

# EQUITY AND EXTRAMARITAL SEX<sup>1</sup>

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Recently, social psychologists have become interested in marriage contracts — both the formal legal documents a few couples negotiate . . . and the informal “contracts” couples work out through experience.

For many years, Americans’ marriage contracts were fairly standard. Couples promised to “love, honor, and cherish one another . . . forsaking all others . . . until death do us part”. Other than that, most couples gave it little thought. Recently, however, young people have started to become far more thoughtful about the kinds of marriages that they want. They have started to think in a concrete way about the kinds of things they are willing to sacrifice for their relationships . . . and the kind of things they expect in return.<sup>2</sup>

Equity theory (Walster *et al.*, 1978) has been found to provide a useful framework for understanding the effects of equity/inequity in a variety of relationships — exploiter-victim relationships, philanthropist-recipient relationships, employer-employee relationships. Recently, Equity theorists have proposed that Equity theory might give us some insights into intimate “contractual” relationships as well (Pearlin, 1975; Scanzoni, 1972; Hatfield *et al.*, 1978).

In Section I of this paper, we will briefly review Equity theory. (Those who are already familiar with the theory can skip ahead to Section II.) In Section II we will review the sparse research evidence which indicates that Equity considerations do operate in romantic and marital relationships. Finally, in Section III we will present some evidence that Equity considerations may determine how willing men and women are to risk extramarital relationships.

## SECTION I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE EQUITY FORMULATION

Equity theory is a strikingly simple theory. Essentially it consists of four propositions:

Proposition I: *Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcome equals rewards minus costs).*

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<sup>2</sup> Sussman (1975) studied more than 1300 marriage contracts. He found that in recent contracts the major provisions concern economic matters, career decisions, household responsibilities, parenting, relationships with others and terms for renewing and negotiating the contract.

Proposition II: *Groups can maximize collective reward by evolving accepted systems for "equitably" apportioning rewards and costs among members. Thus, members will evolve such systems of equity and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.*

*The only way groups can induce members to equitably behave is by making it more profitable to behave equitably than inequitably. Thus, groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish (increase the costs for) members who treat others inequitably.*

Equity theorists define an "equitable relationship" to exist when the person scrutinizing the relationship (who could be Participant A, Participant B, or an outside observer) perceives that all participants are receiving equal relative gains from the relationship,

$$\text{i.e. } \frac{\text{Outcomes}_A - \text{Inputs}_A}{(|\text{Inputs}_A|)^{k_A}} = \frac{\text{Outcomes}_B - \text{Inputs}_B}{(|\text{Inputs}_B|)^{k_B}}$$

#### A. Definition of Terms

Inputs ( $I$ ) are defined as "the participant's contributions to the exchange, which are seen (by a scrutineer) as entitling him to rewards or costs". The inputs that a participant contributes to a relationship can be either assets — entitling him to rewards — or liabilities — entitling him to costs.<sup>3</sup>

In different settings, different inputs are seen as entitling one to rewards or costs. In industrial settings, assets such as "capital" or "manual labor" are seen as relevant inputs — inputs that legitimately entitle the contributor to reward. In social settings, assets such as "physical beauty", or "kindness" are generally seen as assets entitling the possessor to social reward. Social liabilities such as "boorishness" or "cruelty" are seen as liabilities entitling him to costs.

Outcomes ( $O$ ) are defined as "the positive and negative consequences that a scrutineer perceives a participant has incurred as a consequence of his relationship with another". Following Homans (1961), we shall refer to positive outcomes as "rewards" and negative outcomes as "costs". The participant's total outcomes in a relationship are equal to the rewards he obtains from the relationship minus the costs he incurs.

$$k_A = \text{sign}(I_A) \times \text{sign}(O_A - I_A).$$

$$k_B = \text{sign}(I_B) \times \text{sign}(O_B - I_B).$$

[The exponents  $k_A$  and  $k_B$  simply take on the value +1 or -1, depending on the sign of A and B's inputs and the sign of their gains (Outcomes - Inputs).]<sup>4</sup>

For a complete description of the assumptions underlying Equity theory and its derivation, see Walster (1975).

<sup>3</sup> The restriction of this formula is that Inputs cannot equal zero.

