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Author(s): Richard C. Huseman, John D. Hatfield and Edward W. Miles
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A New Perspective on Equity Theory: The Equity Sensitivity Construct

RICHARD C. HUSEMAN
JOHN D. HATFIELD
EDWARD W. MILES
University of Georgia

Equity theory proposes that individuals who perceive themselves as either underrewarded or overrewarded will experience distress, and that this distress leads to efforts to restore equity. This paper describes a new construct, equity sensitivity, and proposes that reactions to equity/inequity are a function of an individual's preferences for different outcome/input ratios. The construct is delineated through a series of propositions, and implications for equity research in organizations are discussed.

Equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965) draws from exchange, dissonance, and social comparison theories in making predictions about how individuals manage their relationships with others. Four propositions capture the objectives of the theory:

1. Individuals evaluate their relationships with others by assessing the ratio of their outcomes from and inputs to the relationship against the outcome/input ratio of a comparison other.
2. If the outcome/input ratios of the individual and comparison other are perceived to be unequal, then inequity exists.
3. The greater the inequity the individual perceives (in the form of either overreward or underreward), the more distress the individual feels.
4. The greater the distress an individual feels, the harder he or she will work to restore equity and, thus, reduce the distress. Equity restoration techniques include altering or cognitively distorting inputs or outcomes, acting on or changing the comparison other, or terminating the relationship.

The theory's distress prediction (Proposition 3 above) is based upon the assumption that individuals are equally sensitive to equity; that is, the general preference is that outcome/input ratios be equal to that of the comparison other. This premise has been termed the "norm of equity" (Carrell & Dittrich, 1978; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), and both laboratory studies (e.g., Austin & Walster, 1974; Messé, Dawson, & Lane, 1973; Radinsky, 1969) and field research (e.g., Finn & Lee, 1972; Goodman, 1974; Telly, French, & Scott, 1971) show support for the norm.

Yet, research into reward allocations (i.e., how individuals distribute outcomes among receivers) has identified other norms that appear to contradict the norm of equity. Leventhal (1976), for example, suggested three distribution rules that an individual might employ when allocating outcomes to others: (a) the contribution (equity) rule, where others are rewarded outcomes in proportion to their inputs; (b) the needs rule, where others are rewarded based upon their legitimate needs, and (c) the equality rule, where others

receive equal outcomes irrespective of their individual inputs. These distribution rules, as Mowday (1983) indicated, suggest that different norms govern the allocation of rewards. Also, a number of studies (e.g., Shapiro, 1975; Reis & Gruzen, 1976; Greenberg, 1978) have shown that allocators do not universally adhere to the equity norm when distributing outcomes to others. Thus, evidence suggests that the norm of equity has important exceptions, at least in terms of how one allocates to others.

Despite the absence of research into norms that receivers employ when evaluating their own outcomes, research on individual differences also suggests exceptions to the norm of equity. These exceptions include both demographic variables such as sex (Austin & McGinn, 1977; Callahan-Levy, & Messé, 1979; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984), age (Hook & Cook, 1979), and nationality (Gergen, Morse, & Gergen, 1980; Weick, Bougon, & Maruyama, 1976), and personality traits such as the Protestant Work Ethic (Greenberg, 1979), Machiavellianism (Blumstein & Weinstein, 1969), and interpersonal orientation (Swap & Rubin, 1983). Plus, as Major and Deaux (1982) indicated in their review of individual differences in justice behavior (i.e., reward distributions and reactions to injustice), the effects of individual differences also vary according to whether experimental subjects are allocating outcomes to themselves and/or others, or whether they are simply reacting to inequitable treatment from others.

