

## DISCUSS RESEARCH INTO THE MAINTINANCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS (8 + 16 marks)



Social Exchange Theory (**SET**) states that relationships involve rewards and costs and humans run their relationships by keeping a track of them. Whether or not we are satisfied with a relationship depends if we perceive it to be in a state of PROFIT (rewards outweigh losses) or LOSS (costs outweigh the rewards). Ultimately it sees people as being selfish by always aiming to maximise rewards and minimise costs.

An extension of the SET was developed which states that relationships are often maintained using two comparisons; the *Comparison Level* (CL) and the *Comparison Level for Alternatives* (CL ALT). With the CL it is believed that we compare our current relationship with a general expectation of how relationships should be (which is created from our previous experiences). The CL ALT states that we compare our relationship with other possible ones on offer and will only maintain our current relationship if it compares favourably or if there are no other alternatives on offer.

There are, however, several criticisms of SET. Firstly, as found by **Hays**, it is clear that people can be altruistic in that they can do things for others without expecting anything in return. This shows that humans are not fundamentally selfish and can receive pleasure from giving as much as receiving. It may also be noted that people only begin monitoring the reward-cost ratio when they become dissatisfied with the relationship, as found by **Argyle**, and so the theory may not provide a complete account into relationship maintenance. Additionally, studies into this area of relationships, such as this one by Argyle, suffer from low ecological validity. This is because relationships are complex and fluid processes which clearly cannot be fully understood when in a laboratory and thus taken out of the social context. The internal validity of the study would therefore be reduced which would affect the extent to which they can support the theory.

The theory can also be criticised due to being culturally bias. It was developed in westernised countries and so may contain ideals that are focused around individualistic cultures. It therefore may not be able to be generalised to collectivist cultures as they tend to place focus on the group rather than the individual rewards of each partner or to cultures that believe in arranged marriages as these types of marriages are often harder to break and so couples may maintain their relationship in a different way so as to avoid divorcing.

A further substantial point of criticism is that the theory fails to explain why people stay in abusive relationships. It seems likely that there would be an overall state of loss in the abusive relationship yet a study by **NRCDV** found that 29% of women in Britain had been in an abusive relationship and remained in it for some time. However, if we believe the SET to be correct, then there should be 0% of people staying in abusive relationships. It is possible that they remain in that relationship due to the previous investments made into it already rather than the rewards and costs that are happening in the present moment. As SET does not account for these relationships it can therefore be said to be reductionist for not providing a full picture of relationships and for reducing complex relationships to simply profits and rewards.

In addition, **Mills and Clark** found that there was more than one type of relationship. The 'Communal relationship' is when couples give out of concern or love for their partner and the 'Exchange relationship' is one where partners keep a mental record of profit and loss. This idea of there being many different types of relationships further demonstrates how this theory lacks external validity.

A second theory is Walster's **Equity theory**. This theory agrees with SET that people weigh up rewards and costs but differs in that it believes people have an expectation that relationships should be fair and so both partners' costs and rewards should be equal. If this is not equal the relationship will be experienced as 'inequitable' which would lead to problems. The feeling of inequity will lead the 'loser' to feel dissatisfied and the 'winner' to feel guilty.

It believes that there are several solutions to inequity. If the relationship is of a short duration it is best to end it, however, if it is relatively long-term then equity can be restored by reducing inputs or increasing outputs.

A longitudinal study by **Buunk** et al. found support for the theory. They studied 259 couples and used "Hatfield's global measurement of satisfaction" to find an equity score. Their results showed that 65% of women felt their relationship were equitable, 25% of men felt over-benefitted and 25% of women felt under-benefitted. This therefore supports the theory as, when questioning the couples a year later, the 65% who felt their relationship was equitable were most satisfied. This study can be commended as it is longitudinal and therefore can show the effects of perceived equity years on rather than only showing how couples feel in one stage of their relationship.

Further supporting research comes from **Hatfield** who found that those who were under-benefitted felt angry and those who were over-benefitted felt guilty.

However, there are several problems with the theory. Firstly it may be subject to ethnocentric bias as research into the theory that has been carried out outside of America does not seem to support it. This therefore shows that it may not be generalizable to other countries or cultures.

It also suffers from beta bias as found in a study by **Prins**. He found that equity may be more important for women as men did not seem as bothered by inequity as women and it was also found to be more important in lesbian couples. This therefore suggests that the theory cannot be equally applied to both genders. In addition, a study by **Steil and Weltman** found that women tend to seek less for themselves in a relationship and thus it makes equity difficult to measure.

A further problem is that it is reductionist because it attempts to reduce complex relationships into business-like transactions. Nevertheless, the theory is important as it has practical applications in real-life counselling by allowing the counsellor to identify how best to rectify problems of inequity in the relationship.