<sup>4</sup> The exponent's effect is simply to change the way Relative gains are computed: If  $k = +1$  then we have  $(O-I)/|I|$ , but if  $k = -1$  then we have  $|I| \cdot (O-I)$ . Without the exponent  $k$ , the formula would yield meaningless results when  $I < 0$  and  $O - I > 0$ , or  $I > 0$  and  $O - I < 0$ .

## B. Who Decides Whether a Relationship is Equitable?

In Proposition II we argued that societies develop norms of equity and teach these systems to their members. Thus, within any society there will be a general consensus as to what constitutes an equitable relationship. However, the Equity formulation makes it clear that ultimately, equity is in the eye of the beholder. An individual's perception of how equitable a relationship is will depend on *his* assessment of the value and relevance of the various participants' inputs and outcomes. Participants themselves, even after prolonged negotiation with one another, often do not agree completely as to the *value* and *relevance* of various inputs and outcomes. For example, a wife — focusing on the fact that she works long hours, is trapped with no one over 5 to talk to all day, and is constantly engulfed by noise, mess and confusion — may feel that her relative gains are extremely low. Her husband — focusing on the fact that she gets out of bed in the morning whenever she pleases, and can see who she wants, when she wants — may disagree.

If participants do calculate inputs and outcomes differently — and it is likely that they will — it is inevitable that they will differ in their perceptions of whether or not a given relationship is equitable. Moreover, “objective” outside observers are likely to evaluate the equitableness of a relationship quite differently than do participants.

## C. The Psychological Consequences of Inequity

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

According to Equity theory, both the person who gets “too much” as well as the person who gets “too little” feel distressed. The person who gets too much may feel guilt or shame. His deprived partner may feel angry or humiliated. [Austin & Walster (1974 a, b; 1975) review the evidence which supports Proposition III.]

*Proposition IV: Individuals who discover they are in an inequitable relationship attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity that exists, the more distress they feel, and the harder they try to restore equity.*

## D. Techniques by which Individuals Can Reduce Distress

Participants in an inequitable relationship can restore equity in two radically different ways: *Restoration of Actual Equity*: Participants can try to “set things right”. The overbenefited person can cede some benefits to his partner. His deprived partner can accept them. *Restoration of psychological equity*: Participants can reduce their distress in a second way. They can distort reality and convince themselves (and perhaps others) that their ostensibly inequitable relationship is in fact perfectly fair.

## SECTION II. RECENT EVIDENCE INDICATING THAT EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS DO OPERATE IN ROMANTIC AND MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

Recently, Equity researchers have begun to focus on two goals: (1) developing scales to measure couples' perceptions as to whether *their* marriage "contract" is equitable/inequitable, and (2) testing equity predictions as to the impact that marital equity/inequity has on a relationship.

(1) *Scale development.* In the 1970s Equity researchers began developing measures of the contributions couples expect to make to their relationship, the benefits they expect to derive from their relationship and, thus, the equity/inequity of their relationship.

Thus far, the following scales have been developed:

- (a) The *Berscheid-Walster-Bohrnstedt* (1973) *Scale of Equity/Inequity*;<sup>5</sup>
- (b) The *Hatfield* (1978) *Global Measures of Participants' Inputs, Outcomes, and Equity/Inequity*;<sup>6</sup>
- (c) The *Traupmann-Utne-Hatfield* (1978) *Measures of Participants' Inputs, Outcomes, and Equity/Inequity*.<sup>6</sup>

(2) *Theory testing.* In the 1970s, researchers also began to explore the impact that temporarily . . . or long-standing . . . inequities have on dating couples', newly-married couples' or old-marrieds' relationships.<sup>7</sup>

According to Equity theory:

- (a) *Proposition III.* When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress individuals feel.

Couples in an equitable relationship should feel more comfortable about their relationship than should either their overbenefited or deprived friends, who should feel distinctly uneasy about their relationship. (The overbenefited should feel "guilty" or "fearful of losing" their favored position. Their deprived mates should feel "resentment" or "anger" about not getting all that they deserve from their marriages.) Of course, both the theory and common sense acknowledge that the overbenefited should be less distressed by inequity than their deprived partners.

