

Describe and evaluate two theories of interpersonal relationships.

The social exchange theory is based upon the idea that relationships are formed on the rewards and costs of the relationship and that the most appealing are those with maximum reward for minimum cost to the parties involved. This theory can be applied to all types of relationships, including family, work, friendship and romantic relationships. Homans suggested that before we start a new relationship we weigh up the possible rewards and benefits of the relationship before setting out in it, this applies to both partners and therefore for a relationship to continue or begin it must be mutually beneficial. Rewards are considered to be anything that we find pleasurable, be it, a compliment, affection, material or prestigious. Therefore costs are anything in which we find no pleasure, such as bad habits or arguments. Homans believed we analyse these costs and benefits before we embark on a relationship. However we are not as calculating as this and think very little of the costs of relationship at the beginning instead considering only the positive aspects which are to be gained.

Lloyd supports this theory; he found that a couple who starts out with a highly rewarding relationship is more likely to be sustainable and mutually beneficial than one which begins with few rewards. This suggests that we do consider the rewards we are gaining from a relationship when we are in the relationship and that this consideration determines whether we continue in it. However it is highly questionable whether during a relationship we think about what we are gaining from a relationship when it is going well instead concentrating on enjoying the relationship itself. However, this may be a plausible explanation, as we are unlikely to remain in a relationship in which we find we are dissatisfied but it does not explain whether we consider the likely rewards and costs before we embark on a relationship. Thiabult and kelley suggested that not only do we consider the rewards and cost of the relationship of which we are going to undertake but that in addition we compare with alternative and previous relationships in order to determine whether it fulfills our expectations and indeed what our expectations are. It also determines whether we continue with a relationship, if we have expectations of high rewards we may remain in the hope these expectations will be realised. However this theory suggests that our decision to start a relationship is calculated and considered and leaves no room for desire for the person, altruism, such as a parent and child will experience, or trust they have for their partner based on their own experience of their partner. It is suggesting that the relationship is undertaken as a result of what is to be gained from it and that this decision determines the fortune of the relationship once undertaken depending on the realisation of the expectations we set out with. However there are many examples of relationships where neither party gains very much from a relationship and yet there are many costs which outweigh the rewards of it and yet these relationships are undertaken, and do continue. Therefore the explanation is flawed and cannot be used as a universal explanation of why relationships continue and are initially undertaken, as it does not consider individual differences.

In addition we are not as selfish as this and do not necessarily need to gain anything in order to gain pleasure from the relationship. Equally we do not necessarily consider the benefits of it merely that we want to be with that person at that time, perhaps however the consideration of rewards and costs has a more important role in the continuation of relationship after the 'rose tinted', 'first flush' of love has passed.

However plausible this is it still does not consider those relationships that continue despite the significant costs of it. Rusbult supports the belief that we continue based on the strength, or not, of the initial relationship. He found that in the first three months of a relationship the focus is on the rewards of a relationship and that those relationships which were sustainable were those relationships that suffered fewer costs and were thus more mutually beneficial. Therefore this suggests that many relationships are based upon the strengths in which they have at the beginning and perhaps relationships which were strong in the beginning despite what happens later in the relationship are sustained because of this. Therefore the model is predictive and as such has a valuable point in its favour. However it does not consider those who remain in long term relationships because the prospect of a single life commands too much uncertainty to be a sound alternative, and once in the relationship it is harder to leave. Therefore individual differences play a role in the continuation of the relationship and this is not considered as this would vary with the person and thus how strong they are depends on how likely they are to make a break if they believe they are gaining little from the relationship.

An explanation of why we remain in a relationship is the level of investment we have already placed in the relationship and may explain why people continue in a relationship that has long been stagnant. Importantly though it does not consider how a once good relationship changes over time and why a relationship becomes unsatisfactory or stagnant. These investments may be anything we would lose if we left, such as a house, car or time and energy. Rusbult believed the greater the investment the less likely the person was to leave, therefore this offers a more plausible explanation of how and why relationships break down, those who have invested less or see the waste of their investment find it easier to leave. This explanation is supported by research conducted by Rusbult and Marz who researched the dissolution of abusive relationships. They found that those women who returned were those who had the most to lose financially and had invested heavily in it, such as having children. This suggests that long term relationships do not continue based on rewards and costs but on the level of investment in the relationship and the alternative, such as less money or loneliness that is offered.

Walster proposed the equity theory as an extension of the Social Exchange Theory. This suggests that people expect the rewards they gain from a relationship to be in proportion to the amount they have invested in the relationship. Which suggests that we consider our relationships in the same manner an accountant would our finances and this is flawed as commitment and the value of a kiss varies between people and therefore it is difficult to determine what is a fair exchange or what is equal. When we see a young attractive girl and an old man together and we believe the relationship to be unequal it is likely that the man is very rich and therefore the relationship has equality, with both parties offering something of similar value to the relationship. However how do we know whether that is a fair exchange to either desire for the sake of looks or money? Equally we expect partners to have a certain level of equality in the roles they fulfill whether it be in or out of the home. Therefore this suggests that happiness in a relationship can only be reached if there is equity within the relationship. However there are many examples of uneven relationships where one partner fulfills more roles within the relationship than the other does and yet the relationship continues for many years. However this is an out of date concept now and this is less likely to occur as we expect a much higher level of equality from our partners. Hatfield supports this idea he found that

those who were underbenefitted in a relationship are likely to be angry and resentful and who are over benefitted guilty, which suggests that for a harmonious relationship equality is necessary. Further support comes from Buunk who found that those marriages, which were perceived to be equitable, were happier than those relationships were not balanced and those who were underbenefitted were the least happy. Therefore it suggests that in order for both spouses to be equally satisfied it necessary for a balance and equal relationship be it, time energy or financial.

Conversely Hill found that some relationships were not concerned with equity, he found that it does not play a role within families. Parents invest a great deal in to their children and have no expectation of reward from their children, they simply take pleasure in watching them grown and become their own person. Therefore in this situation investment is based on the child's need of the parent rather than exchange or reward. Equally this may be the case in other relationships, Cate believed that is the absolute level of rewards rather than fairness which determines the satisfaction which we gain rather than Perfect equity. This may offer a more plausible explanation for why an abusive relationship may continue as they gain pleasure from the high's and thus consider these when evaluating the reasons to remain in the relationship.

The culture from which we come may also affect the value of this model. Berman researched this possibility and asked participants to decide who they should give a job to the needy or the excellent worker. He found that given the opportunity to decide whom they should give a job those who came from an individualistic culture placed higher value on excelling in their job and those from the collectivist culture the needy. Which corresponds with their culture as value is placed on need or achievement therefore this suggests that equity can not give us a universally accepted explanation. It applies to those who base their life on investment, be it education and achievement etc and therefore cannot explain the continuation of a relationship universally merely one culture.

In conclusion it is important to note that both explanations have valuable points to consider and yet neither is able to give a universal explanation of relationships. The equity theory seems more plausible than the exchange theory as it considers the partner and the individual. However even this gives little weight to reasons other than economic reasons and therefore although there may be a little of each in every relationship it is not the only force governing relationships and these are the more important factors to consider.