

# EQUITY, MARITAL SATISFACTION, AND STABILITY

**Mary K. Utne**

*University of Chicago*

**Elaine Hatfield**

*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

**Jane Traupmann**

*Family Development Center, Cambridge, MA*

**David Greenberger**

*Ohio State University*

Equity Theory, a social psychological theory concerned with fairness in interpersonal relations, has been shown to be predictive in casual encounters. Is it applicable in intimate relations as well? Newlyweds were asked a series of questions designed to measure the perceived level of equity in their relationship. Measures of their contentment/distress with the relationship and stability of the relationship were also taken. It was hypothesized that men and women who felt equitably treated would feel more content in their marriage and would perceive the marriage as more stable than would men and women in inequitable marriages. Strong evidence in support of both hypotheses was found. Also reported is a test of a post hoc hypothesis that women and men should be differentially concerned with equity. No significant sex differences were found on any of the dependent variables in the study.

In principle, Equity Theory is a general theory of social behaviour. If such a theory is truly 'general', however, its propositions must be shown to apply to a broad range of dyadic interactions. There is a great deal of research showing that Equity Theory does predict behaviour in a variety of casual encounters (Walster (Hatfield) et al., 1978). But there is very little evidence that Equity principles are equally good at predicting behaviour of *intimates* (i.e. loving persons

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whose lives are deeply intertwined (Hatfield, Utne & Traupmann, 1979, p. 106)). This study was designed to determine whether Equity principles can provide insight into intimate relations as well.

According to Equity Theory's Proposition III (Hatfield et al., 1979, p. 101 and Figure 1)

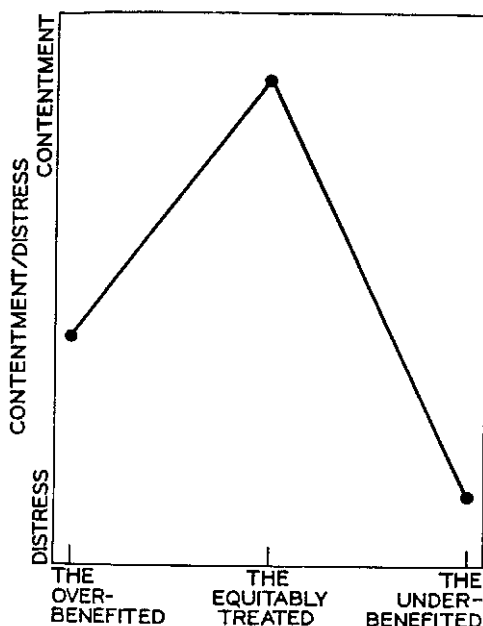
When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they will feel.

The overbenefited should feel guilty about receiving more than they deserve. The underbenefited should feel angry at receiving less than they deserve. While both the beneficiaries and victims should be distressed by inequity, they should not be equally distressed: those who benefit from inequity are more tolerant of injustice than those who are deprived.

Researchers interested in casual encounters have collected con-

FIGURE 1

The hypothetical relationship between equity and contentment/distress



siderable evidence in support of Proposition III. (See Walster (Hatfield) et al., 1978 for a review of this evidence.) Unfortunately, in all of such studies, participants were involved in casual, single-encounter relationships, in laboratory settings. They shared no history or anticipated future.

Recently, researchers have begun to study couples involved in more intimate relations. Hatfield et al. (in press), for instance, indicate strong support for Equity Theory's Proposition III in relation to casually and steadily dating couples. These were most comfortable when they felt they were receiving exactly what they deserved from a relationship — no more and certainly no less.

What about strongly committed couples? Would the same hold true for them? We don't know. Some sceptics have argued that Equity theory's usefulness still has not been demonstrated in profoundly intimate relationships. These scholars (e.g. Mills & Clark, 1980) argue that intimate relationships are 'special' — the reciprocity rules that apply in almost all other encounters, are said to be left at the door when one enters a truly intimate relationship.

Of course, Equity theorists disagree. They assume that considerations of fairness are important in all relationships — casual and intimate. (See Hatfield et al., 1979.) They argue that although the unique characteristics of intimate relationships may change the timing or the form of reaction to inequity, fairness remains critically important in all relationships. A number of marital therapists base their theories of marital functioning and happiness on a fair-exchange model of intimate relations (e.g., Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Patterson & Reed, 1970).

