

Social Exchange Theory Applied to Romantic Relationships

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While idealistic views of sex in romantic relationships focus on sex as a private act between two equal partners who care about each other, it is the unfortunate fact that sexual double standards do exist, more obviously in the past but still to some extent today. Earlier in this chapter, we focused on evolutionary theory as one way of explaining the differences between men and women. Another way of trying to explain the discrepancies between the way sex and romantic relationships are viewed by females and males is through applying the idea of **social exchange theory** to romantic relationships.

Social exchange theory analyzes interactions between two parties by examining the costs and benefits to each. The key point of the theory is that it assumes the two parties are both giving and receiving items of value from each other. Under this theory, interactions are only likely to continue if both parties feel they coming out of the exchange with more than they are giving up—that is, if there is a positive amount of profit for both parties involved. [Baumeister and Vohs 5]

Rewards and **costs** are important concepts that form the basis of most social exchange theories. Rewards are exchanged resources that bring pleasure and satisfaction, while costs are exchanged resources that are perceived as a loss or punishment.

The social exchange framework is useful for understanding sexuality within a **relational** context; it focuses on what each partner gives and receives from the other. It allows one to analyze why people choose each other as romantic partners in the first place, which partner has more influence in the sexual activities the two engage in, and whether or not one or both partners might seek sexual activity outside of the relationship. [Sprecher 32]

The basis of the social exchange theory as applied to romantic relationships is that sex in a heterosexual community is a valuable commodity that a woman gives to a man in exchange for other commodities. Compensation for sexual intimacy might be given in the form of respect, commitment, love, or items of monetary value. [Sprecher 32] Explained in this fashion, sex is primarily a female resource, and hence women would seek to keep the price of their resource high, while men would seek to lower the price. There are three specific social exchange models that are particularly relevant to sexuality that will be discussed in this section: **equity theory, outcome-interdependence theory and investment model,** and the **interpersonal model of sexual satisfaction.**

Equity theory can be summed up with four main points [Sprecher 33]: (1) Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes by maximizing the difference between perceived rewards and costs. (2) In order to maximize individuals' rewards, the collective individuals involved will tend to create systems where resources can be fairly partitioned among members of a group. To maintain this system, individuals who treat others fairly will be rewarded, while those who do not will be punished. (3) Inequalities in relationships will cause the participants to be unhappy to a degree proportional to the amount of inequality. (4) Individuals will tend to work to balance out inequalities; the greater the inequality, the harder they will work to ameliorate it.

Proof for the equity theory is given by evidence that shows relationships where one partner feels that he or she is underbenefited will not tend to be stable relationships. [Sprecher 36] Also, research shows that relationships where partners felt they were either "greatly underbenefited" or "greatly overbenefited" were less likely to have advanced to sexual intercourse. In addition to this, those men and women who felt they were in equal and reciprocal relationships were more likely to say that sexual activity had begun because both members

involved desired it.

The **outcome-interdependence theory** focuses on the rewards and costs that an individual derives from a relationship. The factors that determine a individual's evaluation of a relationship include the actual rewards and costs, the individual's expectation for what he or she should receive (**comparison level**), and the dependence an individual feels on the continued existence of the relationship (**comparison level for alternatives**, or how appealing other options appear) [Sprecher 34]. Added to this theory is the idea of **investments**, defined here as resources an individual gives to a relationship that cannot be retrieved if the relationship were to end. These investments might be in the form of time or exchanged personal confidences or other extrinsic elements, such as mutual friends or shared possessions. All of these investments will cause an individual to feel more committed to a relationship, independent of the satisfaction gained from rewards.

The effect of feeling that one has invested in a relationship helps to determine the onset of sexual activity in romantic relationships. [Sprecher 36] This is due to the fact that sexual activity is one behavioral demonstration of one's commitment to a relationship. The investment model variables of rewards, costs, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives should influence how sexually involved a relationship is.

The **interpersonal model of sexual satisfaction** focuses on exchange within the entire relationship and the consequences of that exchange for relationship satisfaction and commitment. In this model, sexual satisfaction is increased by three main components: the difference between costs and rewards. (2) How the relationship's rewards and costs compare with one's expectations. (3) How equal the relationship is between the two partners in terms of costs and rewards attributed to each. It extends the interdependence theory and introduces the idea of equality being a motivating factor in relationships.

There is a clear disparity between when men and women first expect sex to occur in a romantic relationship. Men, on the whole, tend to expect relationships to become sexual considerably sooner than women do. [Cohen 294, 295] When evaluating how these expectations compare with men and women's actual experiences in relationships, it is seen that only the women's expectations are a good indicator of when sex actually occurs. This suggests that it is women, not men, who have the most influence on when sexual intercourse occurs; women are the "gatekeepers" of sexuality within relationships [Cohen 297]. This evidence supports the idea that sex is a female resource that the woman gives to the man. The fact that women's expectations are more in line with their experiences also suggests that women are more motivated than men to make it seem as though their sexual expectations are consistent with their actions. This consistency would be important in maintaining a woman's reputation; if a woman were to appear to give sex too freely, it would seem to lower the cost of sex as a commodity.

