Long-Term Equity within a Group: An Application of the Seniority Norm in Japan

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Adams' (1965) pioneering research on equity theory explored the concept of fairness in interpersonal relationships by outlining how resources are exchanged between two people. According to Walster, Berscheid, & Walster (1973), a relationship is considered equitable when participants' outcome/input ratio is equal and is perceived to be fair by the participants. If one's outcome/input ratio is more or less than the other's, then the relationship is considered inequitable. Individuals who experience an inequitable relationship suffer distress and are motivated to establish equity. Considerable amount of evidence has accumulated to support this model in explaining interpersonal behavior (Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Mainstream equity theory, evolved from earlier work of Adams (1965), has been reformulated by Hatfield et al., (1978) to examine outcome/input ratio of individuals in a particular timeframe and relationship (i.e., the theory focuses on short-term, one-to-one equity). Austin and Walster (1974, 1975) described such a model as the "person-specific equity" model. Austin and Walster (1974, 1975) articulate an alternative approach that extends the person-specific equity model, known as the "Equity with the World." The Equity with the World is defined as "the degree of equity present in the *totality* of a person's relationships during a given period of time" (Austin & Walster, 1974, p. 478). Austin & Walster (1974, 1975), and Moschetti & Kues (1978) found that people engage in trans-relational equity assessment, which deals with not only one particular relationship, but on two or more relationships. In the experiments, the subjects who experienced disadvantageous outcomes in one relationship showed a strong tendency to compensate and to seek greater rewards in other relationships. The results were interpreted as the subjects' attempt to maintain overall equity with the world.

The Seniority Norm

There is, however, a relationship in which the person-specific equity theory and even the extended Equity with the World model cannot adequately explain. In social groups such as the American fraternity club or sorority club, equitable relationships are not maintained in a particular timeframe and situation. In the case of fraternity clubs that maintains hierarchical relationships, not all members enjoy the same benefits and privileges. The group members are differentiated by their seniority status, and senior members receive preferential treatments and services (e.g., in some fraternity clubs, incoming freshmen are required to cook, clean, and serve the wishes of the senior members); known as the "seniority norm."

From the perspective of the person-specific equity theory, the seniority norm appears to violate the equity principle and therefore junior members should perceive the relationship to be inequitable. Senior members have access to more privileges and enjoy more benefits and junior members are in a disadvantageous position. The asymmetry of the benefits received will not usually be resolved or reciprocated since the senior members will graduate and leave the group.

Although the seniority norm appears to violate the equity principle from the person-specific, short-term perspective, the long-term equity can be maintained by considering the trans-relational aspects of a group. An incoming junior member of a group have to serve senior members, and the senior members do not reciprocate. However, as long as the group persists and the seniority norm is maintained, the junior members can expect similar privileges and benefits of current senior members when they themselves become a senior member. Although this type of short-term inequity is also found in many sports teams, recreational clubs, and interest groups, the equity is maintained in a long-term, trans-relational, and trans-situational context.

The Equity with the World model cannot adequately explain the seniority norm. Within the Equity with the World model, a person who experienced an inequitable relationship will attempt to find a non-specific other whom they could enjoy surplus benefits from. Under the seniority norm, the target person is predefined as an incoming junior member of one's ingroup. The incoming junior members will serve them when they themselves become senior members. Equity will be maintained in the seniority norm if the ingroup persists and newcomers uphold the seniority norm. This certainty of future benefits makes it possible for the junior members to willingly serve the senior members.

Long-Term Equity within a Group

The *Long-Term Equity within a Group* (L-TEG) model extends the equity theory by incorporating the long-term, and trans-relational aspects. The seniority norm is an example of the Long-Term Equity within a Group. Within this model, a new member of a group is willing to serve senior members with an expectation that the person will be served when the person becomes a senior member. In other words, one could say: "For me, the current inequity with my senior members is not a problem because I will become a senior member and enjoy similar benefits soon." By accepting the seniority norm, individual members could expect that equity will be maintained in the long run.