There is compelling laboratory evidence that Equity theory's Proposition III is correct (see Austin & Walster, 1974 a, b; 1975). But an experimental laboratory bears little resemblance to a lover's bedroom. Is there any naturalistic evidence that equitable marriages are more content than *either* overbenefited/deprived pairs? Yes. There are some sparse survey data in support of this contention. Berscheid *et al.* (1973) tested Proposition III in a large-scale correlational study.<sup>8</sup> The authors report that: "To measure a respondent's insecurity about his or her relationship, we asked couples (married, living together, or dating) how happy they are, how

<sup>5</sup>This early scale is now obsolete.

<sup>6</sup>A detailed description of the administration procedure for these scales, as well as a copy of the scales, is available in Traupmann (1978).

<sup>7</sup>See Walster *et al.* (1978) for a review of this research.

<sup>8</sup>This survey will be described in more detail in the "Procedure" section.

satisfied they are with their present relationship, and how certain they are that they will be with their current partner 10 years from now.”

On the basis of their data, the authors conclude: “Individuals who are matched with equally desirable partners are happier, more satisfied with the relationship, and more confident that it will last . . . than respondents who are mismatched” (p. 130).

- (b) *Proposition IV.* Individuals who discover they are in an inequitable relationship attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity that exists, the more distress they feel, and the harder they try to restore equity.

According to Equity theory, when couples find themselves enmeshed in an inequitable relationship, there are only two things they can do to “set things right”: they can restore actual equity, and/or they can restore psychological equity.

#### A. Restoration of Actual Equity

One way couples can “set things right” is by inaugurating real changes in their relationship. The Deprived partner — who is getting far less than he/she has coming — will naturally be motivated to set things right by demanding better treatment from his partner. His Overbenefited partner — who is getting far more than he/she deserves, may well reluctantly agree to cede such rewards.

For example:<sup>9</sup> *Physical appearance:* the deprived partner, who resents the fact that he’s already contributing far more than his share to the relationship, can easily slip into becoming careless about the stylishness of his dress, his cleanliness or his diet. *Day-to-day talk:* or the deprived partner might begin to feel that *he’s* entitled to conversation when he feels like it, and solitude when he doesn’t . . . that he’s entitled to be grumpy when he feels like it, but his partner is not. *Financial security:* the deprived partner might feel a little less pressure to work hard (or to save money) so that his partner can have the things she wants. *Expressions of love and affection:* the deprived partner might become a little less careful about reassuring his partner that he loves and admires her. *Self-sacrifice:* the deprived partner might become especially reluctant to make sacrifices for his partner’s benefit. When an argument arises as to who should take the car in for servicing . . . or whose mother they should visit at Christmas . . . or whether they should go to a play or on a hunting trip . . . he should be inclined to take a stronger stand than usual. *Sex:* the person who feels he’s already putting too much into the marriage may well feel reluctant to make his partner’s sexual life fulfilling. He might feel that his partner should be as warm or aloof as *he* prefers; that she should be willing to explore the sexual practices that *he* likes.

Of course, his overbenefited partner’s reactions would be quite different. Since she feels she’s *already* getting much more than she deserves, she might be especially eager to “set things right” by agreeing to his demands.

There are a variety of ways, then, that a mismatched couple can restore *Actual* equity to their relationship. (Walster *et al.*, 1978, review the existing evidence that couples do utilize a variety of techniques to restore equity to their marital relationships.)

<sup>9</sup> In the following examples, the deprived person is always labeled “he” and his overbenefited partner “she”. (This should help the reader to keep things straight.) Things could, of course, be reversed.

## B. Restoration of Psychological Equity

Of course, sometimes men and women find it harder to change their behavior than to change their minds. Sometimes couples, threatened by the discovery that their relationship is an unbalanced one, prefer to close their eyes and to reassure themselves that "really, everything is in perfect order". (Walster *et al.*, 1978, document the variety of techniques that couples use to convince themselves that an inequitable relationship is in fact, perfectly fair.)

## C. Leaving the Field

If all else fails, the couple might choose to simply give up, and abandon their relationship.

### SECTION III. DO EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS DETERMINE HOW WILLING MEN AND WOMEN ARE TO RISK EXTRAMARITAL RELATIONSHIPS?

