

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 and AO3 = 5

Possible content

An economic theory of relationships that considers how parties exchange rewards and costs.

Assumes that we are attracted to those who offer rewards (fun, attention, esteem etc).

And put off a relationship perceived to involve great costs (time, emotional strain etc).

Relationships that are mutually beneficial will succeed.

Possible evaluation points

Use of evidence to support or contradict social exchange theory.

Assumes we make rational and calculating decisions about whether or not to pursue relationships.

Different people perceive rewards and costs differently so theory can account for individual differences in attraction.

Explains maintenance better than initial attraction because costs become more significant as the relationship goes on.

Comparison with Rusbult's extension to the theory.

Cultural bias – more suited to individualist culture than to collectivist cultures.

Example response i

There are a number of theories of romantic relationships that each try to explain how we form a relationship with another person and how this keeps going. The main theories are social exchange, equity and the investment model. In this essay I am going to outline and evaluate the social exchange theory of relationships. Social exchange is an economic theory which is based on us working out the benefits of the relationships against the costs. A relationship will continue if we feel we are gaining more than we are losing. Rewards are assessed in two ways. First are we getting back more than we are putting into the relationship, if we are in profit the relationship will continue. There is also the comparison level for alternatives where we think about the rewards that might be gained from an alternative relationship and work out whether what we have is more profitable. If rewards are higher than costs, and better than an alternative, then the relationship will continue. There is a model by Thibault of how relationships develop which has 4 stages: sampling, bargaining, commitment and institution. This model explains how we assess the costs and benefits at first through sampling of a number of

relationships and then bargaining by identifying the costs (e.g. loss of some personal freedom) with the benefits (e.g. financial gain) and decide whether to commit to that relationship because we are happy with the exchange of rewards. Eventually the relationship is maintained because both feel settled that the gains outweigh the losses. In this essay I have explained the social exchange theory of relationships. I have shown how this works by a relationship going through the 4 stages of the model, sampling relationships, bargaining in a particular relationship, having weighed up the benefits and costs decided that the profit is worth committing for and finally settling down. Some people don't like the idea that romantic relationships can be based on economy and people working out what is best for them, but I think it is a good theory.

Example response ii

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is an economic theory of relationships. A relationship is judged on the rewards and costs. So, if the rewards outweigh the costs then we stay in a relationship but if the costs are too high the relationship will break down. Rewards differ from person to person but might be financial or social support, for example. The costs might be the effort that has to be put into the relationship or any stress it is causing etc. One way to measure the profit in a relationship i.e. the rewards minus the costs, is by a comparison level. This means the amount of reward you think you are worthy of. This differs between people and their previous experiences with all sorts of relationships. People with low self-esteem might stay in a relationship which seems to be offering very little reward and a high cost. There is also the comparison with alternatives – would we be better off out of this relationship (on our own or with someone else), or is this the best alternative we have? If the costs of our current relationship outweigh the rewards and there are more satisfying alternatives then a relationship is likely to break down, according to SET. One of the problems with this theory is that the concepts proposed are difficult to investigate and measure. For example, a reward might be considered money – but many people are less interested in this (which might be measurable) than other psychological gains from a relationship such as closeness, honesty and shared interests. Because these are difficult to define and measure it makes the theory difficult to research in the real world. Many researchers are unhappy with the focus on the rewards/profits and economic nature of the Social Exchange Theory. They argue that in romantic relationships there is no adding up of rewards, although this might be the case with work and social friendships. It is thought that the analogy with the economy is incorrect for more personal relationships. An important finding of Argyle and others is that in romantic relationships rewards and costs are not weighed up until we become dissatisfied. We would not even look at whether other relationships might be more rewarding if we are satisfied with the current one. So there is a problem here with cause and effect – SET would suggest that we weigh up the rewards and costs of a relationship and this can lead to a breakdown, whilst others argue when our relationship starts to breakdown (i.e. when we become dissatisfied with it) only then do we look at the rewards and costs. This questions the validity of social exchange theory as a theory of relationships.