The notion of individual differences in regard to equity has received little systematic attention in the organizational behavior literature. In fact, two reviews of equity theory (Miner, 1980; Mowday, 1983) have underscored the value of examining individual differences in equity research. Yet Major and Deaux (1982) concluded that much of this research is "scattershot" and "opportunistic" (p. 44), relying heavily on easily identifiable demographic variables and involving ex post facto reasoning from results. Of special significance is the absence of any theoretical framework or paradigm for conceptualizing and un-

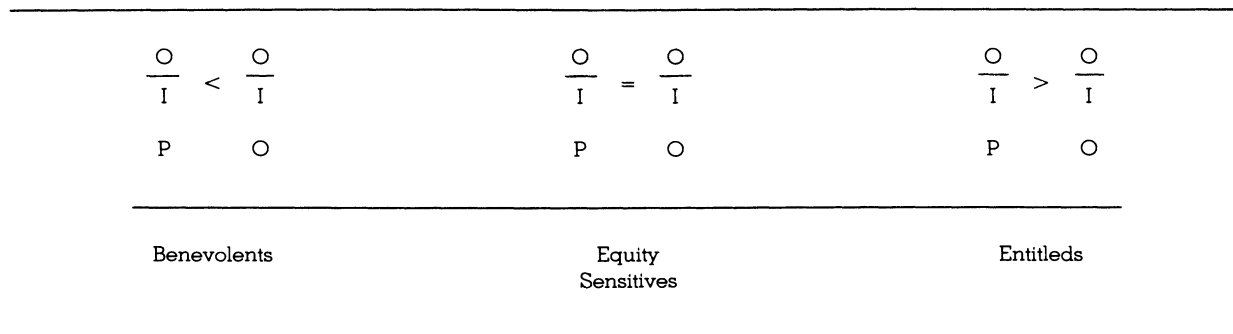
derstanding individual differences in reactions to inequity. This paper sets forth a new construct, equity sensitivity, that, as a personality variable, potentially can explain individual differences in reactions to inequity. Relationships between equity sensitivity and individual reactions to inequity in organizations are proposed, and suggestions about how this construct can potentially improve the utility of equity theory are offered.

The Equity Sensitivity Construct

As indicated, research on individual differences suggests that a number of demographic and psychological variables affect how individuals allocate to themselves and/or others, as well as how they react to inequitable treatment. With few exceptions (e.g., The Protestant Work Ethic), these variables are conceptually independent of equity itself. The equity sensitivity construct proposed here relates directly to equity theory and suggests that individuals react in consistent but individually different ways to both perceived equity and inequity because they have different preferences for (i.e., are differentially sensitive to) equity. Figure 1 presents a continuum of these preferences with three classes of individuals represented along the continuum: (a) Benevolents, those who prefer their outcome/input ratios to be less than the outcome/input ratios of the comparison other; (b) Equity Sensitives, those who, conforming to the traditional norm of equity, prefer their outcome/input ratios to equal those of comparison others; and (c) Entitleds, those who prefer their outcome/input ratios to exceed the comparison other's.

Benevolents

The conceptual roots of benevolence can be traced to the psychology of individuals by Alfred Adler (Adler, 1935; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Rychlak, 1973), who typed individuals by their reactions to others in interpersonal relationships. Salient among Adler's types is the "socially useful," the individual who "thinks more of giving than receiving" (Rychlak, 1973, p. 116) and is



P = Person
O = Comparison other

NOTE: The equity formulas shown in Figure 1 are simple adaptations of Adams' original formula. Other equity researchers (e.g., Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1976) revised his formula, and considerable controversy exists in the equity literature (cf., Moschetti, 1979; Romer, 1977; Samuel, 1978; Singh, 1983) about how equity formulas should be constructed. The formulas presented here can be readily altered to complement other perspectives.

Figure 1. The equity sensitivity continuum.

"prepared for cooperation and contribution" (Mosak, 1959, p. 194). Although psychologists are ambivalent about the actual existence of altruism (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1983), it is suggested here that Benevolents show altruistic tendencies because they give while expecting little in return. In fact, the Figure 1 formula depicting Benevolents' equity preferences is quite similar to Hatfield and Sprecher's (1983) equity formula for altruistic helping relationships.

Several sources of benevolent preferences exist. First, as Weick et al. (1976) suggested in explaining differences in outcome/input ratio preferences between Dutch and American students, a Calvinistic heritage would promote the personal philosophy of high inputs for self with little regard for outcomes. Such a personal philosophy is analogous to Rushton's (1980) suggestion that social responsibility (as opposed to equity or reciprocity) is a potential motivating force for altruistic behavior.

