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Measuring Equity in Close Relationships

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Purpose

According to Equity theory, people perceive a relationship as equitable when the benefits they receive from the relationship are similar to the benefits they are putting into the relationship. In theory, couples are assumed to feel most comfortable when their romantic and sexual relationships are maximally profitable and they are getting exactly what they deserve from them—no more and certainly no less (See Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Equity has been found to relate to many aspects of relationships, and appears to be important throughout a couple's lifetime (Pillemer, Hatfield, & Sprecher, 2009). More recently, evolutionary theorists contend that concerns about equity have enormous impact in the dating marketplace (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). The Global Measure of Equity and the Multi-Factor Measure of Equity were designed to assess men and women's perceptions of how fair and equitable their love and sexual relationships are (Traupmann, et al., 1981; Walster, 1975.).

Description

On the widely used *Global Measure of Equity*, men and women are asked to assess how fair and equitable they perceive their dating and marital relationships to be. Respondents indicate their judgments on a seven point Likert scale, with answers ranging from +3: I am getting a much better deal than my partner, to -3: My partner is getting a much better deal than I am.

On the *Multi-Factor Measure of Equity*, the experimenter begins by explaining the concept of equity by saying:

We're interested in the give-and-take that goes on in a dating relationship or marriage. We'd like to ask you a few questions about the things you put into your relationship . . . and the kinds of things you get out of it.

She then hands the respondent a list of 25 items, which are comprised of Personal Concerns, Emotional Concerns, Day-to-Day Concerns, and Things one gains or loses simply by dating or being married (each item can also be rated as to importance). Once again, men and women are asked to assess how fair and equitable their dating and marital relationships are and to indicate their judgments on a seven point Likert scale, ranging from +3: I am getting a much better deal than my partner, to -3: My partner is getting a much better deal than I am.

Response Mode and Timing

The Equity measures can be administered either individually or in groups. Respondents are asked to circle the number (ranging from +3 to -3) that indicates how true each statement is for them. The Global Measure of Equity generally takes one minute to administer. The Multi-Trait Measure of Equity takes approximately 15 minutes to administer. If each item on the Multi-Trait Measure is weighted by importance, the scale generally takes 30 minutes to complete.

Scoring

On the Multi-trait Measure of Equity, the experimenter begins by calculating a *Total Index*, by summing the respondents' estimates of how over-benefited, equitably treated, or under-benefited they consider themselves to be on each of the 25 scale. On both the Global and Multi-trait Measure of Equity, participants who

rate their relationships positively are generally categorized as overbenefitted; those who rate them negatively are categorized as underbenefitted, and those who rate them as 0 are categorized as participating in equitable relationships. Some researchers, of course, have treated the scores as a continuous variable.

Reliability

Despite its brevity, the widely used Global Measure of Equity possesses reasonable reliability and has been used to study a variety of relationship types (see Canary & Stafford, 1992; Sprecher, 1986, 1988; Traupmann, 1978; Traupmann et al., 1981). During development of the Multi-Trait Measure of Equity, Traupmann and her colleagues (1981) demonstrated the larger scale's reliability (Chronbach's α for total inputs = .87; for total outputs scales = .90).

Validity

If the Equity scales are valid, they should be related to other variables in ways expected by past theoretical and empirical work. There is some evidence for such construct validity. The Hatfield Global measure correlates with other measures of equity. Sprecher (1986,1988), for example, found the Hatfield Global measure is positively and significantly correlated with the Sprecher Global Equity measure (correlations range from $r=.45$, to $.52$, $p<.001$), which was created to measure day-to-day equity. Sprecher (2001) also correlated a multi-faceted measure of equity to the Hatfield Global Measure (with r 's ranging from $.43$ to $.73$)

Other validity findings include: (1) Profitable and equitable dating relationships are associated with satisfying and comfortable relationships; inequity is associated with distress, guilt, anger, and anxiety. (2) Profitable and equitable dating

relationships appear to be more stable (and more likely to lead to more serious relationships) than are inequitable relationships. (3) Those in equitable relationships are less likely to risk extramarital affairs than are their peers. (4) In close, intimate relationships, couples in equitable relationships have been found to feel more intensely about one another, share more of their lives, have more exciting sex lives, and have longer-lived relationships than do couples in fleeting affairs. (See Hatfield, Rapson, & Aumer-Ryan (2007) for a summary of this evidence.)

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