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Equity and Sexual Satisfaction in Recently Married Couples

ELAINE HATFIELD, DAVID GREENBERGER,
JANE TRAUPMANN, AND PHILIP LAMBERT

Abstract

This study was designed to determine whether or not equity considerations are important in couples' sexual relations. To answer this question, 53 newlywed couples were interviewed about their sexual relationships. Two main hypotheses were tested: (a) Men and women who feel their relationships are equitable will be more content (less distressed) than people who feel either overbenefited or underbenefited. (b) Men and women who feel equitably treated will have more satisfying sexual relations than those who feel either underbenefited or overbenefited. Some support for both hypotheses was obtained. Specifically, couples in equitable relationships were more content with their relationships and with their lives in general than other couples. In addition, equitably treated men and women were more satisfied with their sexual relationships *overall* than were other couples. They felt most loving and close after sex and assumed their partner felt that way too. While equitable couples did not say they felt more satisfied immediately after a sexual encounter than did other couples, they believed their partners were unusually satisfied. Reasons why these findings, though providing some support for the equity paradigm, must be interpreted with caution are discussed.

Equity theory (see Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979) consists of four interlocking propositions:

Proposition I: Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes equal rewards minus punishments).

Proposition IIA: Groups (or rather the individuals comprising these

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groups) can maximize collective outcomes by evolving accepted systems for equitably apportioning rewards and punishments among members. Thus, members will evolve such systems of equity and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.

Proposition IIB: Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish members who treat others inequitably.

Proposition III: When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they will feel.

Proposition IV: Individuals who discover they are in inequitable relationships will attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity that exists, the more distress they will feel, and the harder they will try to restore equity (pp. 100-101).

There is a great deal of evidence that equity considerations are critically important in determining how people act in nonintimate encounters. Equity considerations have been found to be important in such diverse areas as employer/employee relationships, exploiter/victim relationships, and philanthropist/recipient relationships. (See Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978 for a comprehensive review of this research.) Recently, Equity theory has been applied to intimate relationships—to dating couples' encounters (Hatfield, Walster, & Traupmann, 1979), to married couples' interactions (Traupmann, Petersen, Utne, & Hatfield, 1981) and even to extramarital liaisons (Hatfield, Traupmann, & Walster, 1978).

There is accumulating evidence that the same equity considerations that shape casual encounters, shape intimate encounters as well. As yet, however, equity theorists have not explored whether or not equity considerations are important in couples' *most* intimate of relations—their sexual encounters. The present correlational study was designed to do just that.

According to Proposition III of Equity theory, men and women's perception that they are fairly/unfairly treated should have an impact on their sexual relations. Couples in equitable relationships should feel fairly comfortable about their relationships; couples in inequitable relationships should not. It is obvious why "underbenefited" men and women (who feel they are getting far *less* than they deserve) should feel uncomfortable—they have every reason to feel resentful and angry. At first consideration, it is not obvious that their overbenefited mates

should feel uneasy too. But, according to equity theorists, they should. The “overbenefited” may delight in their good fortune—but their delight must be tempered by their guilt and their fear that they might lose it all. In studies of workers, and in a few studies of dating couples, researchers have found that equity and distress typically have the curvilinear relationship predicted in Proposition III—i.e., the equitably treated are most content, the overbenefited are slightly upset and the underbenefited extremely upset by existing inequities. (For a review of this research, see Walster et al., 1978.)

But how does this relate to sexuality? Equity theorists have argued that marital satisfaction leads to equity which then leads to sexual satisfaction. (See Hatfield et al., 1979.) They argue as follows: If couples like or love one another, if they feel equitably treated, if they feel comfortable with one another, sex may go well. If couples dislike or hate one another, feel trapped in inequitable relationships, or feel uncomfortable in one another’s presence, their deep-seated resentment or guilt may corrode their sexual encounters. (See Berne, 1964; Hunt, 1974; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966, 1976; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977.) Men and women who feel underbenefited may find that their anger makes it difficult for them to respond sexually to their partners. They may find themselves responding sadistically or passive-aggressively to sexual advances. The overbenefited, plagued with guilt over their good fortune, may find it difficult to receive still more pleasure from their partners. Such feelings are obviously not conducive to a good sexual experience. In fact, such feelings are more likely to be associated with primary or secondary impotence or orgasmic dysfunction (frigidity). (See Barbach, 1975; Heiman, LoPiccolo, & LoPiccolo, 1976; Kaplan, 1974; Masters & Johnson, 1970; Zilbergeld, 1978.) Thus, we hypothesized that men and women in equitable relationships would have more satisfying sexual experiences than would the underbenefited or overbenefited.

