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Social Exchange Theories and Sexuality

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Social Exchange Theory is one of the social science theories that have been applied to the study of human sexuality. This theoretical perspective is of particular relevance for understanding sexuality as it is negotiated between two people who have a relationship with each other. In this article, I describe three specific social exchange models with particular relevance to sexuality: equity theory (e.g., Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), and the Interpersonal Model of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1992, 1995). Then, I discuss how the general social exchange perspective or one of the more specific exchange models/theories has been applied to five topics that focus on sexuality within a relational context: (a) partner selection, (b) onset of sexual activity, (c) sexual satisfaction, (d) sexual initiation and refusal, and (e) extradyadic sexual behavior.

A social exchange framework, in its various forms, has been applied to a number of topics within sexuality. In particular, because the focus of exchange theories is on interpersonal transactions (Huston & Burgess, 1979), this framework is useful for understanding sexuality within a *relational* context, including why two people choose each other as sexual partners, which partner has more influence on what sexual activities they do together, sexual satisfaction, and the likelihood that one or both partners seek sexual activity outside the relationship. The exchange approach is applicable to all types of sexual dyads, ranging from the prostitute-client relationship (where exchange is very explicit and salient) to a couple married for many years (where the exchange is more implicit).

A social exchange framework, very broadly, refers to any conceptual model or theoretical approach that focuses on the exchange of resources (material or symbolic) between or among people and/or refers to one of the major exchange concepts, which are rewards, costs, and reciprocity. Some exchange theorists also consider the fairness or equity of the exchange, which refers to the relative rewards and costs for both partners.

Background to General Social Exchange Theories

A social exchange approach has its origins in several disciplines, including anthropology (e.g., Levi-Strauss, 1969; Mauss, 1954), economics (Ekeh, 1974), sociology (e.g., Cook & Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1981), and social psychology (e.g., Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Of the different theoretical approaches, social psychological models of exchange have special relevance to sexuality because of their focus on exchange between the two members of a dyad. Social exchange theories and concepts (e.g., Huston & Burgess, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; LaGaipa, 1977; McClintock, Kramer, & Keil, 1984) have been important in research on mate selection, relationship formation, and the prediction of relationship dissolution (for summaries, see Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985; and Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994).

Most social exchange models share the following basic assumptions (e.g., LaGaipa, 1977; Nye, 1979): (a) Social behavior is a series of exchanges; (b) individuals attempt to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs; and (c) when individuals receive rewards from others, they feel obligated to reciprocate. Although these assumptions refer to all interpersonal transactions, they can be applied to specific types of transactions, such as the exchange of sexual favors.

A few concepts are common to most social exchange theories. *Rewards* and *costs* are two key concepts included in the social exchange framework. Rewards are defined as exchanged resources that are pleasurable and gratifying. Resources are sometimes used synonymously with rewards. Costs are defined as exchanged resources that result in a loss or punishment (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Costs also include foregone opportunities because of being in the particular relationship or interpersonal transaction. Rewards minus costs equal the *outcome,* although the difference, when it is positive, has also been referred to as *benefits* and *profits. Reciprocity* is another key concept (see the third assumption) of social exchange and refers to the notion that we give something back (and do not hurt) to those who have given to us (Gouldner, 1960). Specific exchange models, described in the next section, employ additional exchange concepts. Although rewards, costs, and reciprocity, as defined in general social exchange theory, refer to any types of exchanges, these concepts can also be redefined more specifically to refer to sexual exchanges. As will be discussed later, in many intimate relationships, sexual rewards and costs are sometimes exchanged for other resources in the relationship, such as intimacy, love, favors, and money.

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In the next section, three specific social exchange models with particular relevance to sexuality are described. The first two are theories that were developed, based on earlier exchange approaches, to apply to a range of human interactions but especially to interactions within intimate relationships. The third exchange model was developed specifically as a model of *sexual satisfaction.*

Background to Specific Social Exchange Theories Relevant to Sexuality

Equity theory. Hatfield (formerly Walster) and her colleagues extended earlier justice theories of Homans (1961, 1974), Adams (1965), and Blau (1964) through a version of equity theory (e.g., Walster et al., 1978) that has been applied frequently to the study of close relationships (for reviews, see Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979; and Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). The theory contains four propositions:

> Proposition 1: Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes equal rewards *minus* punishments).
>
> Proposition 2A: Groups (or rather the individuals comprising these groups) can maximize collective reward by evolving accepted systems for equitably apportioning resources among members. Thus, groups will evolve such systems of equity and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.
>
> Proposition 2B: Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish members who treat others inequitably.
>
> Proposition 3: When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they will feel.
>
> Proposition 4: Individuals who discover they are in inequitable relationships will attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity, the more distress they will feel and the harder they will try to restore equity.

