Critically consider one theory of the maintenance of relationships

Social exchange theory (SET) is a major theory of the maintenance of relationships. There are different versions of SET, but they all share the underlying view of people as fundamentally selfish. According to Homans (1974), we view our feelings for others in terms of profits – the amount of reward obtained from a relationship minus the cost. The greater the reward and lower the cost, the greater the profit and hence the attraction and the longer-term wish to stay in the relationship. Blau (1964) argues that interactions are 'expensive'. They take time, energy and commitment, and may involve unpleasant emotions and experiences. Because of this, what we get out of a relationship must exceed what we put in. According to Berscheid & Walster (1978), all social interactions involve an exchange of rewards (such as affection, information and status). The degree of attraction or liking will reflect how people evaluate the rewards they receive relative to those they give.

SET predicts that people are more likely to become romantically involved if they're fairly closely matched in their ability to reward one another. This is the matching hypothesis (MH). Since we cannot all have the ideal partner, we try to find a value-match, that is, a subjective belief that our partner is the most rewarding we could realistically hope to find.

An indirect way of testing SET is by considering studies that test the MH. The MH is more commonly discussed in the context of attraction, that is, how people get into relationships in the first place. An example is the computer dance study, starting with Walster et al. (1966). Over 700 male and female fresher students bought tickets for a computer dance at the start of the academic year. When they bought the ticket, they were asked to complete a questionnaire about themselves. This information would be fed into a computer, which would match them with their ideal date. In fact, they were assigned a partner randomly. While they completed the questionnaire, an unseen observer rated the students for physical attractiveness. After spending two hours with their partner, the students were asked to indicate how much they liked them. The more attractive the partner (as rated by the observer), the more they were liked – regardless of their own attractiveness.

Murstein's (1972) study also tested the MH, but this involved engaged couples, so this represents a more direct test of SET. In other words, the couples were in long-term relationships. Independent judges rated the photographs of two separate samples of engaged couples for physical attractiveness without knowing who belonged to whom. The couples had to rate their own and their partner's physical attractiveness. Partners received very similar ratings and these were significantly more alike than the same ratings given to 'random couples' (the actual couples' photographs randomly sorted into couples to form a control group).

Walster et al.'s study provided strong evidence for the impact of physical attractiveness in initial attraction. Although this could be seen as consistent with reward theory (and with common sense!), it's actually the opposite of what the MH predicts (and, hence, challenges the major assumption of SET that people are fundamentally selfish). Berscheid et al. (1971) argue that a more valid test of the MH would involve having to specify in advance the kind of partner we'd like, including how attractive we'd like them to be. Later computer dance studies (e.g. Berscheid & Walster, 1974) used this improved methodology and the results tended to support the MH.

Murstein's study was well controlled (the random couples constituted a comparison group), and the judges were unbiased (not knowing who were actual couples were prevented a halo effect). But like other similar studies, Murstein restricted his definition of physical attractiveness to facial appearance. For both sexes, a good body is also important.

The different versions of SET share a few basic ideas, such as profit and reward. The obvious link between SET and reward theory is useful, and shows the overlap between (a) explanations of initial attraction/formation of relationships and (b) the maintenance of relationships. But are we really as selfish as SET suggests, and are our relationships just about what we can get out of them for ourselves? Although this shouldn't be taken too literally, our attitudes towards others are determined largely by how rewarding they are for us

(Rubin, 1973). But we're also capable of being altruistic, that is, doing things for others without expecting anything in return – especially towards those who are closest to us.

Some psychologists distinguish between 'true' love and friendship, which are altruistic (the opposite of selfish) and less admirable forms based on considerations of exchange (Brown, 1986). Fromm (1962) defines true love as giving, as opposed to the false love of the 'marketing character' (expecting to have favours returned). Mills & Clark (1980) found support for this distinction, thus contradicting SET. They identified two kinds of intimate relationship, the communal couple, where each partner gives out of concern for the other, and the exchange couple, where each keeps mental records of who's 'ahead' and who's 'behind'.

SET is really a special case of a more general account of human relationships called equity theory (ET). The extra component in ET that's added to reward, cost and profit is investment. Equity doesn't mean equality, but a constant ratio of rewards to costs, or profit to investment. So, ET involves a concern with fairness. It's changes in the ratio of what you put in and get out of a relationship which are likely to cause changes in how you feel about it. If you start giving much more than you did, and receive proportionately less, then you're likely to become dissatisfied with the relationship.

Stage theories are also relevant here. For example, according to Murstein's stimulus–value–role (SVR) theory (1976), what's important changes as the relationship develops. SET seems to completely ignore these developmental changes.