Are there any data in support of the contention that equitable relationships are better sexually? In a study designed to test another hypothesis (the impact of gender and equity on sexual activity), Hatfield et al. (1979) interviewed 227 men and 310 women who were dating casually or steadily. They found that, regardless of gender, those in equitable relationships were having sexual intercourse. Most couples in inequitable relationships were not—both the greatly overbenefited

and the greatly underbenefited generally stopped before “going all the way.”

Unfortunately, for our purposes, the Hatfield et al. (1979) study has two serious limitations: (a) Critics of Equity theory have acknowledged that people are concerned about fairness in their casual and dating relationships but not in deeply intimate relationships. For example, Rubin (1973) observes:

The principles of the interpersonal marketplace are most likely to prevail in encounters between strangers and casual acquaintances, and in the early stages of the development of relationships. As an interpersonal bond becomes more firmly established, however, it begins to go 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)

Hatfield et al. (1979) only interviewed casual and steady *daters*. They did not interview any couples who were deeply committed to, or married to, one another. (b) Equity theory's Proposition III makes predictions about how sexually *satisfied* equitable *versus* non-equitable couples will be. Hatfield et al. (1979) asked couples how far they had gone sexually, but not about the *quality* of their sexual experiences. Thus, the present study was designed to determine if couples who feel equitably treated have more satisfying and fulfilling sexual lives than do couples in inequitable relations—even after a year of marriage.

Method

Respondents

The population from which our sample was drawn consisted of all couples who applied for marriage licenses in Madison, Wisconsin from August to November of 1976 ($N = 495$). We eliminated 66 couples who lived farther than 25 miles from Madison, 33 couples who were over 45, 105 couples who were unlocatable (exhaustive efforts to locate couples' addresses or telephone numbers failed), 4 couples who did not speak English, and 3 couples who were never married.

The remaining 284 couples were sent an introductory letter describing this research. We explained that the University of Wisconsin Marriage Research Center was conducting an interview study of early marital relationships. We were interested in learning about the daily give-and-take of married life and the concerns that recently married men and women have with their relationships. Of these, 160 couples

(56%) agreed to be interviewed. Of these, 26 couples did not show up for the scheduled interview, cancelled, and/or were rescheduled and did not show up a second time. Thus, the final interviewed sample of couples totalled 124 (44%). The data from only 118 couples was available for the final analysis, due to loss of six completed interviews by one of the interviewers.¹

One year later (in connection with the present study) we contacted the 118 couples who had participated a second time. (By now they had been married a little more than a year.) Fifty-three couples were still in Madison at this later date and agreed to participate in the second interview.

There was concern that the 53 couples who were still living in Madison and agreed to be interviewed a second time might differ in some critical way from the 65 who were not and did not. In order to check for differences couples who were/were not available were compared on 36 Interview I variables which we thought might distinguish participants from non-participants. No significant differences between the groups were found.

In the final sample couples varied in age from 17-46. The mean age of men was 27+; the mean age of women was 25+. On the average, couples had dated seriously for a little over two years before marrying. For 80% of the couples, this was their first marriage. Almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of them had lived together before their marriages. The couples had a variety of occupations—including homemakers, accountants, teachers, farmers, and construction workers. A few (8%) were students.

The Interviews

Most of the interviews took place at the University of Wisconsin's Department of Sociology. Efforts were made to soften the decor by

¹*The other 56%:* How did those who did not participate (56%) compare with those who did (44%)? Traupmann (1978) attempted to find out. First she telephoned and asked them why they would not be interviewed. Most of the refusers (111 couples) said they were too busy or simply disinterested in participating. Fourteen couples cited personal problems or a fear that the interview would be too personal. Two said they were separated from their spouses. Four couples refused because of illness or hospitalization. Next, Traupmann sent a short questionnaire to 116 of the refusers. She attempted to find out if refusers differed from accepters on a few basic dimensions—(1) marital happiness, (2) marital satisfaction, and (3) equity of their relationship. Twenty percent of the couples returned their questionnaire. Traupmann could find no compelling evidence that accepters and refusers differed in any important ways.

placing plants and posters in these rooms. Coffee and rolls were served. A few interviews were conducted in the homes of couples who could not come to the campus. Husbands and wives were interviewed apart from one another, and were assured of the complete confidentiality of their responses.

The interview schedule consisted of four parts. Part I was a series of demographic questions. These were answered orally by the respondent. In Part II of the interview, equity was assessed.

