

The Importance of Fairness for the Marital Satisfaction of Older Women¹

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Abstract

A great deal of research exists to indicate that dating couples and newlyweds are very concerned with the fairness of their relationships. As yet, no research has investigated whether or not considerations of equity are equally important for older couples. In this study, we interviewed 240 older women, ranging in age from 50 to 82, about the inequities they encountered, and how satisfied they were with their relationships, and with their lives.

Previous research has indicated that older women acknowledge that when they were dating and newlywed, concerns of fairness were important to them (Traupmann and Hatfield, 1981). We found no evidence, however, that at the present time older women were concerned with equity. Equitably treated women were significantly more content, happier with their relationships and with their lives than were the inequitably treated...but these results were not significant. However, interview data collected in a follow-up study suggests that women's concern with equity greater than the objective data indicate.

The Importance of "Fairness" for the Marital Satisfaction of Older Women

Equity theory, a social psychological theory of social interaction, has been applied to help predict what happens in interpersonal relationships as a result of the balance of exchange between the individuals. According to equity theory, individuals evaluate their own inputs and outcomes and their partner's inputs and outcomes in order to determine how equitable the relationship is (see Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978). Theoretically, an equitable relationship exists when both partners' relative gains are equal. If inequity exists in a relationship, both the underbenefited partner (who is getting less from the relationship than he/she deserves), and the overbenefited partner (who is getting more from the relationship than he/she deserves) are predicted to become psychologically distressed. (As we might expect, it has been found that the overbenefited become less distressed over equity than do the underbenefited (Austin & Walster, 1974a and b; Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978).

While traditionally equity theory has been applied to understand such diverse relationships as employer/employee, exploiter/victim, and philanthropist/recipient (for a review see Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978), it has been only recently that equity principles have been applied to such intimate relationships as romantic, marital and family relationships. The type of couple examined in such research has typically been young and dating or newly-married.

Among such couples, it has been found that couples in equitable relationships are more likely than couples in inequitable relationships to be content and satisfied with their relationship, and to expect their relationship to endure, (Hatfield, Walster & Traupmann, 1978; Traupmann, Hatfield & Wexler, in press). In addition, it has been found that couples

in equitable relationships are more likely than other couples to move toward becoming increasingly intimate--for example, by becoming more sexually intimate (Hatfield, Walster & Traupmann, 1979; Traupmann, Hatfield & Wexler, in press).

Less clear is whether equity is also a critical issue for people in their later years of life, and/or in relationships that have lasted a lifetime. Some theorists argue that while equity may be a concern in newly-formed relationships, it isn't important once the relationship has survived several years (see, for example Chadwick-Jones, 1976; Deutsch, 1974; Douvan, 1974; Ekeh, 1974; Mills, 1976; Murstein, 1980; Rubin, 1973). For example, Rubin (1973) argues that although young couples are concerned with equity, older couples are not. He notes:

The principles of the interpersonal market place are most likely to prevail in...the early stages of the development of relationships. As an interpersonal bond becomes more firmly established...it begins to beyond exchange. In close relationships, one becomes decreasingly concerned with what he can get from the other person and increasingly concerned with what he can do for the other.

(pp. 86-87)

Other theorists, however, argue that older people, like all people, are profoundly concerned with fairness (see, for example, Bernard, 1964; Blau, 1964; Lederer & Jackson, 1968; McCall, 1966; Patterson & Reed, 1970; Scanzoni, 1972; and Storer, 1966).

But what does the evidence indicate? The evidence for either side is strikingly sparse. As stated above, elderly people are an under-researched

group by behavioral scientists, in general, and by equity reserachers, in particular. However, tentative evidence does exist to suggest that equity is important for intimate couples, regardless of age of partners or length of the relationship.

In one study, Shafer & Keith (1980; 1981) surveyed more than 300 married couples who ranged in age from 19 to 88. The couples were selected in a random area sample and were drawn to include who were married for various lengths of time and who were at various stages of the family life-cycle. Equity was measured within the context of performance in the family roles of cook, housekeeper, provider, companion, and parent. Husbands and wives evaluated their own and their spouses' levels of effort in the different roles, and equity was determined by taking the difference in the scores of self-evaluation and partner-evaluation.

They found that husbands and wives who were either overbenefited or underbenefited in their relationships reported higher levels of depression (as measured by the Derogatis et al., 1971 scale) than did equitably treated husbands and wives (Shafer & Keith, 1980). This effect was found regardless of the length of the relationship. The researchers also found that those couples who were in more advanced stages of the family life-cylce (i.e., children leaving home; retirement) reported greater equity (and less inequity) in the various family roles than did younger couples who were at early stages of the family life-cycle (Shafer & Keith, 1981). One could conclude from the research by Shafer & Keith that older couples are just as likely as young couples to experience distress over inequities-- however, they may be less likely to perceive the relationship as inequitable.

