DISCUSS TWO THEORIES OF THE MAINTENANCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Outline

Social exchange theory – Thibaut and Kelley

This theory acknowledges the interaction between partners, each with their own needs and expectations. Social behaviour is a series of exchanges between individuals where each person tries to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs. Exchanging is when the individual receives rewards and feels obliged to reciprocate and give back. Rewards – company, security, friendship etc. Costs – physical or psychological harm, loss of items or friends etc.

SET is based on operant conditioning, we maintain relationships because they are rewarding. When deciding to maintain a relationship or not there are 2 things we compare. 1- the comparison between costs/rewards in the current relationship and what we have been used to in the past. If it is better we maintain the relationship. 2- the comparison between costs/rewards of the current relationship and what is available in an alternative relationship.

Research found profit is less important for many than fairness. This meant the SET was modified to the equity theory. In this theory it is about maximising equality and minimising inequality within the costs and rewards. Unfair relationships cause dissatisfaction and a possible breakdown.

Supporting Evidence

This theory can be applied to homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships and therefore avoids bias, enhancing the credibility of the theory. Other research has also shown the importance of equity in gay and lesbian relationships, Dwyer argues that lesbians put a considerable value on equity within a relationship. Supporting the modification to the equity theory.

Negatives

The model does not predict at what level a relationships becomes so unsatisfactory that we decide to leave it even if there is no alternative. Therefor meaning it is descriptive rather than predictive.

Issue

Cultural Bias: Moghaddam argues that the emphasis on exchange and equity is a reflection of the dominant values of individualism and capitalism in western society. The theory doesn’t take into account or reflect non-western cultures views meaning it is not applicable to all countries.

Debate

Determinism: The theory suggests that the maintenance of relationships is based solely on rewards and costs and that an uneven balance will cause a breakdown. It fails to take into account people’s free will and does not explain why some are happy to remain in unbalanced relationships. For example communal relationships are much more relaxed about costs and rewards and believe that it will eventually even itself out.