Assessing the Equity of the Marital Relationship. We assessed how equitable or inequitable couples' relationships were via *The Hatfield (1978) Global Measure* (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979). It asks:

Considering your relationship as a whole, what you put into it and what you get from it . . . and what your partner puts into it and what your partner gets from it . . . how does your total relationship "stack up"?

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

Men and women who scored +3 to +1 were classified as "Overbenefited," those scoring 0 as "Equitably treated," and those scoring -3 to -1 as "Underbenefited."

The *Hatfield (1978) Global Measure* of equity is a modification of the Traupmann-Utne-Hatfield Scales (TUH Scales) which measure perceived equity in close relationships. The TUH Scales ask people to indicate how their relationship "stacks up" in 25 different areas and then to indicate how equitable their relationship is *overall*. The overall portion of the TUH Scales is the forerunner of the *Hatfield (1978) Global Measure* used in the present study. Although information on the reliability and validity of the global measure is not yet available, Traupmann (1978) and Traupmann et al. (1981) show that the expanded equity measures are reasonably reliable (Chronbach's Alpha for total inputs scales = .87; for total outputs scales = .90) and valid (construct validity was demonstrated).

Part III of the interview schedule consisted of a self-administered questionnaire. Included in this section were the dependent variables—the measures of contentment/distress and sexual satisfaction. The respondent was alone until its completion.

Assessing Contentment/Distress

As in other studies (Hatfield, Traupmann, Utne, & Hay, Note 1), men's and women's satisfaction with their relationship was assessed in three ways:

The Austin (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress (reported in Walster et al., 1978). Men and 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 and what (s)he gets out of it—how does that make you feel?" They then indicated how "content," how "happy," and how "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 the respondents' "content" and "happy" scores and subtracting their "angry" and "guilty" scores. The higher the score, the more content (and the less distressed) they were. Although this is a standard measure of contentment/distress (see Austin, 1972, 1974) no reliability or validity data are available.

Measures of contentment with their relationships. Men's and women's satisfaction and happiness with their relationships were assessed via two questions: (a) How satisfied are you with your marriage? (Possible answers ranged from 1 = Very dissatisfied—I am often not satisfied with my relationship—to 5 = Completely satisfied—I could not be more satisfied with my relationship.) (b) How happy are you with your marriage? (Possible answers ranged from 1 = Very unhappy—I am often not happy with my relationship—to 5 = Completely happy—I could not be happier with my relationship.) A *Total Index* of "Contentment with the Relationship" was calculated by summing respondents' replies to these two questions.

Men's and women's contentment with their lives. (a) How happy are you with your life in general? (As before, possible answers ranged from 1 = Very unhappy to 5 = Completely happy.) (b) How satisfied are you with your life in general? (As before, answers ranged from 1 = Very dissatisfied to 5 = Completely satisfied.) A *Total Index* of "Contentment with Life" was calculated by summing respondents' replies to these two questions.

Assessing Sexual Satisfaction

Respondents' sexual satisfaction was measured by five questions:

Overall sexual satisfaction. (a) How satisfied are you with your sexual relationship with your partner? (Possible answers ranged from 8 = Extremely satisfied to 1 = Extremely dissatisfied.) Two questions assessed people's report as to how satisfied *they* were immediately after a sexual encounter: (b) After sex with my partner, I usually feel . . . (Possible answers ranged from 8 = Extremely loving and close, to 1 = Extremely distant and angry.) (c) After sex with my partner, I usually feel . . . (Possible answers ranged from 8 = Extremely sexually satisfied to 1 = Extremely sexually frustrated.) Finally, two questions assessed respondents' perceptions as to how satisfied their *partners* were after sex. (d) After sex, I think *my partner* usually feels . . . (Possible answers ranged from 8 = Extremely loving and close to 1 = Extremely distant and angry.) (e) After sex, I think *my partner* usually feels . . . (Possible answers ranged from 8 = Extremely sexually satisfied, to 1 = Extremely sexually frustrated.)

Part IV of the interview concluded with an oftentimes lengthy open discussion. The interviewers admitted that they'd asked "a lot of pretty structured questions about things" about which respondents were interested in learning. But, they were learning about marriage. "We're not experts. If anyone's an expert, it's you." Thus, they asked "Are there things that you've learned about marriage that you feel are important?" This led into a general discussion which allowed respondents to comment on the questionnaire and to add anything that they felt should be added.