As discussed above, under the seniority norm, an equitable senior-junior relationship is maintained if the following two conditions are met. First, the group must remain intact. If the group is dismantled, the current junior

members will not be able to enjoy the benefits since there will not be incoming junior members to serve them. Second, the seniority norm must be maintained in the group. If the seniority norm is rejected by incoming junior members, the current senior members will not receive benefits that they once provided to their former senior members. In these conditions, junior members will accept the seniority norm and consider it as fair.

Japanese Society and Culture

Japanese society is found to be relatively high in *Power Distance* and *Collectivism* compared to Western societies (Hofstede, 1980). The seniority norm, known as *Nenko-Joretsu* in Japanese, is widespread in many informal and formal groups. For example, rookies of university baseball teams are required to prepare the ground before a game, pick up stray balls, and clean up after the game for senior members. Even in informal situations, junior members are expected to be compliant and entertain the senior members. Similarly, in Japanese companies, junior workers are expected to work harder, show respect to senior workers, and receive less salary compared to senior workers.

There are several reasons why Japanese people are likely to accept the seniority norm. First, Japanese people tend to adopt a long-term perspective in forming and maintaining their interpersonal relationships. Acceptance of the seniority norm requires individuals to adopt a long-term perspective since the interval between the time of serving and served is usually several years. This is consistent with Triandis' (1990) observation that people living in collectivistic cultures tend to foster long-term interpersonal relationships. They do not expect immediate reciprocity, but emphasize the importance on long-term reciprocity.

Second, Japanese people tend to see individuals in terms of their ingroup membership. Individuals who have collectivistic tendencies are likely to see one's ingroup as being more homogeneous than outgroups (Hidaka & Yamaguchi, 1994; Triandis, 1990, 1994). In a study on Equity with the World, Austin and Walster (1975) suggested that individuals were more likely to engage in trans-relational equity with similar others. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Japanese people, who are relatively collectivistic, are more likely to engage in trans-relational equity in an ingroup situation.

Third, anthropologists point out that Japanese social groups are stable and long-standing (Hsu, 1975; Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1970). Thus, it may be reasonable for Japanese people to expect long-term equity maintenance. The indigenous Japanese concept of *On* (obligation) is an example of a long-term equity maintenance (Ho, 1993).

We experimentally tested the validity of the L-TEG model, and more specifically, the seniority norm, with a sample of Japanese college students. In the present study, we examined how students perceive a protester of the seniority norm in a fictitious situation as a third party. Research has

demonstrated that impartial observers react to injustice in much the same way as participants (Baker, 1974; Lerner, 1965, 1970; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Austin, Walster, & Utne (1976) concluded that impartial observers' reactions to injustice were similar to participants' reactions, although they are less passionate and more objective than participants. Thus, it is meaningful to examine the perception of subjects who evaluate a fictitious scenario as a third party.

The independent variable in the present study was the expectation of the persistence of a fictitious ingroup of the stimulus person. In the condition labelled as the *breakup*, the group was to be disbanded in the near future. In the *control* condition, there was no mention of the future of the group. Leventhal (1980) suggested that individuals' concern with inequity and injustice may become salient when exchanged resources change suddenly. Similarly, Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay (1985) point out that concerns with equity may become salient when there are dramatic shifts in the relationship.

We also examined a contributing factor, the subjects' attitude toward the seniority norm that affects the perception of equity. Even in the collectivistic Japanese society, there are individuals who reject the seniority norm. Therefore, it was expected that those who have a positive attitude toward the seniority norm will dislike the protester of the seniority norm, whereas those who have a negative attitude toward the seniority norm will like the protester, due to similarity in attitudes (Byrne & Nelson, 1965).

Attitude toward the seniority norm may also operate as a moderating variable. It is expected that people who have a positive attitude toward the seniority norm will sympathize with the protester who cannot maintain the long-term equity within the group and accept the person's objection to the seniority norm. Therefore, it is expected that those who have a positive attitude toward the seniority norm will like the protester of the seniority norm more when his ingroup is going to be disbanded than when it is not. On the other hand, since the L-TEG model is based on the perception of fairness of people who accept the seniority norm, our experimental manipulation may not affect people who reject the seniority norm. Thus, for individuals who have negative attitudes toward the seniority norm, a direct prediction was not made. The above reasoning led us to the following two predictions.

