

CHAPTER 5

For the Good of Others: Toward a Positive Psychology of Sacrifice

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It's Friday night, and you and your partner can't agree on which movie to see. You want to see the new romantic comedy, and your partner wants to watch the latest action film.

You're sitting in rush-hour traffic at the end of an exhausting workday, looking forward to getting home. Your partner calls and asks you to pick up dry cleaning from a store back by your office.

Your partner calls to excitedly tell you about a great new job offer in another state, far away from your family and friends.

Situations in which partners have conflicting interests and desires are inevitable in close relationships. After all, what is best for one person may not always coincide with his or her partner's own interests, and vice versa. Sometimes those situations are as mundane as choosing which movie to see or deciding to run an errand for your partner; while at other times they can be as momentous as choosing where to build a life together. Couples must learn to negotiate these times successfully if they want their relationships to survive and grow. One way that partners can deal with conflicting interests is to sacrifice, defined as giving up one's own interests in order to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). Many people include sacrifice, along with caring, respect, and loyalty in their definition of what it means to truly love another person (Noller, 1996).

The topic of sacrifice is important for several reasons. First, it is inevitable that couples will be confronted with situations in which they have

conflicting interests and desires. It is essential that we understand more about when sacrifice is a useful and beneficial strategy for couples if we want to promote healthy, happy, and long-lasting relationships. Second, sacrifice is a topic to which everyone can relate. If you bring up the topic of sacrifice at a dinner party, each guest will be waiting their turn to tell their own story about being the one staying up late to feed the crying baby or attending a dreaded family gathering as a favor to their partner. Third, shifting gender roles in today's society that place a greater emphasis on autonomy and independence for women may create even more possibilities for conflicts of interest in male-female romantic relationships. In some ways, learning how to promote healthy sacrifice—for both women and men—may be more important than ever before.

In this chapter, we explore the role of sacrifice in romantic relationships, considering both the benefits and the costs of decisions to give up one's own wishes and preferences for the good of another person. In the first section, we provide a definition of sacrifice and review the ways in which sacrifice has been measured in psychological research. In the second section, we discuss factors that promote sacrifice, examining the circumstances under which people are willing to sacrifice their own self-interest for the sake of their partner or their relationship. In the third section, we review research on the positive side of sacrifice, presenting research on the potential benefits of sacrifice for the person who sacrifices, the recipient of sacrifice, as well as the relationship between the partners. Fourth, we advance a word of caution about the possible dangers of sacrifice, especially when sacrifice is not mutual in relationships. Fifth, we present a motivational perspective on sacrifice that sheds light on when sacrifice is beneficial versus costly for people and their relationships. In the sixth section, we consider the roles of both gender and culture with regard to the willingness to sacrifice. In the final section, we present several important directions for future research on sacrifice. At the end of the chapter we present personal mini-experiments that will enable you to apply the research on sacrifice to your own life and relationships.

We should note at the outset that this chapter focuses on sacrifice in the context of *adult romantic relationships* because the bulk of the empirical research on sacrifice has focused on these types of relationships. Nevertheless, we believe that understanding sacrifice in a variety of different relationship contexts (e.g., with friends, parents, children, etc.) is an important endeavor and one that provides many interesting directions for future work. Further, our discussion of sacrifice is based on the assumption that sacrifices are made willingly, so this chapter excludes situations in which an individual is coerced or controlled into giving in to another person.

WHAT IS SACRIFICE?

Consider the following three actions: (a) Jane spends her Saturday afternoon helping her boyfriend move to a new apartment; (b) Ryan orders Chinese food because it is his girlfriend's favorite food; and (c) Joe transfers

to a different college to be closer to his girlfriend. Sacrifice has been defined as foregoing one's immediate self-interest in order to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship (Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). Based on this definition of sacrifice, would you consider any of the above actions a sacrifice? Without being provided with additional information about why Jane, Ryan, and Joe engaged in those behaviors, and what they had to give up in the process, it is difficult to tell if their actions represent sacrifices. In this section, we clearly define sacrifice, we distinguish between sacrifice and help, and we describe different types of sacrifices that people make in their relationships.

Is Sacrifice the Same as Helping Others or Doing Favors?