Results and Discussion

Statistical Note

According to Equity theory (see Austin & Walster, 1974a, 1974b), although inequity is disturbing to everyone, it is far easier for the overbenefited to accept inequity than for the deprived to do so. Inevitably, previous research has found that while the overbenefited are slightly upset by a given magnitude of inequity, the underbenefited are extremely upset by the same inequity. As Austin and Walster (1974b) and Hatfield et al. (1979) suggested, we attempted to embody these expectations in our statistical analyses by predicting, a priori, that our independent variable should be scaled as follows: Overbenefited group (+1), Equitably treated group (+2), Underbenefited group (+4). In all

of the following analyses, we used unequal interval Linear and Quadratic contrasts. (See Hays, 1963.)

Equity and Contentment/Distress

Our first prediction was that men and women who feel their relationships are equitable will be more content and satisfied with their relationships than will men and women who feel inequitably treated. The overbenefited should be slightly distressed by the existing inequities; the underbenefited should be extremely distressed. The data strongly support these predictions.

Table 1

Relationship Between Equity of an Intimate Relationship and Contentment/Distress

How Equitable is the Relationship?	(n)	Austin's Total Mood Index	Measure of Contentment with Relationship	Measure of Contentment with Life
Men				
Overbenefited	(10)	3.90	7.80	7.10
Equitably treated	(35)	4.37	8.11	7.46
Underbenefited	(8)	1.13	4.50	5.63
Women				
Overbenefited	(7)	3.29	7.57	6.43
Equitably treated	(33)	4.88	8.06	7.21
Underbenefited	(13)	2.15	6.31	6.31
Pooled within-cell SD		1.55	1.25	1.26

Summary of Analysis of Variance

Source	df	F Values		
Subject's Sex (A)	1	.47	.06	.85
Equity (Linear B)	1	48.31***	48.31***	8.47**
(Quadratic B)	1	24.37***	19.15***	9.36**
A x Linear B	1	.53	5.48*	1.73
A x Quadratic B	1	.72	.86	.00

Note. The higher the means, the more content, satisfied, and happy a subject feels.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

As is illustrated in Table 1, men and women in equitable relationships are more content (and less distressed), more satisfied, and happier with their relationships than are the men and women in inequitable relationships. Overbenefited men and women seem to be some-

what upset by inequity, while underbenefited men and women are extremely upset by it. For both *Austin's (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress* and the Measure of Contentment with the Relationship, the Quadratic F is significant. These findings replicate the findings of a number of earlier studies (see Austin & Walster, 1974a, 1974b; Traupmann, 1978; Walster et al., 1978). It appears that how fairly treated people feel has considerable impact on how content/distressed they feel in their love relationships.

Is there any evidence that equity/inequity colors not just one's satisfaction with one's intimate relationships, but one's satisfaction with one's entire life? Are intimate relationships so critical that if one is satisfied with *them*, one tends to be satisfied with everything? In the present study, the perceived fairness of one's relationship does relate to one's overall life satisfaction. The Quadratic F for the measure of content with life is significant. Finally, as can be seen, significant linear main effects were found for each of the contentment measures.²

Equity and Sexual Satisfaction

The central prediction in this study was that equity would be related to sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction was assessed in three ways: respondents' *overall* estimate of sexual satisfaction, respondents' reports as to how *they* felt immediately after a sexual encounter and respondents' perceptions as to how satisfied they thought *their partners* were after a sexual encounter. As shown in Table 2, the hypothesis generally was supported. *Overall*, equitably treated men and women are more satisfied with their sexual relationship than are overbenefited and underbenefited men and women (the Quadratic F was significant). As predicted, overbenefited respondents, although somewhat dissatisfied, were far less dissatisfied than were the underbenefited.

As predicted, equitably treated men and women felt more loving and

²When one examines the means (see Table 1), it appears that these "significant" linear trends are an artifact of our scaling procedure. If a true linear effect existed, the Overbenefited, Equitably treated, and Underbenefited group means would decrease systematically. They do not. In fact, as predicted, the O mean is lower than the E group mean. Why then, does the linear trend reach significance? This is probably due to two factors—(a) the O and E groups do not differ by very much, and (b) the O and E groups have a relatively low weight (+1 and +2 respectively) while the U groups count more heavily in the analysis (+4).

