

## Predictors of Comforting Communication in Romantic Relationships

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The ability to provide adequate comforting is valued in close relationships. As a valued commodity, the quality of the comforting that a person provides may be used to maintain equitable relationships or to balance rewards and costs in close relationships. We examined whether perceptions of equity in dating relationships predicts the quality of comforting communication. One hundred and fifteen college students reported their perceptions of equity in their relationships. In addition, they estimated the effort they would expend on comforting their partner in different situations and reported the verbal messages they would use to comfort their partners in a particular scenario. Although molecular measures of equity were significant predictors of comforting behavior, global measures were not. Support was found for the use of comforting communication as a maintenance and as a balancing mechanism. In addition, the effort that participants reported they would expend in comforting their partner did not mediate the association between equity and comforting quality.

An individual can reduce the emotional distress of another by providing effective comforting communication (Burlleson, 1984). In romantic relationships, individuals may benefit from the comfort provided by a partner during times of emotional distress. As the sophistication of one's comforting messages increases, so do the benefits one's partner receives (Burlleson, 1984). Comfort and support received from a romantic partner also has been linked to various positive outcomes. In particular, social support that young adults receive in their romantic relationships is positively linked with their romantic competence (Laursen, Furman, & Mooney, 2006). Furthermore, social support is positively associated with

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Date submitted: 2007-01-23

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satisfaction in young adults' romantic relationships (Cramer, 2004). The benefits of social support within marriage to the spouses and the marital relationship are well-documented (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Because comforting can provide benefits in romantic relationships, understanding the forces that influence an individual's decision to provide comforting communication to a partner is important to the success and stability of these relationships.

Some research has examined how aspects of one's relationship influence the quality of comforting one gives (Burlison, 2003). For example, Costin and Jones (1992) found that people expend more effort comforting close friends than they do strangers. However, it is unclear how other relational variables may influence people's comforting strategies. Will people's comforting communication differ based on their perceptions of their relationships? In this article, we will examine how relationship variables influence the quality of comforting provided in romantic relationships. More specifically, we propose to examine whether perceptions of equity in romantic relationships influence the quality of comforting provided in those relationships. In the next section, we will discuss how equity theory predicts comforting communication in romantic relationships.

### *Equity Theory*

Equity theory holds that individuals are motivated to pursue balanced relationships (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). This balance is predicated on an equity norm which states that the ratio of benefits to costs for a person in a relationship should be roughly equal to that of the partner. Perceived violations of the equity norm arouse distress in individuals. Particularly, equity theory argues that people who receive more from a relationship than their partner (over-benefited people) will feel guilty and those who receive less from the relationship than their partner (under-benefited people) will feel angry. In contrast, people in equitable relationships should not feel distress, but should instead feel satisfied with the relationship.

How perceptions of equity affect comforting communication in interpersonal relationships can be considered from two perspectives. Comforting can serve either as a tool to restore equity to an unbalanced relationship or as a method to maintain an equitable relationship.

### *Using Comforting to Restore Equity Generally*

In situations where the equity norm is violated — or perceived to be violated — individuals are motivated to restore balance (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985). To restore balance, individuals in a relationship may choose to address either their own cost-benefit ratio or that of their partner. An over-benefited individual could contribute more or better assets to a relationship to increase a partner's outcomes. However, at the same time, providing more and better contributions would likely increase the costs incurred by the over-benefited partner. Applying these two approaches together to increase both the partner's outcomes and one's own costs should help restore equity when one is over-benefited.

In contrast, under-benefited individuals could withhold contributions and thereby reduce their partner's outcomes, while potentially reducing their own costs. This process should serve to restore equity by decreasing the partner's cost-benefit ratio and improving one's own.

#### *Using Comforting to Restore Equity Specifically*

The quality of comforting provided is an asset in interpersonal relationships. Receiving better comforting should be a more valued asset than receiving poorer comforting. In the preceding scenarios, an individual could choose to use more sophisticated comforting to increase a partner's outcomes or less sophisticated comforting to decrease those outcomes. If it were shown that comforting serves as a balancing mechanism, we would predict that a linear relationship could be established between an individual's perceptions of equity in a relationship and the quality of that person's comforting. Under-benefited individuals, then, would provide the least sophisticated comforting and over-benefited individuals the most sophisticated comforting. This reasoning leads us to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 (balancing hypothesis): A linear relationship exists between perceptions of global relational equity and comforting sophistication wherein over-benefited individuals provide the most sophisticated comforting and under-benefited individuals the least sophisticated comforting.