It is interesting that early Equity researchers — who were so sensitive to the complex ways in which couples can balance and rebalance their relationships — somehow forgot about *extramarital sex*.<sup>10</sup>

This omission is even more peculiar in view of the fact that Equity theory makes a clear prediction as to how equity/inequity should effect a couple's eagerness to engage in extramarital sex: i.e. the more deprived a person is in his marriage, (1) the more concessions he should expect (and induce) his partner to make in the sexual area and (2) the more likely he is to risk illicit extramarital sex.

Equity theorists would make such a prediction for three entirely different reasons:

#### A. Restoration of Actual Equity

Earlier, we recorded a seemingly endless chronicle of all the ways that a deprived person could try to get his "just desserts" from a relationship, i.e. he could let his physical appearance go, feel he is entitled to conversation when *he* feels like it . . . and solitude when he does not, etc. This chronicle *could* have continued: "*Sex*: The deprived partner, who resents the fact that he's already contributing far more than his share to the marriage, may well feel that his partner should be tolerant of *his* extramarital affairs . . . but refrain from making him feel jealous and insecure by having any of her own."

His overbenefited partner might well agree.<sup>11</sup> One reason, then, that a deprived person might demand extramarital freedom, while his overbenefited mate would not, is that they are using sex as a vehicle for restoring Actual equity.

<sup>10</sup>This omission is especially surprising in view of the fact that extramarital relationships are so common. Kinsey *et al.* (1948; 1953) found that by the age of 40, 50% of American men and 26% of American women had had extramarital affairs. In 1974 Hunt (1974) reviewed more recent surveys. Their conclusion: the double standard is disappearing. Men and women are now beginning to enjoy . . . or suffer . . . extramarital affairs at about the same rates.

<sup>11</sup>His partner might not *like* the idea of his having extramarital affairs, but she may well have to put up with them.

## B. Leaving the Field

There is a second reason why — if a relationship is markedly unbalanced — the deprived partner is especially likely to risk the security of his marriage in order to explore a new love affair, a fleeting affair, swinging or group sex. The deprived person has relatively little to lose if his mate discovers his infidelity, concludes she cannot tolerate his infidelity, and divorces him. He knows full well that he can “do better”.

His overbenefited partner should have grave reservations about taking such risks; she knows she has a good thing.

## C. Equity-with-the-World

Neo-Equity theorists would argue that there is a *third* reason why the deprived person is more likely to indulge in an affair than is his overbenefited mate.

Equity revisionists, such as Austin (Austin & Walster, 1974 a, b, 1975), agree that Person A is, indeed, concerned about keeping his relationship with Person B (in this case with his mate) equitable. But, Austin insists, Person A is *also* concerned that *all* of his relationships be equitable, i.e. his relationship with Persons B, C, D . . . In short, he wants what he deserves out of life. Thus, he insists, if a person feels cheated in *one* relationship, he is especially likely to feel that he's entitled to make things up in supplementary, outside relationships. If a person feels overbenefited in *one* relationship, he is more likely to be willing to sacrifice in supplementary relationships.

For a variety of reasons, then, Equity theorists predict that the equity/inequity should have a profound impact on a couple's sexual relationship . . . and on their extramarital relationships as well.

These hypotheses are intriguing. To find out if Equity theorists are correct, we adopted a dual strategy: (1) In this paper, we have retrieved existing data, and reanalyzed them (see Berscheid *et al.*, 1972, 1973). (2) We have begun some longitudinal research (Hatfield *et al.*) to test these hypotheses. (Unfortunately this research will not be completed until late 1978.)

## METHOD

In 1972 Berscheid *et al.* (1972) asked *Psychology Today* readers to express their thoughts and feelings about their dating, living together, or marital relations. The response was overwhelming. More than 62,000 readers returned the 109-item questionnaire.<sup>12</sup>

*Selecting a sample.* Because of the sheer volume of 62,000 responses, they sampled 2000 questionnaires for analysis. They stratified the sample on sex and age, to approximate the national distribution. The final sample consisted of 50% men and 50% women. Within each sex, 45% were 24 years old or younger, 25% were between 25 and 44 and 30% were 45 or older.

Twenty percent of the respondents were dating occasionally and 19% were steadily dating;

<sup>12</sup>This study was conducted in 1972. If we were running the study now, we would use either the Hatfield (1978) *Global Measure of Equity/Inequity* or the Traupmann-Utne-Hatfield (1978) *Measure of Equity/Inequity*. These scales were not available in 1972.

