Equity Theory - Walster

Agrees that people weigh up rewards and costs within relationship but argues that people have an expectation that relationship should be fair. Couples keep an eye on what both they and their partner are putting in and getting out. If this is roughly equal likely to feel reasonably satisfied with the relationship. However, if this is unequal, with one partner putting in a great deal more effort than the other or getting much more out, the relationship will be experienced as “inequitable” and this will lead the relationship into problems. This feeling of inequity will lead the “loser” in the relationship to feel dissatisfied and the “winner” to feel guilty. If the relationship is of relatively short duration one partner may simply end it. However, if the couple have been together for a long time and both have invested in the relationship in terms of time and money, they may well be monitored to repair the relationship by restoring equity this could be done by:

- Reducing inputs – putting less effort into the relationship
- Increasing outputs/rewards – encouraging the other person to put more effort into the relationship.

DeMoris assessed importance of equity in relation to marital dissatisfaction and later breakdown using a sample of 1,500 American couples. He found that a women’s sense of being under-benefited was most important in predicting later disruption.

Other research has shown the importance of equity in gay and lesbian relationships. Dwyer argues that lesbians put a considerable value on equity within a relationship.

Together the findings of these studies imply that equity is indeed important in relationships. But probably more so far women than men.

Mieu & Craghan argue that the equity principle is more important in western, individualistic cultures and less important in collectivist cultures. Other critics argue that truly intimate relationships don’t involve counting inputs/outputs.

Van Yperen & Buunk: Longitudinal study, used 259 couples, recruited by an advert in a local paper, 86% married, remainder were cohabiting. Obtained a score for equity in the relationship using Hatfield’s global measurement of satisfaction, found about 65% of men felt their relationship was equitable, about 25% of men felt over benefited, about same number of women felt under benefited. One year later asked about the satisfaction in their relationship. Those who felt their relationship was equitable as stage one were the most satisfied, those who felt their relationship was equitable as stage one were the most satisfied, the over benefited were next and the under -benefited were least satisfied, supporting equity theory.

People strive to achieve fairness in their relationships. Any kind of inequity can have people feel distressed, true both for the giver and receiver.

Four principles: Profit - rewards are maximised and costs minimised.

Distribution – Trade off / compensations negotiated.

Dissatisfaction – Greater perceived unfairness the greater the dissatisfaction.

Realignment – If restoring equity is possible, maintenance continues, equity realigned.

Equity does not mean equality.

Equity=fair, subjective opinion.

A’s benefits – costs= B’s benefits-costs

- Steil & Weltman: Found among married working couples, husbands who earned more than their wives rated their own careers as more important than their wife’s careers. In couples where the woman’s income exceeds the man’s, neither partner rated their careers as more important. Researchers concluded that “wives” tendency to seek less for themselves than comparable men making comparable contributions … impeded the achievement of equality at home.

- Prins at al: Dutch couple’s inequity had different consequences for Males & Females. Men didn’t consider having an affair, but women did; and some reported they just had done, for that very reason.

- Khan et al: Men more likely to focus on the norm of equity in relationships. Women are more likely to focus on the norm of equity: should get the same benefits no matter how much they put into the relationships.

- Lujarsky & Mukulla: No equity effects on romantic relationships in Austria.