#### *Using Comforting to Maintain Equitable Relationships*

As noted above, individuals in inequitable relationships feel distress while individuals in equitable relationships should experience a satisfying relationship. Studies of different types of relationships have shown that individuals in equitable relationships engage in behaviors to maintain these equitable relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000; Stafford & Canary, 2006). These researchers have found that individuals in equitable relationships engage in more maintenance behaviors than those involved in inequitable relationships. Comforting may be used as a maintenance behavior in close relationships. In fact, comforting bears some similarities to the maintenance behavior of positivity, which includes being supportive of one's partner (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Contrary to the predictions of hypothesis one, researchers who study maintenance strategies assert that, if comforting is used to maintain equitable relationships, the relationship between perceptions of equity and comforting sophistication should be non-linear. Specifically, the relationship between perceived equity and comforting should be a quadratic relationship, with the most sophisticated comforting occurring in equitable relationships, less sophisticated comforting occurring when individuals perceive themselves as over-benefited, and the least sophisticated comforting occurring when individuals perceive themselves to be under-benefited (Stafford & Canary, 2006). Thus, we offer hypothesis two as a competing hypothesis to hypothesis one.

Hypothesis 2 (maintenance hypothesis): A quadratic relationship exists between perceptions of global relational equity and comforting sophistication wherein individuals in equitable relationships provide more sophisticated comforting than individuals in over- or under-benefited relationships.

### *Measuring Equity*

Global measures are frequently used to assess perceptions of equity in relationships (e.g., Messman et al., 2000; Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 2006; Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999). These measures require individuals to broadly assess their own and their partner's contributions to and outcomes from the relationship. In contrast, Foa and Foa (1980) propose that equity needs to be considered by examining a variety of resources. We propose to examine perceived equity for specific characteristics of individuals that: (1) are valued by individuals in relationships; and (2) may differ in terms of equity across individuals' perceptions of themselves and their partners.

One asset highly valued in relationships is physical attractiveness (e.g., Moore, Cassidy, Smith, & Perrett, 2006; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966; White, 1980). Generally, individuals prefer attractive partners to unattractive partners. In addition, characteristics such as economic stability, earning potential, and social standing are valued assets in assessing the desirability of opposite-sex targets (e.g., Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994; Townsend & Levy, 1990; Townsend & Roberts, 1994). Beyond physical attractiveness and economic status, kindness and stability are also valued assets in relationships (e.g., Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993).

In the present study, each molecular type of equity may produce different results than the perceptions of global equity. Parallel competing hypotheses (three and four) are proposed for the molecular measures of equity.

Hypothesis 3 (balancing hypothesis): A linear relationship exists between perceptions of molecular types of equity and comforting sophistication wherein over-benefited individuals provide the most sophisticated comforting and under-benefited individuals provide the least sophisticated comforting.

Hypothesis 4 (maintenance hypothesis): A quadratic relationship exists between perceptions of various types of molecular equity and comforting sophistication wherein individuals in equitable relationships provide more sophisticated comforting than individuals in over-benefited or under-benefited relationships.

### ***Effort Expended on Comforting***

In addition to examining whether couples use comforting to restore or maintain equity in romantic relationships, we are also interested in how effort expended in comforting relates to the association between equity and comforting quality. Because costs are involved in expending effort to comfort a relational partner, equity likely influences the amount of effort a person will invest in comforting. If this effort also is predictive of the sophistication of comforting, then effort likely mediates the association between equity and comforting quality. If effort is unrelated to comforting quality, however, then outcomes of equity might be observed in the amount of effort a person expends on comforting the relational partner, or the sophistication of the comforting provided, or both.

Burleson (1994) identifies several characteristics of sophisticated comforting strategies. First, sophisticated strategies are listener centered in that they attempt to discover the other person's perspective. Second, sophisticated strategies focus on the proximate rather than the distal causes of distress. Thus, a sophisticated comforting message is more likely to focus on the psychological reactions a person has to an event than on the event itself. Third, a sophisticated comforting strategy offers an explanation of the feelings the other person is experiencing and helps that person to better understand what is being felt. Finally, sophisticated comforting strategies are evaluatively neutral and are accepting of the distressed other.