Second, a number of writers (e.g., Rosenhan, 1978; Rushton, 1980; Wispe, 1968) contended that empathic arousal motivates individuals to act

altruistically; that is, by experiencing others' needs vicariously, they are sufficiently affectively aroused to sacrifice their own interests for those of others. Unfortunately, much of the research into altruism is short-term oriented, focusing on temporary or transient relationships such as those between bystanders and others who need their assistance (Huesmann & Levinger, 1976; Krebs, 1970). Thus, while the altruism literature largely neglects longer term relationships such as that which an employee might have with his or her organization, it appears reasonable that a Benevolent might perceive real or imagined employer needs and, thus, be inclined to emphasize own inputs over outcomes.

Third, but less consistent with Adler's perception of an "ideal" type, Merton, Merton, and Barber (1983) proposed that altruistic behavior represents little more than "disguised self-interest" (p. 15). Thus, a Benevolent's preference for lower outcome/input ratios than the comparison other's might emanate either from a need for social approval (Blau, 1964) or a desire to enhance one's self-image (Homans, 1961). Blumstein and Wein-

stein (1969), for example, found that subjects high in need for approval claimed less credit for themselves when confronted by inequitable claims from a partner. Thus, whether Benevolents' preferences for lower outcome/input ratios accrue for selfish or unselfish reasons is, as it is in the case of altruists, unclear.

Generally, then, Benevolents are givers. Their contentment derives from perceptions that their outcome/input ratios are less than the comparison other's. Distress occurs for Benevolents either when the two ratios (P and O) are equal or when the Benevolent's ratio is greater.

Equity Sensitives

Equity Sensitive individuals represent the traditional equity theory model, and thus, require little description. Briefly, they subscribe to the norm of equity and feel distress when either overrewarded or underrewarded. Equity Sensitives are most content when their outcome/input ratios equal those of the comparison other.

Equity Sensitives feel "distress" when underrewarded and guilt when overrewarded. This is the only group that experiences both of these feelings. Benevolents are satisfied when underrewarded and experience guilt when either equitably- or overrewarded. Entitleds are satisfied when overrewarded and feel "distress" when under- or equitably-rewarded.

Equity Sensitives may score higher than Benevolents or Entitleds on Swap and Rubin's (1983) Interpersonal Orientation scale. If a person is oriented toward a focus on the other party in a relationship, then he/she should be more concerned with an equitable relationship than a person who scores low on interpersonal orientation.

Entitleds

The label "Entitled" is taken from Coles' description (1977a, 1977b), which used the term to describe the affluent child who "has much, but wants and expects more, all assumed to be his or hers by right—at once a psychological and material inheritance the world will provide"

(Coles, 1977a, p. 85). Greenberg and Westcott (1983) extended Coles' concept of entitlement to the general population; they described Entitleds as having high thresholds for feeling indebted: "Whatever aid [outcomes] they receive is their due, and therefore they feel little or no obligation to reciprocate. They exist in a world where all but one are debtors" (p. 105).

Adlerian psychology also provides the conceptual basis for entitlement. In sharp contrast to Adler's socially useful (Benevolent) individual, the "getting type":

Exploits and manipulates life and others by actively or passively putting others into his service. He tends to view life as unfair for denying him that to which he is entitled. He may employ charm, shyness, temper, or intimidation as methods of operation. He is insatiable in his getting (Mosak, 1971, p. 78).

Mosak (1959) identified several factors that appear to promote development of an Entitled orientation: (a) post-World War II cultural values that have changed from getting ahead by doing to getting ahead without doing; (b) overly permissive childrearing practices which encourage children, especially the youngest, the ill, the handicapped, or the only child to get; and (c) our "age of anxiety" (which has not changed dramatically since the late 1950s) where, given uncertainties in the future, we are encouraged to "get as much as we can before the hydrogen bomb falls" (p. 194).

Therefore, Entitleds are getters: They subscribe to the exploitative equity relationship described by Hatfield and Sprecher (1983), where their own outcome/input ratios exceed those of comparison others. Distress would occur if they were not "getting a better deal" than their comparison other.

Sources of General Equity Preferences

The different general preferences for equity among Benevolents, Equity Sensitives, and Entitleds can be traced to more specific preferences

that are delineated through three sets of propositions; each set of propositions builds upon its predecessor.