This study was designed to explore how a special group of elderly people respond to equity/inequity in their intimate relationships. The special group consists of elderly women over 50 years of age, a portion of the population that has increased dramatically in modern America. Contrary to the measures used in the Shafer & Keith study, equity will be measured via scales that have been developed by equity researchers to measure equity in ongoing intimate relationships.

Following are the hypotheses to be tested:

1) Older women who feel inequitably treated in their intimate relationship will feel more distressed (and less content) than those who feel equitably treated.

2) Older women who feel inequitably treated in their intimate relationship will be less satisfied and happy with their relationship than those who feel equitably treated.

3) Older women who feel inequitably treated in their intimate relationship will be less satisfied with their life, in general, than those who feel equitably treated.

In addition, we will supplement the "hard" data, with results from open-ended interviews in order to explore in more detail the elderly women's feelings and perceptions of equity/inequity in their relationships.

Method

Sample

As part of a multidisciplinary study of aging women, a random sample of 240 older people from different areas of Madison, Wisconsin were interviewed.

The women ranged in age from 50 to 82, and came from a variety of social backgrounds and work statuses. About 1/3 of the women were working either part-time or full-time. The rest of the women were either not working at the time, or were retired.

The samples' representativeness was assessed by comparing characteristics of the sample to the national population of older women. It was found that the group was financially better off and more educated than other American older women. This is because Madison's population tends to be more highly educated than populations from other cities.

Out of the 240 women in the sample, 106 reported that they were in an ongoing intimate sexual relationship. For most of these women, it was their husband; for a very few it was with a spouse equivalent. These 106 women received the questions on which the data below are based.

Measures

a. Equity/Inequity:

How equitable the elderly women perceived their relationships to be was measured via the Hatfield (1978) Global Measures and via a modified version of the Traupmann-Utne-Hatfield (1978) scales.

After an introduction that explained the exchange focus of the research, women were asked to think about the following three areas that are of concern to many couples (see Traupmann, 1978).

1. Think about the area of PERSONAL contributions and rewards. These include looks, sociability, intelligence, and the like...
2. Think about the area of EMOTIONAL contributions and rewards. These include liking, loving, understanding, sex, security, and the like...
3. Think about the area of DAY-TO-DAY contributions and rewards. These include finances, household maintenance, being easy to live with...

Women were asked to indicate how fairly or unfairly treated they felt in each of these three areas.

Second, the overall equity/inequity in the relationship was assessed via a slightly modified version of the Hatfield (1978) Global Measures.

Considering what you put into your relationship compared to what you get out of it...and what your partner puts into it compared to what he gets out of it...how would you say your relationship "stacks up"?

- +3 I am getting a much better deal than my partner.
- +2 I am getting a somewhat better deal than my partner.
- +1 I am getting a slightly better deal than my partner.
- 0 We are both getting an equally good...or bad...deal.
- 1 My partner is getting a slightly better deal than I am.
- 2 My partner is getting a somewhat better deal than I am.
- 3 My partner is getting a much better deal than I am.

It was women's responses to this last question that determined whether they were categorized as overbenefited (those scoring +3 to +1), equitably treated (those scoring 0), or underbenefited in their relationships (those scoring -3 to -1).

b. Contentment/Distress:

The feelings of contentment and distress in the relationship were measured via Austin's (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress (reported in Walster et al., 1978). The women were asked, "When you think about your relationship--what you put into it and what you get out of it--and what your partner puts into it and what s(he) gets out of it--how does that make you feel?" They indicated how "content", "happy", "angry" and "guilty" they felt (Possible answers ranged from 1="not at all" to 4="very much",)

A Total Mood Index was calculated by summing a woman's scores on the first two items (how "content" and "happy" are you) and subtracting their scores on the last two items (how "guilty" and "angry" are you). The higher

the score, the more contented and the less distressed women are said to be.

c. Satisfaction with the relationship:

Women were asked the following two questions:

How satisfied are you with your relationship?

1. Very dissatisfied; I am often not satisfied with my relationship.
2. Somewhat dissatisfied; I am sometimes not satisfied with my relationship.
3. Somewhat satisfied; I am usually satisfied with my relationship.
4. Very satisfied; I am almost always satisfied with my relationship.
5. Completely satisfied; I could not be more satisfied with my relationship.

How happy are you with your relationship?

1. Very unhappy; I am often not happy with my relationship.
2. Somewhat unhappy; I am sometimes not happy with my relationship.
3. Somewhat happy; I am usually happy with my relationship.
4. Very happy; I am almost always happy with my relationship.
5. Completely happy; I could not be happier with my relationship.

An Index of Total Satisfaction with the relationship was calculated by summing the respondents' replies to the two questions.

d. Satisfaction with life:

Finally, the women were asked how satisfied and happy they were with life, in general.

How satisfied are you with your life?

