

## HOW IMPORTANT IS MARITAL FAIRNESS OVER THE LIFESPAN?

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### ABSTRACT

Do marital relationships become more equitable over time? Is a sense of fairness or equity in marriage equally important at different points across the lifespan? To answer these and related equity/intimacy questions, a sample of middle-aged and older married women was asked to describe the level of equity in their marriages at eight points across their lifespan and their feelings about the equity/inequity at each point. The aggregated results suggested women begin a marriage with a sense of overbenefit, move into a period of underbenefit during their middle years, and finally feel fairly treated in late middle age. The disaggregated data revealed three distinct patterns of equity/inequity over the lifespan. Women's reactions to the level of equity at each stage followed the predicted curvilinear pattern.

Theorists have long been engaged in a debate about whether or not love relationships are special relationships that transcend social exchange [1]. The longing for unconditional love is a primitive one. People want to believe that even if they lose their looks, openly express their most unacceptable feelings, can no longer work, etc., their loved ones will continue to love them. They are equally insistent that, come what may, they will continue to love their intimates with equal vigor.

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A number of eminent theorists, such as Douvan, Mills, and Murstein, contend that love transcends equity [2-4]. They argue that love relationships are special relationships—they transcend social exchange.

An equally prominent group of theorists insists that equity considerations *do* apply in even the most intimate of relations. Lederer and Jackson observe:

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 “for something or nothing”) . . . The *Quid Pro Quo* process is an unconscious effort of both partners to ensure themselves that they are equals, that they are peers. It is a technique enabling each to preserve his dignity and self esteem. Equality may not be apparent to the world at large: it may be based on values meaningless to anyone else, yet serve to maintain the relationship because the people perceive their behavioral balance as fair and mutually satisfying [5, pp. 177-179].

Other theorists also argue that love relations must be equitable [1, 6-11].

There have been attempts to reconcile the opposing arguments about whether intimates are deeply concerned or unconcerned with considerations of equity by arguing that it is only at certain times of life that people are concerned with fairness and justice. Rubin argues that it is *early* in a relationship that people are most concerned with equity:

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 decreasingly concerned with what he can get from the other person and increasingly concerned with what he can do for the other [12, pp. 86-87].

Murstein *et al.* agree with Rubin. They maintain that equity considerations operate more strongly in dating relationships than in marital ones. The time to calculate whether or not a relationship is equitable is *before* marriage. After that, it is too late. When one tries to keep tabs on a continuing relationship, the effort is destructive as well as futile. The authors argue:

An exchange-orientation . . . [was] . . . hypothesized to be quite appropriate for limited or beginning friendships, and exchange-exchange couples were predicted to develop greater friendship intensity than other combinations . . . perceived exchange equity is almost impossible to obtain in marriage because of greater sensitivity to self than to others. It was hypothesized that exchange-orientation is inimical to marriage adjustment [4, p. 1].

Other social psychologists have argued that things might be more complicated

than this. Hatfield *et al.* have pointed out that an equally good case could be made for each of two opposing positions—i.e., “It is daters” vs. “it is married couples”—who are most prone to insist that their relationships are equitable [13].

One can argue that dating couples should be most likely to believe their relationships are equitable. Dating couples (and perhaps newlyweds) probably have only the sketchiest idea of what their partners are really like. Thus, they may find it very easy to believe what they would like to believe. Long married couples, on the other hand, have been forced to test their illusions against reality. They are likely to have a painfully accurate idea of what their partners are really like. Thus it may be that daters find it far easier to believe that soon everything will work out than do their more experienced counterparts.

The opposite prediction is equally plausible—i.e., that married couples should be the most prone to insist that their relationships are equitable. When one is trying to decide whether or not to marry, it is critical to view reality with a clear eye. Once one has made a 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.

In addition, Equity theorists have argued that precipitous changes in the marital relationship—the birth of the first child, a spouse’s dramatic weight loss, a matriculation from student to professional—will affect the level of perceived equity/inequity in the relationship [1]. According to Equity Theory, such changes would be thought of as increases or decreases in the relative gains of one or both parties. A new baby, for example, may mean less leisure time for the wife and fewer home-cooked meals for the husband. A change in physical appearance may increase (or decrease) one’s ability to attract a new partner. The completion of advanced training such as medical school or law school usually leads to a big jump in income and prestige. At the time of crisis or change, inequity in the relationship is likely to be dramatically increased. Over time, however, this inequity should decrease as the couple learns to adjust to the change. If the couple manages to “weather” the imbalance, they may achieve an even greater level of equity than that experienced before the crisis.