- Proposition 1A: *Benevolents prefer situations of high inputs for self compared to low inputs for self.*
- Proposition 1B: *Entitleds prefer situations of high outcomes for self compared to low outcomes for self.*

In part, these two propositions are adapted from the findings of Weick et al.'s (1976) study of American versus Dutch students' preferences for different forms of equity. Obviously, not all Dutch students in their sample subscribed to Calvinistic values, and not all of the American subjects were "getting" types. Yet, several of Weick et al.'s findings are instructive. First, Dutch students, when confronted with situations where they could choose between high and low inputs for self, selected high inputs for self in six of ten situations. Such selections appear congruent not only with the Calvinistic emphasis on high inputs for self, but also with both the giving and contributing orientation characteristic of Adler's socially useful type and the needs for social approval and self-image enhancement. Second, American students, in ten situations where choices between high and low outcomes for self were required, opted for high outcomes in eight of those ten situations. These preferences are consistent with the Entitled's orientation toward "getting" and may at least partially reflect cultural values that, according to Mosak (1959), are sources of entitlement. Following from the first set of propositions:

- Proposition 2A: *Benevolents prefer that their own inputs exceed their own outcomes.*
- Proposition 2B: *Entitleds prefer that their own outcomes exceed their own inputs.*
- Proposition 2C: *Equity Sensitives prefer that their own inputs equal their own outcomes.*

These propositions specify that, when given the choice among the outcome/input ratios of L/H,

H/H, L/L, and H/L (where H signifies High and L signifies Low), Benevolents will select the first alternative (L/H); Entitleds, the last alternative (H/L); and Equity Sensitives, either H/H or L/L. Weick et al.'s (1976) findings provide additional data here. When Dutch students were asked to choose between L/H and other outcome/input ratios, in four of six cases they chose L/H, the preference posited for Benevolents. American students, on the other hand, opted for H/L in six of six situations where H/L ratios were compared against other outcome/input ratios. Again, it cannot be presumed that the Dutch subjects epitomize the conceptualization of Benevolents presented here, or that the American students were Entitleds. But the findings of Weick et al. showed preference differences between two groups whose cultural dissimilarities are analogous to the distinctions shown here.

The present authors' prediction for Equity Sensitives extends the norm of equity to situations of equity for self. Although Weick et al.'s subjects chose equity for self (H/H or L/L) in only two of eleven possible cases, it is proposed that Equity Sensitives will first search for situations where outcomes and inputs are equal, then assess that outcome/input ratio against the comparison other.

Thus, Propositions 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, and 2C posit that Benevolents prefer high inputs that exceed outcomes; Entitleds, high outcomes that exceed inputs; and Equity Sensitives, outcomes that equal inputs. The following propositions, by introducing the comparison other and building upon Propositions 1 and Propositions 2, represent a general conceptualization of equity sensitivity:

- Proposition 3A: *Benevolents prefer that their outcome/input ratios be less than that of the comparison other's.*
- Proposition 3B: *Entitleds prefer that their outcome/input ratios exceed that of the comparison other's.*
- Proposition 3C: *Equity Sensitives prefer that their outcome/input ratios be equal to that of the comparison other's.*

These propositions assume that all three classes of individuals employ a comparison other to assess the existence of equity. As Pritchard (1969) indicated, individuals may use an internal standard, as opposed to some external comparison other, when determining equity. Obviously, they might employ an internal standard as well as comparisons to others (Goodman, 1974). However, neither Pritchard nor Goodman offered empirical support for these positions. Clearly, this is an empirical question that future research should address. The position presented here, consistent with Pritchard (1969) and as reflected in earlier propositions, is that individuals use internal standards first, then they use a comparison other.

