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### Using Equity Theory to Explore Adult Siblings' Use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors and Relational Characteristics

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# Using Equity Theory to Explore Adult Siblings' Use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors and Relational Characteristics

Scott A. Myers, Alan K. Goodboy, & Members of COMM 201

*The purpose of this study was to explore the role that equity plays in the adult sibling relationship in terms of the behaviors siblings use to maintain their relationships and their assessment of relational characteristics (i.e., commitment, trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving). Participants were 637 individuals who reported on a relationship with a sibling. Results indicated that (a) adult siblings in an equitable relationship use the openness relational maintenance strategy at a higher rate than adult siblings in an underbenefitted relationship, but not at a higher rate than adult siblings in an overbenefitted relationship; (b) adult siblings in an equitable relationship report higher levels of commitment, trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving than adult siblings in an underbenefitted relationship; and (c) adult siblings in an overbenefitted relationship report higher levels*

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*of trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving than adult siblings in an underbenefitted relationship.*

*Keywords: Equity Theory; Relational Characteristics; Relational Maintenance Behaviors; Sibling Relationships*

For over a decade, family communication researchers have studied the use of relational maintenance behaviors (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and tasks; Stafford & Canary, 1991) among adult siblings (Myers & Members of COM 200, 2001; Myers & Rittenour, 2012). Although researchers have found that siblings report using these behaviors with each other across the lifespan (Eidsness & Myers, 2008; Goodboy, Myers, & Patterson, 2009; Myers, Brann, & Rittenour, 2008), they have not explored whether equity affects the extent to which adult siblings use these behaviors in their relationships. Equity theory is built on the premise that relational partners consider the contributions they make to, and the benefits they receive from, the relationship (Dainton & Zelle, 2006). When comparing their contributions and benefits in light of their relational partners' contributions and benefits, individuals make one of three assessments about their relationship. If the ratio of contributions to benefits is considered to be the same for both partners, the relationship is deemed equitable; if the benefits to contributions ratio is higher, the relationship is considered to be overbenefitted; and if the contributions to benefits ratio is higher, the relationship is considered to be underbenefitted (Stafford & Canary, 2006).

Extant research conducted on the role that equity plays in interpersonal relationships has revealed that not only do individuals in equitable relationships use relational maintenance behaviors at a higher rate than those individuals in inequitable (i.e., overbenefitted or underbenefitted) relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 2001; Dainton, 2003; Stafford & Canary, 2006; Yum & Canary, 2009), but they also assess their relationships more favorably than those individuals involved in inequitable relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1993). Because most adult siblings view their relationships positively (Myers & Goodboy, 2010) and are both committed to (Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2007) and satisfied with their relationships (Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006), similar findings should exist within the adult sibling relationship in that adult siblings who are involved in equitable relationships will use relational maintenance behaviors more frequently and assess their relationships more favorably than adult siblings who are involved in either overbenefitted or underbenefitted relationships. To investigate these ideas, as well as to extend the study of equity to the adult sibling relationship, the following two hypotheses are posited:

- H1: Adult siblings who consider their relationships to be equitable will use relational maintenance behaviors at a higher rate than adult siblings who consider their relationships to be either overbenefitted or underbenefitted.*
- H2: Adult siblings who consider their relationships to be equitable will report higher levels of commitment, trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving than adult siblings who consider their relationships to be either overbenefitted or underbenefitted.*

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 637 individuals (331 men, 306 women) whose ages ranged from 18 to 81 years ( $M = 24.49$ ,  $SD = 10.58$ ). Of these participants, 85 (13%) were married and 96 (15%) had children (range = 1–7 children). Participants reported on 339 male and 293 female siblings (five participants failed to indicate their sibling's sex) whose ages ranged from 18 to 83 years ( $M = 25.79$ ,  $SD = 10.47$ ). Of these siblings, 138 (22%) were married and 141 (22%) had children (range = 1–7 children). The majority of participants ( $n = 491$ ; 77%) reported on a full biological sibling. Approximately 75% of the participants ( $n = 475$ ) were college students.