In a general sense, equity refers to the degree of perceived balance in the relationship between partners' inputs and outcomes. More specifically, "an equitable relationship exists when the person evaluating the relationship—who could be Participant A, Participant B, or an outside observer—concludes that all participants are receiving equal relative gains from the relationship" (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981, p. 166). *Inputs* are defined as the participant's positive and negative contributions to the exchange that entitle him or her to reward or punishment. *Outcomes* are defined as the rewards and punishments the participant receives in the relationship. *Total outcomes* are defined as rewards minus punishments. Two types of inequity can be experienced: underbenefiting inequity and overbenefiting inequity. Whether a relationship or a specific aspect of the relationship (i.e., the sexual relationship) is judged to be equitable or inequitable depends on the "eye of the beholder." Individuals' perceptions of the equity/inequity will depend on how much they value various inputs and outcomes in the exchange relationship. Two members of a dyad may reach different conclusions about the equity in a relationship.

According to Proposition 3 of equity theory, men and women who find themselves in inequitable relationships will become distressed. Individuals who are overbenefited are expected to experience less overall distress than their underbenefited counterparts, but they are expected to experience more guilt. Anger is the primary emotion theoretically associated with underbenefiting inequity, although research suggests that depression and frustration are also common emotional reactions to underbenefiting inequity (Sprecher, 1986, 1992). The distress experienced as a result of inequity can include or eventually affect sexual dissatisfaction, as will be discussed later.

Proposition 4 states that individuals who perceive that they are inequitably treated will be motivated to restore equity to reduce the distress they experience. Equity can be restored to the relationship in two possible ways. Individuals may engage in actual equity restoration by changing their contributions or convincing their partner to change his or hers. Psychological equity restoration involves convincing oneself that inequity does not exist. Offering or refusing particular sexual behaviors is one way that equity can be restored in a relationship. Involvement in an extradyadic relationship may also be a way to restore equity to a relationship. Research to examine ways of restoring equity that involve sexual behaviors will be reviewed in a later section. If neither psychological nor actual equity restoration is effective in restoring equity to the relationship, the final option available to the individual is to "leave the field" or end the relationship.

Equality is considered to be another distributive justice norm, similar to equity, except the focus is only on the balance between the partners' outcomes. A relationship is considered to be equal if both partners are receiving the same level of outcomes from the relationship, regardless of what they contributed to the relationship. Some theorists (Deutsch, 1975; Steil & Turetsky, 1987) have argued that equality is the distributive justice norm that is most conducive for building intimate relationships. Although there is a theoretical distinction between equity and equality, research shows that equity and equality (or inequity and inequality) have a high degree of overlap (e.g., Cate, Lloyd, Henton, & Larson, 1982; Michaels, Edwards, & Acock, 1984).

The outcome-interdependence theory and investment model. Whereas equity theory focuses on the principle of justice or fairness (and thus, *relative* contributions and outcomes between partners), outcome-interdependence theory focuses on the rewards and costs derived from the relationship for the individual. The major variables included in this theory (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) are

rewards, costs, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives. Comparison level (CL) refers to one's expectation of what one deserves in such a relationship and is a standard for evaluating the relationship that develops based on past experiences and an awareness of the experiences of others. Comparison level for alternatives (CL_{ALT}) affects how dependent one feels on the relationship. Individuals compare the outcomes they receive from their relationship with what they *expect* to receive in an alternative, available relationship or what would be available to them from their social network but without obtaining another primary relationship. If the outcomes they are receiving from their current relationship are better than what they expect to receive from their best alternative(s), they will feel dependent on the relationship and become committed to it.

Rusbult (1980, 1983) extended Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory by introducing *investments* as an important additional component. According to the investment model, commitment is increased, not only by greater satisfaction (which is outcome compared to comparison level) and comparison level for alternatives, but also by investments. Investments are defined as the resources one gives to the relationship that cannot be retrieved if the relationship were to end. Investments may be either intrinsic elements that are put directly into the relationship, such as time or self-disclosure, or elements that are extrinsic but are connected to the relationship, such as mutual friends or shared material possessions (Rusbult, 1983). The investment model distinguishes between predictors of satisfaction, or positive affect experienced in the relationship, and commitment, or the intent to maintain and feel psychologically attached to the relationship. The propositions of Rusbult's investment model are expressed in the following ways:

Satisfaction = (Rewards - Costs) - Comparison Level

Commitment = Satisfaction - Comparison Level for Alternatives + Investments

Stay/leave = Commitment

More recently, Rusbult and her colleagues extended the investment framework by examining consequences of commitment and implications of the investment components for relationship-maintenance processes (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Some maintenance mechanisms that have been studied within the framework of investment theory that are at least indirectly related to sexual behaviors are derogation of alternative partners and managing jealousy and extradyadic involvements. These issues will be discussed in a later section.