Certainly, these characteristics imply that providing sophisticated comforting may require more effort than providing less sophisticated comforting. If this is the case, the effort individuals expend to comfort one another may predict the quality of comforting a person provides. Contrariwise, comforting sophistication may be better predicted by a person's personality and experience. Thus, two people may put forth equal effort to comfort someone, yet one may provide sophisticated comforting where the other provides unsophisticated comforting.

Because effort expended in offering comforting represents a relational cost to the comforter, we would expect that equity would influence the amount of effort a person is willing to put forth. If comforting sophistication is related to effort expended on comforting, we would expect better comforting to be provided by individuals who put more effort into comforting. In this way, effort would play a mediating role in the association between equity and comforting quality. However, if comforting sophistication is not dependent on effort, we would anticipate that the effort individuals expend would not predict comforting sophistication, and we would not observe this mediated association. We examine this issue in research question one.

Research Question 1: Will the effort individuals report expending on comforting mediate the association between equity and comforting sophistication?

## ***Method***

### *Participants*

Participants included 115 students involved in romantic relationships at the time and enrolled in introductory communication courses at a large Midwestern university. They received extra course credit for participating in the study. Of the 69 females and 45 males (one unreported) who participated in the study, 93.9% were Caucasian Americans, 1.7% Asian Americans, 3.5% African Americans, and 0.9% Hispanic Americans. The average age of participants was 20.17 years (range: 17-34).

### *Procedure*

Participants were told they were participating in a study examining communication in romantic relationships. Each read a scenario that asked them to imagine their response to a distressed partner. For

instance, what if their relational partner had just failed an exam in a course needed to graduate that semester? We felt this represented a believable scenario that college students might encounter in their relationships. Comparable alternative workplace scenarios were provided if a participant reported that a partner was not taking any college courses. Participants were asked to list, on a lined page of paper, all of the verbal messages they would say to their partner. If they felt they would not say anything to their partner, they were instructed to leave the page blank. Participants then assessed their own and their partners' dating alternatives (not addressed in this study) and rated themselves and their partners across a series of personal characteristics.

### *Measures*

*Comforting quality.* Participants were evaluated based on the sensitivity of the message they would use to comfort a partner. Comforting sophistication was assessed by examining the list of verbal messages that a participant would say to a partner in the comforting scenario. The list was analyzed using Burleson's hierarchical coding system for sensitivity of comforting behavior (1984). Two trained coders evaluated each participant's list and assigned it a score from 0 (no comforting) to 9 (highest sensitivity comforting), using Burleson's coding system ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ). The intraclass correlation between coders was .80. Differences were resolved by having both coders discuss items until they reached a unanimous resolution.

*Comforting effort.* Participants responded to a 10-item questionnaire that assessed how much effort they would expend to comfort a partner under certain circumstances. Effort in comforting was assessed for two different types of a range of situations encompassing minor distress and major distress. For example, the 10-item scale included: your partner had a fight with a friend; your partner can't find an important assignment; your partner terminates a friendship with a friend; and your partner accidentally destroys an important assignment. Participants estimated how much comforting effort they would expend for each of the 10 items, using a 5-point scale, with 0 designating no effort (not a situation that needs comforting) and 5 designating a very high effort. The scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = .52$ ).

*Global equity.* The global measure of equity was constructed using a four-item measure of ratings by participants of their own and their partners' relational rewards and costs. To complete this measure, called *global equity*, participants rated their own and their partners' outcomes from and contributions to their relationship on an eight-item scale from 4 (extremely positive) to -4 (extremely negative). There was no zero point on the scale to ensure there would be no division by zero. Each participant's ratio of rewards to costs was subtracted from the partner's ratio of rewards to costs ( $M = -.09$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). A positive score indicated the participant is over-benefited, a negative score under-benefited.

*Molecular equity.* Participants also filled out measures that assessed positively valued attributes for themselves and their partners. These attribute assessments were considered contributions to and rewards from the relationship. This scale included 27 items intended to tap into qualities such as attractiveness, earning potential, stability, and supportiveness. Participants rated themselves and their partners from 1 (bottom 1% of the population) to 100 (top 1%) for each attribute. To create a measure of equity between the participants and their partners, the participant's score was subtracted from the

partner's score for each attribute. Thus, each item is represented by the difference score between a participant's self-perception and that person's perception of a partner.