To illustrate this process, Figure 2 contains all possible combinations of hypothetical high and low outcomes for both Person (P) and comparison other (O). Proposition 1A specifies that a Benevolent would first seek situations involving high inputs for self (Blocks A and B in Figure 2). Following Proposition 2A, the Benevolent then would opt for Block A, where inputs are high and outcomes are low. Finally, Proposition 3A identifies what is termed the Benevolent's first order preferences (marked with a "1" in parentheses)—high inputs and low outcomes for self, the ratio of which is less than the comparison other's outcome/input ratio. Therefore, first order preferences are those situations consistent with all three propositions. Second order preferences

<u>Block</u>	<u>P</u> <u>O/I</u>	<u>O</u> <u>O/I</u>	<u>Preference</u>
A	L/H	H/H	BEN (1)
	L/H	L/L	BEN (1)
	L/H	H/L	BEN (1)
	L/H	L/H	EQS (2)
B	H/H	H/H	EQS (1)
	H/H	L/L	EQS (1)
	H/H	H/L	BEN (2)
	H/H	L/H	ENT (2)
C	L/L	H/H	EQS (1)
	L/L	L/L	EQS (1)
	L/L	H/L	BEN (2)
	L/L	L/H	ENT (2)
D	H/L	H/H	ENT (1)
	H/L	L/L	ENT (1)
	H/L	H/L	EQS (2)
	H/L	L/H	ENT (1)

P = Person; O = Other.

BEN = Benevolent's Preference; ENT = Entitled's Preference; EQS = Equity Sensitive's Preference.

(1) = First Order Preference; (2) = Second Order Preference

Figure 2. Equity preferences for benevolents, entitleds, and equity sensitives.

(2) are situations where the Benevolent's outcome/input ratio is inconsistent with his or her desired outcome/input ratio for self (Propositions 1A and 2A). However, the Benevolent's ratio is nevertheless smaller than the comparison other's (Proposition 3A). Only one of the three propositions is satisfied.

Entitleds, on the other hand, would show first order preferences in Block D, where outcomes would exceed inputs for self. The two second order preferences for Entitleds, labeled ENT (2), do not reflect situations where the Entitleds' outcomes exceed their own inputs; however, outcome/input ratios for self are higher than the comparison other's. Finally, Equity Sensitives would opt first for the four combinations labeled EQS (1) in Blocks B and C and then would opt for the two combinations in Blocks A and D where outcome/input ratios for Person and Other are equal.

Generally, it is proposed that not all individuals adhere to the norm of equity. As shown in the research on individual differences, reactions to inequity appear to vary along with certain demographic and personality variables. The equity sensitivity construct is a parsimonious explanation for consistent reactions to equity/inequity because it identifies the individual preferences for equity according to Benevolent, Entitled, or Equity Sensitive orientations.

Further, it is proposed that Benevolents, Entitleds, and Equity Sensitives first look for situations that match their own internal standards of equity (Pritchard, 1969). If these situations also are congruent with their preferences vis à vis the comparison other, then equity exists, as does contentment. Some degree of distress occurs when outcome/input ratios for self are not consistent with internal standards, but this distress is at least partially ameliorated if outcome/input ratios for self and other are congruent with general equity preferences. The highest degree of distress occurs when neither outcome/input ratios for self nor assessment of these ratios against the comparison other's is consistent with the individual's preferences.

Equity Sensitivity in Organizations

The equity sensitivity construct poses a number of implications for equity research in organizations. Three general propositions describing posited relationships between perceptions of equity and an important organizational outcome—job satisfaction—for Benevolents, Equity Sensitives, and Entitleds are presented. Then the relationship between equity sensitivity and an individual's perceptions of ambiguous job inputs and outcomes is discussed.

Equity Sensitivity and Organizational Outcomes

Equity research has examined the impact of perceived equity/inequity on a number of organizational outcome variables, including quantity and/or quality of work (Andrews, 1967; Goodman & Friedman, 1968; Valenzi & Andrews, 1971); turnover (Carrell & Dittrich, 1976; Telly, French, & Scott, 1971); absenteeism (Carrell & Dittrich, 1976); and job satisfaction (Farr, 1976; Jenkins & Lawler, 1981; Pritchard, Dunnette, & Jorgenson, 1972). A major implication of equity sensitivity for equity research in organizations is suggested by developing three further propositions concerning the relationship between equity and job satisfaction for Benevolents, Equity Sensitives, and Entitleds.