Prediction 1: Compared to the opponents of the seniority norm, the proponents will perceive the protester as less desirable.

Prediction 2: Compared to the control condition, the proponents will perceive the protester of the seniority norm as more desirable when the protester's ingroup is to be disbanded (breakup condition).

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 90 Japanese female undergraduate students recruited from a women's college in Tokyo area. They were enrolled in introductory psychology classes; their age ranged from 18 to 25 years old; 99% of them were first year students; and their major was either English literature or Japanese literature.

Procedure

The subjects were classified into two groups according to their individual attitudes toward the seniority norm: (1) subjects who have a positive attitude toward the seniority norm (i.e., *proponents* of the seniority norm), and (2) subjects who have a negative attitude toward the seniority norm (i.e., *opponents* of the seniority norm). They were then randomly assigned to either the breakup condition or control condition.

The subjects were given a questionnaire entitled, *Research on College Club Activities*. There were two types of questionnaires corresponding to two different experimental conditions scenarios (control vs. breakup).

Scenario

The subjects were presented with the following fictitious scenario:

There is a first year college student, named Sato, who is enrolled in a college tennis club. In the club's tradition only the first-year members do the "dirty-work" such as picking up stray balls, preparing the courts, and disassembling the equipment after the game. As a first-year student, Sato has been doing the "dirty work." One day, however, Sato went to the leader of the club and complained against this norm. Sato's objection was that "this norm is not just and from now on, let us share our dirty work equally.

Experimental Conditions

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and read the corresponding scenario. Information about the future of the group was varied in two ways: (1) the tennis club is going to be disbanded at the end of the year (breakup condition), or (2) no mention is made about the future of the club (control condition).

Dependent Variable

After having read one of the two scenarios, the subjects were asked to rate the perceived desirability of the protester on 7-point scales that measured: (1) likability, (2) independence, (3) rationality, and (4) reliability of the protester.

Attitude toward the Seniority Norm The subjects rated on a 5-point scale which measures their attitude toward the seniority norm (ranging from 1: very unacceptable, to 5: very acceptable). They were thoroughly debriefed at the end of the experiment.

Results

The Manipulation Check

To examine the effectiveness of the manipulation of the persistence of the protester's ingroup, the subjects were asked to rate the likelihood that the tennis club would exist a year later. The result of the one-way analysis of variance yielded a significant effect for the experimental conditions, $F(1, 89) = 41.41, p < .0001$. In other words, the perceived persistence was rated lower in the breakup condition when compared to the control condition. Thus, the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation was confirmed.

The Classification of Subjects.

Based on the subjects' attitudes toward the seniority norm, they were classified into three groups. First, those subjects who answered 1 or 2 were classified as the *opponents* of the seniority norm. Second, those subjects who answered 4 or 5 were classified as the *proponents* of the seniority norm. Third, those subjects who gave the response of 3 (i.e., they had either ambivalent or undecided feelings about the seniority norm) were not included in the analysis. The classification of the subjects into the proponents and opponents of the seniority norm and the prior random assignment of the subjects into the breakup or control condition yielded four comparison groups: (1) the proponents of the seniority norm in the control condition (*proponent-control*, a total of 17 subjects); (2) the proponents of the seniority norm in the breakup condition (*proponent-breakup*, 17 subjects); (3) the opponents of the seniority norm in the control condition (*opponent-control*, 13 subjects); and (4) the opponents of the seniority norm in the breakup condition (*opponent-breakup*, 15 subjects).

The Evaluation of the Protester

A principal component analysis was conducted on the four evaluation items, which measured the perceived desirability of the protester. It yielded one factor solution, explaining 53% of the total variance, with the item loadings varying from .61 to .80. A composite index named *Desirability* score was computed by averaging the scores based on the four items.