It is also observed that men say they have had more sexual partners than women do [Cohen 297] and that men and women count their sexual experiences differently. Men tend to estimate and round up, while women enumerate each example and round down. It is evident, also, that virginity is viewed very differently among men and women. Studies show that women are twice as likely to think of their virginity as something that is given as a gift to a significant other, while men are three times as likely to view virginity as a stigma that they must discard as soon as possible. Interesting to note was that lesbians were less likely to think of virginity as a gift in their relationships [Baumeister and Vohs 33]. These facts show that a woman's sexuality is far more valuable than a man's, and that this phenomenon is confined to heterosexual relationships, and therefore the interactions between men and women.

The value of a woman's virginity can also be observed through the legal system and the concept of an **age of sexual consent**, which means that a person below that age is legally unable to agree to have sex. While it may seem that these kinds of laws prohibit both young men and women from sexual activity, historically and even overwhelmingly in modern-day courts, this law has been applied only to adult men males who have sexual relations with underage females. [Baumeister and Vohs 46] This is consistent with the idea that a woman's virginity is a valuable resource that must be protected by society, while a man's virginity is not so highly valued.

Consistent with the fact that a woman is giving something valuable to a man when she has sex with him are the traditional customs of men buying gifts for women and paying for their food and entertainment. There is also evidence to suggest that a woman can make up for an inequality in a relationship by offering sex, while a man cannot do the same when he is in an inferior position in a relationship. Female sports celebrities, for instance, do not frequently engage in relationships with their male fans, stating that the difference in status is too great, while male sports celebrities are flippant about their numerous sexual encounters with female fans. This shows that females are able to gain access to males that are considerably higher in social status by offering sex as a reward, while a similar exchange is unlikely to occur in the cases where the female has a much higher status.

More evidence for the social exchange theory is the fact that it is women, not men, who are perceived to enforce the sexual double-standard, judging fellow women more harshly when they engage in sexual promiscuity. [Milhausen and Herold 364] This would support the idea that women have a vested interest in keeping the perceived value of a woman's sexuality high by making sure that the supply (in this case, women who are willing to engage in sex) is higher than the demand (men who are looking for sex). It has been proven that women

are more generally opposed to prostitution and pornography, which would tend to cheapen sex and hence lower the “market value” of a woman’s sexuality by making it easier for men to obtain sexual satisfaction. Studies have also shown that women are more likely than men to oppose nudity in movies and are more likely to approve of a ban on renting X-rated sex videos [Baumeister and Vohs 42].

Finally, although social exchange theory is a useful way of looking at the dynamics of heterosexual romantic relationships, it should not be seen as an exclusive explanation for how men and women interact. It is clear that economic theories do not apply to all aspects of romantic relationships equally, and that a social exchange theory cannot adequately explain all of the ups-and-downs of human interactions. There are many cultural and biological causes for the different roles that men and women play in romantic relationships, and social exchange theory is just one way of analyzing the result of many different motivations.

Summary

1. **Social exchange theory** is a useful way of approaching the way men and women behave in romantic relationships. It shows how economic terms of **costs** and **rewards** can be applied, focusing on the give-and-take aspects of interpersonal relationships.
2. The three specific social exchange models that are most relevant to sexuality are **equity theory, outcome-interdependence theory and investment model**, and the **interpersonal model of sexual satisfaction**.
3. Sexual intercourse can be viewed as a female commodity whose perceived value females seek to preserve by keeping the “price” high and the supply low. This explains why it is actually females who tend to maintain double standards for sexuality, in part by castigating fellow females who have many sexual partners. A woman’s virginity is viewed by society as more valuable than a man’s virginity.

Bibliography

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Placement of prose in Gleitman

This section that I have written would go under Chapter 11: *Biology, Emotion, and Social Behavior* in Gleitman. It would go on page 426, after the section titled "Mating systems" and before the section titled "Love." The logic for this placement would be to follow up the evolutionary theory for why men and women often play unequal roles in romantic relationships with another theory and a different approach to the same question. It would introduce students to how economic principles can be applied to interpersonal relationships and would present a useful analogy for the analysis of heterosexual relationships. To help make room for this prose, the sections from page 439 to page 441 (starting with "Reciprocity and Human Altruism" and ending with the section titled "Fairness" could be removed, as this new passage also treats and expands upon the ideas of social exchange theory and equitability in human relationships.