Equity theory proposes that, as a result of the distress of either overreward or underreward, inequitably rewarded individuals should experience lower levels of job satisfaction than equitably rewarded individuals (Adams, 1965; Locke, 1976; Pritchard et al., 1972). Adams (1965) also argued that the threshold for inequity presumably would be higher for overrewarded individuals, who might rationalize their overreward as "good fortune" without the attendant distress. Thus, following general equity theory predictions, it is expected that the relationship between perceptions of equity and job satisfaction will be inverted and u-shaped, similar to that shown for Equity Sensitives in Figure 3. Underrewarded

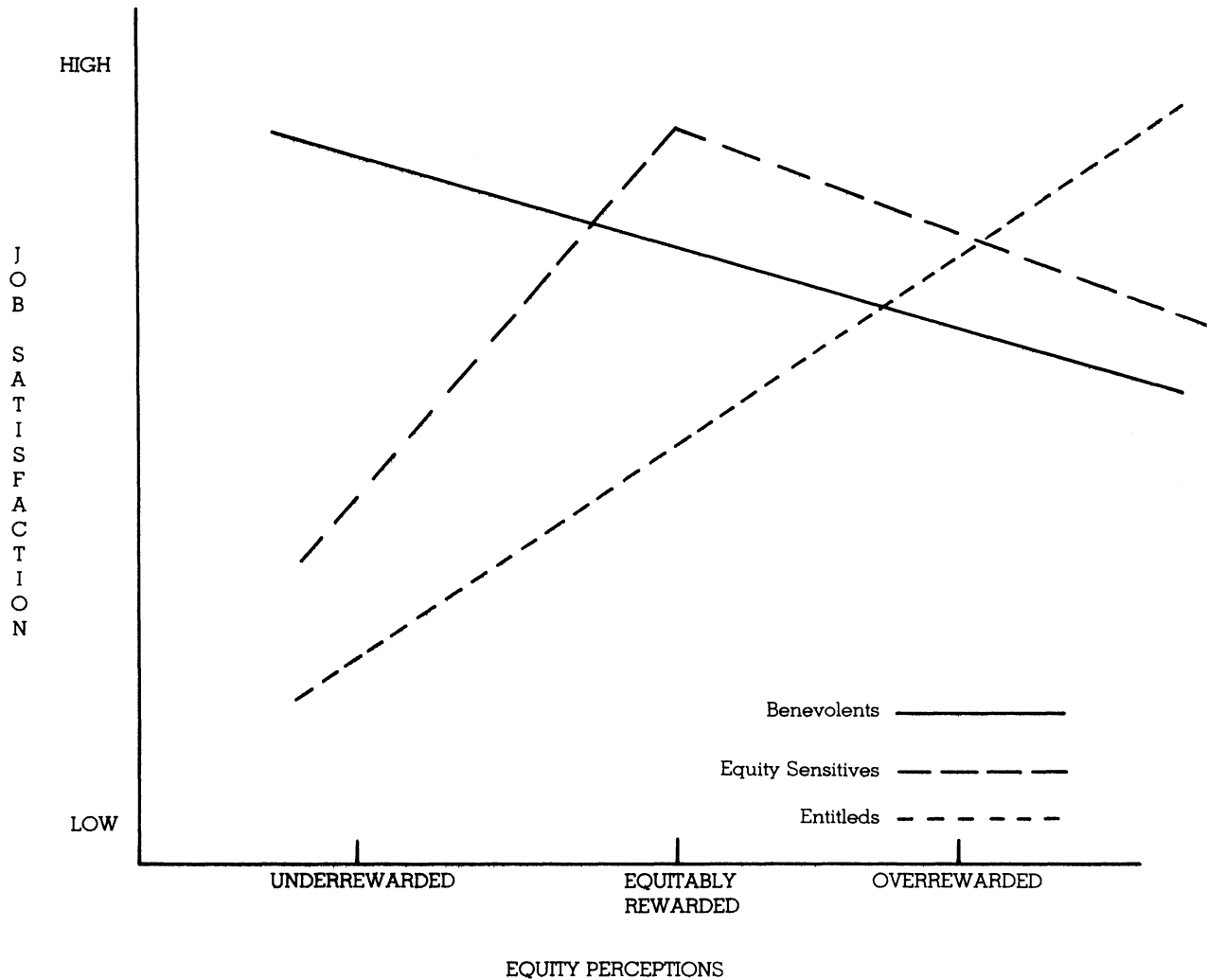


Figure 3. Predicted job satisfaction levels for equity sensitivity orientations.

individuals should report low satisfaction levels; equitably rewarded individuals, high satisfaction; and overrewarded individuals, low to moderate satisfaction.

