and those who support the quid-pro-quo formulation—insist that people are concerned about the fairness of their intimate relationships. The third group discounts fairness altogether.

1. Are couples concerned with equity? (The Equity Formulation) Equity theory insists that participants in both casual and intimate relationships consider both (a) what they and their partners are contributing to their relationship, and (b) what they are getting out of it, in calculating equity—inequity. According to equity theorists, couples are motivated to maintain a fair and equitable relationship.

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

2. Or are couples concerned with quid-pro-quo? (The Clinicians' Quid-Pro-Quo Formulation) Other theorists argue that casual relationships and intimate ones are different. In casual relationships, these theorists maintain, participants are well aware that contributions may be of far different value. An intimate relationship, however, is by definition a relationship between equals. Thus, clinicians insist, couples' day-to-day negotiations are far simpler than equity theorists think. A person, to

calculate whether or not he is being fairly treated, need only make one simple determination: Am I getting as much as my partner is from this relationship?

$$\frac{(O_A - I_A)}{1} = \frac{(O_B - I_B)}{1}$$

3. Or are couples concerned with power? (The What-the-Market-Will-Bear Formulation) Finally, another group of exchange theorists insist that fairness is irrelevant—all that counts in this world is power. Such theorists argue that what matters is not how a person is treated in his existing relationships (i.e., fairly or unfairly) but how well he could fare in an "open market." According to these theorists, the important thing to determine is who has the power in a given relationship. From this perspective, the important question is who—oneself or one's partner—would find it easier to secure a new partner as attractive as the present one if forced to seek a new one. One could tap power in questions such as the following:

If you found yourself unattached again, for whatever reason, and wanted to find a new partner, how easy or difficult would that be? How do you think you would fare? That is, how would the new partner compare with your present partner?"

If your partner were unattached again, and wanted to find a new partner, how easy or difficult would that be? How do you think your partner would fare in finding a new partner? That is, how would the new partner compare with you?"

In any case, from our data we will eventually be able to determine whether equity theory or its two popular competitors—the quid-pro-quo formulation or the what-the-market-will-bear formulation—is the best predictor of the mode of a couple's interaction.

Let us turn now to the equity theorists' final hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS IV. Equitable relationships will be stable relationships; inequitable relationships will be fragile ones.

According to the equity theorists dating couples should be more likely to progress toward marriage if their relationship is equitable than if it is not; married couples should be more likely to stay married if their relationship is equitable than if it is not.

Exchange theorists (see Backman & Secord, 1966, and Blau, 1968) have long argued in favor of such a "matching hypothesis." They have proposed that the more equitable a romantic relationship, the more likely it is to progress to marriage. Equity theorists have also argued that the more equitable a marital relationship is, the more likely it is to endure.

Walster et al. (1973)—along with Adams and Freedman (1976), Bernard (1964), McCall (1966), Scanzoni (1972), and Thibaut and Facheux (1965)—point out that if a couple's relationship becomes grossly inequitable, the couple should be tempted to sever it. Of course, it is far easier for dating couples than for married couples to part. The dating couples who break up suffer, but, as Bohannan (1971) documents, the married couples who divorce suffer even more: Their parents and friends express shock, one partner may lose rights to the children, and their close friends may drop them; it is, moreover, expensive to secure a divorce and to establish and maintain two households. Divorce, then, is costly in both emotional and financial terms. Yet equity theorists argue that if a marital relationship is unbalanced enough, and if couples can find no better way than divorce to set things right, participants may be expected to part. Udry (1971) calculates that from 20 to 25% of first marriages end in annulment, desertion, or divorce.

THE EXISTING EVIDENCE

Is there any evidence that equity considerations operate both in determining who gets together in the first place, and in determining who stays together? Is there any evidence that people end up with partners who are no better and no worse than they deserve? For years, marriage-and-the-family researchers have explored the process of homogamy (the tendency for similar individuals to be attracted to each other). This literature provides evidence that if a person possesses only one important asset in common with a prospective partner—say, physical attractiveness, or intelligence, or understanding and concern—he will be more successful than his peers who possess none in attracting and keeping that partner.

a. *Beauty.* A number of researchers have demonstrated that couples tend to date and marry those who are similar in physical attractiveness (see Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Huston, 1973; Murstein, 1972; Rubin [in press]; Silverman, 1971; Stroebe et al., 1971; Walster et al., 1966).

b. *Mental Health.* Most clinicians agree that mentally healthy people, and emotionally disturbed people tend to pair up with their own kind. Perhaps Edmund Bergler (1948), a psychoanalyst, presents the case more strongly than anyone else:

All stories about a normal woman who becomes the prey of a neurotic man, and vice versa, [sic] or a normal man who falls in love with a highly neurotic woman, are literary fairy tales. Real life is less romantic; two neurotics look for each other with uncanny regularity. Nothing is left to chance as far as emotional attachments are concerned [p. 11].

