

Social exchange theory

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Social Exchange Theory states that relationships involve the exchange of resources. The extent to which a relationship develops will depend on how mutually beneficial the relationship feels i. e. how rewarding it is. The rewards associated with relationships are anything positive which makes us feel valued: which could include gaining access to money, status, gratification, pleasure etc. Determinants of attraction such as similarity could be seen as rewarding as we feel supported by a partner if their views are similar to ours.

The costs involved in relationships are anything that is unpleasant: they could be financial costs as well as emotional such as pain, disappointment. Sedikides et al (1994) - things like happiness and feeling loved are among the most important rewards of a relationship, while stress and worry about the relationship were significant costs. Whereas Females thought intimacy and self growth were rewards males tended to emphasis sexual gratification as a reward and monetary losses as a cost.

Homans (1961)—people weigh up the costs and benefits of an action before deciding what they do. In terms of relationships, he suggests that we consider the actual and potential past, present and future rewards and costs before deciding whether a relationship is likely to be profitable. For Homans, choices about relationships are essentially rational economic decision. Homans (1974)—we are attracted to those who provide us with economic rewards. “ Satiation” which is suggests that if something is in short supply we appreciate it more.

In terms of relationships, if a partner is supplying you with something you are short of, e. g. attention or social approval, then you are likely to find their

company attractive. Thibaut and Kelly (1959)—proposed when in a relationship we try to minimise costs while maximising benefits—which is the ‘minimax strategy’. A relationship will be maintained as long as the rewards exceed the costs. They suggested there are stages that relationships progress through: Sampling- people consider the potential costs and rewards of a relationship and compare it with others.

Bargaining- There is a giving and receiving of rewards at the beginning of the relationship which tests whether the relationship should continue ?

Commitment- focus is on the relationship and the costs and rewards are stabilised. Institutionalisation- Norms of rewards and costs are established by

the partners as they ‘settle down’. Social exchange theory suggests that people’s feelings about a relationship depend upon the number of factors 1.

How they perceive the rewards 2. How they perceive the costs 3. Perceptions about the relationship they deserve (comparison level) 4. Perceptions about

their chances of getting a better relationship elsewhere (comparison level for alternatives). Individuals will calculate the outcome of the relationship quite

simply by using a basic formula $Outcome = Rewards - Costs$. Whether your outcome is regarded as satisfactory depends on 2 factors. Your comparison

level - the standard by which all other relationships are judged, based on past experiences e. g a bad relationship in the past then your comparison

level will be lower than if you had a good relationship.

Comparison level for alternatives - depends on whether we believe that there is an alternative relationship that can provide us with a better outcome

? Our comparison levels are likely to change over time as we experience different relationships or as the current relationship changes in terms of cost

and benefits and they may also be affected by things like our level of self esteem. Rusbult (1983) extended the S. E. T into Investment model she suggested the maintenance of a relationship also depends on how much we have invested in it.

Investments are defined as anything that would be lost if the relationship ended and could include material possessions as well as security for the future. If we feel that we have made a large investment then we may stay in the relationship, even if the rewards are low and the costs are high. Rusbult said we are committed to a relationship if it gives us a high degree of satisfaction, if alternatives are of a low quality and if we have invested highly by making sacrifices for the sake of a relationship.