Figure 3 incorporates the equity sensitivity construct into the standard equity theory prediction, with the following proposed:

Proposition 4: *A negative, linear relationship should exist between Benevolents' perceptions of equity and job satisfaction.*

As the solid line in Figure 3 shows, it is expected that Benevolents would report higher levels of job satisfaction when they are underrewarded than

when they are either equitably rewarded or over-rewarded.

Proposition 5: *An inverted u-shaped relationship should exist between Equity Sensitives' perceptions of equity and job satisfaction.*

As indicated earlier, Equity Sensitives are predicted to follow the traditional equity model. Thus, as in Figure 3, they should experience the highest levels of satisfaction when equitably rewarded.

Proposition 6: *A positive, linear relationship should exist between Entitleds' perceptions of equity and job satisfaction.*

This proposition not only reflects the Entitleds' preference for overreward, but also suggests a potential link between expectancy theory and equity theory. As Pritchard et al. (1972) noted, equity theory's prediction of lower satisfaction in the overrewarded condition runs counter to Porter and Lawler's (1968) expectancy theory prediction of a linear relationship between rewards and satisfaction. To the extent that Entitleds' satisfaction levels covary with level of reward as shown in Figure 3, a nexus between expectancy and equity theory predictions is possible.

Obviously, propositions similar to those outlined for job satisfaction can be constructed for relationships between equity sensitivity and other behavioral and attitudinal variables such as absenteeism, quantity and quality of work, and organizational commitment. In reviews of empirical research both Campbell and Pritchard (1976) and Mowday (1983) indicated mixed results from attempts to confirm equity theory's predictions for quantity and quality of work. Campbell and Pritchard (1976, p. 107) summarized this research by saying there is "a small effect in the predicted direction, but it frequently falls short of statistical significance." Such consistent, but nonsignificant results often can be attributed to low statistical power. An alternative explanation is the existence of a moderator variable. The present authors believe that equity sensitivity is such a variable.

Examples of predictions based on expansions of quality and quantity of work research (e.g., Andrews, 1967; Valenzi & Andrews, 1971) include:

1. On a piece-rate system, Entitleds consistently will produce at a high level, but the quality of their work will be consistently low.
2. Under the equitably-rewarded condition on a piece-rate system, Benevolents will produce the highest quality work.
3. On a salary or wage, Benevolents will produce consistent quality and quantity under all three reward conditions.
4. For Benevolents, absenteeism and turnover will be consistent regardless of reward level; Entitleds will have the highest absenteeism and turnover in the equitably-rewarded condition.

Thus, it is proposed that equity sensitivity will moderate relationships between perceptions of equity and organizational outcomes. However, demonstrating the validity of a variable as a moderator variable is a difficult process. Large sample sizes are necessary (Schmidt & Hunter, 1982; Zedeck, 1971). Also, the strict definition that a moderator variable is "found to be linearly uncorrelated with both the predictor variable and the criterion variable . . ." (Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981, p. 478) makes the prediction that equity sensitivity is a moderator variable a rather tenuous prediction. However, if its validity as a moderator variable is demonstrated, this would have significant potential for reducing unexplained variance in equity research in organizations.

Equity Sensitivity and Ambiguous Job Elements

The equity sensitivity construct also appears relevant to how individuals actually perceive inputs and outcomes. As Pritchard (1969), Campbell and Pritchard (1976), and others noted, one problem in equity research is the extent to which individuals view specific job elements as inputs or outcomes: One individual might perceive "doing challenging work" as an outcome, while another might view this job element as an input. Tornow (1970, 1971) addressed this problem by

developing a 24-item instrument comprised of ambiguous elements (e.g., "making many decisions," "knowing one's job well") and administering it to 80 or 90 subjects from Pritchard et al.'s (1972) study. Responses to his instrument allowed Tornow to classify subjects into two groups: (a) Type I, who perceive ambiguous elements as inputs, and (b) Type O, who view these same elements as outcomes. Reanalyzing the Pritchard et al. data, Tornow found that differences in perceptions of and reactions to inequity were attributable to an individual's input or outcome orientation.

