
Referential Comparisons, Relational Comparisons, and Exchange Orientation: Their Relation to Marital Satisfaction

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Employing a sample of 214 individuals, this study showed that most individuals felt the input/outcome ratio in their marital relationship was better than that of most same-sex others (referential comparisons) but equal to that of their spouse (relational comparisons). Perceptions of superiority in referential comparisons and of equity in relational comparisons were accompanied by the highest level of marital satisfaction. However, further analyses showed that only for individuals high in exchange orientation was equity related to marital satisfaction and that individuals low in exchange orientation were, overall, more satisfied with their relationship. Women were more deprived and less satisfied, especially when they were high in exchange orientation. The results are related to the controversy surrounding the application of equity theory to close relationships. In addition, the cognitive mechanisms that help individuals maintain a positive view of their marital relationship are considered.

Since the pioneering work of Hyman (1942), social and behavioral scientists have devoted considerable attention to the fact that individuals compare themselves with others to assess how well off they are in terms of their outcomes and status. Specifically, relative deprivation researchers have illuminated how well-being depends not on one's absolute level of outcomes but on one's outcomes relative to those of others in the reference group (Crosby, 1976). Although research on outcome comparisons has usually focused on the economic and social status of individuals, it can be assumed that social comparisons also play a prominent role when individuals evaluate the input-outcome ratio in their marital relationship. This article contrasts two rather different social comparison strategies that married individuals can engage in. As equity theorists have emphasized, married people may primarily compare their inputs and out-

comes with those of their spouses (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985). Such comparisons will be referred to here as *relational* comparisons. According to reference group theory, however, individuals will compare the inputs in and outcomes from their marriage in the first place with those of individuals in their reference group. Comparisons of this type are designated here as *referential* comparisons (see Austin, 1977). In the present study, it is assumed that the reference group consists of similar others—that is, friends and acquaintances of the same gender.

Various motives for social comparisons have been brought forward in the literature. Festinger (1954) emphasized that informational uncertainty particularly enhances the desire for social comparison and assumed that individuals engage in social comparisons mainly for reasons of self-evaluation. As Wood (1989) noted, Festinger saw the individual as largely rational and unbiased, motivated to seek out information that is maximally informative. However, there is a growing body of literature that shows that individuals are not at all unbiased and may harbor unrealistically positive views of themselves and tend to process information in a self-serving manner (see Taylor & Brown, 1988). From this perspective, in many cases social comparisons are not made for the purpose of self-evaluation but, rather, for the purpose of maintaining and developing a positive view of oneself and one's situation (Wood, 1989).

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In line with this latter perspective, it is supposed here that concerning the input-outcome ratio in one's marriage, social comparison processes primarily serve to develop and maintain those perceptions that contribute to a positive concept of one's marriage. The assumption in the present study is that individuals do not compare themselves with others primarily to evaluate how good or fair their input-outcome ratio *really* is. Quite in contrast, it is proposed here that individuals are motivated to perceive their own inputs and outcomes in comparison with those of others in such a way that their own marriage will look as good as possible. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that different perceptions are preferred in referential than in relational comparisons.

When engaged in referential comparisons, individuals will be motivated primarily to perceive the input-outcome ratio in their marriage as better than those in other marriages. This can be achieved, for instance, by actually improving one's input-outcome ratio, by choosing favorable comparison dimensions, or by selecting specific comparison others (Rijmsman, 1983). Even when a comparison dimension is specified, individuals can select subdimensions that are favorable to themselves. Various lines of research suggest that, indeed, most individuals seem to feel that they are "better" than most others. For instance, most individuals feel that they are more capable car drivers than others (Svensson, 1981), run smaller risks of coming down with various diseases (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), and have a higher chance of being confronted with positive life events (Weinstein, 1980). In addition, there is considerable evidence that with regard to desirable dimensions, individuals tend to perceive themselves as superior to others (Wood, 1989). Because having a good marriage is probably, for most individuals, an important dimension, individuals will be motivated to feel advantaged in this respect in comparison with others.