The interpersonal model of sexual satisfaction. Whereas the previous two exchange models are focused on exchange in the entire relationship and the consequences of that exchange for *relationship* satisfaction and commitment, the Interpersonal Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS), proposed by Lawrance and Byers (1992, 1995), is focused on *exchange within the sexual relationship* and consequences for *sexual satisfaction.* The concepts included in the model are rewards, costs, comparison level, and equality.

The model can be expressed in the following way:

$$\text{Sexual satisfaction} = \{(\text{Rewards} - \text{Costs}) + (\text{Comparison Level}_{\text{Rewards}} - \text{Comparison Level}_{\text{Costs}}) + (\text{Equality}_{\text{Rewards}}, \text{Equality}_{\text{Costs}})\}$$

According to this model, sexual satisfaction is increased by each of the three components, and because the process occurs over time, it is cumulative. First, sexual satisfaction is increased to the degree that, *within the sexual relationship,* rewards are high, costs are low, and rewards exceed costs. Second, sexual satisfaction is increased to the degree that sexual rewards and costs in the relationship compare favorably to what was expected (comparison level). The final contribution to sexual satisfaction, according to this exchange model, is the degree to which there is equality between one's and one's partner's level of rewards and level of costs within the sexual relationship. Thus, this model extends interdependence theory (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) to sexuality and also adds a distributive justice norm (equality). In the discussion of the applications of social exchange variables for sexual satisfaction, I present evidence in support of this exchange model of sexual satisfaction.

Applications of Exchange Models to Sexuality

The exchange framework has been applied to a limited range of sexual phenomena. The social exchange perspective is particularly relevant to five topics that focus on sexuality as it relates to relationship phenomena. These topics range from processes that occur very early in a relationship (partner selection, the negotiation of the onset of sex) to processes that occur once sexual activity begins and that continue throughout the course of the relationship (evaluation of sexual satisfaction, initiation and refusal of sex, decisions about extradyadic sex). These topics, and any relevant research, are summarized next. Although most of the relevant investigations have been conducted with heterosexual relationships, the issues are also applicable to homosexual relationships. Social exchange concepts and principles have been usefully applied to several aspects of the intimate relationships of gays and lesbians (for a discussion, see Peplau, 1991).

An exchange approach to partner selection. Most people are not willing to have sex with just anyone. They select and are selected, and most often several factors are involved because the selection is for a person who also becomes a dating/romantic partner and possibly a life partner. Equity theorists (Blau, 1964; Goffman, 1952) have argued that equity and market

issues operate to affect who dates and marries whom. More specifically, Goffman (1952, p. 456) stated "A proposal of marriage in our society tends to be a way in which a man sums up his social attributes and suggests to a woman that hers are not so much better as to preclude a merger or partnership in these matters."

Based on this reasoning, early equity theorists (e.g., Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966) proposed the "matching hypothesis," which contains two specific predictions: (a) The more socially desirable a person is (in physical attractiveness, social standing, intelligence, etc.), the more socially desirable he or she would expect a dating, marriage, or sexual partner to be, and (b) couples who are matched (both partners are equally socially desirable) are more likely to have happy and enduring relationships than couples who are mismatched (one partner is more socially desirable than the other).

In field studies involving opposite-sex pairs set up for dates and in experimental studies involving people reacting to a confederate or to information ostensibly presented about another, only limited support has been found for the matching hypothesis (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Huston, 1973; Walster et al., 1966). There is some evidence that socially desirable people are more likely than less socially desirable people to choose a socially desirable partner, but the major finding from these studies is that everyone likes a socially desirable person regardless of his or her own level of social desirability.

However, stronger evidence has been found for matching in correlational studies conducted with actual couples. In actual couples, a high degree of similarity on physical attractiveness and other desirable characteristics is found (Murstein, 1972; Price & Vandenberg, 1979; Silverman, 1971). It has been suggested that the competitive marketplace, where less desirable people risk being and often are rejected by more socially desirable men and women, operates to assure that couples are matched in real life (e.g., Murstein, 1972). For a more recent discussion of evidence and explanations for the matching hypothesis, see Aron (1988) and Kalick and Hamilton (1986, 1988).

Couples can end up matched in very complex ways, and in ways that may not be immediately obvious to others. In particular, research indicates that in heterosexual relationships, women's physical attractiveness is often traded for a man's wealth or social standing (e.g., Elder, 1969; Taylor & Glenn, 1976; Udry, 1977; Udry & Eckland, 1984).

One issue that has been examined is how a person's prior level of sexual experience (or sexual inexperience) is related to his or her social desirability in the marketplace of dating and mating. Many years ago, a female's desirability as a marriage partner was linked to her chasteness. Rubin (1990), in a discussion of adolescent sexuality in the late 1950s and early 1960s, wrote about "Reputation—a girl's most prized possession in that era, inextricable from her virginity. Her 'good name,' she was reminded in a hundred ways, was all she had, her ticket to a respectable marriage and a place in the community" (p. 28).