1. Very dissatisfied; I am often not satisfied with my life.
2. Somewhat dissatisfied; I am sometimes not satisfied with my life.
3. Somewhat satisfied; I am usually satisfied with my life.
4. Very satisfied; I am almost always satisfied with my life.
5. Completely satisfied; I could not be more satisfied with my life.

How happy are you with your life?

1. Very unhappy; I am often not happy with my life.
2. Somewhat unhappy; I am sometimes not happy with my life.
3. Somewhat happy; I am usually happy with my life.
4. Very happy; I am almost always happy with my life.
5. Completely happy; I could not be happier with my life.

An index of Total Satisfaction with life was constructed by summing respondents' replies to these two questions.

Results

According to Equity theory (see Austin & Walster, 1974 a & b, 1975), although inequity is disturbing to everyone, it is far easier for the overbenefited to accept it than for the deprived to do so. Previous research has generally found that the overbenefited are slightly upset by inequity; the underbenefited are extremely upset by the same magnitude of inequity. This makes sense--the overbenefited, after all, are gaining by the inequity; the underbenefited are losing.

We attempted to embody these expectations in our statistical analyses in the following way: We predicted a priori that our independent variable should be scaled as follows: Overbenefited group (+1), equitably treated group (+2); underbenefited group (+4). In the analysis, we used unequal interval linear and quadratic contrasts (see Hays, 1963).

Let us now turn to the results for the three hypotheses.

Equity and Contentment/Distress

Our first prediction was that older women who feel they are inequitably treated in their intimate relationships will feel more distress than those who feel they are equitably treated. (See Figure 1)

insert figure 1 about here

Contrary to what has been found in previous studies, the data do not support this prediction. As is illustrated in Table 1, there were no significant differences between the overbenefited, equitably treated, and underbenefited women on the Total Mood Index $[(\text{content} + \text{happy}) - (\text{guilty} + \text{anger})]$. The means, however, were exactly in the direction predicted--the equitably treated women tended to be more content than the inequitably treated women. As has been found in previous studies, the overbenefited women were slightly upset by the inequity (although not significantly so), the underbenefited women were far more upset (again, although not significantly so).

Table 1 about here

When the emotions are examined separately, it can be seen that the groups differ in how negatively aroused they were. A significant quadratic effect was found for anger--underbenefited women were more angry than equitably treated and overbenefited women. In addition, a significant linear effect was found for guilt--overbenefited women were more guilty than underbenefited and equitably treated women.

In sum, although anger and to some extent guilt were related to inequity, total affect for older women was not strongly related to the equity/inequity of the relationship.

Figure 2 around here

Equity and Relationship Satisfaction

Our second prediction concerns the women's evaluation of their intimate relationship as a whole. In studies with college students (Traupmann, Hatfield & Wexler, in press; Hatfield, Walster & Traupmann, 1978), and with young married couples (Traupmann, 1978; Utne, 1978), the results clearly supported a curvilinear prediction. That is, both underbenefited and overbenefited "intimates" were less satisfied with their intimate relationship than were men and women in equitable relationships.

The results for older women again paint a different picture. When asked how satisfied and how happy they felt about their intimate relationships, it was the overbenefited women, rather than the equitably treated women, who scored highest (see Table 2 and Figure 3). All linear F's were significant. None of the curvilinear F's were significant. It appears that for older women, feeling overbenefited is most rewarding.

 Insert Table 2 and Figure

3 about here

Equity and Life Satisfaction

Does equity/inequity in one's relationship color the rest of one's life? Are intimate relationships so critical that discontent with one's mate makes one's whole life look bleak? In our third hypothesis, we examined whether older women who are equitably treated will be more satisfied with their life, overall, than those who feel inequitably treated. In previous studies with both college students and newlyweds we found this to be true.

Once again, the older women appear to be different from our other samples. There were virtually no differences between the equitably and inequitably treated women. All reported feeling very happy and satisfied with their total lives (see Table 2 and Figure 4).

 Insert Figure 4 about here

Additional Interview Data:

The preceding "hard" data led us to conclude that equity and fairness issues may be of little concern for older women in their marriages. This surprising finding (or non-finding) raised a series of questions: Were older women always unconcerned with equity? When they were in their 20s, 30s, & 40s, were they as concerned with the fairness of unfairness of their lives as today's couples are? Or did they grow up in an era when it was taboo to think about marriages in contractual terms? Do all older women insist that equity is unimportant? Or are there some older women who admit to caring about the fairness or unfairness of their relationship?

To get some rough indications of how women felt about these issues, we interviewed women a second time, one year later. This time, the questions were open-ended. We wanted to tap each woman's understanding of the role, if any, that fairness or balance had played in her married life.

After a brief introduction about equity and marriage, the interviewer said:

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about the "give and take" in your marriage. We are interested in understanding how you felt about the BALANCE OF THINGS between you and your husband at various critical points in your married life, like when you first got married, when your first child arrived, when your children went off to school and so on."