Clearly, whether or not equity theory can usefully illuminate aspects of intimate interaction is a question answerable only by systematic research. The present research seeks to do just that — to study the impact of equity/inequity on just such a loving, committed, group — newlyweds. The present study tests two specific hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: According to Equity Theory's Proposition III, men and women in equitable marriages should be fairly content and satisfied. Men and women who feel they've received either far more, or far less, than they deserve, should be less content. Newlyweds who feel overbenefited, should be slightly uncomfortable about their embarrassment of riches. Underbenefited newlyweds should be even more distressed.

Hypothesis 2: Equitable relationships will be more stable than inequitable ones.

## Method

### *Subjects*

In late 1976, we obtained the names and addresses of 495 Madison couples, who had applied for marriage licences from September 1 to November 30, 1976, from the County Clerk's public records. We eliminated from our sample 66 couples who lived more than 25 miles from Madison, 33 couples who were over 45 years of age, 105 couples who could not be located, four who did not speak English, and three couples who had never married.

We sent the remaining 284 couples an introductory letter describing our research — 'A study of the concerns that recently married men and women have in their relationships', and asked them to agree to participate in our project. Our final sample consisted of 118 couples, or 42 percent of the total.

Couples ranged in age from 16–45. The average age of the men was 26.3 years; the women was 24.4 years. Most couples had dated seriously for over two years before marrying. This was the first marriage for 80 percent of the respondents. The newlyweds had a variety of occupations — the sample included homemakers, accountants, teachers, farmers and construction workers; only 8 percent were students. At the time of the interview most of the newlyweds (74 percent) had been married four months or less.

We interviewed husbands and wives separately. The interview covered a variety of topics, including the history of the relationship, perceived equity/inequity of the relationship, satisfaction with the marriage as a whole, satisfaction with sex, and the perceived stability of the marriage. (See Traupmann, 1978 and Utne, 1978 for a complete description of these procedures.)

### *Procedure*

Over a five year period, we have developed four measures of Equity/Inequity, two global and two finer-grained (see Traupmann, 1978; Traupmann et al., 1981). The Walster (1977) Global Measure of Equity/Inequity, subsequently replaced by the Hatfield (1978) Global Measure of Equity/Inequity, are designed to assess men and women's general impressions about the fairness of their relationships.

The Traupmann-Utne-Walster (1977) and the Traupmann-Utne-Hatfield (1978) Scales were designed to give us a finer-grained analysis of the marital give and take in four different areas — Personal concerns, Emotional concerns, Day-to-Day concerns and Opportunities-gained-or-lost. The Personal area includes such characteristics as how attractive spouses are, how sociable, and how intelligent. The emotional area touches such matters as how much spouses like and love each other, their understanding of each other's needs, their sexual relationship, and their commitment to one another. Day-to-Day exchange is concerned with the money they both bring in, the day to day maintenance of the house, being easy to live with, fitting in with each other's friends and relatives, and the like. Another area assessed, Opportunities-gained-or-lost, includes such advantages as the opportunity to be married, the opportunity to have children, and such losses as the chance to have married someone else. (See Traupmann et al., 1981, for information on the reliability and validity of these measures.)

In the research reported in this paper, we used the older Walster (1977) Global Measure and the T-U-W (1977) Scale to assess Equity/Inequity, the only measures available at the time. On the basis of their scores on the Walster (1977) Measure

and the T-U-W (1977) Scales, men and women were classified into three groups: *The Overbenefited*: Those men and women who were receiving more than they deserved from their marriages were labelled Overbenefited (i.e. those scoring above 0 on the Walster (1977) Global Measure or above +0.10 on the T-U-W (1977) Scales). *The Equitably Treated*: Those who were receiving just what they deserved from their marriages were labelled Equitably Treated (i.e. those scoring 0 on the Walster (1977) Global Measure, or +0.10 to -0.10 on the T-U-W). *The Underbenefited*: Those men and women who were receiving less than they deserved from their marriages were labelled underbenefited (i.e. those scoring below 0 on the Walster (1977) Global Measure or below -0.10 on the T-U-W (1977) Scale). (See Table 1 for the N in each category.) Reviewers have asked who is most likely to feel overbenefited/underbenefited — men or women. Analyses reveal that newlywed men are more likely to feel overbenefited; less likely to feel underbenefited, than are their wives. Perhaps men are merely being chivalrous, but in a society in which most of the economic and political power lies in the hands of men, perhaps it is not surprising that men should feel more advantaged than women in their intimate relations as well. (See Traupmann (1978) for a further discussion of this point.)