Traupmann, *et al.* posed the question of whether or not equity is important through the lifespan, or whether concern with fairness begins to dwindle in importance in old age [14]. They came to mixed conclusions about the importance of fairness in old age. The objective data suggested that the elderly were not very concerned with the equity or inequity of their marriages, or, rather, that the overbenefited were not very distressed by inequity, although the underbenefited still were. (Is this perhaps because, after a lifetime of marriage, overbenefited people begin to feel confident that their partners will not abandon them? Perhaps.) On the other hand, Traupmann’s anecdotal data suggested that a concern with overbenefit/underbenefit remained important throughout the lifetime.

The previous conflicting theorizing leads us to one clear conclusion—research needs to be done to determine if people's concern with equity changes over the lifespan. Specifically, these questions must be answered: 1) Does the fairness of couples' relationships vary systematically over the lifespan? If so, how? Do relationships get more and more equitable over time? 2) What are participants' reactions to existing inequities at different states in their marriages? Did they recall being more distressed by inequity at one period than at another? Equally distressed at all periods? Or equally unconcerned with fairness at all periods?

## METHOD

### The Sample

As part of a multidisciplinary study of aging women, Traupmann and Wood interviewed a randomly generated sample of 400 women living in five different areas of the city of Madison, Wisconsin, in June 1979 [15]. The women ranged in age from fifty to ninety-two.

This group was slightly better off than is the typical older American woman. Their median annual income was approximately \$2,000 higher than the median income of older women. The respondents were very highly educated compared to national averages for women in this age group. There were fifty-four B.S. or B.A. degrees, twenty-seven masters degrees, and five Ph.D.s in this group of 400. Most of them (over 75%) reported being in very good health. They were a surprisingly active group, with 75 percent reporting that they got some regular physical exercise every day. Over one third of them (36.5%) were working either part time or full time.

### Measuring Equity/Inequity

Women's perceptions of how equitable their marriage had been overall were measured *via* the *Hatfield Global Measure* [16]. We began by asking women to think through their lives and say, all in all, how equitable they felt their marriages had been.

Considering your *relationship as a whole*, what you put into it, and what you got from it, and what your partner put into it and what your partner got from it, how did your total relationship "stack up?"

Women were asked to indicate their answers on the following scale:

- +3 I was getting a much better deal
- +2 I was getting a somewhat better deal
- +1 I was getting a slightly better deal
- 0 We were both getting an equally good, or bad, deal
- 1 My partner was getting a slightly better deal
- 2 My partner was getting a somewhat better deal
- 3 My partner was getting a much better deal

Women with scores of +1, +2, or +3 were considered to be overbenefitted; women with scores of -3, -2, and -1 were considered to be underbenefitted, and a score of 0 defined the equitably treated women.

### Assessing Contentment/Distress

The women were then asked how they felt about this, using the *Austin Mood Measure* [17]:

When you think about your relationship, what you and your husband put into it—and what you and he got out of it, how did that make you feel? How content and happy did you feel? How angry *or* guilty did you feel?

- +3 Extremely content and happy,  
not at all guilty or angry
- +2 Very content and happy
- +1 Fairly content and happy
- 0 Entirely neutral
- 1 Fairly guilty or angry
- 2 Very guilty or angry
- 3 Extremely guilty and angry,  
not at all content and happy

### Measuring Equity/Inequity and Contentment/Distress at Different Stages in the Lifespan

We then asked women to indicate both how equitable their relationship had been, and their reactions to this, at various points in life:

1. When they first began dating
2. When they were first married
3. In their thirties
4. In their forties
5. In their fifties
6. In their sixties
7. In their seventies
8. In their eighties

These responses were used to generate individual graphs for each respondent, depicting the level of equity/inequity and reactions to the equity/inequity at each of the above eight periods of life.