After the respondent had traced the balance in her marriage from the first year of marriage to the present, she was asked:

1) Think back to when you were first married. How has the balance of your marriage changed since then? Does it seem more fair then or now, or about the same?

2) Would you say that you were more concerned about fairness when you were first married...or now? Why?

3) Can you tell us how you think sudden illness would affect your feelings about your marriage...especially those feelings about the balance in the marriage?

As we expected, this technique yielded a very rich data set, one which provided us with insights needed to interpret the negative results of our first year's study.

The first author selected 75 of these interviews, recorded the women's answers to the open-ended questions, and tried to find some commonalities in them. It was concluded that, in general, women were reluctant to admit they thought in terms of fairness...yet, at the same time, it was evident that, at least sometimes, they did.

Six meta-interpretations of the interview responses will be described, with the accompanying patterns of responses:

1. First, there seemed to be a great deal of ambivalence, inconsistency and even denial, surrounding the idea that fairness is important in marriage. Many women seemed reticent to think in these terms about their marriage. yet they readily used such terms as "deserved" or "owed" in their answers.

Said one 61 year old woman:

"I haven't ever thought of my marriage like that--in terms of fairness. We each had our jobs to do."

But when asked about her reactions to her husband becoming seriously ill, she replied:

"I would feel he would deserve my care--I would owe him my love and my care. Fairness and balance doesn't enter into it, in my mind."

Livison (1978) observed that older women generally feel they are being disloyal to their husbands and their marriages ("a sacred institution ordained by God") if they publicly evaluate him or the marriage negatively. We found that when negative material came up during the interview, it was "normalized away" (see Yarrow, 19__). Some of the women in our sample described appallingly bad marital situations. They suggested they simply accepted the unpleasantness as their lot in life. When asked whether or not the relationship was equitable, however, they said it was.

2. Roughly a third of our sample thought their relationships had always been fair. They had achieved what seemed to be a fair arrangement at the beginning of their relationship and maintained that equity through 30, 40, and 50 years of married life. Many women said they had never thought about fairness--that they fulfilled their role as "homemaker" while their husband fulfilled his as "breadwinner". This agreement about the division of labor was clear from the start and had not changed.

A woman in her early sixties had this response to the equity questions:

"We always felt we were equal. We didn't think about balance. We don't belong to this generation who analyzes every feeling. I haven't thought about my marriage in those terms and I still don't. We're both not very demonstrative of our feelings so we don't expect it of each other--we just know it's there."

3. Some women reported that it was not until a major change in the marital balance occurred, that they realize that it was unsettling to get far more or far less than one deserved. For example, a surprising number of women reported a shift in the balance of the marriage when a serious illness

occurred in the family. Many women said they felt overbenefited when their husbands had to care for the children because they, the wives, were seriously ill. The illness, by temporarily destroying the role structure of the marriage, seemed to illuminate the implicit terms of the marriage contract. To rephrase an old adage--we never see the balance until the scales are tipped.

4. For some the fairness issue arose only during the stressful period of child-bearing and raising. These women admitted feeling underbenefited--overworked and unappreciated--when the children were very young. They felt tied down at home with the children, disappointed in their husband's meager parenting, and restricted in their routes to self-expression. However, when the children left the next, the relationship returned again to one in which equity prevailed. This group seemed to constitute roughly another third of the total.

A fifty-two year old woman's story:

"In my 30's, I was taking care of the kids--he was working. We were married 9 years before the kids came--and, when they came it was not that great. Suddenly life had changed completely, and at that age, you're not as flexible. I was not easy to live with. Now it's more fair. Kids grow up. When you're first married, you're immature. You have to learn a lot about sharing and giving."

5. What of the others, the women whose lives didn't seem to fit either of those patterns? For the most part this group was made up of women who did not get a good deal, either from life, or from their marriage. Their misfortune seemed to trigger some questioning of the fairness of the marriage.

A 60 year old woman said she was at a major turning point in her marriage. It had started out very happy, like most marriages. "Heck", when you're in love you're always happy," she said. "I just made excuses for his drinking in those days." As time went on, her dependency on him decreased--she got a part time job, and his drinking got worse. Now

they've agreed to give it one more try but, she says if it doesn't work this time, that's it. When we asked about how her concern about fairness had changed she answered, "I was just a little concerned in the beginning--now I demand it!"

Yet, the equity score she chose to describe her relationship currently was zero or equity.

A number of women described their attitude toward their marriage as one of acceptance--that's just the way it is.

A 58 year old woman said she had felt they were equal partners in the marriage, but later realized that she had been very naive.

