PSY.OPT4 Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory of Romantic Relationships

Total Marks

AQA 7182 · Calculators not allowed · about 70 minutes

Name: ______________________________ Date: ____ / ____ / ______

Answer ALL questions. Show all your working.

1 In the context of Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut and Kelley) as applied to romantic relationships, define the term 'rewards' and give one example of a reward in a romantic relationship context.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

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2 In Social Exchange Theory, define the term 'costs' in the context of a romantic relationship, and give one clear example.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

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3 Outline what is meant by the comparison level (CL) in Social Exchange Theory when explaining why people stay in or leave romantic relationships.

(Total for Question 3 is 3 marks)

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4 Outline the comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) in Social Exchange Theory, and explain its role in decisions to stay in or leave a romantic relationship.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

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5 Outline Equity Theory (Walster et al.) as an explanation for relationship maintenance, including what is meant by perceived fairness and the predicted consequences of under-benefiting or over-benefiting in romantic relationships.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

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6 Distinguish between Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory when explaining why people maintain romantic relationships. Refer to the role of comparisons and fairness in your answer.

(Total for Question 6 is 6 marks)

7 Applied scenario: In a long term relationship, Amal cooks and shops, while Jordan does paid work and pays most household bills. Amal feels exhausted and that they do more than Jordan. Using Equity Theory, identify whether Amal is under-benefited or over-benefited, and state two behaviours Equity Theory predicts Amal might show. Then, using Social Exchange Theory, explain two factors that would determine whether Amal stays in the relationship.

(Total for Question 7 is 6 marks)

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8 Explain how a researcher could operationalise and measure 'rewards' and 'costs' in a quantitative study of romantic relationships. Give two specific measurement techniques and one limitation of these operationalisations.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

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9 Outline one piece of empirical evidence that supports Social Exchange Theory as an explanation for relationship maintenance. Mention the study and explain briefly how it supports SET.

(Total for Question 9 is 6 marks)

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10 Explain one way individual differences and one way cultural differences can affect whether people adopt an exchange oriented approach to relationships, and why these differences matter for applying SET and Equity Theory.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

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11 Explain one methodological problem with operationalising and measuring 'equity' in relationship research, and outline one research method that could address this problem. Give a short justification.

(Total for Question 11 is 6 marks)

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12 Design a simple cross cultural questionnaire study to test whether perceived equity predicts relationship satisfaction more strongly in individualist than in collectivist cultures. State the independent variable, dependent variable, sampling method, one control, and one ethical issue with how you would address it.

(Total for Question 12 is 6 marks)

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13 Discuss Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory as explanations for relationship maintenance. In your answer, compare the two theories, evaluate their strengths and limitations, and consider methodological issues and evidence concerning individual and cultural differences. You should use relevant theory and empirical evidence, and reach a supported conclusion.

Discuss Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory as explanations for relationship maintenance. Compare, evaluate and reach a conclusion.

(Total for Question 13 is 16 marks)

Mark scheme · PSY.OPT4 Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory of Romantic Relationships

Question 1

- **B1** defines rewards as positive outcomes or benefits that a person gains from a relationship, oe
- **B1** gives one appropriate example, e.g. companionship, emotional support, sex, practical help, financial support oe
- **Answer: Rewards are the positive outcomes or benefits gained from a relationship, for example emotional support or companionship.**

Question 2

- **B1** defines costs as negative aspects or losses experienced within a relationship, oe
- **B1** gives one appropriate example, e.g. time spent, emotional strain, arguments, loss of freedom oe
- **Answer: Costs are the negative aspects or losses in a relationship, for example time demands or persistent arguments causing emotional strain.**

Question 3

- **M1** states that CL is the standard of expected rewards minus costs based on past experiences and social norms oe
- **A1** explains that individuals judge their current relationship against this expectation, so if outcomes exceed CL they are satisfied oe
- **A1** notes that CL is formed from previous relationships and cultural expectations, influencing relationship satisfaction oe
- **Answer: CL is an individual's standard of expected rewards relative to costs, based on past relationships and social norms; if current outcomes exceed the CL the person feels satisfied.**

Question 4

- **M1** defines CLalt as the perceived rewards minus costs available from the best available alternative to the current relationship oe
- **A1** explains that if CLalt offers better outcomes than the current relationship, a person is more likely to leave oe
- **A1** notes that CLalt depends on perceived availability of alternatives such as other partners or being single oe
- **Answer: CLalt is the perceived rewards minus costs from the best alternative to the current relationship; if an alternative seems better than the current relationship a person is more likely to leave.**

Question 5

- **M1** states Equity Theory says relationships are maintained when partners perceive fairness in the ratio of rewards to costs for each person oe
- **M1** defines perceived fairness as similar rewards-to-costs ratios for both partners, rather than identical rewards and costs oe
- **A1** states consequence of under-benefiting: the disadvantaged partner will feel distressed, resentful and may try to restore equity or leave oe
- **A1** states consequence of over-benefiting: the advantaged partner may feel guilt or discomfort and may also change behaviour to restore balance oe
- **Answer: Equity Theory proposes partners remain when they perceive fairness in each partner's rewards to costs ratio. Under-benefiting leads to distress and attempts to restore equity or end the relationship, while over-benefiting leads to guilt or attempts to rebalance.**