Attempts to create molecular equity scores from reliable subscales, according to a priori assignment of items to categories, did not result in satisfactory reliability using Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . To address this problem, principal components analysis was used to create new variables from the scale. Varimax rotation was used so the analysis would generate a set of uncorrelated predictors for regression analyses.

An initial principal components analysis resulted in eight factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 69.13% of the variance in the scale. However, because the scree plot indicated that a five-factor solution was acceptable, and in order to further reduce the data, a second principal components analysis was conducted, forcing a five-factor solution. The resulting factors were similar to the first five factors extracted in the initial analysis.

The first factor, with an eigenvalue of 5.61 and accounting for 20.79% of the variance, was labeled *supportiveness* because the items with primary loadings on the factor were those measuring the difference in how kind and understanding, friendly, comforting, supportive, empathic, and dominant (negative loading) the participant is compared to the partner. The second factor, with an eigenvalue of 3.49 and accounting for 12.92% of the variance, was defined as *attractiveness*, with primary loadings for differences in physical attractiveness, aggressiveness, power, and sexiness. The third factor, with an eigenvalue of 2.17 and accounting for 8.04% of the variance, measured *financial security*; the differences in a participant and a partner's good earning capacity, high social status, intelligence, ambition, and wealth loaded primarily on this factor. The fourth factor, *pragmatism*, with an eigenvalue of 2.14 and accounting for 7.93% of the variance, was defined by the following items: good housekeeper, will (did) graduate college, religious, easygoing (negative loading), and emotionally stable (negative loading). This combination seemed to indicate that a person could be relied upon to accomplish significant, though not exciting, tasks (keeping the house in order, accomplishing the goal of graduation), and that spiritual strength or emotional variability can prevent complacency and contribute to one's motivation to achieve goals. The final factor, *heredity*, was defined by the terms good heredity and wants children (negative loading), with an eigenvalue of 1.62 and accounting for 5.98% of the variance. Together, these five factors accounted for 55.66% of the variance in responses to the attributes scales. The component score coefficient matrix was used to transform the 27 difference variables into the five new variables. As a result, each of the molecular equity variables is a standardized variable (i.e.,  $M = 0.0$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ), and the molecular variables are all uncorrelated with each other (all  $r_s = .00$ ). Correlations between the five molecular equity measures and the global equity measure are presented in Table 1. Of the molecular variables, only supportiveness equity is significantly correlated with the global measure of overall equity.

**Table 1.** Correlation of Global and Molecular Equity Variables.

	Correlation with Overall Equity
<i>Molecular Measures</i>	
Supportiveness	.67*
Attractiveness	.02
Financial Security	.08
Pragmatism	-.08
<u>Heredity</u>	<u>.13</u>
* $p < .01$	
Note: No correlations were significant at $.05 > p > .01$ . For correlations with overall equity, $n = 92$ . For all other correlations, $n = 93$ .	

## Results

All tests were conducted with  $\alpha$  set at .05. Multiple regression analyses were performed with the linear and quadratic measures of global equity, linear and quadratic measures of molecular equity, and comforting effort entered as predictors of the sensitivity of an individual's comforting. Linear measures of equity ranged from negative values (when the participant was under-benefited) to positive values (when over-benefited).

Quadratic measures of equity were used to determine if individuals provided better comforting when the relationship was equitable than when it was not. Quadratic scores were calculated by squaring the linear score for each molecular measure as well as for the global measure.

Separate tests of the relationships between equity and comforting quality were conducted for global and for molecular measures of equity, in accordance with hypotheses one, two, three, and four. In addition, because research question one asks whether effort mediates the relationship between equity and comforting, the hypotheses were tested in the context of the possible mediated relationship.