"I realized I was the stronger of the two of us. I thought that it would change over the years. I didn't know if he was just unable to give emotionally or just that he didn't want to. In my 30's I realized that he wouldn't change, that he was unable to be giving. I had to decide whether to maintain the relationship or leave. I felt very negative about divorce and so I decided to accept what I had, but it was traumatic. Now I know I must accept the decision I made. I am peaceful accepting it. I never allow myself to think what if I had done it differently."

The interviewer noted here that this was a very difficult and painful part of the interview for this woman.

6. Another type of woman who reported many fluctuations in the balance of the marriage was the woman who had worked several years before getting married. She generally was older--in her late 20's or early 30's--when she got married, and believed she was less dependent within the marriage, because of this history. These women calculated into the marriage balance such things as the property they owned prior to the marriage, the salary they earned and their own and their partner's physical health. Those who married even later, were more outspoken about what they expected from the marriage. One 68 year old woman, who married about 6 years ago, reported that she felt quite underbenefited because she was in good health, while her 78 year

old husband was in poor health.

Let us conclude by returning to the question we began with. Is equity an important concern in the lives of older women?

It appears that women 50 and older who have been married for some time are not quick to evaluate their marriage in terms of its fairness. When asked how equitable or inequitable the marriage is, most women report that their marriage is equitable.

Yet, the women's descriptions of their marriages over time, including the present, point to a different conclusion. In their own words, the respondents told us that fairness was an important issue for many of them, that stressful life events such as the arrival of children, or a serious illness, brought imbalances to light and that even in the happiest of marriages, some awareness of the balance or fairness was present and had some impact on the overall relationship.

Footnotes

1. This research was supported in part by HEW-AOA Grant #90 A-1230 for Multi-disciplinary research in aging women, awarded to the Faye McBeath Institute on Aging and Adult Life, University of Wisconsin, Madison (1977-1979) and in part by National Institutes of Health Grant for Biomedical Research, to the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Figure 1