With regard to relational comparisons, the situation is substantially different. With the partner, an interdependent relationship exists in which the outcomes are closely related and overlap (Kelley, 1979). In such relationships, individuals will be motivated to attain a situation in which they perceive themselves as being as well off as their spouses. In general, it is in the interests of a group to develop an equity outlook among its members (Caddick, 1980). A perception of being overbenefited will be accompanied by guilt feelings and fear of revenge and will therefore be avoided. In a similar vein, individuals will dislike and shun the perception of being deprived. For instance, research by Hatfield, Utne, and Traupmann (1979) showed that the perception of being underbenefited led to feelings of anger, and the perception of being advantaged led to feelings of guilt. In general, it has been suggested that concern for the stability of the

relationship, as well as altruistic tendencies, may foster the actual and cognitive reduction of differences in the input-outcome ratio (Hatfield et al., 1985).

The foregoing analysis implies that people prefer the perception that their marriage is better than those of others ("I get a better deal than my friends") and the perception that the inputs and outcomes are equitably divided within the relationship ("My partner and I get an equally good deal"). Combining these two conclusions leads to the *first hypothesis* that, with respect to the input-outcome ratio in their marital relationship, individuals will feel more advantaged in comparison with same-sex others than in comparison with their partner.

If the perception of being better off than others is indeed preferred, one would expect that this perception will be characteristic of people high in marital satisfaction and that other perceptions will be related to lower satisfaction. Although only a few studies (e.g., Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Buunk & Van Yperen, 1989; Keith & Schaffer, 1987) have examined the role of referential comparisons with regard to satisfaction in marital relationships, it is supposed here that the perception of a better input-outcome ratio than that of others in the reference group will be accompanied by the highest level of marital satisfaction (cf. Van Yperen & Buunk, 1991). Therefore, the *second hypothesis* is that individuals who perceive their input-outcome ratio as being better than that of comparable same-sex others will experience a higher level of satisfaction in their marriage than individuals who perceive that they and others are getting an equally good deal. This latter group will, in turn, express more satisfaction than those who feel worse off than others.

In contrast to this supposed relationship between referential comparisons and satisfaction, in relational comparisons feeling as well off as the other will be accompanied by the highest level of satisfaction. Those perceiving equity with their spouse will show *higher* satisfaction than those who feel advantaged, because, according to equity theory, in this latter case, feelings of guilt and fear of revenge as well as concern over the stability of the relationship will exist. Although other variables may be more important, including reward level (see Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988), many studies have shown that relational comparisons are correlated with marital satisfaction. In general, as predicted by equity theory, those treated equitably have been found to be the most satisfied, followed by the advantaged, the deprived being the least satisfied (Hatfield et al., 1985; VanYperen & Buunk, 1991). Accordingly, the *third hypothesis* is that individuals who perceive their own input-outcome ratio as being as good as their partner's will experience the highest level of satisfaction, followed by those who perceive themselves as better off than their partner, the deprived experiencing the lowest degree of satisfaction.