Clearly, whether individuals view ambiguous job elements as outcomes or inputs would directly affect their perceived outcome/input ratios. An individual who sees ambiguous job elements as outcomes is likely to compensate by providing greater inputs. Individuals who view these same elements as inputs will have higher expectations regarding deserved outcomes. Therefore, different individuals in identical situations could have different expectations of appropriate levels of inputs and outcomes. A useful area for future research is the extent to which Benevolents and Entitleds view ambiguous job elements as inputs or outcomes. It could be hypothesized that, like Tornow's Type O individuals, Benevolents are more likely to perceive ambiguous elements as outcomes; Entitleds are more likely to perceive them as inputs, like Tornow's Type I individuals. Such perceptions would more readily satisfy a Benevolent's preference that inputs exceed outcomes and the Entitled's preference that outcomes exceed inputs. The extent to which Benevolents and Entitleds perceive ambiguous elements as inputs or outcomes for the comparison other appears promising as well. For example, it might be discovered that Entitleds, while viewing "doing complex work" as an input for self, categorize that same element as an outcome for others.

Conclusion

The equity sensitivity construct suggests that individuals do not conform consistently to the

norm of equity. Instead, individuals react consistently to specific, but different, preferences they have for the balance between their outcome/input ratios and that of a comparison other. Benevolents prefer that their outcome/input ratios be less than the comparison other's; Equity Sensitives, who adhere to the norm of equity, prefer balanced outcome/input ratios; and Entitleds prefer that their outcome/input ratios exceed the comparison other's. Furthermore, these general preferences for equity can be traced to internal standards that characterize the Benevolent as emphasizing own inputs exceeding own outcomes; the Entitled, own outcomes exceeding own inputs; and the Equity Sensitive, own outcomes equaling own inputs.

As an individual difference variable, equity sensitivity is proposed to moderate relationships between an individual's perceptions of equity and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, quantity and quality of work, absenteeism, and turnover. The construct also provides a framework to explain how individuals perceive ambiguous job elements, a problem that has received far too little attention in research on organizational behavior. Given the psychologically based conceptual basis that has been used to develop the notion of equity sensitivity, the construct should be related to other personality variables, such as need for approval.

One final but important issue is the extent to which equity sensitivity is a state or a trait. If it is a state, then an individual's propensity toward Benevolence, for example, would vary with changes in the situation (e.g., a Benevolent in one job might show Entitled preferences in a later job). If it is a stable trait, then Benevolence would persist from one job to the next. Obviously, this is an empirical question; yet, it is the suspicion of the present authors that it is a trait. As the previous discussion of the sources of Benevolent, Equity Sensitive, and Entitled preferences suggests, these preferences represent values emanating from both cultural (e.g., the Calvinistic heritage) and individual psychological (e.g., altruism) areas. Thus, changes in these prefer-

ences presumably would occur rarely and only as the consequences of grossly significant changes in the situation.

This suspicion that equity sensitivity is a trait also is tempered by the possibility that individuals may show different preferences during different life contexts. For example, individuals might exhibit Entitled preferences at work, but consistently Benevolent preferences in their relationship with their spouse. This implies that either different distinct traits exist or that researchers

may simply be identifying different alternative states of the same trait. The initial prediction of the present authors is the latter. But in either case, the construct has important implications for how individuals react to the perceptions of equity in the workplace. Investigation of equity sensitivity should increase the accuracy of prediction of behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. This increased accuracy should enhance the utility of equity theory as a framework for understanding and predicting organizational behavior.

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Richard C. Huseman is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Management, College of Business Administration, University of Georgia.

John D. Hatfield is Associate Professor and Director of Ph.D. Programs in the Department of Management, College of Business Administration, University of Georgia.

Edward W. Miles is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Management, College of Business Administration, University of Georgia.

Address correspondence to Richard C. Huseman, Chairman, Department of Management, College of Business Administration, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.