## RESULTS

### Does the Equity of a Couple's Relationship Vary Systematically Over Time?

Did women perceive that their relationship became more and more equitable over time, stayed about the same, varied randomly, or became less and less equitable over time? We attempted to answer this question by looking at women's estimates of how equitable their relationships were from the time they first began dating until the present time (for some women, this was when they were in their eighties). Two strategies were employed. First the data were aggregated and subjected to statistical tests of central tendency. The lifespan curves were then examined individually and sorted into several pattern types.

When we examine women's descriptions of their lives *as a group*, a clear pattern emerges. (See Table 1 and Figure 1.) Women *start off* feeling overbenefited. During the course of their marriages, they come to feel slightly underbenefited. Finally, at the close of their lives, they begin to feel fairly treated.

How do the *individual* lifespan equity curves compare to the mean curves? Do the individual curves paint the same picture—overbenefit early in the marriage, underbenefit in the middle years, and equity late in the marriage—or are there several opposing patterns producing the aggregate picture?

After thirty-four of the cases were eliminated from the analysis because they had fewer than three data points, the remaining 143 curves were sorted in two ways. The first division separated curves whose last point was equity from those which ended in inequity. The results of this division lend support to the prediction that couples tend to move toward greater equity. Fifty-four curves fluctuated from inequity to equity, while another 59 curves remained equitable across the entire lifespan. Thirty-one curves ended in inequity; fourteen ended in underbenefit, sixteen in overbenefit. Thus, 113 women (approximately 80%) reported feeling equitably treated in the latter years of their marriage.

Are there distinct patterns in the fairness of relationships over time? First, let us consider the group of curves ( $n = 113$ ) whose final point is at equity. Here, three distinct patterns emerge.

*Pattern 1*—Constant equity. The most common pattern of equity scores ( $n = 59$ ) was the straight line pattern. The relationship was perceived as equitable from the start and remained so through thirty-five, forty-five, and up to fifty years of married life. Apparently, these women either experienced no major changes in their relationship or if changes did occur, they were able to adapt to them quickly without an upset in the balance.

*Pattern 2*—The one-crisis-recovery marriage. This pattern begins in dating and early marriage at an equitable or only slightly inequitable point, moves to a

Table 1. Women's Perceptions of the Equity of Their Marriages and Contentment/Distress at Different Stages in the Life Span

Period	Equity			Contentment/Distress		
	(N)	M	(S.D.)	(N)	M	(S.D.)
Dating	(179)	.11	(.85)	(171)	1.88	(1.23)
Newlyweds	(177)	.06	(.96)	(172)	1.60	(1.87)
30's	(131)	-.25	(1.14)	(129)	1.26	(2.43)
40's	(133)	-.23	(1.04)	(131)	1.16	(2.54)
50's	(128)	-.05	(1.12)	(126)	1.37	(2.62)
60's	(69)	-.26	(.73)	(70)	1.66	(1.94)
70's	(18)	.17	(.74)	(16)	2.31	(.63)
80's	(7)	.00	(1.00)	(6)	2.33	(.67)

point of extreme inequity, and then recovers to equity once again. The inequity could be either that the wife feels she is getting more (overbenefit) or less (underbenefit) than she deserves. More common for this sample of women was the feeling of being underbenefited ( $n = 30$ ) for a time. It is this pattern which most closely matches the mean curve discussed earlier. However, half as many ( $n = 16$ ) reported a change in the opposite direction, i.e., they felt overbenefited for a time.

*Pattern 3—Initial inequity resolved.* An additional eight women reported feeling inequitably treated (all felt underbenefited) at the beginning of the marriage but found the inequity was resolved later in the marriage.

The second group of curves, those whose last point is not at equity ( $n = 30$ ), were equally distributed between moving toward overbenefit ( $n = 15$ ) and moving toward underbenefit ( $n = 15$ ). Five of these curves contained only three data points, and thus could be expected to move back toward equity at a later point in the marriage. Another fourteen of the curves showed at least two reversals in direction. These wives viewed their relationships as extremely changeable, moving from overbenefiting them to underbenefiting them and then back again.