The last issue explored in the present study concerns individual differences in the importance of relational comparisons for satisfaction in intimate relationships. Various authors have questioned the extent to which equity considerations do indeed apply to these relationships (Mills & Clark, 1982), and others have stated that such considerations are of paramount importance in close relationships (Hatfield et al., 1985). The present article proposes that part of this controversy can be resolved by assuming that equity considerations are more important for some individuals than for others. A number of years ago, Murstein and his colleagues (see Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977) introduced the concept of *exchange orientation* to refer to the personality disposition of individuals who are strongly oriented to direct reciprocity, who expect immediate and comparable rewards when they have provided rewards for others, and who feel uncomfortable when they receive favors that they cannot immediately reciprocate. Such an orientation seems to reflect a rather rigid way of perceiving social relationships, characterized by a low degree of tolerance for even temporary imbalances in the exchange process. Therefore, the *fourth hypothesis* is that the assumptions of equity theory apply better to individuals high in exchange orientation. For those individuals, the perception of inequity will be accompanied by more dissatisfaction than for individuals low in exchange orientation. For these latter individuals, feeling deprived or advantaged will matter less.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 82 men and 132 women, including 79 couples, who were recruited by an announcement placed in a local newspaper in which they were asked to participate in a study on marital relationships. Most respondents were married (87%), 11% were cohabiting, and 2% had recently been divorced or become widowed. The mean age was 41 years (range: 22.0 to 92.0) and 84% had children. Level of education varied from only elementary education (4%) to college education (7%); 73% of the men and 35% of the women were employed outside the home for 20 or more hr per week. A wide range of occupations was represented. As is generally the case in volunteer samples (Shaver & Rubenstein, 1983), this sample was somewhat more highly educated, younger, and more liberal than the general population.

Procedure

Readers responding to the announcement received a mailed questionnaire. They were asked to complete it in

privacy and not to discuss it with their partner until it had been mailed. After 2 weeks nonrespondents received a reminder, and after 4 weeks a second reminder plus a new questionnaire. A total of 94% of those responding to the advertisement completed the questionnaire.

To assess the stability of the marital satisfaction scale and the exchange orientation scale, all 79 couples in the initial sample were asked, exactly 1 year later, to complete both scales again. A total of 50 couples responded for the second time (63%).

Measures

Relational comparison. Contributions to an intimate relationship were first described and illustrated, and subsequently subjects' perceptions of equity/inequity were determined using the Hatfield Global Measure (Hatfield et al., 1985). It asks: "Considering what you put into your relationship compared to what you get out of it and what your partner puts in compared to what (s)he gets out of it, how does your relationship 'stack up'?" Seven possible answers were presented, varying from "I am getting a *much better* deal than my partner" (score +3) through "We are both getting an *equally good* or *bad* deal" (score 0) to "My partner is getting a *much better* deal" (score -3). In line with the studies of Hatfield and her associates (see Hatfield et al., 1985), subjects with scores of +1, +2, or +3 were considered to be advantaged; subjects with scores of -1, -2, or -3 were considered to be deprived; and a score of 0 defined the subjects who perceived equity.

Referential comparison. The comparison of one's own relationship with those of same-sex others was assessed in the same way as the relational comparison. However, "partner" was replaced by "other *men* whom you know well" in the men's version of the questionnaire and by "other *women* whom you know well" in the women's version. For reasons of consistency, this measure was scored in the same way as the relational comparison measure.

Marital satisfaction. Satisfaction with the relationship was measured by an 8-item Likert-type scale that has been described in detail by Buunk (1990) and VanYperen & Buunk (1990). The scale measures the frequency with which the interaction with the partner in an intimate relationship is experienced as rewarding and not as aversive. In a longitudinal study, a test-retest reliability (over an interval of 1 year) of $r = .63$ was found (VanYperen & Buunk, 1990). In the present study, the test-retest reliability was even higher: $r = .81$. Examples of items are "I feel happy when I'm with my partner" and "We have

quarrels." Possible answers range from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. In this study, coefficient alpha was .92. Marital satisfaction was hardly related to demographic variables. Women's satisfaction was correlated (negatively) only with age ($r = -.24, p < .01$). No correlations with educational or occupational level were found among men or women.