*Assessing Marital Contentment/Distress.* Distress was measured in three ways:

(1) Austin's (1974) Measure of Contentment/Distress (described in Walster (Hatfield) et al. (1978)). The Austin measure asks: 'When you think about your marriage — 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?' Newlyweds indicated how 'content', how 'happy' and how 'angry' and 'guilty' they felt. (Possible answers ranged from 0 = 'Not at all' to 4 = 'Very much'.) Austin's Total Mood Index was calculated by summing the respondents' content and happy scores minus their angry and guilty scores. The higher the score, the more content (and the less distressed) they were.

(2) Contentment with Marriage. Respondents were asked 'How satisfied are you with your marriage?' and 'How happy are you with your marriage?' Possible answers ranged from 1 = 'very unsatisfied (unhappy)' to 5 = 'completely satisfied (happy)'. A total index was constructed by summing respondents' scores on these two measures. The higher the score, the more positive the feelings.

(3) Contentment with life. Respondents were asked: 'How satisfied are you with your life in general?' and 'How happy are you with your life in general?' Again, possible responses ranged from 1 = 'very unsatisfied (unhappy)' to 5 = 'completely satisfied (happy)'. Once again, responses were summed to form a total index. (The two latter measures were adapted from the Locke-Wallace (1959) Marital Adjustment Test.)

*Measures of Marital Stability.* We measured how stable newlyweds perceived their marriages to be via four questions: 'How certain are you that the two of you will be together five years from now?' Possible answers ranged from 1 = 'Very uncertain' to 5 = 'Completely certain'. 'Since your marriage, how often have you considered moving out?' Possible answers ranged from 1 = 'Often' to 4 = 'Never'. 'How stable do you feel your marriage is?' Possible answers ranged from 1 = 'Extremely unstable' to 8 = 'extremely stable'. Once again, responses were summed to form a total index.

TABLE 1  
The relationship between equity/inequity and contentment/distress

Equity condition	The Walster (1977) Global Measure	(N)	Austin Measure		Satisfaction with marriage		Satisfaction with life		Marital stability	
			Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Overbenefited		89	4.11	3.89	8.05	7.69	7.20	7.04	15.59	15.96
Equitably treated		123	4.63	4.56	7.98	8.19	7.23	7.22	16.08	16.21
Underbenefited		24	3.93	3.80	7.43	7.20	6.21	6.30	15.29	15.10
Total		236								
(S.D.)			(1.62)		(1.27)		(1.39)		(202)	
F-Tests										
Sex			0.32		0.02		0.02		0.65	
Linear Equity			0.07		1.85		5.52*		0.59	
Quadratic Equity			8.66**		5.41*		4.45*		4.40*	
Sex × Linear										
Equity			0.17		0.55		0.35		0.22	
Sex × Quad Equity			0.07		2.33		0.03		0.01	

Table 1 continued

The Traupmann-Utne-Walster (1977) Scales		Austin Measure		Satisfaction with marriage		Satisfaction with life		Marital stability	
(N)		Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
(105)	Overbenefited	4.35	3.74	7.86	7.90	7.08	7.07	15.73	16.17
(87)	Equitably treated	4.68	4.82	8.45	8.25	7.53	7.35	16.34	16.47
(44)	Underbenefited	3.65	3.96	7.12	7.33	6.24	6.59	14.88	14.96
(236)	Total								
(S.D.)		(1.59)		(1.24)		(1.37)		(1.97)	
<b>F-Tests</b>									
Sex		0.33		0.03		0.02		0.68	
Linear Equity		0.44		6.88**		5.67*		7.64**	
Quadratic Equity		13.48***		15.82***		9.30**		8.69**	
Sex × Linear									
Equity		1.44		0.03		0.10		0.77	
Sex × Quad Equity		0.99		0.81		0.61		0.61	

d.f. = 1/230

1. The higher the number, the more contented respondents feel.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Results and discussion