13% were living together and 48% were married. We chose respondents in those latter two groups as our subjects. (In the latter two groups, 42% of the couples had been living together or been married a short time – less than 2 years; 30% a medium length of time – 3-15 years and 29% for a long time – more than 15 years.)

*Measuring Equity/Inequity.* The questionnaire respondents completed began by asking them how important a variety of factors were, to them, in their selection of a marriage partner, i.e. physical appearance, personality, affection and liking for them, intelligence, family background, financial resources and security, education or occupation. They then assessed themselves and their partners on a panoply of physical and personality traits that might be important determinants of “social desirability”.

Finally, in a sort of summing-up question, they were asked:

Question 65: Describe your partner's desirability:

- o 1. Much more desirable than I.
- o 2. Slightly more desirable than I.
- o 3. As desirable as I.
- o 4. Slightly less desirable than I.
- o 5. Much less desirable than I.
- o 6. Not applicable.

We chose this single question as our measure of equity/inequity.

We considered *Overbenefited* respondents to be those whose partners were “much more” or “slightly more” socially desirable than themselves. *Equitably treated* respondents were those whose partners' desirability was equal to their own. *Deprived* respondents were those whose partners were “slightly less” or “much less” desirable than themselves.

*Equity and extramarital sex.* Berscheid *et al.* included two questions which enable us to test our hypotheses that the more overbenefited a person is in his marriage, the more reluctant he will be to explore extramarital sex:

Question 78: When, after your present or most recent marriage or cohabitation, did you first have sex with someone else?

- o 1. Never.
- o 2. Sixteen or more years.
- o 3. Twelve to 15 years.
- o 4. Nine to 11 years.
- o 5. Six to eight years.
- o 6. Three to five years.
- o 7. One to two years.
- o 8. Less than a year.

Question 79: With how many other persons have you had sex during your present or most recent marriage or cohabitation?

- o 1. None.
- o 2. One.
- o 3. Two or three.
- o 4. Four to 10.
- o 5. Eleven to 20.
- o 6. Twenty-one to 50.
- o 7. More than 50.
- o 8. Not applicable.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Do the Berscheid *et al.* (1972) data provide any support for our hypotheses? Yes. When we examine our results (see Tables 1 and 2 and Fig. 1) we see that our hypotheses receive some support.

Table 1. THE IMPACT OF SEX, LENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP, AND THE IMPACT OF MARITAL OVERBENEFIT/EQUITY OR DEPRIVATION ON MEN AND WOMEN'S EAGERNESS TO ENGAGE IN EXTRAMARITAL SEX

Sex	Length of relationship?	Equity of relationship	(N)	How soon did you try out extramarital sex? <sup>a</sup>	How many partners have you had?
Men	Short	Overbenefited <sup>b</sup>	(56)	3.52	1.70
Men	Short	Equitably treated	(84)	2.92	1.43
Men	Short	Deprived <sup>c</sup>	(14)	5.00	2.21
Men	Medium	Overbenefited	(57)	2.54	1.70
Men	Medium	Equitably treated	(86)	2.91	1.86
Men	Medium	Deprived	(12)	4.17	2.42
Men	Long	Overbenefited	(53)	2.91	2.15
Men	Long	Equitably treated	(93)	2.81	2.26
Men	Long	Deprived	(28)	3.79	3.29
Women	Short	Overbenefited	(34)	2.03	1.06
Women	Short	Equitably treated	(71)	2.69	1.31
Women	Short	Deprived	(4)	4.25	2.00
Women	Medium	Overbenefited	(39)	2.28	1.23
Women	Medium	Equitably treated	(89)	2.42	1.36
Women	Medium	Deprived	(10)	3.50	1.90
Women	Long	Overbenefited	(32)	1.59	1.22
Women	Long	Equitably treated	(104)	2.05	1.63
Women (S.D.)	Long	Deprived	(29)	3.31	2.55
			(895)	(2.63)	(1.25)

<sup>a</sup>The higher the number, the sooner they began engaging in extramarital sex, and the more partners they had.

<sup>b</sup>i.e. The spouse is *more* desirable than self.

