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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 they and their partners are getting what they both “deserve” from their romantic and marital relationships. In theory, couples feel most comfortable when their romantic and sexual relationships are maximally profitable, and (considering what they and their partners contribute to their relationship) they are reaping all the rewards they deserve—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, 2008). More recently, evolutionary theorists contend that concerns about equity have an enormous impact in the dating marketplace (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). The Global Measure of Equity and the Multi-Trait Measure of Equity were designed to assess men’s and women’s perceptions of how fair and equitable their love and sexual relationships are (Traupmann, Peterson, Utne, & Hatfield, 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-Trait 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 Global Measure correlates with other measures of fairness and equity in intimate relations. 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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Equity Measures

Technically, Equity is defined by a complex formula (Traubmann, et al., 1981; Walster, 1975). Respondents' perceptions of the equitableness of their dating relationships or marriages are computed by entering their estimates of Inputs and Outcomes of Persons A and B (I_A , I_B , O_A , and O_B) into the Equity formula:¹

¹ The Equity formulas used by previous researchers, from Aristotle to Stacy Adams, only yield meaningful results if A and B's Inputs and Outcomes are entirely positive or entirely negative. In mixed cases the formulas yields extremely peculiar results. Thus,

$$\frac{(O_A - I_A)}{(I_A | I)^{KA}} = \frac{(O_B - I_B)}{(I_B | I)^{KB}}$$

Respondents are classified as “over-benefited” if their relative gains exceed those of their partners. They are classified as “equitably treated” if their relative gains equal those of their partners, and as “under-benefited” if their relative gains fall short of those of their partners.

In practice, however, the equity of love relationships can reliably and validly be assessed with the use of two simple measures: The Global Measure of Equity or a Multi-Trait Measure of Equity

The Global Measure of Equity

Women were asked: “Considering what you put into your dating relationship or marriage, compared to what you get out of it . . . and what your partner puts in, compared to what (s)he gets out of it . . . how does your dating relationship or marriage ‘stack up’?”

Possible responses are:

- +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.

we proposed an Equity model designed to transcend these limitations. See Walster (1995) for a discussion of the problems and the mathematical solutions. The superscript k simply “scales” equity problems (by multiplying all inputs and outcomes by a positive constant) such that the minimum of $|I_A|$ and $|I_B|$ is greater than or equal to 1.

On the basis of their answers, persons can be classified as over-benefited (receiving more than they deserve), equitably treated, or under-benefited (receiving less than they deserve).

The Multi-Trait Measure of Equity

Introduction: Explanation of Concepts

“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. We know that most people don’t ordinarily keep careful track of exactly what they’re giving and getting from their dating relationships or marriages. They certainly don’t pull their relationship apart and think about the various aspects of their relationship, one by one. But in order for us to get some idea of what goes on in dating and marital relationships, we have to ask you and the other people we’re interviewing to *spell out* some of the give-and-take that naturally occurs.

Let us look at some of the critical areas in any dating relationship or marriage. Look over this list. [Hand respondent list.] We’d like to ask about you and your partner’s Personal Concerns, your Emotional Concerns, your Day-to-Day Concerns, and a little about the things the two of you feel you gain or lose—simply by dating or being married. We’d like you to read each item.

[Each item is read through, aloud if interviewer is used. After reading each item, Respondent is asked]:

Considering what you put into your dating relationship or marriage (in this area), compared to what you get out of it . . . and what your partner puts in compared to what he or she gets out of it, how does your dating relationship/marriage “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.

Areas Involved in the Dating/Marital Give and Take

Personal Concerns

Social Grace

1. Social Grace: Some people are sociable, friendly, relaxed in social settings. Others are not.

Intellect

2. Intelligence: Some people are intelligent and informed.

Appearance

3. Physical Attractiveness: Some people are physically attractive.

4. Concern for Physical Appearance and Health: Some people take care of their physical appearance and conditioning, through attention to such things as their clothing, cleanliness, exercise, and good eating habits.