It was different for males at that time. Their social desirability was either unaffected or was even increased by their level of sexual experience. However, times have changed, and the sexual behaviors and attitudes of young men and women have become more similar. Recent experimental studies have been conducted to examine how a person's dating and marriage desirability is affected by his or her level of prior sexual experience. Results from these "bogus stranger" studies indicate that extensive sexual experience is perceived to be less desirable in a mate than is low or moderate sexual experience, *but for both men and women* (e.g., Jacoby & Williams, 1985; O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1991).

Although the matching hypothesis helps to explain why two people would choose each other to begin a relationship, equity theory (Walster et al., 1978) and the investment model (Rusbult, 1983) have been used to explain why a couple would maintain their relationship beyond early interactions and thus reach the stage at which sexual involvement would be likely. Equity theorists predict that equitable relationships are likely to last longer than inequitable relationships (Hatfield et al., 1979). However, most researchers examining the degree to which equity forecasts relationship stability have not found it to be a good predictor (e.g., Berg & McQuinn, 1986; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Lujansky & Mikula, 1983), at least controlling for other variables. On the other hand, absolute reward level, investments, and poor alternatives have been good predictors of relationship longevity (e.g., Felmlee et al., 1990; Rusbult, 1983). Relationships that are likely to be maintained and thus become a consistent source of sexual gratification for its members are those that are rewarding, have high investments, and are perceived to be better than the alternatives.

An exchange approach to the onset of sexual activity in the relationship. The two members of a dating couple do not always agree about how soon they should begin sexual activity or even whether they should prior to reaching a level of commitment (e.g., engagement). Although there is evidence that dating partners are often similar to each other on sexual attitudes and standards (Cupach & Metts, 1995), the onset of sexual activity still needs to be negotiated by most couples. Research suggests that when partners in heterosexual relationships disagree about how soon they should begin sexual activity, the man more often than the woman wants sex sooner (Byers & Lewis, 1988; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Partners in lesbian and gay couples, although perhaps more similar in sexual beliefs than partners in heterosexual couples, may nonetheless also disagree. In some couples,

disagreement about the onset of sexual activity can be a major source of conflict (Buss, 1989), and processes of exchange can become particularly relevant to these couples. The partner who is more reluctant to have sex has a valued resource—her (or his) consent to sexual activity. At some point she (or he) may agree to have sex, and although there may never be any discussion of a "trade" or an "exchange," one or both partners may treat the act as having exchange value. Gifts or special favors may be presented by the person who wants sex more, either before sex occurs (to create a sense of obligation) or after sex begins (as a form of reciprocation).

Some men, and possibly a few women, may come to expect sex after they have invested a certain amount of time and other resources into the relationship. They may experience inequity distress if their partner is not willing to have sex, particularly if through comparison processes they see that their friends in similar types of relationships and/or with similar levels of investments are already having sex. Shotland (1989), in a model explaining different types of date rape, discussed how forced sex occurring in established dating relationships (called *relational date rape* to distinguish it from *beginning date rape* and *early date rape*) is often associated with these exchange and comparison processes.

Many years ago, Walster, Walster, and Traupmann (1978) tested the implications of equity theory for the onset of sexual activity in dating relationships. Based on equity theory and notions about a societal double standard (that men are encouraged to have sex whenever they can and women are encouraged to wait), they reasoned that perceptions of equity/inequity should be related in different ways to sexual involvement in a dating relationship for men versus women. They argued, based on equity theory, that if a person feels underbenefited in his or her dating relationship, he or she may expect the partner to be willing to do what he or she wants sexually. However, the societal double standard suggests that what men and women want will differ. An underbenefited man may feel entitled to demand sex, whereas an underbenefited woman, if she is less eager to begin sexual activity, may expect her partner to wait until she is ready. Although the researchers found no evidence for this prediction with a sample of undergraduate students, they did find that the individuals who believed they were in an equitable relationship were those who had advanced the most sexually with their partner. Both those who were "greatly underbenefited" and those who were "greatly overbenefited" were less likely to have advanced to sexual intercourse. Furthermore, of those who had had sexual intercourse, those who were equitably treated were more likely than their underbenefited and overbenefited counterparts to say that they had begun sexual activity in the relationship because "they both wanted it." The results of this study suggest that couples who have equitable relationships are more likely to engage in premarital sex, probably because they feel more content and happy and in love with each other and less distress and discontent (e.g., anger and guilt). However, the researchers found no evidence that, among the sexually active relationships, equitable ones advanced to sexual involvement any sooner than the inequitable ones.

Although the interdependence/investment model framework (e.g., Rusbult, 1983) has not been used to forecast the onset of sexual activity in romantic couples, becoming sexually involved is one behavioral manifestation of subjective commitment, which is the primary outcome variable predicted by the model. Thus, it is likely that investment model variables (rewards, costs, comparison level, comparison level for alternatives, investments) should predict how sexually involved dating partners become.