Table 1 shows the mean scores on the desirability of the protester by experimental conditions, differentiated by the subjects' attitude toward the seniority norm. As can be seen in Table 1, the opponents of the seniority norm perceived the protester as more desirable than the proponents of the seniority norm. A 2 x 2 analysis of variance was conducted on the Desirability score. The main effect for attitude toward the seniority norm was statistically significant, F $(1, 58) = 9.98, p <.005$. This result supports Prediction 1.

Table 1. The Effect of Subject's Attitude Toward the Seniority Norm and Future Persistence of the Stimulus Group on Perceived Desirability of the Protester of the Seniority Norm

Attitude toward the seniority norm	Group's fate	
	Control	Breakup
Pro	3.16	3.92
Con	4.55	3.83

The higher the number, the more desirable the protester was perceived.
Minimum value = 1, Maximum value = 7.

The interaction effect for experimental conditions x attitude toward the seniority norm was also statistically significant, F $(1, 58) = 6.98, p < .05$. The planned comparison between the proponent-control and proponent-breakup condition yielded a statistically significant result, F $(1, 32) = 5.08, p < 05$. This result supports Prediction 2, since the proponents of the seniority norm perceived the protester as more desirable in the breakup condition than in the control condition.

Although it was not predicted, a follow-up comparison between the opponent-breakup and opponent-control condition yielded another significant result, $F(1, 26) = 5.28, p < .05$. The opponents of the seniority norm perceived the protester as less desirable in the breakup condition than in the control condition.

Discussion

The present results clearly support our predictions. The proponents of the seniority norm liked the protester of the seniority norm to a lesser extent than the opponents of the seniority norm (Prediction 1). When the ingroup of the protester was to be disbanded, the protester was more liked by the proponents of the seniority norm (Prediction 2). Thus, the predictions derived from the Long-Term Equity within a Group model were supported. It appears that the proponents sympathized with the protester who could not maintain the L-TEG.

We found an unexpected, but interesting result. The opponents of the seniority norm liked the protester less when the person's ingroup was expected to be disbanded than when the group was not going to be disbanded. It appears that the opponents of the seniority norm are objecting to the long-term, trans-relational equity principle, in favor of the short-term, person-specific equity principle. This result suggests that the opponents liked the protester's *heroic* efforts, in the control condition, to reject the L-TEG and establish the person-specific equity in the ingroup. When the ingroup is to be disbanded, on the other hand, the protester's behavior is considered as reasonable and not at all *heroic*, since the protester could experience both long-term and short-term inequity if the person accepts the seniority norm.

The results of the present experiment demonstrate the usefulness of the L-TEG model in explaining the seniority norm. In a situation in which one's ingroup is expected to persist, a protester of the seniority norm would be disliked, since the person should tolerate the seniority norm as a junior member and expects benefits as a future senior member. In a situation in which one's ingroup will be disbanded, protesting against the seniority norm is considered legitimate since the person will not receive any benefits and thus experience inequity. For a stable group, the seniority norm could be considered equitable from the long-term, trans-relational perspective. Even if the short-term person-specific inequity exists in the group, the persistence of the group could ensure equitable relationships in the long run.

It should be noted, however, that there is a limitation in generalizability of the results obtained in this study. The subjects employed in this study were Japanese female undergraduate students. Thus it can not be exclusively concluded that these results show that any people who have positive attitude toward the seniority norm employ the L-TEG framework. Further research should be done using diversified subjects who are different in sex, age, social class, and culture.

The L-TEG model has important implications for people's decision making processes and group participation. Individual beliefs about the nature of group stability can affect their decision to join the group which maintain the seniority norm. If they consider a social group as a permanent entity which will exists over a long period, then they are more likely to participate in the group and sacrifice for the group, expecting long-term equity. If, on the other hand, they believe a group to be a transient aggregate of individuals, then they may not be willing to participate in and sacrifice for the group. In Japan, many social groups and companies foster the ideas inherent in the L-TEG model. The concept of lifetime employment, paternalism, filial piety, and *On* (obligations) are examples of the L-TEG model.

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Note