Table 2
Relationship Between Equity/Inequity of an Intimate
Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction

How Equitable is the Relationship?	(n)	Overall Sexual Satisfaction	Feelings After Sex		Perception of Partner's Feelings		
			Loving and Close	Satisfied	Loving and Close	Satisfied	
			Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	
Men							
Overbenefited	(10)	6.20	6.80	7.10	7.30	6.60	13.90
Equitably treated	(35)	6.83	7.11	7.11	7.37	7.06	14.43
Underbenefited	(8)	4.75	5.75	5.38	6.88	5.50	12.38
Women							
Overbenefited	(7)	6.43	7.14	7.29	7.00	6.43	13.43
Equitably treated	(33)	6.67	7.18	6.58	7.09	6.97	14.06
Underbenefited	(13)	5.15	6.15	5.69	6.31	6.77	13.08
Pooled within-cell SD		1.61	1.16	1.29	.67	.83	2.22

Summary of Analysis of Variance

Source	df	F Values	
Subject's Sex (A)	1	.13	.68
Linear Trend (B) Equity	1	13.77***	21.87***
A x B Linear Trend	1	.00	.12
Quadratic Trend for B	1	10.86**	3.12
A x B Quadratic Trend	1	.66	1.70

Note. The higher the means, the more sexually satisfied, loving and close, and satisfied S feels and assumes partner feels.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

close (versus angry and distant) after sex than did inequitably treated respondents. Underbenefited men and women felt angrier and more distant than did overbenefited respondents. However, respondents' sexual satisfaction after sex was not exactly as predicted. A significant linear trend was found, but the Quadratic trend was not significant. Equitably treated and overbenefited men are both very satisfied with their sexual relations; underbenefited men are far less so. However, contrary to prediction, overbenefited women are the most satisfied with their sexual relations, and underbenefited women are the least satisfied. It should be noted that no Sex x Equity interactions were found for any of the variables.

Respondents were also asked how their partners felt after sex. The results suggest that men and women in equitable relationships *may* see their partners as more satisfied sexually, but the data are not conclusive. When we look at the data on how loving and close people think their partners felt, we find there is a trend in the predicted direction, but this trend is not significant. Both the overbenefited and equitably treated men and women feel very close to one another, although the equitably treated feel a little closer after sex. The underbenefited are convinced that their partners feel far less loving and close after sex. As can be seen in Table 2, the linear trend was also significant. Respondents' estimates of their partners' satisfaction (as opposed to frustration) was in the predicted direction (the Quadratic F is significant). Equitably treated persons perceived their partners as being most satisfied after sex. Overbenefited respondents perceived their partners as being more satisfied than did underbenefited respondents.

Conclusions

These results provide considerable support for the contention that equity considerations do indeed have an important impact on men's and women's sexual satisfaction in a marriage, but this evidence is not conclusive. There are two reasons for our caution.

First, the data are not totally consistent. When we look at men's and women's estimates of their overall sexual satisfaction, the data are clear: People in equitable relations do have the most satisfying sexual relationships. When we begin to ask precise questions about the details of their sexual experience, however, things get less clear. When respondents are discussing their own sexuality, it is clear that equity

considerations have a critical impact on the emotional aspect of sexuality (how loving and close they feel to their partner). The results are far muddier when we consider the more physical aspects of sex (sexual satisfaction). The quadratic relationship is no longer significant. It may be that the global measure of equity is too broad and, consequently, is not sensitive to the variance in just one area of the relationship, i.e., sexuality. A further study of sex and equity in marriage, in which perceived fairness in the realm of sex alone is measured, in addition to the global measure, would clarify this issue. It would also be important to assess the amount of variance in the global equity measure accounted for by the perceived equity/inequity in the sexual aspect of the relationship.

We also get some, but not total, support for the notion that equity considerations are important in sex, when we look at people's assumptions, projections, or real information as to what their partners must be feeling. Equity considerations do seem to have an impact on how loving and close they think their partner feels (this time, this Quadratic F is not significant), and how sexually satisfied their partner is.

The data, then, seem to provide considerable support for the notion that equity considerations are important in sex, but when we begin asking about the details of couples' sexual experience, the data are not as clear as we would wish.

Second, causal relationships cannot be established by correlation. These data are correlational. We have the same problem as other sociologists who have speculated about the link between marital satisfaction and sex, or sex and marital satisfaction. It seems likely that there are two reasons why equity and sexual satisfaction become so tightly intertwined: (a) People's feelings about the overall fairness of their relationships affect their sexual feelings, and (b) vice versa. One might well make the following argument: For some reason something may go wrong in a sexual relationship. People are reluctant to speak openly about their sexual problems and complaints. So, they transform their complaints. They complain about the fairness of their relationships. This argument, of course, cannot explain why the overbenefited are dissatisfied; it does suggest, however, that there are a variety of reasons why perceptions of underbenefit and sexual dissatisfaction might be linked.

Reference Note

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Theme: Sexual Arousal: New Concepts of Basic Sciences,
Diagnosis, and Treatment

Organized by the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior
of Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University

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