<sup>c</sup>i.e. The spouse is *less* desirable than self.

The reader will recall from our earlier discussion of Equity theory (and from Austin, 1974 a, b, 1975) that although inequity is disturbing to *everyone*, it is far easier for the overbenefited to accept than for the deprived to accept. Previous research has always found that the overbenefited show a mild response to inequity. (The overbenefited are *slightly* upset by inequity . . . and, thus, somewhat eager to restore equity.) Thus, in this survey we would expect the overbenefited to be *slightly* more careful to avoid extramarital sex than are their well-matched peers. The underbenefited always react with volatility to inequity. (They are, understandably, *extremely* upset by inequity . . . and, thus, *extremely* eager to restore equity.)

Table 2. THE IMPACT OF MARITAL OVERBENEFIT/EQUITY/OR DEPRIVATION ON MEN AND WOMEN'S EAGERNESS TO ENGAGE IN EXTRAMARITAL SEX (COMBINED MEANS)

	(N)	How soon did you try out extramarital sex? <sup>a</sup>	How many partners have you had? <sup>a</sup>
Overbenefited men and women <sup>b</sup>	(521)	2.60	1.58
Equitably treated men and women	(572)	2.61	1.66
Deprived men and women <sup>c</sup>	(97)	3.86	2.61

Linear C = 17.34\* 25.44; \* 1/877 d.f.  
 Quadratic C = .13 .00; 1/877 d.f.  
 \*  $p < .0001$ .

<sup>a</sup>The higher the number, the sooner they began engaging in extramarital sex, and the more extramarital partners.

<sup>b</sup>i.e. The spouse is *more* desirable than self.

<sup>c</sup>i.e. The spouse is *less* desirable than self.

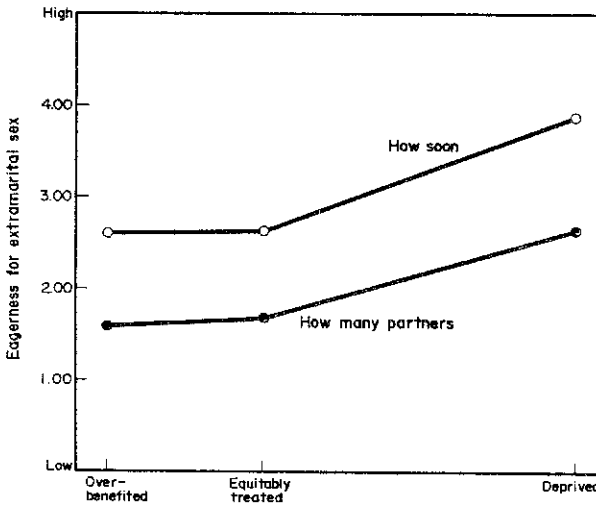


Fig. 1. The relationship between equitableness of treatment and eagerness for extramarital sex.

In this study, we would expect them to be the most eager to engage in extramarital sex by far.<sup>13</sup>

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). Thus, in the analysis, we used unequal interval Linear and Quadratic Contrasts. The unequal spacing for the Overbenefited, Equitably treated, and Deprived groups in Fig. 1 reflects our prediction that the Deprived respond far more volatily to inequity than do the Overbenefited.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Bell *et al.* (1975) or Hunt (1974). Bell and his colleagues interviewed 2262 married women. They assessed twenty-nine variables that they thought might be related to extramarital coitus. They found that the variable with the highest association was "How do you rate your marriage?" Some women rated their marriage as either "Very good" or "Good"; 20% of such women had had extramarital experience. Among the women rating their marriage as either "Fair", "Poor", or "Very poor", 55% had had such experience.

Overbenefited and Equitably treated men and women *were* very reluctant to experiment with extramarital sex. On the average, Overbenefited and Equitably treated men and women waited 12-15 years before getting involved with someone else. Deprived men and women began exploring extramarital sex far earlier — only 9-11 years after marriage. Similarly, on the average, the Overbenefited had the fewest extramarital encounters (0-1). Equitably treated men and women had a few more . . . and the Deprived had the most extramarital liaisons of all (1-3). The F tests for the Linear Contrasts on both dependent variables are clearly significant, and the departure from linearity is negligible. It is clear that it is the deprived who are most upset by inequity and most likely to begin an extramarital relationship as a consequence.