Exchange orientation. Upon the request of the first author, Murstein provided his original Exchange Orientation Scale of 19 items. This scale was translated into Dutch and, by omitting items that reflected marital dissatisfaction rather than exchange orientation, reduced to a 13-item scale. This was administered to the present sample. To raise Cronbach's alpha, 5 items of this scale were deleted. The final version of the Dutch Exchange Orientation Scale comprises 8 items (5-point scale: 1 = *disagree completely*, 5 = *agree completely*): (1) "I feel resentment if I believe I have spent more on a friend's present than he/she has spent on mine," (2) "If my spouse needs assistance with the carrying out of his/her responsibilities, I resent it because I don't ask anyone to help with my responsibilities," (3) "It is only with money which I earn that I feel I can spend it as I desire," (4) "When I feel that I have been injured in some way by my spouse, I find it hard to forgive him/her even when he/she says he/she is sorry," (5) "My spouse's caring for me exerts a kind of restrictive power over me," (6) "My spouse's relationship with others sometimes makes him/her neglect me," (7) "I am apt to hold a grudge if I feel a friend or loved one has not fulfilled an obligation in our relationship," (8) "It bothers me if my spouse is praised for deeds that he/she never did or did by accident." Cronbach's alpha equaled .67, and test-retest reliability (over an interval of 1 year) was $r = .62$. Accordingly, exchange orientation seems to be a rather stable personality disposition. Exchange orientation was, among men, negatively correlated with educational level ($r = -.30, p < .01$) but not with age or occupational level. Among women, only a small correlation with age was found ($r = .18, p < .05$).

To examine the construct validity of the exchange orientation scale, a factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted with all the exchange orientation and marital satisfaction items. This analysis produced a two-factor solution explaining 49.2% of the variance and provided clear evidence for the conceptual independence of the two variables. All items of the marital satisfaction scale loaded higher than .40 on the first factor but not on the second factor. Similarly, all items (except Item 5) of the exchange orientation scale loaded higher than .40 on the second, and not on the first, factor.

RESULTS

Referential Versus Relational Comparison

The first hypothesis predicted that individuals would feel more advantaged in comparison with persons of the same gender (referential comparisons) than in comparison with their partner (relational comparisons). To test this hypothesis, *t* tests for correlated pairs of means were executed for men and women separately over the original 7-point scales. These tests supported the prediction. For men, M (referential) = 1.00 and M (relational) = .17, $t(81) = 5.28, p < .001$. For women, M (referential) = 1.03 and M (relational) = -.20, $t(126) = 10.24, p < .001$.

As indicated above, for the subsequent analyses, subjects were classified as either deprived, equal, or advantaged on both measures. Examination of the distribution across the various categories revealed that in comparison with same-sex others, only 8% of men and 16% of women felt deprived, 29% of men and 18% of women felt equally well off, and the highest percentage felt advantaged: respectively, 63% and 66%. The difference between men and women was not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 5.13, n.s.$ In relational comparisons, almost half the subjects perceived equity (for both males and females: 47%). Approximately 20% of men and 34% of women felt deprived, and 33% and 19%, respectively, felt advantaged. A chi-square showed that this gender difference was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 7.65, p < .05$. Thus, more men than women felt advantaged, whereas more women considered themselves deprived in comparison with their partner.

Referential Comparison, Relational Comparison, and Marital Satisfaction

It was expected in the second hypothesis that persons who considered their own input-outcome ratio to be better than that of comparable same-sex others would be most satisfied with their relationship and that persons who perceived themselves to be as well off as same-sex others would be more satisfied than those who perceived themselves as deprived. These expectations were tested by executing an univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the referential comparison measure and gender as independent variables and marital satisfaction as the dependent variable.

There was a significant effect of gender on marital satisfaction, $F(1, 195) = 22.01, p < .001$. Women were less satisfied with their relationship than men ($M = 3.78$ vs. $M = 4.18$). As predicted, there was a main effect of the referential comparison measure on marital satisfaction, $F(2, 195) = 28.56, p < .001$. As is pictured in Figure 1, and in line with the predictions, subjects who felt advantaged in comparison with same-sex others were most satisfied,

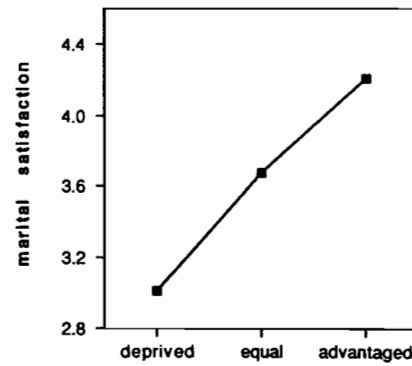


Figure 1 Association between marital satisfaction and referential comparison, combined for both genders.