Of the eleven remaining curves, seven seemed to be on a steady, downward trend, becoming more underbenefited across the lifespan. The other four all began at equity and became overbenefited; some after only a few years of marriage, others after many years. One of these, for example, was from an eighty-three year-old woman who reported her marriage was equitable throughout its sixty-two years. It was only in her eighties that she felt overbenefited.

In summary, it appears that the most common patterns of equity in marriage are either an unchanging equity or a one crisis/recovery type.

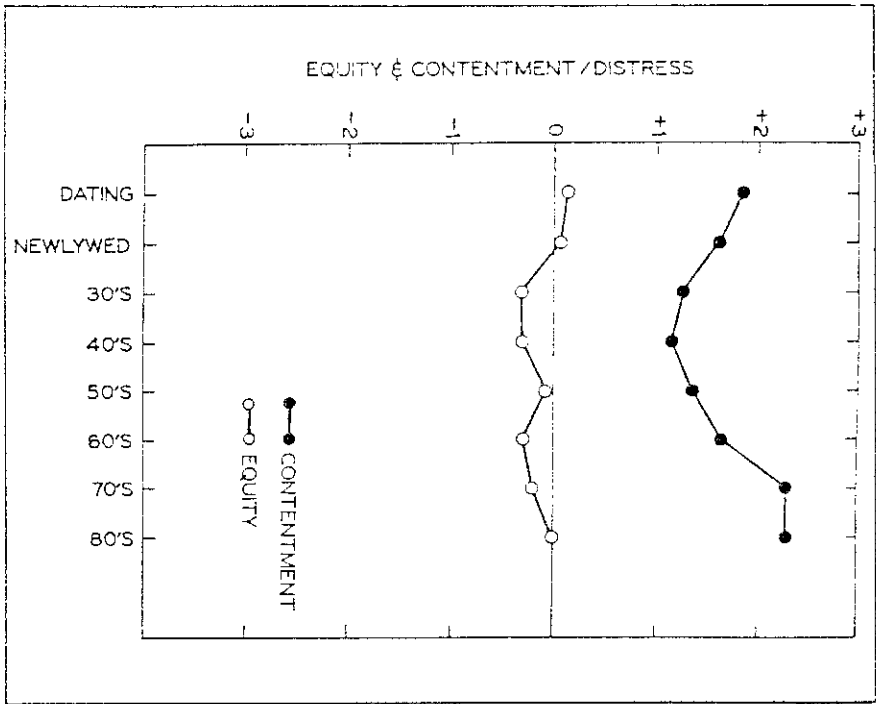


Figure 1. Women's perceptions of the equity of their marriages, and their contentment/distress at different stages in the life span.

### Are Participants Equally Concerned with Existing Inequities at Different Stages in Their Marriages?

Do they recall being more distressed by inequity at one period than another, equally distressed at all periods, or equally unconcerned with fairness at all periods?

Equity theorists agree about the impact that the equity of a relationship *should* have on participants' contentment/distress. According to Equity Theory's 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." [1] Figure 2 graphically depicts this prediction.

There is some support for Equity Theory's Proposition III [18-20]. Walster, Walster, and Traupmann interviewed 500 University of Wisconsin men and