Accordingly, two sets of regression analyses were performed, one involving the global measure of equity and the other involving the molecular measures of equity. Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) method for testing mediated relationships, a series of three regression analyses was used to test each mediated effect. In the first regression equation, the mediator is regressed on the independent variable. In the second equation, the dependent variable is regressed on the independent variable. Finally, in the



third regression model, the dependent variable is regressed on both the independent variable and the mediator. If the mediated model is appropriate, then the independent variable will emerge as a significant predictor of the mediator (in the first equation) and the dependent variable (in the second equation), and the predictive effect of the independent variable will be significantly weaker in the model that includes the mediator (the third equation) than in the model that does not include the mediator (the second equation) (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

First, hypotheses one and two were tested. Hypothesis one predicted a linear relationship between global equity and comforting, with the most sophisticated comforting performed by over-benefited individuals and the least sophisticated comforting provided by under-benefited individuals. Hypothesis two predicted a quadratic relationship, with the best comforting quality offered by those in equitable relationships as measured globally. In the initial multiple regression model, effort was regressed onto the linear and quadratic measures of global equity. This analysis did not produce a significant multiple correlation:  $R = .12$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(2, 110) = .85$ ,  $p = .43$ . Next, comforting quality was regressed onto the linear and quadratic measures of global equity. This regression analysis also did not produce a significant multiple correlation:  $R = .16$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(2, 111) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .24$ . Finally, comforting quality was regressed onto the linear and quadratic terms for global equity, along with the effort variable. Again, the test did not produce a significant multiple correlation:  $R = .19$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3, 109) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .25$ . This test did not provide support for hypothesis one or two. In answer to research question one, this analysis did not find that effort mediated an association between equity and comforting quality.

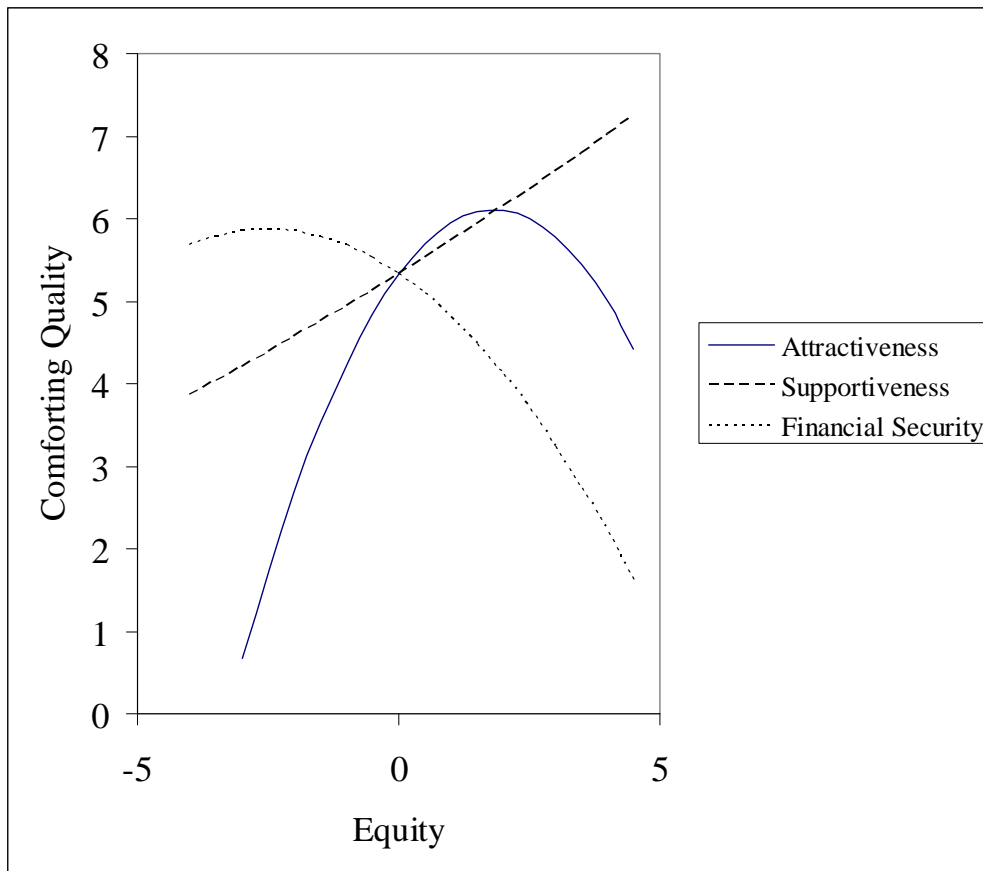
Next, hypotheses three and four were tested. Hypothesis three predicted a linear relationship between the molecular measures of equity and comforting quality, and hypothesis four predicted a quadratic effect of molecular measures of equity on comforting quality. In the initial model, effort was regressed onto the linear and quadratic terms for the five molecular equity variables created through principal components analysis. The multiple correlation was significant:  $R = .46$ ,  $R^2 = .21$ ,  $F(10, 81) = 2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . The only significant predictor of comforting effort was financial security equity ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $b = .18$ ,  $t = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The second analysis regressed comforting quality onto the linear and quadratic forms of the molecular equity variables. This analysis produced a significant multiple correlation:  $R = .52$ ,  $R^2 = .27$ ,  $F(10, 81) = 2.96$ ,  $p < .05$ . The linear ( $\beta = -.49$ ,  $b = -.85$ ,  $t = -4.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and quadratic ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $b = -.21$ ,  $t = -2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ) terms for attractiveness equity were the only significant predictors of comforting quality. In the final analysis, the quality of a participant's comforting strategies was regressed onto the linear and quadratic forms of the five molecular equity variables created through principal components analysis, along with the measure of comforting effort. The regression produced a significant multiple correlation:  $R = .54$ ,  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(11, 80) = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ . Effort was not a significant predictor of comforting quality when entered into the equation with the molecular equity measures:  $\beta = .16$ ,  $b = .57$ ,  $t = 1.51$ ,  $p = .14$ .