followed by those who felt equally well off, deprived subjects expressing the lowest level of satisfaction. Post hoc comparisons revealed that subjects who felt better off were indeed more satisfied than those who felt equally well off, $t(175) = 4.79, p < .001$, and than subjects who felt worse off, $t(155) = 9.25, p < .001$. Furthermore, the equally well off were more satisfied than those who felt worse off, $t(68) = 3.55, p < .001$.

Particularly among women was satisfaction related to comparison with same-sex others, as indicated by a significant interaction between referential comparison and gender on marital satisfaction, $F(2, 195) = 3.25, p < .05$. However, additional ANOVAs, performed separately for both genders, showed that the effect of referential comparison was significant among men, $F(2, 77) = 9.68, p < .001$, as well as among women, $F(2, 118) = 32.24, p < .001$. As is clear from Table 1, the relationship between referential comparison and satisfaction is basically the same for the two genders but is more pronounced among women.

In the third hypothesis, on relational comparison, it was predicted that subjects who felt their relationship was equitable would be most satisfied with their relationship, followed by the advantaged, and that the disadvantaged would feel least satisfied. This hypothesis was tested by an ANOVA with orthogonal polynomial contrasts, with the relational comparison measure and gender as independent variables and marital satisfaction as the dependent variable. A significant quadratic trend would indicate that individuals who felt equally well off were

TABLE 1: Marital Satisfaction as a Function of Referential and Relational Comparisons and Exchange Orientation, by Gender

	Men	Women
Referential comparison		
Deprived	3.73 (6)	2.81 (20)
Equitably treated	3.94 (23)	3.41 (21)
Advantaged	4.34 (51)	4.12 (80)
Relational comparison		
Deprived	3.81 (16)	3.30 (40)
Equitably treated	4.30 (37)	4.17 (57)
Advantaged	4.22 (27)	3.65 (24)
Relational comparison, low exchange oriented		
Deprived	4.31 (4)	4.11 (10)
Equitably treated	4.36 (25)	4.44 (29)
Advantaged	4.41 (14)	4.35 (5)
Relational comparison, high exchange oriented		
Deprived	3.64 (12)	3.03 (28)
Equitably treated	4.20 (12)	3.84 (26)
Advantaged	4.03 (12)	3.34 (17)

NOTE: Cell *n*s are shown in parentheses. Scores on the measure of marital satisfaction could range from 1 to 5, higher numbers indicating greater satisfaction. *n*s may vary due to missing data.

most satisfied, and a significant linear trend would indicate that those who perceived themselves as better off than their partner were more satisfied than individuals who felt worse off.

The data support the predictions. Persons who felt their marital relationship was equitable reported the highest degree of relational satisfaction, as shown by a significant quadratic trend, $F(1, 195) = 25.45, p < .001$. There was also a significant linear trend, pointing to the fact that advantaged persons reported a higher degree of satisfaction than deprived ones, $F(1, 195) = 7.82, p < .01$. A significant interaction between the quadratic trend and gender was also found, $F(1, 195) = 4.30, p < .05$. Additional ANOVAs, performed separately for both genders, showed that the quadratic trend was basically the same for men, $F(1, 77) = 7.62, p < .01$, and for women, $F(1, 118) = 23.82, p < .001$. The association between relational comparisons and satisfaction is pictured in Figure 2 for the total sample, and the means for the various conditions are presented in Table 1. This table shows that the curvilinear relationship between relational comparison and satisfaction is more pronounced among women.