### Possible Alternative Explanations for the Data

Berscheid *et al.*'s (1972) data are, of course, correlational data. With correlational data, there is always the possibility that some variable — Variable X — which is confounded with the independent variables is “really” accounting for the results. Some unknown Variable X might be causing men and women to (1) rate themselves as Overbenefited, Equitably treated or Deprived, *and* (2) make them more or less susceptible to extramarital affairs. We could think of two possible variables — subject's sex and length of the couple's relationship.

*Sex.* Perhaps men are less chivalrous than women (they routinely claim their partner is less desirable than themselves) . . . and more likely to have extramarital sex. Perhaps Sex of Subject is “really” accounting for the apparent correlation between “Deprivation” and Extramarital relations.

*Length of relationship.* Perhaps couples who have only lived together a short time are more idealistic about their relationships . . . and less likely to have had extramarital affairs. (They simply have not had time.) Perhaps Length of Relationship is *really* accounting for the apparent correlation between “Overbenefit” and Extramarital abstinence.

Thus, we classified respondents into three groups: *Short-term relationships* (those who had been living together two years or less), *Medium-term relationships* (those who had been living together 3-15 years), *Long-term relationships* (those who had been living together more than 15 years).

An inspection of our data makes it clear that neither of these explanations is tenable. (Within each of the Sex X Length groups, Overbenefit/Underbenefit appear to operate in much the same way.)

As a further precaution, however, we designed our statistical tests to *insure* that neither Sex nor Length of Relationship produced correlations that would inflate the Overbenefited/Deprived significance tests. We conducted a Sex X Length of Relationship X Overbenefited/Equity/Underbenefited, Least Squares Analysis of Variance. We *first* computed that portion of variance associated with our A Main Effect (Sex), B Main Effect (Length), and all of the Interactions (AB, BC, AC, ABC), set them aside, and *then* tested the hypothesis that there was a Linear C or a Quadratic C relationship between our independent and dependent variables.

The results of this test indicated that Overbenefit/Deprivation did have the predicted relationship with men and women's eagerness to explore extramarital affairs.

*A concluding note.* We cannot stress too emphatically that our data are correlational data.

Thus we have proposed that (1) Equity/Inequity should determine (2) how content or distressed couples are about their relationship, and that (3) this, in turn, should determine how ready they are to risk extramarital affairs.

Of course, one might argue that the sequence goes in quite a different direction. It may be that (1) for a variety of reasons, people may be dissatisfied with their marriages. Their generalized dissatisfaction leads people to complain that (2) their marriages are inequitable, and (3) to seek out extramarital relationships. (A variety of researchers have found that men and women who are dissatisfied with their marriages are more likely to risk extramarital affairs.)

The creative researcher can surely come up with a panoply of other variables that might "really" be accounting for our results. Our data, then, merely offer suggestive results. To settle the controversy as to what is "really" going on, we will have to await the results of the longitudinal studies now in progress.

### SUMMARY

*Equity theory* has recently been found to be a useful framework for understanding the effects of imbalances in intimate "contractual" relationships such as marriage. Equitable couples seem to be happier, more satisfied with their relationship and more confident that it will last than their more mismatched, i.e. inequitable, counterparts. Furthermore, inequitable couples predictably act to "set things right" in their marriage. They either restore actual equity to the relationship or they psychologically set their relationship in balance. If neither works, they may "leave the field".

*Extramarital sex* may be viewed as an equity restoration mechanism in that (1) it may be used by the deprived partner to achieve actual equity, (2) it may indicate a partner's readiness to leave the relationship because it feels he can "do better", (3) it may represent a desire to achieve equity in an alternative relationship(s) when inequity pervades the primary one.

The hypothesis that the inequitable/underbenefited group should be more likely than the equitable or overbenefited groups to have engaged in extramarital sex was tested using data from a large-scale *Psychology Today* questionnaire. The results indicated that men and women in *inequitable/underbenefited relationships* had more extramarital affairs and began their extramarital activities earlier than did the men and women in *equitable and inequitable/overbenefited relationships*. Alternative explanations of this finding, sex role demands and length of the relationship, are explored and are discarded as untenable.

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