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| **Theories of Romantic Relationships: Social Exchange Theory AO1** |
| **Rewards, Costs and Profits***Thibault and Kelley (1959);** Behaviour in relationships reflects the economic assumptions of exchange
* We try to minimise losses, and maximise gains *(the minimax principle)*
* Judge our satisfaction in terms of the profit it yields
* Rewards – costs
* There is a wide range of outcomes – subjective view of ‘rewards’. Rewards e.g. companionship, sex, emotional support.
* Blau (1964) relationships can be expensive; costs include time, stress, energy, compromise etc.
* There is also an opportunity cost; investing in your current relationship means using resources that you cannot invest elsewhere
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| **Comparison Level (CL)**There are two ways in which we measure the profit in a romantic relationship. The first, the comparison level (CL), is essentially the amount of reward that you believe you deserve to get. It develops out if our experiences of previous relationships, which feed into our expectations of the current one. It is also influenced by social norms that determine what is widelyt considered, within a culture, to be a reasonable level of reward. This is often reflected in the media, in books, in films, and TV programmes such as soap operas. Over time, we get more relationships ‘under our belt’ and more experience of social norms, so our CL changes as we acquire more ‘data’ to set it by. We consider a relationship worth pursuing if our CL is high. There is an obvious link with self-esteem. Someone with low self-esteem will have a low CL and will therefore be satisfied with gaining just a small profit (or even a loss) from a relationship. Someone with higher self-esteem will believe they are worth a lot more. |
| **Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt)**The second measure of profit provides a wider context for our current relationship. Do we believe we could gain greater rewards and fewer costs from another relationship (or from being on our own)? Given that romantic relationships in our culture is usually exclusive, we ask ourselves ‘could I do better? Is the grass greener elsewhere?’. SET predicts that we will stay in our current relationship only so long as we believe it is more rewarding than the alternatives.According to Duck (1994), the CLAlt we adopt will depend on the state of our current relationship. There are usually ‘plenty more fish in the sea’, so if the costs of our current relationship outweigh the rewards, then alternatives become more attractive. Being in a satisfying relationship means that you may not even notice that alternatives could be available. |
| **Stages of Relationship Development** * *Sampling stage:* explore rewards and costs by experimenting with them in our own relationship, or by observing others doing so
* *Bargaining stage:* the beginning of the relationship, romantic partners start to exchange various rewards and costs, negotiating and identifying what is most profitable
* *Commitment stage:* as time goes on, source of costs and rewards becomes more predictable and relationships becomes more stable… rewards increase, costs lessen
* *Institutionalisation stage:* partners are now settled down because norms have been established
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| **Theories of Romantic Relationships: Social Exchange Theory AO3** |
| **Inapproprite Assumptions**P: One issue with the SET as an theory of adult romantic relationships is that the theory contains inappropriate assumptions.E: For example, Clark and Mills (2011) argue that the theory fails to distinguish between two types of relationships. They suggest that exchange relationships (e.g. between work colleagues) do involve social exchange as SET predicts. But communal relationships (e.g. between romantric partners) are marked by the giving and receiving of rewards without keeping score of who is ahead and who is behind.E: This is a weakness because SET claims that relationship partners return rewards for rewards, costs for costs and these reciprocal activities are monitored. But if we felt this kind of exchange monitoring was going on at the start of a promising relationship, we would probably question what kind of commitment our partner wanted. It is clear from some research that SET is based on faulty assumptions and therefore cannot account for the majority of romantic relationships.L: As a result, the explanatory power of SET as an explanation for romantic relationships is questioned. | **Direction of Cause and Effect**P: One weakness of SET as a theory for romantic relationships is that it cannot account for the direction of causation of dissatisfaction.E: For example, Argyle (1987) points out that we don’t measure costs and rewards in a relationship, nor do we constantly consider the attractiveness of alternatives. This is not until the we are dissatisfied with the relationship. Furthermore Miller (1997) found that people who rated themselves as being in a highly commited relationship spent less time looking at images of attractive people. Less time spent looking was a good predictor of the relationship continuing two months later. So people in commited relationships ignore even the most attractive alternatives.E: This is an issue as SET states that dissatisfaction sets in when we suspect that costs outweigh rewards, or there are attractive alternatives. However it can be said that we don’t measure costs and rewards in a relationship, or consider alternatives until we are dissatisfied.L: As a result, the credibility of the SET theory as an explanation for romantic relationships is reduced. | **Subjective Measures**P: One weakness of SET as an explanation for romantic relationships is that it is subjectiveE: for example, superficial rewards like money are easy to measure whereas psychological costs are hard to measure as what one individual thinks of as a cost, another may not. E: This is an issue because it is difficult to operationalize what the value of the comparison level is and the comparison level alternative are before it threatened the relationship.L: This therefore weakens the explanatory power of SET as an explanation for romantic relationships. | **Artifical Research**P: One weakness of SET as an explanation for romantic relationships is that artificial.E: One common procedure involved two strangers working together on a game-palying scenario in which the rewards and costs are distributed. The 2 partners know nothing about each other and their so-called relationship depends entirely on the task they are performing.E: this is a weakness because of the lack of mudane realism, affecting the external validity. The results of the game-playing scenario make it difficult to generalise to real-life relationships (the more realistic realistic were in fact less supportive). Real-life relationships, by nature of the theory, are built on knowledge of your romantic partner, and getting to know them over time, not just on a first chance meeting.L: As a result, the overall validity of research into SET is reduced, which in turn reduces the credibility of SET as a theory for romantic relationships.  |