Inspection of the regression coefficients for this final regression model revealed that the linear form of supportiveness equity ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $b = .23$ ,  $t = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ), attractiveness equity ( $\beta = .49$ ,  $b = .85$ ,  $t = 4.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and financial security equity ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $b = -.44$ ,  $t = -2.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of the sensitivity of comforting communication. The linear form of pragmatic equity

( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $b = -.14$ ,  $t = -.76$ ,  $p = .45$ ) and heredity equity ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $b = .16$ ,  $t = .81$ ,  $p = .42$ ) did not produce a significant regression coefficient.

In addition, the quadratic form of attractiveness equity was significant:  $\beta = -.34$ ,  $b = -.23$ ,  $t = -2.50$ ,  $p < .05$ . The quadratic forms of supportiveness equity ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $b = .01$ ,  $t = .07$ ,  $p = .94$ ), financial security equity ( $\beta = -.11$ ,  $b = -.09$ ,  $t = -1.02$ ,  $p = .31$ ), pragmatic equity ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $b = .05$ ,  $t = .52$ ,  $p = .61$ ), and heredity equity ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $b = .02$ ,  $t = .15$ ,  $p = .88$ ) did not produce significant regression coefficients. Figure 1 was created to visually represent the relationship between attractiveness equity and comforting quality, with all other variables held constant at the mean. (For comparison purposes, Figure 1 also shows the association between supportiveness equity and comforting quality, as well as the association between financial security equity and comforting quality. Each association is calculated separately, with all other variables held constant at the mean.)

Results provided partial support for hypotheses three and four. Results for supportiveness equity showed a linear association between supportiveness equity and comforting quality consistent with hypothesis three: the more over-benefited the participant was in terms of supportiveness, the more sophisticated comforting that person provided. The quadratic term for attractiveness equity was a significant predictor of comforting sophistication, as predicted by hypothesis four (see Figure 1). That is, comforting sophistication shows a curvilinear, inverted-U shaped association with comforting quality, with a sharper decrease to the left of the peak than to the right of the peak, as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Predicted value of comforting quality as a function of three molecular equity variables.

(Each association between an equity variable and comforting quality was calculated with all other variables held constant at the mean.) *Note:* Although only the linear terms for financial security equity and supportiveness equity emerged as significant predictors, the coefficients for the quadratic terms also must be included in the equation, resulting in the observed curve in the financial security equity line above.

Because the variables created through the factor analysis are standardized, the value of 0 for attractiveness equity does not necessarily represent the exact point of equity. Nonetheless, it appears that comforting quality decreases as a person becomes more under-benefited, and that this decrease outpaces the decrease in comforting sophistication as a person becomes more over-benefited. Results for financial security equity were quite interesting. That is, financial security equity was positively related to comforting effort, but negatively related to comforting quality. So, the more over-benefited a person was in terms of financial security, the more effort that person expended in comforting, but the less sophisticated it would be. Pragmatic equity and heredity equity were unrelated to comforting sophistication.

The relationship between equity and comforting quality differs for global and molecular measures of equity. In this study, the global measure of equity was not a significant predictor of comforting quality, whereas three of the five molecular equity measures were significant predictors of comforting quality.