Question 6

- **M1** states SET explains maintenance in terms of rewards, costs, CL and CLalt, focusing on absolute profit maximisation oe
- **M1** states Equity Theory explains maintenance in terms of perceived fairness of partners' rewards to costs ratios, focusing on proportional balance oe
- **A1** contrasts that SET predicts people stay if outcomes exceed expectations or alternatives, even if partners are unequal, oe
- **A1** contrasts that Equity Theory predicts imbalance, even with high absolute rewards, will cause distress if one partner is under-benefited oe
- **A1** offers a brief applied example, e.g. in SET a person may stay because CLalt is poor, whereas in Equity Theory the same person may feel unhappy if chores are uneven despite good alternatives oe
- **A1** notes the focus difference: SET is economic and comparative, Equity Theory emphasises fairness and psychological discomfort from inequity oe
- **Answer: SET focuses on maximising profit relative to expectations and alternatives (CL and CLalt), so people may stay if outcomes are favourable. Equity Theory focuses on proportional fairness between partners, predicting distress when one is under or over benefited even if absolute rewards are high.**

Question 7

- **M1** identifies Amal as under-benefited according to Equity Theory cao
- **A1** predicts one behaviour, e.g. Amal may feel resentment and complain or withdraw emotionally oe
- **A1** predicts second behaviour, e.g. Amal may attempt to restore equity by asking Jordan to do more, or may reduce their own contributions oe
- **M1** states a SET factor: Amal's judgement of outcomes versus their comparison level (CL), e.g. whether Amal expected to share chores differently oe
- **A1** explains how CL affects staying, e.g. if outcomes still meet Amal's CL they may remain despite under-benefit oe
- **A1** states a second SET factor: the comparison level for alternatives (CLalt), e.g. perceived availability of better alternatives or being single oe
- **Answer: Equity Theory: Amal is under-benefited. Predicted behaviours include feeling resentful and asking Jordan to take on more, or withdrawing/reducing contributions. Social Exchange Theory: Amal's decision to stay would depend on whether current outcomes meet their CL, and on CLalt, the perceived quality of alternatives; if alternatives seem worse Amal may stay despite being under-benefited.**

Question 8

- **M1** gives one specific measurement technique for rewards, e.g. self report questionnaire rating emotional support, satisfaction, frequency of positive interactions oe
- **M1** gives one specific measurement technique for costs, e.g. time-use diaries, reports of arguments, standardised stress or burden scales oe
- **A1** explains how these give quantitative data, e.g. Likert scales or counts can be analysed and compared oe
- **A1** states a limitation, e.g. subjective bias in self reports, difficulty capturing intangible rewards, or reduction of complex experiences to single scores oe
- **Answer: Rewards could be measured by self report questionnaires rating emotional support or frequency of positive interactions; costs by time-use diaries or standardised stress scales counting arguments or burden. These provide quantitative Likert or count data, but are limited by subjective bias and by reducing complex, qualitative features to simple scores.**

Question 9

- **M1** identifies a relevant empirical study or pattern of findings, e.g. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) theoretical work and research showing satisfaction relates to perceived rewards and costs oe
- **M1** states the key finding or observation from the study or literature, e.g. people report greater commitment when perceived rewards exceed costs and alternatives seem poor oe
- **A1** explains how this finding supports SET, e.g. demonstrates role of CL and CLalt in predicting satisfaction and commitment oe
- **A1** provides a secondary supporting example or evidence, e.g. longitudinal studies linking changes in perceived rewards to breakups oe
- **A1** gives a short qualifying point, e.g. evidence is often correlational so causality is hard to establish oe
- **A1** links the qualifier back to theory limits, e.g. despite support the mechanism may not be purely economic or may interact with other factors oe
- **Answer: Thibaut and Kelley and later empirical work show that relationship satisfaction and commitment are higher when perceived rewards exceed costs and alternatives are poor, supporting SET predictions about CL and CLalt. Longitudinal studies also link falling perceived rewards to breakups, but much evidence is correlational so causality and the purely economic mechanism remain qualified.**

Question 10

- **M1** identifies an individual difference, e.g. some people are more exchange oriented or have higher needs for equity, or differ in tolerance for inequality oe
- **A1** explains effect, e.g. exchange oriented individuals monitor costs and rewards more closely and may end relationships faster when dissatisfied oe
- **M1** identifies a cultural difference, e.g. collectivist cultures emphasise family and duty, so individuals may tolerate inequity more to preserve group harmony oe
- **A1** explains why this matters, e.g. both SET and Equity Theory predictions may not generalise across cultures because expectations and tolerances for equity and alternatives vary oe
- **Answer: Individual differences: some people are exchange oriented and closely track rewards and costs, so they are likelier to end unfair relationships. Cultural differences: in collectivist cultures people may accept unequal exchanges to preserve family or group harmony, so SET and Equity predictions about leaving or distress are less applicable across cultures.**