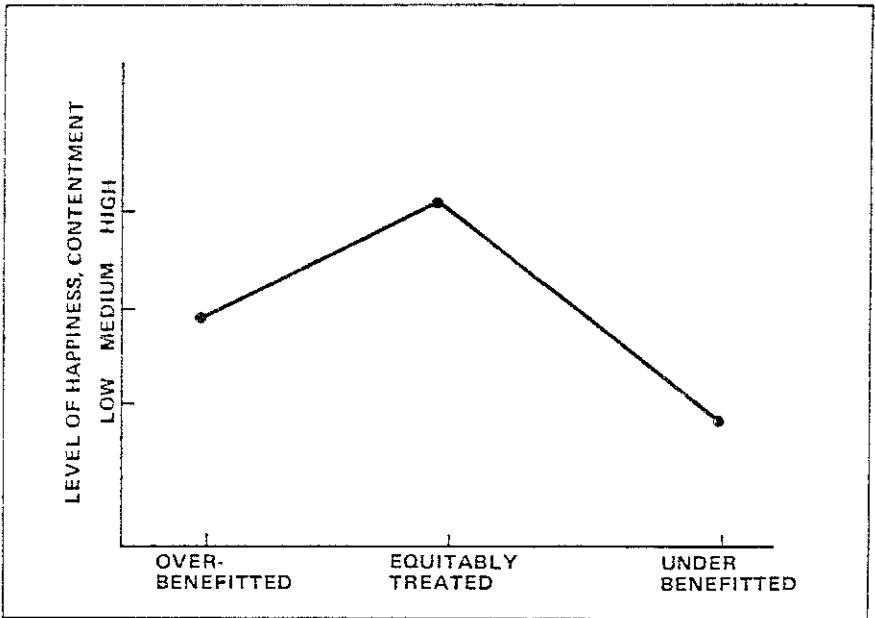


Figure 2. The hypothesized relationship between equity and contentment/distress.

women who were dating casually or steadily. They assessed equity *via* the *Walster Global Measure* [21]. On the basis of this measure, they classified respondents as Overbenefitted, Equitably Treated, or Underbenefitted. As predicted, they found that the more equitable a couple's relationship, the more content and happy they were. Overbenefitted men and women were somewhat less happy and content, and somewhat more guilty, than were Equitably Treated men and women. As one might expect, Underbenefitted men and women were far less happy and content and far more angry than were Equitably Treated men and women.

Studies of newlyweds have secured similar results [22, 23]. These studies indicated that couples who feel equitably treated are happier, more content, less angry, and less guilty than are couples who feel underbenefitted or overbenefitted.

How do older women's *memories* of how they felt during the courtship and newlywed periods compare with the reactions of dating couples and newlyweds today? The results are in striking agreement. Older women correctly recall that in the early days of their marriages they cared very much about the fairness of

their marriages. Equitably Treated women report feeling far more content and happy and far less guilty and angry than did their Unequitably Treated peers. Overbenefited women correctly recall feeling slightly upset by the imbalance. Underbenefited women correctly recall being extremely upset by the existing inequities. These results give us some confidence that older women's memories are reasonably valid.

Figure 2 depicts the impact Equity considerations *should* have on Contentment/Distress at *all* stages in a person's life [1, 18].

Figure 3 shows how Overbenefited, Equitably Treated, and Underbenefited women report feeling at every stage of their lives, from the time they first began dating until they reach their eighties. (See Table 2 and Figure 3.)

A glance at Table 2 and Figure 3 confirms Equity theorists' contention that Equity considerations are important throughout the lifespan. When we examine how Overbenefited, Equitably Treated, and Underbenefited women feel at every stage of life, we find that we secure much the same pattern of means from the dating period to the eighties. (In general, we secure a curvilinear relationship

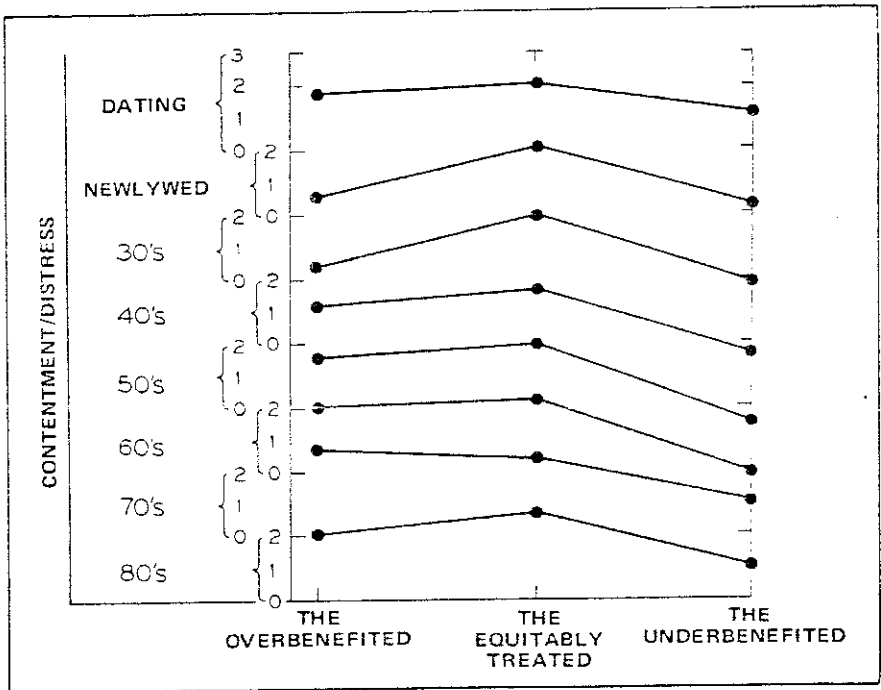


Figure 3. The actual relationship between equity and contentment/distress at different stages of life.