### ***Discussion***

One of the primary purposes of this study was to examine whether perceptions of equity in romantic relationships influence people's comforting communication within those relationships. The results indicate that relational variables do influence comforting. Past research has indicated that people are able to distinguish sophisticated comforting messages as more sensitive and effective than non-sophisticated comforting messages (Burlison, 1994), and that more sophisticated comforting results in positive outcomes for the recipient (e.g., Jones & Wirtz, 2006). The present research indicates that people may alter their comforting strategies, depending on their perceptions of equity within romantic relationships.

We proposed a critical test of two alternative ways of looking at comforting from an equity theory perspective. One approach examined comforting as a balancing mechanism. From this perspective, we anticipated a positive linear relationship between perceptions of equity and comforting sophistication (Walster et al., 1973). The more benefited that people perceive themselves to be, relative to their partner, the more sophisticated comforting they should provide. Perceptions of global equity were unrelated to comforting quality, but findings regarding perceptions of equity specifically related to supportiveness did show support for the notion of comforting as a balancing mechanism.

Thus, when individuals gauge supportiveness in their relationships, they use comforting as a balancing mechanism, improving the sophistication of comforting when they are over-benefited and reducing it when they are under-benefited. For supportiveness this makes a great deal of sense. Comforting reflects a type of supportive communication, and empathy, one of the characteristics inherent in supportiveness, has been shown to predict sophisticated comforting behavior and other prosocial actions (Burlison, 1983; Stiff et al., 1988). Thus, enacting high-quality comforting behavior offers the best opportunity (as compared to global equity or equity in attractiveness, financial security, pragmatism, or heredity) to balance supportiveness-based perceptions of equity. That is, enacting comforting behavior directly influences perceptions of supportiveness within the relationship, whereas enacting comforting behavior would not directly influence perceptions of, for instance, financial security within the relationship. Therefore, it is unsurprising that people seek to balance perceptions of supportiveness using comforting strategies.

Further evidence that individuals evaluate and respond to equity differently across a variety of attributes is provided by the findings for equity perceptions based on differences in financial security. Although a linear relationship existed between financial security differences and comforting sophistication, this result did not fit the balancing mechanism. Individuals provided the most sophisticated comforting when they believed they were more financially secure than their partner.

We believe that this finding may reflect a caretaking bias in relationships. Individuals who perceive themselves as having greater wealth or status than their partner may feel that their role in the

relationship is akin to that of a parent or guardian. If individuals perceive that their status is an important contribution they make to the relationship, they may enjoy being able to effectively comfort their partners. Burleson (1994) notes that sophisticated comfort givers often feel better about themselves after providing comfort. It may be that providing effective comforting is a particularly positive experience for those who feel their status creates an obligation to take care of their partners.

Perception of attractiveness equity also emerged as a positive predictor of comforting quality. The effect for attractiveness, however, is modified by a significant quadratic effect. The quadratic effect for attractiveness equity provides partial support for the second approach to equity in relationships: the maintenance model. Although the exact point of equity could not be identified in this analysis, sophistication of comforting improves when attractiveness moves toward equity from the two extremes of under-benefitedness and over-benefitedness. Thus, individuals seem to use comforting as a maintenance mechanism to preserve relationships in which their attractiveness approximately equals their partner's attractiveness. Those who are over-benefited (the partner is more attractive than the participant) provide less sophisticated comforting, and those who are under-benefited (the participant is more attractive than the partner) provide the least sophisticated comforting. This finding is consistent with research concerning equity and maintenance behaviors in marriages (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 2006) and friendships (Messman et al., 2000). Observation of support for the maintenance model, rather than the balancing mechanism, in the association between attractiveness equity and comforting quality is not surprising. That is, enacting comforting behavior does not offer the benefit of balancing perceptions of physical attractiveness in the relationship, so it makes sense that attractiveness equity would motivate comforting behavior in ways consistent with the maintenance model.