The Hypothetical Relationship Between Equity and Contentment/**Distress**

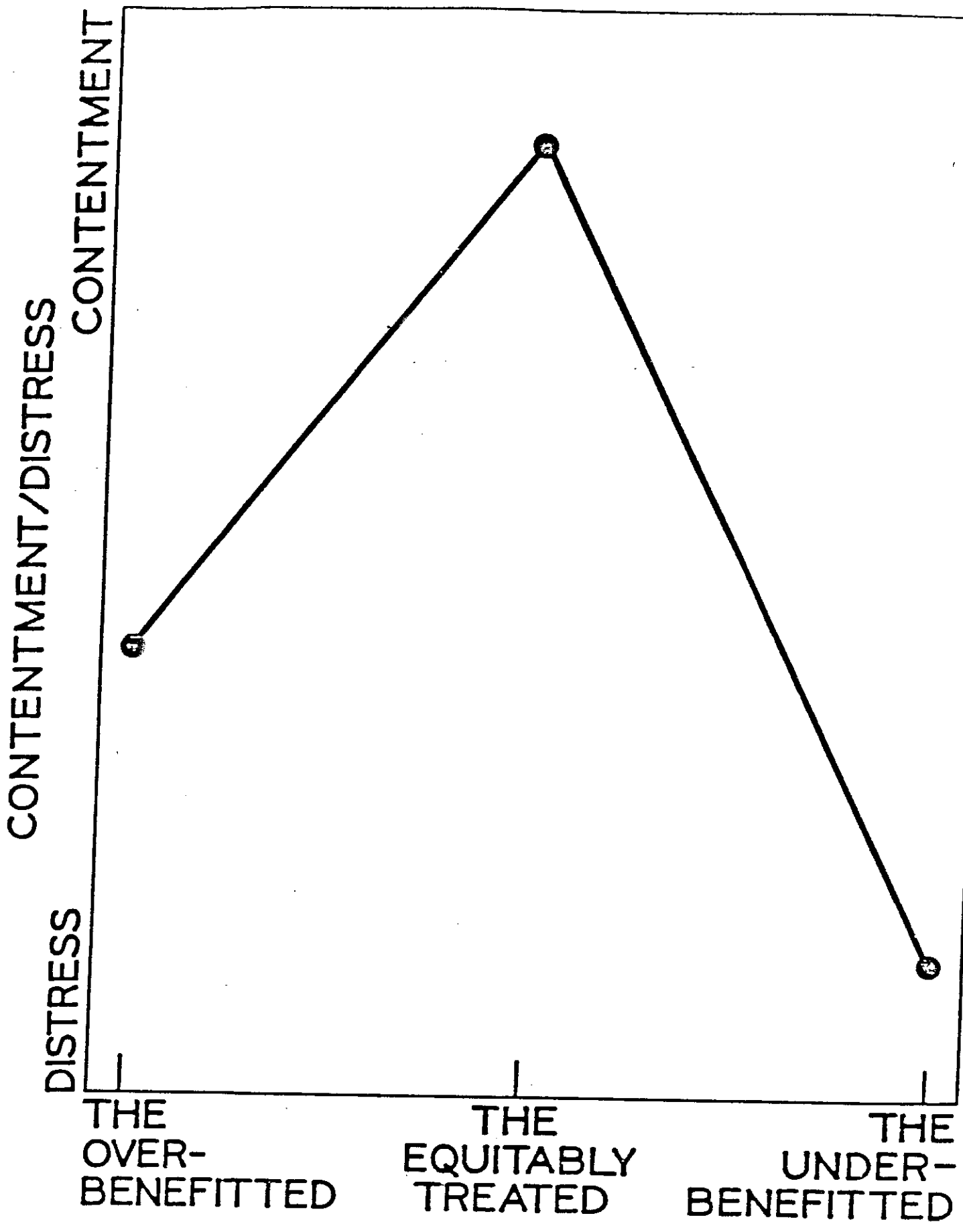


Figure 2

The Relationship Between Equity and Contentment/Distress for Older Women

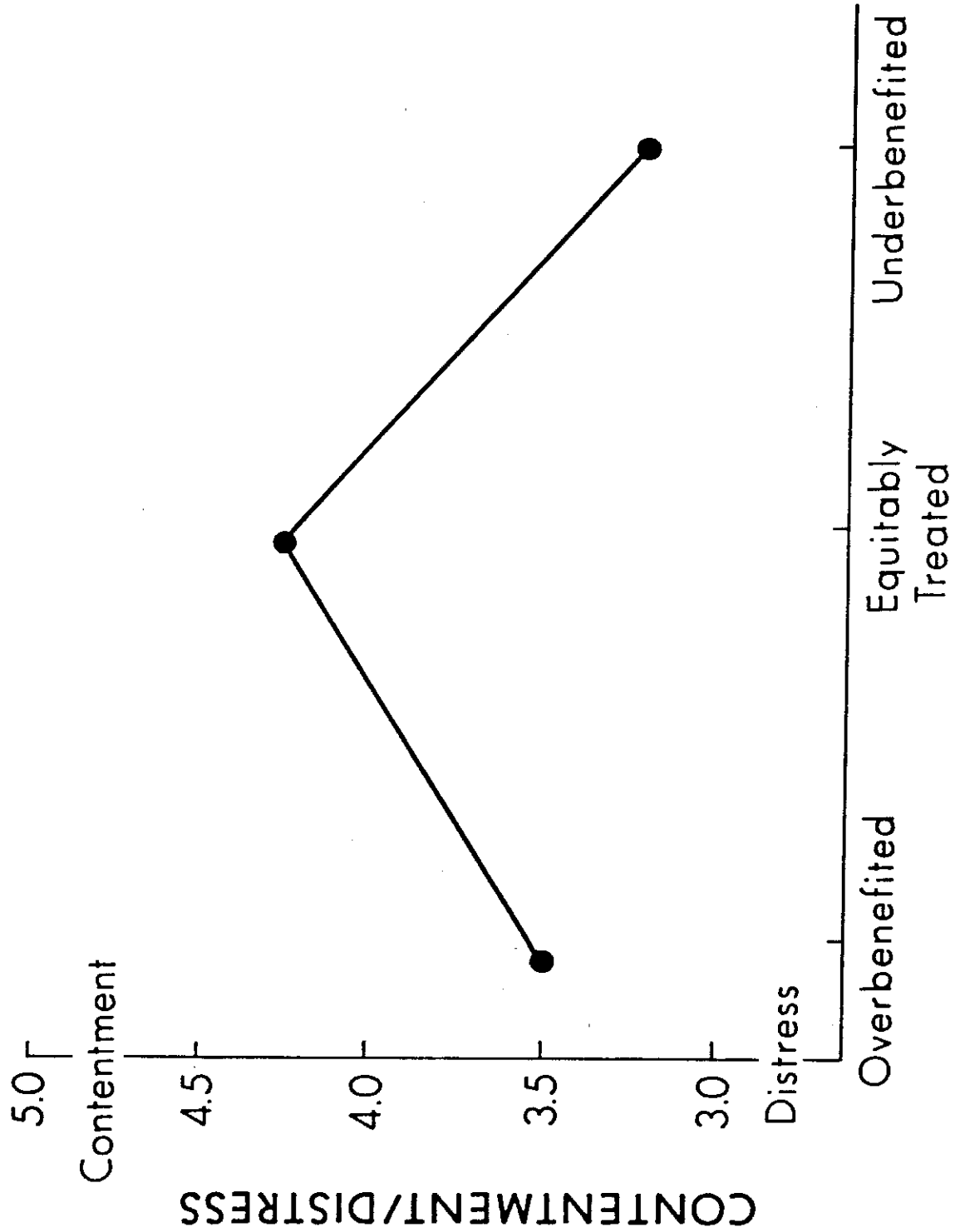


Figure 3

The Relationship Between Equity and Relationship Satisfaction for Older Women

SATISFACTION WITH RELATIONSHIP

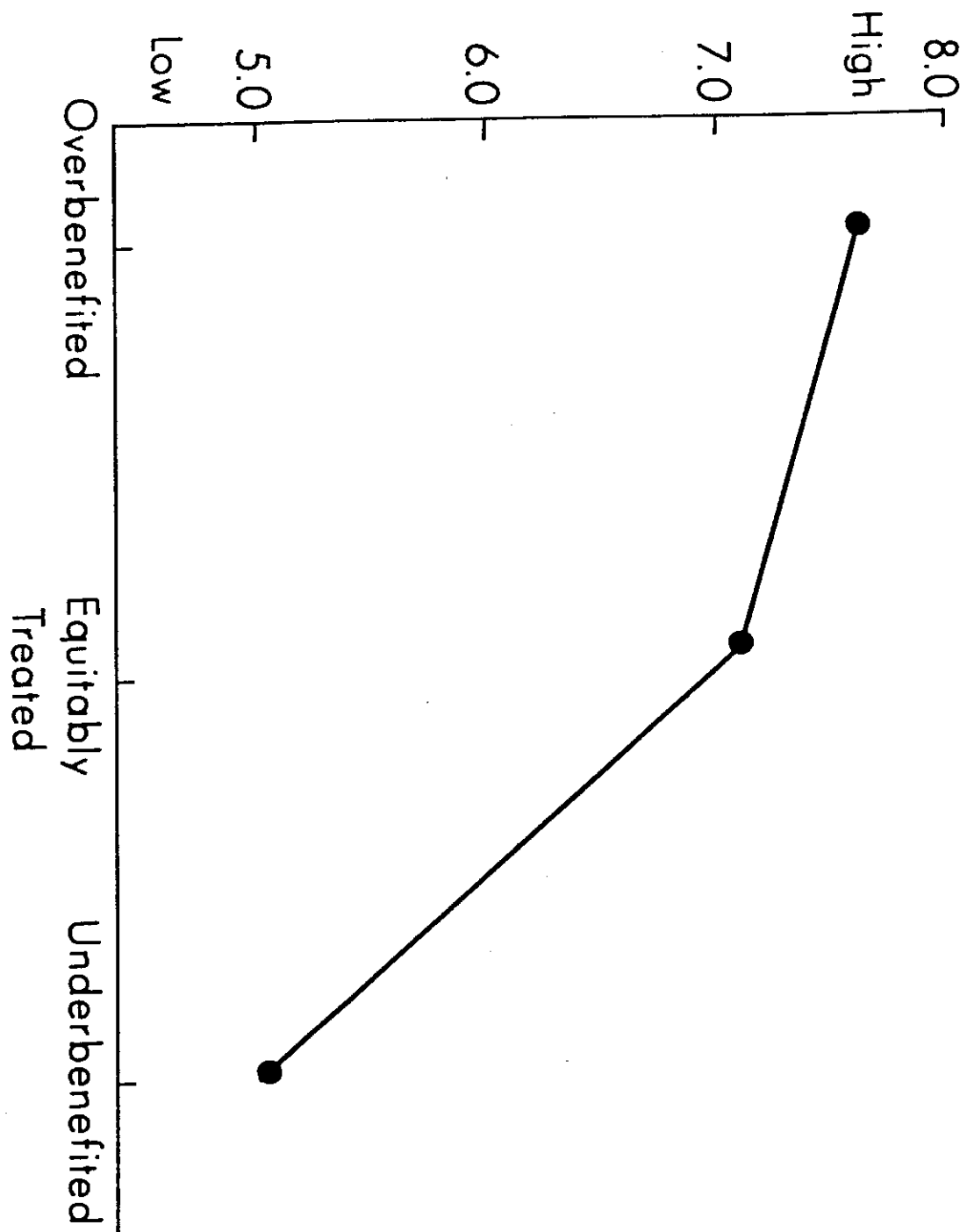


Figure 4

The Relationship Between Equity and Life Satisfaction for Older Women

SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

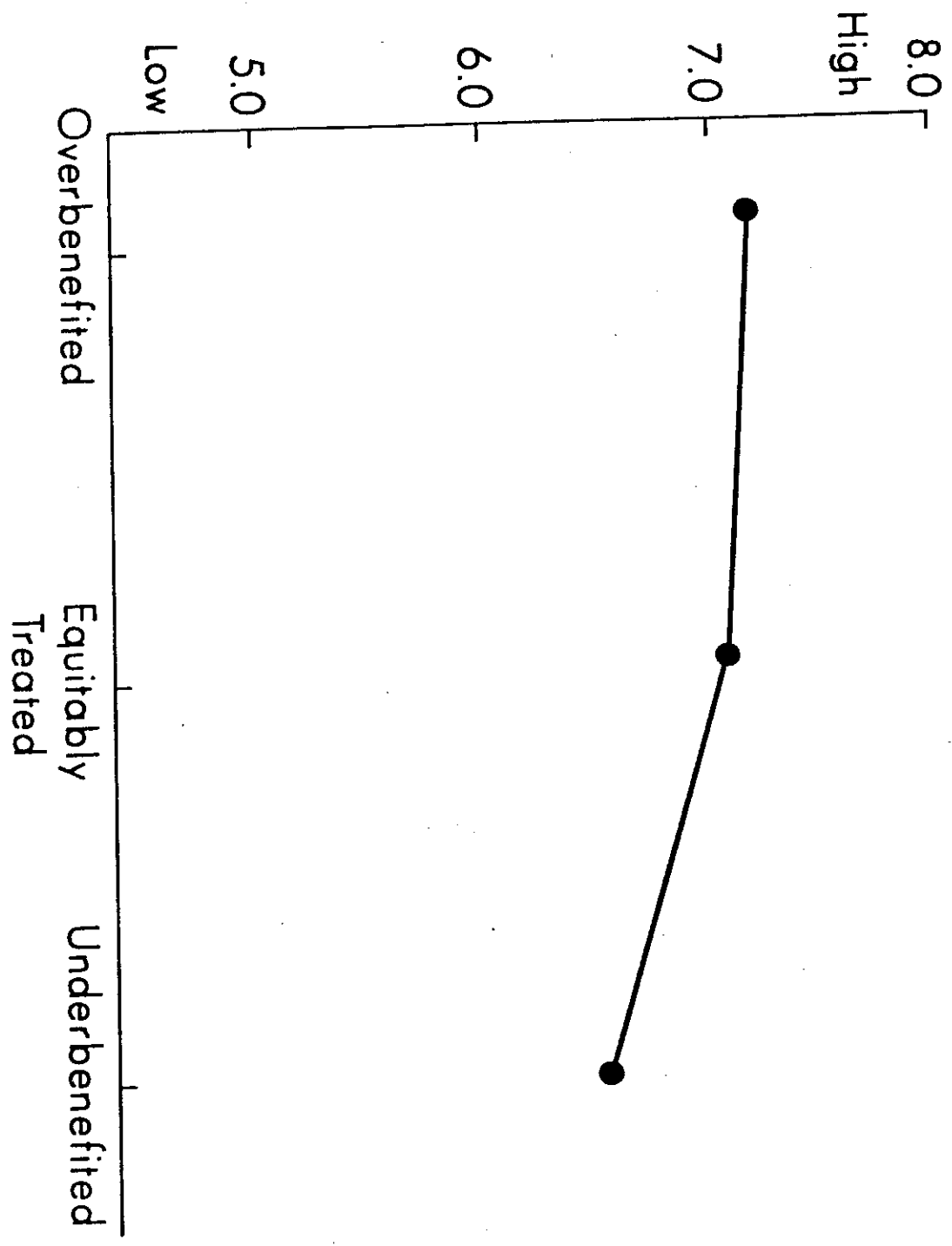


Table 1
 Relationship Between Equity/Inequity
 and Contentment/Distress