Equity theorists, of course, might interpret Bergler's data a little differently. It may be the case that both normal people and neurotics desire well-adjusted partners, but that only the former are able to attract and hold them. The neurotics must settle for partners whose adjustment is as poor as their own. In any case, there is some relatively hard evidence that people tend to date and marry those who are similar in level of adjustment (see, for example, Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Gottesman, 1965; Murstein, 1967a; and Murstein, 1967b).

c. *Physical Health.* Eugenicians have observed that people are likely to marry partners who possess comparable physical disabilities. (See, for example, Spuhler, 1968.)

d. *Intelligence and Education.* A great deal of attention has been given to the fact that people tend to pair up with partners who are similar in education and intelligence. (Evidence that men and women marry partners of comparable intelligence comes from Garrison, Anderson, & Reed, 1968; Jones, 1974; and Reed & Reed, 1965. Evidence that they marry partners of comparable educational attainment comes from Garrison, Anderson, & Reed, 1968; and Kiser, 1968.)

e. *Matching: More Complex Cases.* Thus far, we have reviewed only the evidence that documents people's tendency to pair up with partners who possess traits identical with their own. Of course, previous theorists have noted that couples can be matched in a variety of ways. And we have contended that exchanges go on across as well as within resource types. For example, the handsome man (who is not especially dependable, warm, etc.) may use his assets to capture a beautiful partner, or he may decide to pursue a partner who is far plainer than himself, but far more dependable and warm. Murstein et al. (1977) provide a compelling description of the way such complex matching might operate:

A handsome man is seen with a woman of mediocre attractiveness. "I wonder what he sees in her?" may be the quizzical question of a bystander. Quite possibly, she possesses compensating qualities such as greater intelligence, interpersonal competence, and wealth than he, of which the bystander knows nothing. . . . Another case of compensatory exchange might be indicated if an aged statesman proposed marriage to a young beautiful woman. He would probably be trading his prestige and power for her physical attractiveness and youth [p. 3-4].

These is some evidence, sparse, in support of the contention that people do engage in such complicated balancing and counter-balancing when selecting mates (see, for example, Elder, 1969; Holmes & Hatch, 1938; and Berscheid et al., 1973).

We have already described a study, based on interviews with 500

students, by Walster et al. (1978). Early in the questionnaire used, the students were asked to estimate how much they and their partners contributed to their relationship and how much they and their partners got out of it. From these estimates it was possible to determine how equitable or inequitable the students perceived their relationships to be. After asking the students a series of questions about their involvement, Walster et al. finished by asking them how long they thought their affair would last. They asked: "Are you still going with your partner?" "How certain are you that the two of you will be together one year from now?" "five years from now?" They found that men and women involved in equitable relationships were the most optimistic about the future of their relationships. (See Table 4.2). Men and women who felt their relationship was fair and equitable generally felt that it was currently a viable one, and were "somewhat certain" it would be that way a year or so from now. Men or women who knew that they were getting far more than they deserved from the relationship had every reason to hope it would last, but were not very optimistic that it would. (They were "somewhat" to "very" uncertain that their affair would last a year or more.) Men or women who felt they were getting far less from the relationship than they deserved were even more pessimistic about the future of their relationship.

TABLE 4.2
The Effect of Equity-Inequity on the Perceived Stability of a Relationship

Equity-inequity of Relationship	How certain are you that you will still be going together ^a		
	Are you currently going with partner? ^a	One year from now?	Five years from now?
Person is getting far more than he feels he deserves	1.44	1.68	1.37
Person is getting somewhat more than he feels he deserves.	1.73	2.10	1.56
Person is getting just what he feels he deserves.	1.75	2.60	2.11
Person is getting somewhat less than he feels he deserves.	1.69	2.23	1.73
Person is getting far less than he feels he deserves.	1.47	1.48	1.06

^a A score of 1 = "No"; 2 "Yes"

^b The higher the number, the more certain the man or woman is that the relationship will last.

Earlier we described a study in which Jane Traupmann and Mary Utne interviewed newlyweds about their marriages. In this study, the authors measured newlyweds' perceptions of how overbenefited, equitably treated, or underbenefited they were in their marriages as well as how stable they believed their marriages to be. The authors proposed that spouses who feel equitably treated will perceive their marriages to be more stable than will spouses who feel underbenefited or overbenefited. The authors measured perceived stability in marriage by asking their respondents how often they had considered moving out and how often they had considered divorce. To some extent these escape fantasies correlated with inequity.