A further feature of this finding regarding attractiveness equity lies in the fact that only attractiveness equity resulted in findings consistent with the maintenance model. This finding may reflect the salience of physical attractiveness in the life circumstances of college students, as compared with other characteristics. The students in this sample came from a student body of primarily traditional-aged, upper middle-class students. A dating partner's pragmatic qualities and heredity are not of immediate relevance, as romantic partners in this sample were unlikely to formally live together, to have children together, or to pool financial resources. If partners were planning a life together, the attributes encompassed in pragmatism and good heredity would likely be more significant. Furthermore, the tendency toward matching (i.e., the tendency to choose a mate who is equally attractive as oneself), which is more prevalent in committed than in casual relationships, along with the tendency for individuals to prefer highly attractive potential mates in an experimental setting (see Takeuchi, 2006, for review), seems consistent with our findings showing a peak near the equity (i.e., matched) level for physical attractiveness, but with a general preference for the over-benefited state over the under-benefited state among those in inequitable relationships. That is, matching, as seen in equitable relationships, motivates the most sensitive comforting, but among those in inequitable relationships, those who are over-benefited (i.e., with a relatively highly attractive partner) provide better comforting than those who are under-benefited. Perhaps the balance mechanism and the caretaking role explanation offered for the effects of, respectively, supportiveness and financial security equity, demonstrate a division of labor or role complementarity in romantic relationships distinct from the matching emphasized in perceptions of physical attractiveness.

In summary, our findings indicate that how equity is measured will influence how equity is related to behavior. Overall, both the maintenance (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Messman et al., 2000) and balancing (Walster et al., 1973) models of equity received some support. The fact that molecular measures of equity behaved differently in their relation to comforting sophistication — and were largely uncorrelated with global equity (see Table 1) — indicates that equity scholars should be cautious when using global measures of equity. It also indicates that support for both balancing and maintenance models of equity and communication may be more or less applicable, depending on how equity is measured.

Finally, research question one asked if the effort one expends on comforting mediates the relationship between equity and comforting sophistication. We found that the effort individuals report expending on comforting does not predict the quality of comforting individuals provide. Rather than mediating the association between equity and comforting quality, it appears that effort acts as a suppressor variable in this association. In the only significant effect related to comforting effort, financial security equity was a positive predictor of comforting effort, so that those who are over-benefited in financial security put the greatest effort into comforting. This finding underlines the lack of a relationship between comforting effort and comforting quality, as those who are over-benefited in financial security also provide the least sophisticated comforting. Perhaps dispositional characteristics such as cognitive complexity (Samter, 2002) or attachment style (Weger & Polcar, 2002), or relational characteristics such as the equity variables measured in this study are better predictors of one's response to crises than is effort.

#### *Limitations*

Limitations of this study exist in several areas. First, the sensitivity of comforting was rated based on a strictly verbal message constructed by participants in response to a hypothetical scenario. The scenario may or may not have been relevant to the participants. The situation and their responses might or might not be representative of their actual behavior in existing relationships. Also, the participants' comforting messages were coded according to their verbal form and content, but without any information about the tone or other nonverbal messages that participants would use. Clearly, nonverbal behaviors are also quite important in the provision of and perception of comforting behavior (Burlison, 1994; Jones & Burlison, 2003; Jones & Guerrero, 2001).

Second, the participants in the sample were undergraduate students at a university with a predominantly Caucasian American, upper middle-class student population. Results of this study should be generalized to other groups with caution.

Finally, the inability to construct a set of reliable sub-scales from the 27-item attribute scale was a limitation of this investigation. Although other researchers could construct similar sets of variables using factor analytic methods, the lack of a reliable scale system makes further investigation of the exact molecular equity variables measured in this study difficult. As with the other limitations, the lack of a reliable scale to measure molecular equity should be addressed in future research.

*Future Research*

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study presents promising directions for future research. The emphasis in this study on the influence of the relational variable of equity on comforting behavior demonstrates that future research on the influence of the relationship on comforting communication likely will yield interesting results. In addition to continuing the inquiry into relational effects on comforting, future research should investigate the combined impact of verbal and nonverbal comforting messages and messages actually delivered to the partner. Perhaps such a study could ask partners to role play comforting in response to a scenario or to discuss an actual problem that one of them is experiencing. Such a study would provide more complete information about the quality of a person's comforting communication. In addition, the ability to collect information about perceived equity from both partners and to observe the comforting behavior of both partners would add to knowledge of the specific relationship between variables reported in this study.

This study presents information that would be useful in extending equity research. The impact of the molecular measures of equity indicates that such an approach to measuring equity probably will be fruitful. In particular, the finding regarding financial security equity, with the possible explanation of a provider role, runs counter to previous research and the predictions of equity theory. Further investigation into the ways that equity at global and molecular levels affects communication is warranted.

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