### Procedures and Instrumentation

Undergraduate students ( $N = 48$ ) enrolled in an introductory research methods course at a large mid-Atlantic university collected the data to fulfill a course requirement. Following approval from the university's institutional review board, each student was instructed to recruit 16 individuals to voluntarily complete a set of questionnaires. Participants completed a questionnaire in reference to the sibling whose birthday was closest to theirs. This questionnaire consisted of the Relational Maintenance Strategy Scale (Canary & Stafford, 1992), the Measure of Commitment Scale (Stafford & Canary, 1991), the Dyadic Trust Scale (Larzelere & Huston, 1980), a modified version of the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory for adult siblings (Martin, Anderson, & Rocca, 2005), the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1987), the Liking Scale and the Loving Scale (Rubin, 1970), and two measures of equity<sup>1</sup> (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979; Sprecher, 1986). The responses on all items on all instruments (with the exception of the equity measures) were solicited using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

## Results

Table 1 contains the mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of each scale used in this study, as well as a correlation matrix of all the variables examined in this study. The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed partial support for  $H1$ —Wilks's  $\lambda = .97$ ;  $F(10, 1,260) = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ —although univariate effects were significant only for the openness relational maintenance behavior (see Table 2). Scheffe follow-up analysis revealed that adult siblings in an equitable relationship used the openness relational maintenance strategy at a higher rate than those adult siblings in an underbenefitted relationship, but not at a higher rate than those adult siblings in an overbenefitted relationship.

The results of a MANOVA revealed partial support for  $H2$ : Wilks's  $\lambda = .85$ ;  $F(12, 1,258) = 9.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ . Univariate effects were significant for

**Table 1** Correlation Matrix

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Positivity	51.96	11.51	.90	—									
2. Openness	26.37	7.75	.84	.64	—								
3. Assurances	20.87	5.26	.82	.80	.70	—							
4. Networks	16.36	3.90	.82	.76	.57	.79	—						
5. Tasks	26.95	5.67	.82	.77	.57	.72	.75	—					
6. Commitment	33.54	7.30	.83	.66	.47	.69	.70	.63	—				
7. Trust	39.20	10.18	.86	.62	.35	.55	.57	.51	.59	—			
8. Communication satisfaction	42.10	10.10	.89	.73	.53	.72	.71	.65	.76	.78	—		
9. Relational satisfaction	38.31	8.74	.86	.69	.44	.68	.71	.63	.77	.74	.88	—	
10. Liking	66.08	15.72	.92	.74	.56	.70	.71	.64	.73	.73	.80	.76	—
11. Loving	64.03	14.42	.89	.72	.66	.74	.72	.67	.74	.60	.75	.70	.84

Note. All correlations are significant at the  $p < .001$  level.

commitment, trust, relational satisfaction, communication satisfaction, liking, and loving (see Table 2). Scheffe follow-up analyses revealed that (a) adult siblings who considered their relationships to be equitable report higher levels of commitment, trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving than adult siblings who considered their relationships to be underbenefitted; and (b) adult

**Table 2** Mean Differences in Equity Scores

Variable	Overbenefitted <sup>a</sup>		Equitable <sup>b</sup>		Underbenefitted <sup>c</sup>		<i>F</i>	Partial $\eta^2$
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Positivity	51.82	11.77	52.48	11.28	50.69	11.97	1.31	.01
Openness	25.89	8.36	26.94 <sup>a</sup>	7.63	25.16 <sup>a</sup>	7.52	3.10*	.01
Assurances	20.93	5.06	21.11	5.09	20.19	5.76	1.66	.01
Networks	16.17	3.85	16.55	3.73	16.01	3.90	1.77	.01
Tasks	26.43	5.35	26.95	5.82	27.26	5.48	.63	.01
Commitment	34.14	6.83	33.93 <sup>a</sup>	7.09	32.15 <sup>a</sup>	8.00	3.60*	.01
Trust	40.83 <sup>a</sup>	10.06	40.85 <sup>b</sup>	9.12	33.87 <sup>a,b</sup>	11.10	29.30**	.09
Communication satisfaction	43.33 <sup>a</sup>	9.10	42.97 <sup>b</sup>	9.74	39.04 <sup>a,b</sup>	11.03	9.29**	.03
Relational satisfaction	40.11 <sup>a</sup>	8.04	38.72 <sup>b</sup>	8.44	36.11 <sup>a,b</sup>	9.55	7.33**	.02
Liking	69.34 <sup>a</sup>	16.05	68.25 <sup>b</sup>	14.25	58.35 <sup>a,b</sup>	16.75	25.78**	.08
Loving	65.54 <sup>a</sup>	14.96	65.13 <sup>b</sup>	13.77	60.22 <sup>a,b</sup>	15.16	7.02**	.02