Relational Comparison and Exchange Orientation

To examine the role of exchange orientation with regard to relational comparisons, groups of subjects high and low in exchange orientation were created, with the median ($Mdn = 2.25$; the scale ranged from 1.00 to 3.88)

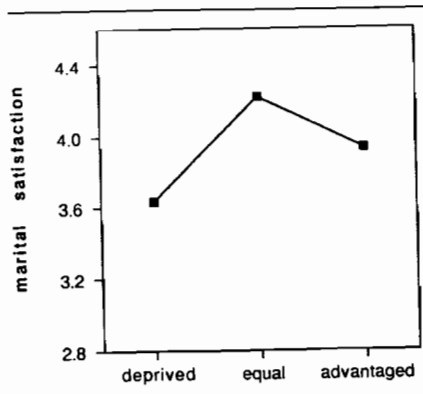


Figure 2 Association between marital satisfaction and relational comparison, combined for both genders.

as the cutoff score. Table 1 shows the numbers of males and females at each level of exchange orientation and relational comparison. Individuals low in exchange orientation considered themselves more often to be equitably treated, whereas subjects high in exchange orientation perceived themselves more often as being deprived or advantaged, $\chi^2(2) = 17.63, p < .001$. Furthermore, relatively more women than men were high in exchange orientation, $\chi^2(2) = 6.68, p < .01$.

It was predicted that the assumptions of equity theory would apply better to subjects high in exchange orientation than to subjects low in exchange orientation. To test this hypothesis, an ANOVA with orthogonal polynomial contrasts was executed, with relational comparison, gender, and exchange orientation as independent variables and marital satisfaction as the dependent variable. Although no linear interaction between relational comparison and exchange orientation on relationship quality was found, $F(1, 182) = 0.44, n.s.$, the quadratic interaction was significant, $F(1, 182) = 4.57, p < .05$. As Figure 3 shows, only among subjects high in exchange orientation was there a curvilinear relation between equity and satisfaction. In contrast, for subjects low in exchange orientation, satisfaction does not seem to depend on whether they feel deprived, equitably treated, or advantaged.

In addition to the earlier-reported main effects of equity and gender, individuals high in exchange orientation generally felt less satisfied than low-exchange-oriented subjects (respectively, $M = 3.59$ and $M = 4.36$; $F(1, 182) = 40.72, p < .001$). As pictured in Figure 3, even

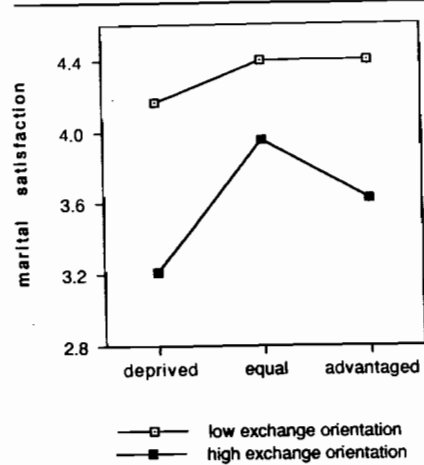


Figure 3 Association between marital satisfaction and relational comparison as moderated by exchange orientation, combined for both genders.

subjects low in exchange orientation who felt deprived were more satisfied than subjects high in exchange orientation who perceived equity. Moreover, there was a significant interaction between gender and exchange orientation, $F(1, 182) = 5.85, p < .05$. This effect can be ascribed to the more pronounced difference among women (high vs. low in exchange orientation: $M = 3.39$ and $M = 4.36, t(114) = 7.90, p < .001$) than among men (respectively, $M = 3.94$ and $M = 4.37, t(78) = 4.19, p < .001$). The present ANOVA revealed no additional interaction effects.

