THEORIES OF THE MAINTENANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959)

Satisfaction (profit) is determined by exchange of rewards and costs. There are two comparisons: between actual and expected rewards, and the comparison level for alternatives.

The *comparison level between actual and expected rewards* is concerned with the past and present – the comparison between the rewards and costs of the current relationship and what we have been used to in the past.

The *comparison level for alternatives* is concerned with other, alternative relationships. Here we compare the current relationship with others we feel we could be in. If we feel that we could do better in a different relationship, we may move on. Relationships develop through key stages:

* Sampling – explore rewards and costs directly or indirectly (observing others).
* Bargaining – prospective partners establish sources of profit and loss.
* Commitment – routines are established.
* Institutionalisation – norms and mutual expectations are established. The couple have ‘settled down’.

EVALUATION: ☺ A strength of SET is that it has ***supporting evidence*** provided by Rusbult. College students in heterosexual relationships were asked to complete questionnaires over a 7-month period. She found that there were three underlying factors that determined whether they were ‘satisfied’ and whether the relationship had ended: 1. They had carefully weighed up the rewards and costs of the relationship.2. They also considered the amount they had invested in their relationship. 3. The existence of an ‘attractive’ alternative featured largely in the final decision to end the relationship. This suggests that SET ***can be backed up*** as a person is more likely to leave a relationship (not maintain it) if they stand to lose little and have a high comparison level for alternatives.

Simpson *et al.* (1990) found that participants who were dating rated members of the opposite sex as less attractive, demonstrating that they close themselves off from attractive alternatives. ☹ One weakness of social exchange theory in its explanation of relationship formation/maintenance is that it is ***reductionist***. This theory breaks down relationships into a number of basic social interactions that are focused on the hedonistic (selfish) rewards of a single individual. e.g. wanting to receive gifts and attention. It also fails to take account of the notion of fairness between the two individuals leading to equity, rather than a constant seeking of profits. This suggests that social exchange theory ***is oversimplified*** in its explanation of the formation/maintenance of relationships.

It is difficult to define rewards and costs precisely. It also doesn’t take into account relationship differences – Clark & Mills (1979) argued that romantic relationships are communal rather than exchange relationships.

Equity theory – (Walster *et al. 1978)*

Balance is achieved more through percieved fairness , as in THE MATCHING HYPOTHESIS (look it up!). Inequity results in striving to restore balace or in dissolution.

Walster *et al.* (1978) offered four principles of equity theory:

* People try to maximse their rewards and minimise negative experiences within any relationship
* The distribution of rewards is negotiated to ensure fairness. This may be achieved through trade-offs or compensation (i.e. a favour or privilege for one person is paid back by an equivaent favour/privilege)
* Unfair (or inequitable) relationships produce dissatisfaction. Not suprisingly, the dissatisfaction is felt more accutely by the ‘loser’, and the greater the degree of percieved unfairness, the greater is the sense of dissatisfaction.
* As long as the loser feels there os a chance of restoring fairness ad is motivated to save the relationship, he or she will endeavor to re-establish equity. Furthermore , the greater the degree of inequity the loser perceives, the greater will be the effort at realignment.

RESEARCH: Hatfield *et al.* (1972) interviewed over 500 students about equity in their relationships. Three months later the inequitable relationships were more likely to have ended.

EVALUATION: Equity may be maintained by matching any ‘attractive’ characteristics, such as physical looks, money or status. Individual differences: individuals low in exchange orientation don’t bother about equity (Buunk & VamYperem, 1991). Cultural differences: equity is not a norm for all cultures.