Note. Means sharing superscripts on each row are significantly different.

<sup>a</sup> $n = 94$ .

<sup>b</sup> $n = 393$ .

<sup>c</sup> $n = 150$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

siblings who considered their relationships to be overbenefitted reported higher levels of trust, communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, liking, and loving than adult siblings who considered their relationships to be underbenefitted. No significant differences for any of the six relational characteristics emerged between adult siblings who considered their relationships to be equitable and adult siblings who considered their relationships to be overbenefitted.

## Discussion

From this study, two general findings can be advanced. The first general finding is that equity does not appear to play a role in the behaviors adult siblings use to maintain their relationships. With the exception of one difference, underbenefitted, equitable, and overbenefitted siblings did not significantly differ in their use of relational maintenance behaviors. Because adult siblings typically provide some form of support—whether it be emotional, practical (e.g., helping each other with tasks or babysitting), personal (e.g., giving advice or talking about problems), or material (e.g., loaning money or providing necessities)—to each other at some point across the lifespan (Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; Goetting, 1986), equity simply may not be an issue when it comes to using specific behaviors to maintain their relationships because they expect each other to remain involved in their lives (Goetting). The second general finding is that underbenefitted siblings perceive their siblings relationships less favorably than either equitable siblings or overbenefitted siblings. Adult siblings who consider their relationships to be underbenefitted may view their relationships less favorably because their relationships may be lacking the affectional tone commonly associated with functional sibling relationships. According to Bedford and Avioli (1996), the affectional tone associated with sibling relationships functions as a way to explain not only why siblings are involved currently in each other's lives, but also as a way to inform their future interactions with each other. Similarly, individuals who are involved in underbenefitted relationships experience a range of negative emotions, including anger, hate, sadness, resentment, frustration, and hurt (Sprecher, 1986). If adult siblings who rate their relationships as underbenefitted experience these same emotions, then it makes sense that they would perceive their relationships less favorably than siblings who rate their relationships as overbenefitted or equitable.

Collectively, these results suggest that the role equity plays in the adult sibling relationship is more salient to siblings' perceptions of their relationships than it is to their use of relational maintenance behaviors. That is, adult siblings' feelings of equity may influence how they feel toward and what they think about each other rather than how they choose to behaviorally maintain their relationships with each other. Consequently, researchers who are interested in studying relational maintenance behaviors among adult siblings should consider exploring the reasons behind why they choose to maintain their relationships with each other. Regardless of how equitable (or inequitable) they view their relationships, it may be that adult siblings simply expect each other to maintain a presence in their lives (Kahn, 1983) due to the obligatory, involuntary, and relatively enduring tone of the adult sibling relationship.

## Note

- [1] Equity was measured by combining the two one-item measures into one measure. Midpoint scores obtained on the combined measure (in this study,  $M = 8.35$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ) then are used to place participants in one of three categories: overbenefitted (i.e., a score between 2 and 6), equitable (i.e., a score between 7 and 9), and underbenefitted (i.e., a score between 10 and 14) following procedures used in prior research (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999). Based on these midpoint scores, 94 participants rated their sibling relationship as overbenefitted, 393 participants rated their sibling relationship as equitable, and 150 participants rated their sibling relationship as underbenefitted.

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