

# LINE ON LIFE

2/9/92

## The Economics of Attraction \*

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On Valentine's Day, people think more about the factors related to loving and liking. What causes us to like or love some people and not others?

Relationships can be viewed in terms of economics. However, we are not necessarily talking about money, but rather rewards and costs. There are at least three theories of the economics of attraction.

The first – **reinforcement theory** – indicates simply that we tend to like or love those who reward us, and we dislike those who punish us. We also tend to like people more, if they are merely present when nice things happen to us. They do not need to be responsible for the rewarding event. Likewise, we tend to dislike people associated with any punishment we get, even if they are not responsible for the punishment. Reinforcement involves many factors. **Physical attractiveness** of others may provide a pleasant sight, or your status might be helped when you are with attractive people. The **competence** of others means that they are more capable of gaining rewards, which they might share with you – if you are with them. **Similarity** in terms of attitudes and values means that others are more likely to reward you by supporting your attitudes and values. To reward you, typically there needs to be **proximity** – others need to be spatially close to you. If they continue to reward you, you are more likely to maintain or seek that proximity. If the presence of others results in repeated punishment, you will make a point of staying away from them.

Some of you may know relationships that are punishing, but people still maintain them. The **exchange theory** helps us to understand this. Added to the reinforcement theory, the exchange theory takes the ratio of benefits versus the costs (or risks) for the individual into account. Any relationship has its own **cost/benefit ratio** for each individual. As long as benefits – good company, attention, increased status, material gains and/or sexual satisfaction – of the relationship outweigh the costs – time, energy, risk of rejection and so on – the relationship will continue. When costs for one person continue to outweigh the benefits for long enough, the relationship will be terminated.

This theory has an interesting sidelight. In relatively **distant relationships**, people keep a more accurate tally of costs and benefits. Any cost is expected to be compensated with a relatively *immediate* benefit. If you invite people over to your home, you expect them to return the invitation. Unfortunately, on a date, some men believe a woman must reciprocate for entertainment and a meal with sexual favors. (This cue strongly suggests that their relationship is a distant one.)

In contrast, people view **close relationships** differently than distant ones. Members are less likely to keep count or to expect immediate compensation for their efforts. In fact, people in close relationships may identify with their partners, so they may feel personally rewarded when their partner receives benefits. We often feel very rewarded when those who are close to us enjoy what we have done for them. No reciprocation is necessary.

**Equity theory** adds to the other two theories by indicating that *all* people in the relationship need to have relatively similar cost/benefit ratios. This does not mean that the values of costs and benefits are the same for each person, just that the ratios need to be similar. If this is true, the relationship will tend to last.

With the equity theory, the cost/benefit ratio must still favor the benefits over the costs. However, with the same costs, some people might have benefits that are valued much higher (or lower) than those of others in the relationship. Likewise, benefits can have similar values, but the value of one person's costs might be much greater (or smaller) than those of others. Either case leads to a perceived imbalance in equity.

If all of the partners in the relationship perceive this imbalance, attempts will probably be made to remedy it. However, if only one person perceives an imbalance, this can lead to problems. If people have relatively lower benefits (or higher costs) than others, they are more likely to get *angry* if this situation continues. Likewise, if people get higher benefits (or lower costs) than those of others – especially in a close relationship – these people are likely to feel *guilty*. If the ratio imbalance is not adjusted, these feelings might end the relationship.

To make relationships even more complex, the values we assign to the costs and benefits are **subjective**. In other words, any act may be valued differently by the various people involved. (For example, the value of a gift might differ greatly between the perception of the giver and the perception of the receiver.) Outside observers rarely share the subjective views of the participants. For this reason, they are likely to have inaccurate estimates of the values of the costs and rewards in others' relationships. This makes some of us wonder, "*What do they see in each other?*"

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\* Adapted from Nancy Denny and David Quadagno's *Human Sexuality*, Mosby-Year Book Inc., 1992, pages 414-416.