Because the independent variables gender, exchange orientation, and relational comparison were intercorrelated, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to provide an additional test for the fourth hypothesis. The dependent variable was marital satisfaction, and the predictor variables were relational comparison, exchange orientation, and gender as well as all the possible interactions among these three variables. Because of the curvilinear relationship between relational comparison and marital satisfaction, the relational comparison measure was recoded as follows: Subjects who experienced greater inequity, being either overbenefited or underbenefited (categories 3 and -3, respectively), were combined and assigned the score of -3. Those perceiving less

inequity (categories 2 and -2 and categories 1 and -1) were respectively combined and assigned progressively higher scores. Those who considered themselves equitably treated were assigned the score of 0. Thus, the recoded variable represents the degree of inequity (see Schafer, Keith, & Lorenz, 1984; Sprecher, 1988). Furthermore, gender was entered as a dummy variable; that is, men were assigned a score of 1 and women a score of 0. The zero-order correlations between satisfaction and relational comparison were, for men, $r = .19 (p < .05)$ and, for women, $r = .53 (p < .001)$; between satisfaction and exchange orientation, respectively, $r = -.48 (p < .001)$ and $r = -.56 (p < .001)$; and between relational comparison and exchange orientation, $r = -.18 (p < .05)$ and $r = -.27 (p < .01)$.

In line with the reported results of the ANOVAs, the stepwise regression analysis revealed four significant predictors of marital satisfaction: exchange orientation ($\beta = -.89, p < .001$) and the three second-order interactions between exchange orientation and relational comparison ($\beta = .46, p < .001$), gender and exchange orientation ($\beta = .54, p < .001$), and gender and relational comparison ($\beta = -.47, p < .001$). Again, no triple interaction among gender, exchange orientation, and relational comparison was found. In contrast to the ANOVAs, however, no significant main effects of gender and relational comparison were found. The multiple correlation (with only the four significant predictors included) was .69. Consequently, 48% of the variance in marital satisfaction could be explained by the four predictor variables.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study are largely as predicted by the hypotheses. On the average, individuals feel much better off in referential than in relational comparisons. It is particularly noteworthy that no fewer than two thirds of the sample considered the input-outcome ratio in their own marriages to be better than that in other marriages. This tendency to feel better off in comparison with same-sex others in a similar situation is in line with other studies in which a majority of the population seem, for instance, to underestimate their own vulnerability to divorce (Weinstein, 1980). The processes that foster such a perception of the superiority of one's own marriage are not exactly known. In addition to the selection of comparison others and comparison dimensions, it is possible that negative information about other marriages is more salient than positive information and that such information, therefore, is better remembered and retrieved. Furthermore, as predicted, there is a strong linear relationship between referential comparisons and satisfac-

tion: The better individuals consider the input-outcome ratio of their own marriage compared with that of similar others, the more satisfied they are with their own marriage (cf. Buunk & Van Yperen, 1989).

The data confirm the results of other studies on the association between relational comparisons and marital satisfaction in showing that relational satisfaction is highest among those who feel equitably treated, followed by the advantaged, and that the deprived feel least satisfied. In an intimate relationship, individuals apparently prefer an equitable distribution of inputs and outcomes. The need for outcome coordination and the need to organize cognitions in a consistent way may be two sources of motivation for equitable behavior in interdependent relationships (Wilke, 1983).

Although the present findings seem to support equity theory, this study concurrently substantially qualifies this theory by showing that in fact its predictions hold only for a particular type of individual. Only among individuals high in exchange orientation are perceptions of equity and inequity related to relational satisfaction. Individuals with a *quid pro quo* attitude, especially women, are apparently sensitive to the perception of inequity as it might arise in their close relationships. In contrast, for individuals low in exchange orientation, it does not seem to matter how their own input-outcome ratio compares with that of their spouse. Even when they perceive themselves as deprived, they are as satisfied as when they perceive equity in their relationship. Moreover, they are generally happier in their relationship than individuals high in exchange orientation and feel equitably treated more often. These data may help in resolving the controversy surrounding the validity of equity theory (and exchange theory in general) for processes in intimate relationships (Hatfield et al., 1985). On the one hand, it seems clear that equity theory *does* apply to what is going on in the relationships of a substantial number of individuals. On the other hand, it seems that, as suggested by various authors (e.g., Mills & Clark, 1982), the application of exchange principles by individuals in their close relationships is indeed not conducive to attaining a high level of satisfaction in these relationships.