Question 11

- **M1** identifies a methodological problem, e.g. equity is subjective, depends on perceptions, and simple measures may miss context oe
- **A1** explains why this is a problem, e.g. partners may differ in what they see as fair, and standard questionnaires may not capture negotiated or time varying fairness oe
- **M1** outlines a research method to address it, e.g. mixed methods combining diaries, in depth interviews and partner comparison of perceived ratios oe
- **A1** explains how this helps, e.g. diaries capture change over time and interviews reveal subjective meaning, triangulating to a richer measure oe
- **A1** justifies why mixed methods improve validity, e.g. reduces reliance on single self report measures and captures the negotiation process oe
- **A1** notes a practical limitation and trade off, e.g. resource intensive and may have smaller samples, limiting generalisability oe
- **Answer: Problem: equity is subjective and context dependent, so single questionnaires may miss partners' differing views and time variation. Method: use mixed methods, combining daily diaries and in depth interviews with both partners to triangulate perceived rewards to costs. This improves validity by capturing change and subjective meaning, though it is resource intensive and may limit sample size.**

Question 12

- **M1** identifies the independent variable, e.g. cultural group (individualist versus collectivist) or perceived equity level if treated as IV oe
- **M1** identifies the dependent variable, e.g. relationship satisfaction score from a standardised questionnaire oe
- **M1** states a sampling method, e.g. matched stratified sampling from two countries, using online panels to obtain similar age and relationship-duration distributions oe
- **M1** states one control, e.g. control for relationship length or age by matching or statistically partialling it out oe
- **M1** identifies one ethical issue, e.g. confidentiality of personal relationship data oe
- **M1** explains how to address the ethical issue, e.g. anonymise responses, store data securely, and provide debrief and local support contacts oe
- **Answer: IV: cultural group (individualist vs collectivist). DV: relationship satisfaction score from a validated questionnaire. Sampling: matched stratified sampling using online panels in two countries to match age and relationship duration. Control: control for relationship length or age by matching or statistical partialling. Ethical issue: confidentiality of sensitive relationship information, addressed by anonymising data, secure storage, and providing debrief and local support contacts.**

Question 13

- **Level 4** (13-16): Knowledge of both theories is accurate, detailed and well focused. Evaluation is thorough and well developed, including clear methodological critique, evidence for and against, and consideration of individual and cultural differences. Comparison between theories is effective and used to reach a balanced, supported conclusion. Specialist terminology is used correctly and the answer is coherent.
- **Level 3** (9-12): Knowledge of both theories is generally accurate with some detail. Evaluation is clear but may be less developed in places, including some methodological points and discussion of differences. Comparison is present and a reasoned conclusion is given, though some points may not be fully linked to evidence.
- **Level 2** (5-8): Knowledge of the theories is present but limited or partial. Evaluation is superficial or one sided, with limited consideration of methodological issues or individual and cultural differences. Comparison is attempted but not well developed, and the conclusion is brief or not well supported.
- **Level 1** (1-4): Knowledge is minimal and answers are superficial. Evaluation is very limited or absent. Comparison and conclusion are not credible. Specialist terms may be missing or used incorrectly.
- **Level 0** (0): No creditable content.
- **Indicative content:**
  - AO1: Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut and Kelley) explains maintenance via rewards and costs, comparison level and comparison level for alternatives; satisfaction and commitment depend on profit and alternatives.
  - AO1: Equity Theory (Walster et al.) explains maintenance via perceived fairness in partners' rewards to costs ratios; inequity causes distress and motivates attempts to restore fairness.
  - AO1: Both are economic in orientation, modelling relationships in terms of costs and benefits, but Equity Theory focuses on proportional fairness rather than absolute profit.
  - AO3: Strength of SET is parsimony and clear testable concepts like CL and CLalt, and supportive correlational evidence linking perceived rewards and alternatives to commitment.
  - AO3: Strength of Equity Theory is the psychological insight that perceived fairness affects wellbeing, with some empirical support showing distress in under-benefited partners.
  - AO3: Limitation common to both is difficulty operationalising and measuring rewards, costs and equity, reducing ecological validity, and risking reductionism by ignoring emotions, meaning and moral factors in relationships.
  - AO3: Methodological issues include reliance on self report questionnaires, correlational designs that limit causal inference, and problems of social desirability and partner differences in perception.
  - AO3: Individual differences matter, for example exchange orientation varies between people, affecting how rewards and costs are monitored. Some partners tolerate inequity for reasons such as altruism or dependency.
  - AO3: Cultural differences matter, collectivist cultures may prioritise family duty and tolerate inequity, challenging universal predictions of both theories.
  - AO3: Theories assume rational economic actors, which may underplay emotion, altruism, investment and identity; this is why Rusbult's investment model adds explanatory power but is outside this question.
  - AO3: Empirical evidence is mixed, some studies support SET and equity effects, but replications vary by sample and era, suggesting limited temporal and cultural generalisability.
  - AO3: A balanced conclusion might say both theories contribute useful frameworks for understanding some aspects of relationship maintenance, particularly decision processes and perceived fairness, but they are incomplete on their own and need to be integrated with broader psychological models that include emotion, investment and cultural context.