An exchange approach to sexual satisfaction. As noted recently by Lawrance and Byers (1995), the study of sexual satisfaction has been largely atheoretical, and of the variables that have been used to predict sexual satisfaction, relationship variables (e.g., intimacy) have been more successful than individual difference variables (e.g., femininity-masculinity). Thus, they concluded that a model of sexual satisfaction "needs to take into account the interpersonal context in which sexual activity occurs" and that "exchange theories offer such an approach" (p. 268). They developed the IEMSS model, described previously, to explain sexual satisfaction (see also Lawrance & Byers, 1992).

Lawrance and Byers (1995) tested this model in a longitudinal sample of men and women who were either married or cohabiting. The participants rated the level of sexual reward in their relationship to be high and their level of costs to be low, and both rewards and costs were perceived more favorably than their expectations. Participants were also quite sexually satisfied in their relationship. At both Time 1 and Time 2 (separated by six months), sexual satisfaction was found to be positively associated with level of sexual rewards, relative reward level, and equality in rewards and costs and negatively correlated with level of costs and relative costs. In addition, Lawrance and Byers tested the entire model by summing the Time 1 and Time 2 exchange measures and entering them as predictors of the Time 2 sexual satisfaction in the order that they are presented in the model (Step 1: Rewards - Costs; Step 2: Comparison $\text{Level}_{\text{Rewards}}$ - Comparison $\text{Level}_{\text{Costs}}$; Step 3: Equality $_{\text{Rewards}}$, $\text{Equality}_{\text{Costs}}$). All components of the model, controlling for the others, were uniquely associated with sexual satisfaction, and Rewards - Costs explained the greatest amount of variance in sexual satisfaction.

The equity model has also been extended to the study of sexual satisfaction. Equity theorists (e.g., Hatfield et al., 1979) have argued that

equity (in the entire relationship) should be related to sexual satisfaction because

> If couples like or love one another, if they feel equitably treated, if they feel comfortable with one another, sex may go well. If couples dislike or hate one another, feel trapped in inequitable relationships, or feel uncomfortable in one another's presence, their deep-seated resentment or guilt may corrode their sexual encounters. (Hatfield, Greenberger, Traupmann, & Lambert, 1982, p. 20)

Hatfield and her colleagues examined how equity, assessed via a global measure for the entire relationship, was related to sexual satisfaction in both dating couples (Traupmann, Hatfield, & Wexler, 1983) and in married couples (Hatfield et al., 1982). In their study of married couples, Hatfield et al. (1982) found that equitably treated husbands and wives were more sexually satisfied overall than were overbenefited and underbenefited husbands and wives. Furthermore, underbenefited men and women were less sexually satisfied than were overbenefited men and women. The researchers also examined how perceptions of equity were related to feelings husbands and wives reported having immediately after a sexual encounter (how loving and close vs. distant and angry they felt and how sexually satisfied vs. frustrated). The analyses were less conclusive than the results for overall sexual satisfaction but suggested a similar pattern. Equitably treated and overbenefited respondents judged their sexual interactions to be more satisfying and less frustrating than underbenefited respondents. In their study of dating couples, Traupmann et al. (1983) found that both equitably treated and overbenefited men and women experienced more overall sexual satisfaction than the underbenefited respondents. Even more support for equity predictions were found for the items asking about satisfaction immediately after a sexual encounter. Men and women who were in equitable relationships rated their sexual encounters more positively than *both* underbenefited and overbenefited respondents. The one consistent finding from the research examining the association between equity and sexual satisfaction is that underbenefited men and women are less sexually satisfied than both equitably treated and overbenefited men and women.

Although the investment model (Rusbult, 1983) and the interdependence framework (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), more generally, are theories of general relationship satisfaction and are not theories of sexual satisfaction, they can be useful for understanding what factors can lead to sexual satisfaction, in part because sexual satisfaction is one component of general relationship satisfaction. Indeed, some of the most well-known satisfaction scales (e.g., Locke & Wallace, 1959; Spanier, 1976) contain a subscale that measures satisfaction with the sexual or physical aspect of the relationship. Furthermore, even if general relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are conceptualized as distinct from each other, general relationship satisfaction is likely to contribute to sexual satisfaction, and vice versa (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993).

An exchange approach to sexual initiation, sexual refusal, and willingness to engage in specific sexual acts. Once a romantic pair becomes sexually involved, the partners are not always in the mood for sex at the same time, may have different appetites for sex, and may not agree about where to have sex (the bedroom vs. a more exciting location) and in which specific behaviors to engage. Although research suggests that most people are moderately to highly sexually satisfied in their sexual relationships (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Brown & Auerback, 1981; Greeley, 1991), men and women can usually identify something they would like their partner to do more or possibly less often (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1988).