Men who felt underbenefited were more likely to report that they had considered moving out than the equitably treated or overbenefited men [T-U-W: $F_{427}(\text{linear}) = 9.26, p < .01$]. Underbenefited men were also more likely to have considered divorce [T-U-W: $F_{427}(\text{linear}) = 9.26, p < .01$]. (See Figure 4.4).

Though inequities don't seem to be related to ideas of moving out for women [(T-U-W) F s were insignificant], there is a strong tendency for overbenefited women, compared with equitably treated and underbenefited women, to consider divorce [T-U-W: $F_{427}(\text{quadratic}) = 6.17, p < .01$].

Despite the newness of these marriages, there are signs of instability in the inequitable relationships.

Walster, Traupmann, and Walster (1978) argued that inequitable relationships might be fragile relationships for still another reason. The man or woman who feels cheated in his or her marriage may be tempted to do some "cheating" of their own.

Walster, Traupmann, and Walster (1978) predicted that the more cheated a person feels in marriage the more likely the person will be to risk illicit, extramarital sex. To test this hypothesis, they retrieved the Berscheid et al. (1973) data and reanalyzed them. As before, they consid-

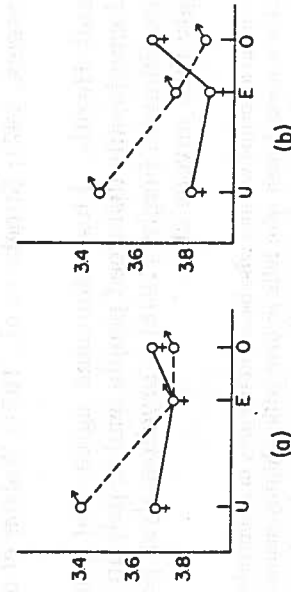


Figure 4.4 Reported functions of considerations of (a) moving out or (b) divorce as a function of the perceived equity-inequity in marriage.

ered overbenefited respondents to be those whose partners were much more or slightly more socially desirable than themselves. Equitably treated respondents were those whose partners were as socially desirable as themselves. Deprived respondents were those whose partners were slightly less or much less desirable than themselves.

Berscheid et al. assessed readers' willingness to engage in extramarital sex in two ways: (a) they asked how soon after they had begun living with or had got married to their partner they had first had sex with someone else. (b) they asked with how many people they had had extramarital affairs.

The results (see Figure 4.5) provide some support for the Walster et al. hypotheses: Overbenefited and equitably treated men and women were very reluctant to experiment with extramarital sex. On the average, overbenefited and equitably treated with men and women waited from 12 to 15 years before getting involved with someone else. Deprived men and women began exploring extramarital sex far earlier—from 6 to 8 years after marriage. Similarly, the overbenefited had the fewest extramarital encounters (none or one). Equitably treated men and women had a few more. The deprived had the most (from one to three).

Once again, we see that, for a variety of reasons, equitable relations are likely to be more stable than inequitable ones.

Is equity theory useful for understanding intimate as well as nonintimate relationships? Can we use equity theory to make sense of the interplay between husband and wife? The preceding evidence suggests that the answer is affirmative.

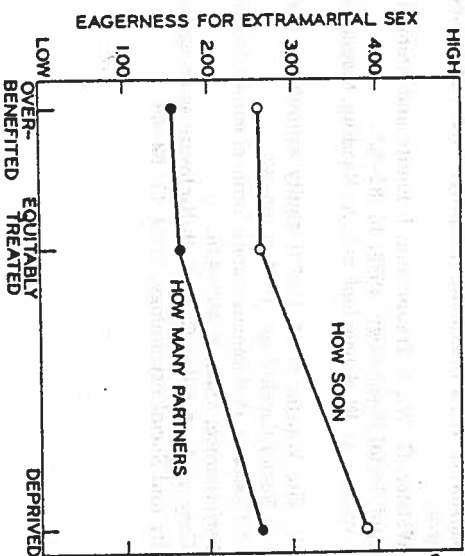


Figure 4.5 The impact of marital overbenefit or equity or deprivation on men and women's eagerness to engage in extramarital sex.

Summary

Equity theory does seem to provide a convenient method of examining romantic and marital relationships. And the data, however sparse, provide at least suggestive evidence that equity principles operate in determining whom one selects as a mate and how the partners will get along. Obviously, however, more research will have to be done before we can have greater confidence in these conclusions.

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