How Equitably Treated Does S Feel?	(N)	<u>Content</u> ^a	<u>Happy</u> ^a	<u>Angry</u> ^a	<u>Guilty</u> ^a	<u>Total Mood Index</u> ^a
Overbenefited	(14)	3.57	3.43	1.64	1.86	3.50
Equitably treated	(114)	3.54	3.48	1.45	1.38	4.19
Underbenefited	<u>(7)</u>	3.28	3.29	2.14	1.14	3.29
	135					
<u>F-Tests</u>						
Linear		.65	.15	1.97	5.30*	.05
Quadratic		.14	.28	3.73*	2.31	2.44

*p < .05

^a The higher the number, the more content, happy, angry and guilty S feels.

Table 2

Relationship Between Equity/Inequity and
Satisfaction with ones Relationship and with Life

How Equitably Treated Does S Feel?	(N)	<u>Satisfaction with Relationship^a</u>	<u>Happy with Relationship^a</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Overbenefited	(14)	3.93	3.71	7.64
Equitably treated	(114)	3.57	3.53	7.10
Underbenefited	(7)	2.57	2.57	5.14
	<u>135</u>			
Linear		8.19**	7.52**	8.63**
Quad		.15	.81	.43
		<u>Satisfaction with Life^a</u>	<u>Happy with Life^a</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Overbenefited	(14)	3.50	3.64	7.14
Equitably treated	(114)	3.42	3.57	7.00
Underbenefited	(7)	3.28	3.29	6.57
	<u>135</u>			
Linear		.23	.91	.63
Quad		.00	.05	.02

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

^aThe Higher the number the more satisfied and happy with life and the relationship women are.

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