Theories of romantic relationships: Equity Theory

Equity Theory

This is an economic theory of how relationships develop; it acknowledges the impact of rewards and costs on relationship satisfaction. However, it criticises the social exchange theory for ignoring the central role of equity. This is the perception that partners have about whether the distribution of rewards or costs in their relationship is fair.

Equity theory is another economic theory which was developed in response to significant criticism of the social exchange theory. The term equity means fairness. Motivation to maintain the relationship comes when each partner is happy and the relationship is fair.

Walster et al (1978) believed that what matters most with equity is that both partners' level of profit (rewards minus costs) is roughly the same. This is not the same as equality which is where costs and rewards have to be identical (equal) for each partner. When there is a lack of equity, and one partner over-benefits whereas the other under benefits, this is a recipe for dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Walster et al (1978) claimed there were four principles of equity;

1. **Profit - where each partner seeks to gain more than they put in**

2. **Distribution - where partners need to negotiate with each other to ensure the relationship remains equitable and fair**

3. **Distress - when unfairness is perceived, dissatisfaction begins. Distress will increase in line with the amount of inequity**

4. **Restoring Balance - when inequity is detected, partners will be motivated to act to restore the balance**

According to the equity theory it is not the size or amount of the rewards and the costs that matter, instead it is the ratio of the two to each other. Partners in satisfied relationships report that negotiations are essential to ensure equity and that rewards are distributed fairly between the partners.

Problems arise when one partner is putting in a great deal more into the relationship but takes little out of it. A partner perceiving inequity will quickly become dissatisfied, and the relationship may break down.

One partner may lose interest in the relationship or what is initially perceived as fair may be viewed as unfair if it continues to develop.

Huseman et al (1987) suggested that individual differences are an important factor in the equity theory. They make a distinction between ‘entitled’ who feel that they deserve to gain more than their partner in a relationship and ‘benevolent’ who are more prepared to invest by working harder to keep their partner happy.

Some cultures have traditions and expectations that one member of a romantic relationship should benefit more from the partnership. The traditional nuclear family, typical in the early to mid-20th century, was patriarchal, and the woman was often expected to contribute to more tasks, such as housework and raising the children, than the man for whom providing money to the family was perceived to be the primary role. This idea has since changed as society has changed.

Dainton (2003) found that people who were in romantic relationships perceived as ‘unfair’ were the least satisfied but were also the most motivated to improve the equity of the relationship. This supports the idea that equity is a leading factor in maintaining relationships.

Others argue that people are inherently selfish as individuals, which goes against the equity theory, because they are judging relationship satisfaction on the basis of what they are gaining.

For relationships to maintain longevity, partners should aim to identify a status quo where they are happy and content with the equitable arrangement. This may need to be revised at several intervals throughout the relationship.