As you might expect, when we look at the typical newlywed's answers to the interview questions, we find that most of them are extremely happy in their marriages:

*Equity:* When we look at Table 1, we see that — regardless of whether we look at the Walster (1977) Global Measure or the Traupmann-Utne-Walster (1977) Scale — we find that when couples feel inequitably treated, they are more likely to feel overbenefited than underbenefited. This is in sharp contrast to what we secure in other studies. For example, Traupmann et al. (1983), in their studies of casually and steadily dating couples, found that, although most couples feel equitably treated, when they do not, men and women tend to claim they are underbenefited.

*Marital Contentment/Distress:* On average, men and women feel very contented and happy in their new marriages. They report feeling little or no guilt or anger toward their partner. They are 'very satisfied and happy' with their marriages and in between 'somewhat' and 'very satisfied' with their lives in general.

*Marital Stability:* At the very early point in married life in which couples were interviewed, most felt very sure of their future together. The vast majority had never even entertained thoughts of moving out or divorce; they felt their marriages were 'very stable'.

Now that we have some sense of context in which couples are making their ratings, let us turn to our hypotheses.

In Figure 1, we saw the impact that Equity considerations have been found to have in casual business and personal relationships. When we look at the pattern of means in Table 1, we see that Equity considerations seem to have the same impact in deeply committed relationships. Our statistical analyses (after Traupmann et al., 1981) support this conclusion. In general, couples in equitable relationships seem to be most contented and happy. Newlyweds who feel they are getting more than they deserve from the relationship feel slightly ill at ease. In every case, the underbenefited feel the most distressed. When we examine Table 1, it appears that Equity considerations seem to have a critical impact even in deeply committed relationships. It makes little difference whether we use the Walster (1977) Global Measures or the T-U-W (1977) Scale to measure equity. In every case, we secure a significant Quadratic Equity effect for the four dependent variables: as predicted, Equity considerations have an important impact on respondent's contentment/distress as measured by the Austin



### Measure, Satisfaction with Marriage, or Satisfaction with Life.

As we see from our data, the second hypothesis, too, is supported. Couples who feel equitably treated in their relationships (as assessed by either the Walster (1977) Global Measure or the T-U-W (1977) Scale) are more secure about their marriages than are either overbenefited or underbenefited men and women.

This study extends our confidence that considerations of equity are important, even in deeply committed relationships. We would like to emphasize that these data are correlational. We have hypothesized that it is Equity/Inequity which produces contentment and stability. Of course, it may well be that it is marital discontent and instability which produce the perception of Inequity. Probably both factors are operating. It is somewhat difficult to explain why discontent and instability should produce a feeling of overbenefit however.

*Data Snooping:* In addition to the hypotheses we have proposed, there is one other hypothesis that we wished to investigate: political sociologists have pointed out that there are undoubtedly political, as well as intellectual, reasons why various theorists prefer one social exchange theory to another. For example, Ekeh (1974) points out that theorists who are satisfied with the status quo, tend to believe that 'whatever is is right', while theorists who are interested in social reform tend to argue that 'equity is in the eye of the beholder'; that is in any society, the powerful define 'what is', and thus 'what's right'.

In a recent paper, Hay & Horton (1980) argue that men — currently the beneficiaries of the status quo — 'naturally' have a vested interest in believing that love relationships should be special relationships, untainted by crass considerations of bargaining and negotiation. Conversely, women have a vested interest in insisting that intimate relationships should be fair: that rules of equity must apply.

One notion we wish to test, then, is that men and women should be differentially concerned with equity. Utne (1978), for instance, argued that women should become unusually upset when they are overbenefited, while men would seem to take overbenefit in their stride. Conversely, women should be able to endure underbenefit with equanimity, while men are extremely upset by it.

Thus, we examined our results to see if we secured mean differences in the predicted directions — i.e., if any of the Sex (A) X Equity (Quadratic B) effects for any of our dependent variables, were significant. As you can see from Table 1, none of them were. There is no support for the hypothesis that newlywed women are more concerned with equity than are newlywed men. Despite the popular

notion that 'true love is unselfish', for both men and women, the best kind of love relationship seems to be one in which everyone feels that he or she is getting what they deserve.

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