Emotional Concerns

Liking and Loving

5. Liking: Some people like their partners and show it. Others do not.

6. Love: Some people feel and express love for their partners.

Understanding and Concern

7. Understanding and Concern: Some people know their partner's personal concerns and emotional needs and respond to them.

Acceptance

8. **Accepting and Encouraging Role Flexibility:** Some people let their partners try out different roles occasionally, for example, letting their partner be a “baby” sometimes, a “mother,” a colleague or a friend, an aggressive as well as a passive lover, and so on.

Appreciation

9. **Expressions of Appreciation:** Some people openly show appreciation for their partner’s contributions to the relationship—they don’t take their partner for granted.

Physical Affection:

10. **Showing Affection:** Some people are openly affectionate—touching, hugging, kissing.

Sex

11. **Sexual Pleasure:** Some people participate in the sexual aspect of a relationship, working to make it mutually satisfying and fulfilling.

12. **Sexual Fidelity:** Some people live up to (are “faithful” to) their agreements about extra-marital relations.

Security/Freedom

13. **Commitment:** Some people commit themselves to their partners and to the future of their relationship together.

14. **Respecting Partner’s Need to be a Free and Independent Person:** Some people allow their partners to develop as an individual in the way that they choose: for example, they allow their partners freedom to go to school or not; to work at the kind of job or career they like; to pursue outside interests; to do things by themselves or with friends; to simply be alone sometimes.

Plans and Goals for the Future

15. Plans and Goals for the Future: Some people plan for and dream about their future together.

Day-to-Day Concerns

Day-to-Day Maintenance

16. Day-to-Day Maintenance: Some people contribute time and effort to household responsibilities such as grocery shopping, making dinner, cleaning, and car maintenance. Others do not.

Finances:

17. Finances: Some people contribute income to the couple's "joint account."

Sociability

18. Easy-to-Live-With: Some people are easy to live with on a day-to-day basis; that is, they have a sense of humor, aren't too moody, don't get drunk too often, and so on.

19. Companionship: Some people are good companions, who suggest interesting activities for both of them to do together, as well as going along with their partner's ideas about what they might do for fun.

20. Conversation: Some people tell partners about their day's events and what's on their mind . . . and are also interested in hearing about their partners' concerns and daily activities.

21. Fitting in: Some people are compatible with their partner's friends and relatives; they like the friends and relatives, and the friends and relatives like them.

Decision Making:

22. Decision-Making: Some people take their fair share of the responsibility for making and carrying out of decisions that affect both partners.

Remembering Special Occasions

23. Remembering Special Occasions: Some people are thoughtful about sentimental things, such as remembering birthdays, your anniversary, and other special occasions.

Opportunities Gained and Lost

Opportunities Gained

24. Chance to be Dating or Married: Dating and marriage give many people the opportunity to partake of the many life experiences that depend upon dating or being married; for example, the chance to become a parent and even a grandparent, the chance to be included in “married couple” social events, and finally, having someone to count on in old age.

Opportunities Foregone

25. Opportunities Foregone: Dating and marriage necessarily requires people to give up certain opportunities . . . in order to be in this relationship. The opportunities could have been other possible mates, a career, travel, etc.

On the basis of their answers, persons can be classified as over-benefited (receiving more than they deserve), equitably treated, or under-benefited (receiving less than they deserve).

To calculate a *Total Index*, the experimenter sums the respondents’ estimates of how Over-benefited, Equitably treated, or Under-benefited they are in each of the 25 areas and divides by 25.

If Es wish to weight the items by importance, they can simply go through the 25 items, one by one, and ask:

How important is this area to you?

8: Extremely important.

- 7: Very important
6. Fairly important
5. Slightly important
4. Slightly unimportant
3. Fairly important
2. Very unimportant
1. Extremely unimportant

Then weight item by importance.

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