The initiation and refusal of sex and the specific behaviors engaged in can be viewed within an exchange approach. Relationships may be more satisfying when these specific behaviors are rewarding, the sexual costs associated with these behaviors are low, and the exchange of these behaviors is equitable or equal. For example, a relationship in which a husband insists that his wife perform oral sex on him but refuses to do so in return will probably have less overall sexual satisfaction than a relationship in which both partners engage in oral sex. Similarly, partners who take turns initiating sex and are also relatively equal in the number of times they refuse sex because of headaches and not being in the mood no doubt are likely to feel balance and thus contentment in their sexual relationship.

Furthermore, the collection of sexual behaviors in which one engages, or refuses to engage, can be considered only one class of resources exchanged in the relationship and, hence, can be exchanged for other types of resources in the relationship. For example, the following woman interviewed by Lillian Rubin (1976) in *Worlds of Pain: The Working-Class Family* recognized the exchange value of oral sex: "He gets different treats at different times, depending on what he deserves. Sometimes I let him do that oral stuff you're talking about to me. Sometimes when he's very good, I do it to him" (p. 207).

When people do something special for their partner in the sexual area of the relationship (e.g., an erotic massage, having sex when not in mood to accommodate one's partner), they may get reciprocation in another area of the relationship. A defining feature of close, intimate relationships is the "substitutability" of resources (Hatfield et al., 1979). Intimates are willing and able to exchange resources from different classes of resources. For example, Foa and Foa (1974) identified six classes of resources—love, status, money, material goods, services, and information—and, in more recent studies using this list, sex has been added as a distinct resource

class (Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986; Michaels et al., 1984). Thus, Partner A may give more sexual resources than Partner B, but Partner B may reciprocate with services, presents (goods), or love and gratitude.

Because intimate partners can exchange from a range of resources and may exchange one type of resource for another, it can sometimes be difficult to determine how fair the exchange is. Hatfield et al. (1979) discussed this difficulty: "Intimates spend much of their time negotiating the value and exchangeability of various behaviors—the terms, so to speak, of their relationship" (p. 110). Regan and Sprecher (1995) explored how men and women perceived the value of several contributions to a close relationship, including contributions in the sexual area of the relationship—being passionate, being sexually faithful, and initiating sex often. The participants (college students) were asked to indicate how much value each resource should be given in the determination of equity or fairness in the relationship, first if contributed by the self and then if contributed by the partner. The researchers found that men and women differed in how much they valued several of the 22 contributions listed in the study and that gender differences in the perceived value of many contributions depended on whether the contribution was made by the self or the partner. Of relevance here is that the researchers found being "sexually faithful" was one of the contributions perceived to have the highest value, although women gave it more value than did men, particularly when regarding it as a contribution from the self. Being passionate in the relationship was also valued quite highly but was not valued more by one gender than by the other and was not valued more as a contribution from the self than as a contribution by the other. Initiating sex often was moderately valued, but women valued partner's efforts at initiating frequent sex more than their own, whereas men valued own initiation and partner initiation equally. These results suggest that partners may not always agree about how much "his" versus "her" sexual behaviors are worth in an exchange perspective.

An exchange approach to extradyadic behavior. Although there is widespread disapproval of extramarital sex, or sex outside of any committed relationship (called extradyadic sex), not everyone engages in monogamy or serial monogamy. Some people have sexual relations outside of their primary relationship while still trying to maintain the primary relationship. Early studies (Hunt, 1974; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) suggested that 25-50% of married individuals are involved in extramarital sexual relationships (men closer to 50% and women closer to 25%), but recent studies, with more representative samples, suggest that the percentages are lower (Greeley, 1991; Laumann, Michael, Gagnon, & Michaels, 1994). Partners in gay couples are more likely than partners in lesbian or heterosexual couples to have sex outside the relationship (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1991).

Social scientists have been interested in identifying the factors associated with the likelihood that individuals engage in extradyadic sex. One factor associated with having affairs is dissatisfaction with one's primary relationship (e.g., Glass & Wright, 1985; Prins, Buunk, & Van-Yperen, 1993). To the degree that inequity contributes to relationship dissatisfaction, it is, therefore, also an indirect contribution to the likelihood of involvement in an extradyadic relationship. In addition, extradyadic behavior may be one way in which a partner in an inequitable relationship restores equity to his or her relationship. As the reader may recall, Proposition 4 of Equity Theory states that individuals who perceive they are inequitably treated will want to eliminate their distress by restoring equity to their relationship. One way in which individuals can restore equity to their relationships is by making real changes—either they change their behaviors or they convince their partner to change how he or she behaves. There are many areas of the close relationship in which changes can be made, including physical appearance, expressions of love and affection, the earning and disposal of income, household chores, and *sexuality.* Hatfield, Traupmann, and Walster (1978) described how extradyadic sex may be used to restore equity to the relationship:

> 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. (p. 314)

An extradyadic affair may also be committed by an individual in an inequitable relationship because he or she is in the process of "leaving the field" or ending the relationship, perhaps after several unsuccessful attempts at trying to restore equity to the relationship. Thus, the individual has little to lose and possibly something to gain by exploring new options.