Table 2. Women's Feelings<sup>a</sup> When Overbenefited, Equitably Treated, or Underbenefited at Different Stages in the Life Span

Period	(N)	How Equitable is Relationship?			(S.D.)	F
		Over- benefited	Equitably Treated	Under- benefited		
Dating	(27/128/14)	1.63	2.03	1.14	(1.11)	5.22**
Newlywed	(24/124/23)	.46	2.08	.26	(1.37)	39.42***
30's	(10/85/31)	.30	1.89	-.06	(1.54)	30.34***
40's	(13/89/25)	1.08	1.60	-.28	(1.58)	17.38***
50's	(21/81/21)	1.48	1.84	-.52	(1.63)	24.43***
60's	(3/51/12)	2.00	2.10	-.08	(1.37)	19.42***
70's	(2/13/1)	2.50	2.38	1.00	(.79)	1.60
80's	(1/13/1)	2.00	2.67	1.00	(.58)	3.20

<sup>a</sup> The higher the number, the more contented/less distressed women report feeling

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

between Equity and Contentment/Distress.) When we examine the F tests for those measures (see Table 2), we find that in all of the groups in which we have a reasonably large N—i.e., up through the sixties—these curvilinear trends are significant. These results provide strong confirmation for the contention that equity and fairness remain of concern to individuals over the lifespan.

## DISCUSSION

We have seen that older women recall dramatic changes in the fairness of their marriages over time and that they report strong feelings about those changes.

How accurate are women in describing the earlier periods of their lives? We don't know. In previous studies, Equity researchers such as Walster et al. [20], Traupmann, Petersen, Utne and Hatfield [22], and Hatfield, et al. [1] have asked dating and newlywed couples how equitable/inequitable their relationships are. They found that in the beginning, both men and women tend to feel *slightly* overbenefited. When asked to recall how *they* felt when dating and newlywed, many older women "correctly" recall feeling slightly overbenefited.

Theorists have speculated about the ability to accurately look at the fairness in one's marriage. For example, in a warning against "marital scorekeeping," Lobsenz and Murstein warned men and women that if they look for fairness in their marriages, they are in trouble [24]. People are biased, the authors warn; they tend to be very sensitive to what they are giving to others and not nearly so sensitive to the sacrifices others are making for them. Once couples start "keeping score," both of them are likely to conclude that they are seriously underbenefited. Whether or not the authors are right has been the subject of intense debate. However, older women do report that they felt slightly

*underbenefited* from their thirties to their seventies. It is not until their seventies and eighties that women begin reporting that their relationships are fair.

These data raise some intriguing questions. Lobsenz and Murstein would predict that both men and women "scorekeepers" should feel underbenefited [24]. They would predict that if we had acquired data from both men and women, we would secure identical equity curves from both.

On the other hand, other theorists might argue that men and women should differ markedly in their reports of how fair their marriages were during the middle portion of their lives. Bernard has argued that there is "His" marriage and "Her" marriage: in the dating period, she claims, women have the advantage—they get the things they want [6]. (Our data do seem to support this contention. Later on, it is men who have the advantage, who reap the most benefits from their marriages and who are most happy with them. Unfortunately, without complete data, we cannot tell which of these alternatives is correct.

Our data raise another intriguing and equally unanswerable question. Why do women's relationships become more equitable in the seventy-plus period? Is this "change" an artifact? Presumably, all women are reviewing the *past*. Yet when older women rate the seventies and eighties, they may be rating the present rather than the past. It may be easier to admit to past injustice than to present injustice. Perhaps, however, this change is a "real" one. Perhaps by seventy-plus women are pleased to have *any* man. Perhaps their husbands have retired and help around the house. There are many possibilities. Our data do not allow us to answer these questions.

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