

This Week's Citation Classic

Adams J S. Toward an understanding of inequity. *J.Abnormal Soc.Psychol.*
67:422-36, 1963.[General Electric Company, Crotonville, NY]

A theory of inequity is presented. The theory specifies the conditions under which perceived inequity will arise and the means by which it may be reduced or eliminated. Field studies supporting the theory and laboratory experiments designed to test certain aspects of it are reported. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited over 215 times since 1966.]

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"This paper was the product of the felicitous interaction of several influences in the 1960-1961 period. The *Zeitgeist* was heavily laden with concern for civil rights and social justice and provided a fertile seedbed in which ideas about the nature of social exchanges, especially employer-employee monetary exchanges, might germinate.

"My attention was originally drawn to inequity problems by a number of phenomena. First, a large proportion of employment dissatisfaction, grievances, and industrial strikes appeared to result from employee perceived wage inequities. Furthermore, intriguing anecdotal evidence suggested that wage dissatisfaction remained among some employees following substantial wage increases. Second, distressful interpersonal social relationships in nonwork situations reportedly often involved perceived inequities, as in child-parent, student-teacher, and marital exchanges. Third, the early 1960s was suffused by concern for civil rights and social justice - matters of equity. Despite the pervasiveness of these phenomena and their economic and social costs, there was little understanding of either the antecedents or the behavioral consequences of perceived inequity, especially of the latter, although Homans¹ had provided seminal insights into causes.

"It seemed to me highly improbable that persons who experienced inequity in their transactions with others would merely feel and manifest dissatisfaction, whatever its emotional coloration and intensity. Indeed, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance² and an abundant body of related research predicted and provided evidence that im-balanced cognitions held by people led them to behave in several distinct ways to redress the imbalance.

"The article provided a theoretical structure that specified the conditions under which perceived inequity in social exchanges occurs and the conditions that lead to differing modes of inequity reduction, both cognitive and behavioral. It was then possible to hypothesize rigorously and test empirically a wide variety of behaviors in different social exchange situations. Indeed, behaviors that defied conventional wisdom were deducible from the theory. For example, it was predictable that overpaid employees would increase their unit work output if paid by the hour, whereas overpaid piece workers would decrease unit output and increase output quality.

"The response of academic researchers and industrial relations practitioners to this paper has been very gratifying since its publication. Some years later, following 12 years of research on inequity by approximately 170 different researchers, a review of the literature bearing directly on equity theory, as it came to be called, revealed four general phenomena.³ First, the annual growth rate of publications was exponentially increasing. Second, the number of new researchers working on inequity was also increasing exponentially, albeit at a lower rate. Third, from an initial emphasis on salary and wage inequity, research expanded to equity problems in the domains of child development, coalition formation, bargaining, social protest, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, and the social psychology of victimization. Finally, major derivations from the original theory were tested, with the consequence that the theory was sustained or modified in part, expanded, and made relevant to a broader spectrum of social phenomena. This continues today."

1. Homans G C. *Social behavior: its elementary forms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961. 404 p.
2. Festinger L. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row Peterson, 1957. 291 p.
3. Adams J S & Freedman S. *Equity revisited: comments and annotated bibliography*. (Berkowitz L & Walster L, eds.) *Advances in experimental social psychology*. New York: Academic Press, 1976. Vol. 9. p. 43-90.