Theories of romantic relationships: Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory

This is a theory of how relationships form and develop. It assumes that romantic partners act out of self-interest in exchange for rewards. A satisfied and committed relationship is only maintained when rewards exceed the costs. These rewards are also compared to potential alternatives, and the relationship only works if these are less attractive than the current relationship.

Both partners in a relationship will gain certain rewards but will also have to give something back to their relationship, which are seen as costs. As an economic theory, it states that provided each person feels that they are in profit the relationship will continue.

Thibault and Kelley (1959) proposed the social exchange theory (SET) claiming that behaviour in relationships reflects the economic assumptions of exchange. They suggest that we judge our satisfaction within a relationship in terms of the profits it yields (rewards) minus the costs. These are very subjective outcomes and exist as a very wide range of possibilities, for example what one person considers a valuable reward in a relationship may not be viewed as important by someone else. Blau (1964) argued that relationships can be expensive, so costs can include time, stress, energy and compromise etc. He suggests that relationships are an economic investment and only work if both parties are satisfied with their exchanges.

Thibault and Kelley (1959) also devised a model which identified a number of different stages of a relationship. Starting with the sampling stage, where couples experiment with the potential costs and rewards of a relationship through direct or indirect interactions, into the bargaining and commitment stages where negotiations of each partner's role in the relationship occur and the rewards and costs are established and become more predictable. Finally arriving at the institutionalisation stage where the couple feel settled and the norms of the relationship are heavily embedded. Here they both set an expectation for costs and rewards which are tolerated for the continuation of the relationship.

According to the social exchange theory, both partners will assess their level of profit and loss regularly to determine their level of satisfaction, here there are two comparison levels;

The comparison level (CL) - which assesses the number of rewards received and the amount of costs they give to their relationship

The comparison level for alternative relationships (CLalt) – which assesses the profit offered by the current relationship against any potential profit from an alternative relationship

The acceptable CL needed to continue to pursue a relationship, changes as a person matures and can be affected by a number of external and internal influencing factors. External factors may include the media, seeing friends and families in relationships or experiences from prior relationships, which have taught the person to expect more or less from a partner. Internal perceptions of self-worth such as self-esteem will directly affect the CL that a person believes they are entitled to in a relationship.

Argyle (1987) questions whether it is the CL which leads to dissatisfaction with the relationship, or dissatisfaction which leads to this analysis. It may be that the social exchange theory serves as a justification for dissatisfaction rather than the cause of it.

Duck (1994) suggested that a person's CLalt is dependent on the level of reward and satisfaction in their current relationship. If the CL is positive, then the person may not consider the potential benefits of a relationship with another person. This is suggesting that we only notice alternatives if our current relationship cost outweighs the rewards we feel benefit us.

One of the problems with this theory is that the concepts proposed are difficult to investigate and measure, for instance a reward such as money. Many people are less interested in this in relationships (however, it might be measurable) compared to other psychological gains such as closeness, honesty and shared interests. As these are difficult to define and measure it makes the theory harder 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, intimate relationships. However, most agree that it is only when relationships feel mutually beneficial, will they succeed.