Hatfield et al. (1979) proposed one additional reason why inequitably treated individuals may seek an extradyadic involvement—to achieve equity in a transrelational manner. According to this argument made by some equity theorists (e.g., Austin, 1974), if a person cannot achieve equity in one relationship, he or she may feel entitled to obtain extra from a supplementary relationship. This has been called the "equity-with-the-world" phenomenon.

Hatfield et al. (1979) examined whether equity considerations may be related to the likelihood that men and women have extramarital relationships by analyzing data provided by *Psychology Today* readers who responded to a survey printed in the magazine. A measure asking about partner's desirability relative to own desirability served as a measure of

equity. The researchers defined overbenefited men and women as those who viewed their partner to be more desirable than themselves, equitable men and women as those who judged their partner to be equally desirable, and underbenefited men and women as those who judged their partner to be less desirable than themselves.

Two questions were included in the questionnaire that asked about involvement in extramarital sex: how soon (if ever) that they had sex with someone other than their current cohabiting or marriage partner and the number of other sexual partners they have had since being in the current relationship. The researchers found that underbenefited men and women (those who thought they were more socially desirable than their partner) were more likely to experiment with extramarital sex and generally started having extramarital sex sooner than their equitably treated counterparts. However, overbenefited respondents (those who thought they were less socially desirable than their partners) were similar to the equitably treated respondents in their low rate of extradyadic involvement.

More recently, Prins et al. (1993) examined the degree to which inequity (measured via global items assessing equity for the entire relationship), along with normative disapproval and marital dissatisfaction, predicted the degree to which married and cohabiting men and women from the Netherlands had been involved and desired to become involved in extradyadic sexual relationships. Their results indicated that, for women only, inequity was associated significantly with both actual and desired extradyadic involvement, controlling for marriage dissatisfaction and normative disapproval. Both underbenefited and overbenefited women had been involved in more extramarital relationships and desired them more than women in equitable relationships. The researchers found it noteworthy that, for women, inequity contributed to extramarital involvement above and beyond any effect from relationship dissatisfaction. For men, actual and desired extradyadic involvement were unrelated to aspects of the quality of their relationship, either relationship satisfaction or equity. The researchers speculated that the gender difference in the effect of equity on extramarital involvement may be due to women feeling they need to have better reasons for extramarital involvement than men (i.e., a double standard) and equity issues in long-term relationships being more salient to women than to men.

Even when individuals have happy, satisfying, and equitable relationships, they may encounter or be pursued by attractive potential alternatives. In a commentary on changes in societal conditions resulting in the reduced longevity of heterosexual close relationships, Berscheid and Campbell (1981) discussed that one effect of having a higher divorce rate (because of a reduction in barriers for long-term commitment) is that more alternatives become available to tempt those who are still in committed relationships (see also recent discussion by Attridge & Berscheid, 1994). Johnson and Rusbult (1989) argued that individuals who are committed to their relationships (because of high rewards, low costs, high investments, and poor alternatives) are likely to "avoid temptation and maintain stable involvement by derogating alternative partners" (p. 194). Correlational and experimental studies provide evidence that highly committed individuals, who are committed because they have rewarding and satisfying relationships in which they are invested, have a tendency to derogate attractive, available alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990).

A social exchange perspective may also be applied to predict a person's reaction upon learning that his or her partner has had sex with someone else. In particular, Rusbult's recent theory of accommodation processes (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), which extends both the investment model and the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect typology of responses to dissatisfaction in dyads (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), has been advanced to understand the conditions under which a person responds constructively (rather than destructively) when one's partner engages in a destructive act. In most relationships, a sexual act with someone outside the relationship would be viewed as a destructive act (the exception would be in couples who have agreed to have "open" relationships or to mate-swap; see Bringle & Buunk, 1991).

According to the accommodation model, there are four possible reactions to a partner's potentially destructive act (e.g., extradyadic involvement). These responses differ along two dimensions: constructive versus destructive and active versus passive. *Exit* refers to behaviors that are active and destructive and include "separating, moving out of a joint residence, actively abusing one's partner, getting a divorce, threatening to leave, or screaming at one's partner" (Rusbult et al., 1991, p. 54). *Voice* refers to behaviors that are active and constructive, such as discussing the problem, seeking joint therapy, and attempting to change to keep the relationship intact. *Loyalty,* the passive and constructive response, refers to waiting and hoping that things will improve. The final possible response is *neglect,* which is destructive and passive. Rusbult et al. (1991, p. 54) described this response in the following way: "ignoring the partner or spending less time together, avoiding discussing problems, treating the partner poorly (become cross with him or her), criticizing the partner for things unrelated to the real problem, or just letting things fall apart." When a person engages in a destructive action, such as having an extradyadic relationship, his or her partner could provide a destructive response in return (having an affair also, threatening to leave or actually leaving), or he or she could respond constructively (voice or loyalty), which has been called *accommodation.* In a