Despite these findings, no definite conclusions can be drawn about the causal relationship among exchange orientation, perceptions of equity, and marital satisfaction. Do feelings of deprivation lead to a higher exchange orientation and, next, to marital dissatisfaction? Or is exchange orientation a cause of the perception of inequity and low marital satisfaction? Although these questions clearly need to be explored in future research, some suggestive evidence on these issues is available. A recent longitudinal study showed that the perception of equity was a better predictor of relationship satisfaction

1 year later than satisfaction was a predictor of equity 1 year later (VanYperen & Buunk, 1990). This finding suggests that, if anything, equity induces satisfaction rather than vice versa. Furthermore, the present study offers the opportunity to perform a preliminary assessment of the causal relationship between exchange orientation and marital satisfaction. For this purpose, partial correlations were calculated between exchange orientation and satisfaction 1 year later (Time 2), controlling for exchange orientation at Time 1, and between satisfaction and exchange orientation 1 year later, controlling for satisfaction at Time 1. These correlations proved to be low and identical ($r = -.13$). Thus, there is as yet no evidence that a high exchange orientation leads to marital dissatisfaction or that the opposite process is the best explanation for the relationship between the two variables. Nevertheless, the high test-retest reliability of the exchange orientation scale is compatible with the assumption that exchange orientation can be considered a more or less stable individual difference variable. However, if marital dissatisfaction leads to a higher exchange orientation, the high test-retest reliability of exchange orientation might also be a result of the high test-retest reliability of marital satisfaction. It must be emphasized, though, that the present study clearly shows that the two variables are conceptually independent. Furthermore, it is important to note that the present study deals with the *perception* of equity, and nothing is known about its association with actual equity in a relationship. The relational comparison measure requires a retrospective and cumulative account of equity, which is difficult for people to make and can be easily biased by one's current marital satisfaction and one's current mood (see VanYperen & Buunk, 1990). In any event, it seems clear that at a certain moment, individuals high in exchange orientation perceive their marriage as less satisfying, especially when they feel they are worse or better off than their spouse.

Finally, no fundamental differences between men and women were found with regard to the main hypotheses of the present study. The relationships between referential comparison and satisfaction, between relational comparison and satisfaction, and among exchange orientation, relational comparison, and satisfaction were basically the same for women and men, though somewhat more pronounced for women. Nevertheless, some unpredicted gender differences must be noted. Women felt deprived more often than men, were more exchange oriented, and were more dissatisfied with their relationship. This more frequently occurring perception of deprivation among women is in line with several other studies (e.g., Davidson, 1984; Rachlin, 1987; Van Yperen

& Buunk, 1991). Because of the lack of data on the causal relationship among these variables, the connection among the various gender differences is not completely clear. If exchange orientation is considered a stable individual difference variable, feelings of deprivation and the concomitant lower level of marital satisfaction can be ascribed to the higher exchange orientation among women. One could argue, however, that because women often get an unfair deal in their relationship, they may more readily develop an exchange orientation. According to equity theory, individuals who feel deprived are more upset than individuals who feel advantaged, and a higher awareness of and responsiveness to exchange processes within the relationship may result. Other studies show, however, that even when women feel more deprived in their relationship than men do, they do not necessarily experience a lower degree of satisfaction in their relationship (Peplau, 1983). It is just possible that the present finding of higher dissatisfaction among women is simply due to the fact that dissatisfied women were overrepresented in the sample. Mainly women responded to our announcement, and we asked their spouses to participate too. Self-selection of women discontent with their intimate relationship could have played a role. In general, even though our sample was demographically quite representative, individuals who respond to a newspaper announcement and volunteer to participate in a study about marital relationships may differ from other married subjects. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conclude that the main findings of the present study could be due solely to such a self-selection factor.

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