series of studies, Rusbult and her colleagues (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1991) examined what factors predict whether a person will react with voice and loyalty rather than exit and neglect in response to a partner's destructive behaviors. Their research indicates that accommodation is more likely under conditions of favorable exchange and interdependence—i.e., greater satisfaction, commitment, investments, and poorer quality alternatives. Thus, although these particular exchange conditions are likely to be associated with the lower probability that either partner in a relationship would ever engage in sex outside the relationship, these factors are also likely to be associated with more accommodating responses by one person to his or her partner's infidelity, if it were to occur.

Critique and Evaluation of the Applicability of Exchange Approaches to Sexuality

When exchange frameworks, such as equity theory, moved from applications primarily in casual relationships (e.g., employer-employee) to applications in intimate relationships, objections were raised. Many theorists argued that intimate relationships transcend equity considerations and selfish cost-benefit analyses (for a discussion, see Hatfield et al., 1985). This debate continues to some degree in that theorists argue about whether altruistic behaviors are possible in intimate relationships (e.g., Brehm, 1992) and whether individuals are more likely to use a need-based rule rather than an equity rule or an equality rule to govern how they distribute resources in their closest relationships (Clark & Chrisman, 1994).

Equity and exchange theorists have responded to criticisms leveled against their theories by expanding their conceptual models to incorporate other important variables. For example, Rusbult (1983) expanded the interdependence framework by including the *investment* concept. She argued that even if individuals have relatively unrewarding and unsatisfactory relationships and desirable alternatives, they may nonetheless remain in their relationships because of high investments in the relationship. More recently, Rusbult has further extended her model to include *normative support* and *prescriptive support* (obligation to remain with a partner) (e.g., Lin & Rusbult, 1995). Furthermore, recent equity researchers have not presumed that equity is all that matters and have often examined how equity and several other variables are related to an outcome variable, such as extradyadic behavior (Prins et al., 1993) or emotions in the relationship (Sprecher, 1986). Furthermore, researchers from an exchange or equity orientation acknowledge that these issues matter more to some than to others (e.g., Hughes & Snell, 1990: Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977; Sprecher, 1992).

Although the social exchange framework has been heralded as a useful framework with wide application to many types of human interactions, including intimate ones, and as being testable, concise, and parsimonious, there are limitations when it comes to actually testing hypotheses derived from the framework. One problem is *measurement.* It is difficult to measure rewards, costs, equity, and other important exchange concepts. Often the researcher must weigh the relative advantages and disadvantages of a global measure (e.g., "How rewarding is your relationship overall?") with a more detailed measure that asks about exchange in many specific areas of the relationship (for a discussion, see Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). Furthermore, the value of certain resources might change over time, might be different for different individuals, and may change as a function of comparison processes that are emphasized. Furthermore, in the study of how exchange is related to sexuality outcomes, such as sexual satisfaction, should the emphasis be on measures of exchange within the sexual relationship or measures of exchange in the entire relationship? Equity theorists who have applied equity to sexuality have focused on equity for the entire relationship (e.g., Hatfield et al., 1982; Traupmann et al., 1983) but have acknowledged that the focus should perhaps be on equity in sexual behaviors (Hatfield et al., 1982). The Lawrance and Byers (1995) Interpersonal Model of Sexual Satisfaction and the research based on this model are unique in that all exchange variables are conceptualized and measured for the sexual aspect of the relationship.

Another limitation of exchange models as applied to sexuality outcomes or any aspect of the intimate relationship is that the *focus is on one causal direction.* The models focus on the effect of exchange variables on the outcomes for the relationship (relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, stability), whereas very little is discussed or tested concerning the reverse causal directions. However, exchange variables may also be affected by the sexuality in the relationship. For example, individuals who are sexually satisfied in their relationship may desire to maintain their relationship and thus behave in rewarding and equitable ways in their relationship.

Although an exchange approach has special relevance to sexual behaviors and feelings within the dyadic relationship, there are many sexual phenomena for which an exchange framework is not relevant. Many topics of interest to sex researchers —sexual orientation, physiological responses, sexual coercion, sexual development, atypical sexual behavior, reproduction, AIDS, contraceptive behavior, premarital sexual standards —would be unlikely to be studied from a social exchange perspective. However, because most dyadic sex occurs within the context of an emotional relationship in which partners are interdependent at many levels, an exchange approach is particularly applicable to the *study of sexual phenomena in close relationships.* As the scientific study of *sexuality* interfaces to a greater degree with the

scientific study of *close relationships* (see Christopher & Sprecher, 1995, and their special issue on sexuality in the journal, *Personal Relationships*), the social exchange framework may emerge as a major theoretical perspective in sexuality.

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