Is sacrificing the same as helping or doing someone a favor? Although sacrificing for a romantic partner may indeed be a provision of help, sacrificing and helping are not the same thing. In general, helping behavior provides a positive benefit for another person without giving up one's own personal goals (Eisenberg, 1990). Sacrifice, on the other hand, involves providing a positive benefit for another individual by subordinating one's own personal goals and potentially accruing personal costs in the process (Killen & Turiel, 1998). The same behavior may be considered a sacrifice or an act of helping, depending on whether the enactor put aside his or her personal goals and interests in order to provide help. For example, if Mary asks her partner to pick her up from the airport, her partner John may feel that he is helping her (instead of sacrificing) if he did not have any pre-existing plans or obligations. However, if John had to miss an important meeting at work in order to pick up Mary, then he may consider his action a sacrifice, especially if he incurred a personal cost in the process (e.g., he was reprimanded by his boss). This example illustrates how sacrifice involves the subordination of personal goals whereas helping typically does not.

Types of Sacrifice

Researchers have identified various types of sacrifices that people make in their relationships. One distinction is between active and passive sacrifice (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). *Active sacrifice* involves doing something, either for or with your partner, which you do not particularly want to do. Such undesirable behaviors may include hanging out with a partner's friends instead of your own, attending a work function for your partner, or moving to a new city to be closer to your partner. In contrast, *passive sacrifice* involves giving up or forfeiting something that you would otherwise want to do or experience, such as not spending time with your friends, not going to your choice of movie, or not accepting an impressive job offer in another city. Many sacrifices involve both giving up a desirable behavior and engaging in an undesirable behavior. Imagine that you and your partner are trying to plan your Friday night. You want to stay home and watch

a movie, but your partner wants to go out to dinner and a jazz show. If you decide to honor your partner's wishes and go out for a night on the town, you give up something that you want (an active sacrifice: staying at home to watch a movie), and do something that you do not want to do (a passive sacrifice: going out for a night on the town).

Another distinction is between major and daily sacrifice. Some conflicts of interest in relationships are of major importance. You may have to decide whether to relocate to a new city so that your partner can take a better job, whether to support your partner financially as he or she pursues a degree, or whether you should give away your beloved puppy because your partner is allergic to dogs. In early research, which focused on major sacrifice, participants were asked to list the three or four most important activities in their lives (Van Lange, Agnew et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). Most individuals listed activities either from various life domains, such as education, religion, and favorite pastimes; or activities that they engaged in with particular people such as parents, siblings, and friends (e.g., going to the beach, playing soccer). Participants were then asked: "Imagine that it was not possible to combine [a particular activity] with your current relationship.... To what extent would you be willing to give up that activity?" Complete the first personal mini-experiment to assess your own willingness to make major sacrifices in one of your close relationships.

Not all sacrifices are as major as moving to a new city or giving up your beloved puppy. Relationships also require that people make relatively small sacrifices in their day-to-day lives (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). When partners have differing tastes (e.g., on food, movies, outings, intimacy), one of them may sacrifice his or her own desires for the sake of the partner or the relationship. For example, you may favor reality TV over action shows, Chinese food over Mexican food, and going out over staying at home. These small differences present opportunities for couples to navigate the realm of sacrifice on a daily basis. Table 5.1 lists 11 kinds of common sacrifices that individuals can make in their romantic relationships (Impett et al., 2005). We should also note that daily sacrifices may become more major with the passage of time. For example, giving up an occasional outing with your best friend may eventually lead to becoming estranged from him or her entirely.

In summary, although all sacrifices involve the foregoing of one's self-interest for the sake of a partner, there is great variability in the kinds of sacrifices that people make for their partners. Sometimes people give up things that they want or enjoy, and other times they engage in behaviors that are undesirable. Some sacrifices are of major importance, whereas others are more mundane and can occur repeatedly in relationships. Why do some people sacrifice while others pursue their own self-interests? In the next section, we consider several factors that promote sacrifice in relationships.

WHAT PROMOTES SACRIFICE?

Consider the following scenario: It's Friday night, and Sarah's friends invite her to go out dancing at a club. She really wants to go but knows that her boyfriend gets upset when she goes out dancing without him.

Table 5.1
Types of Sacrifices Listed by Participants

Type of Sacrifice	Examples (Active and Passive Sacrifices)
Friends	“Went to his friend’s party” and “Cancelled plans with my friends”
Recreation	“Went to the LA auto show” and “No video games when she comes over”
Errands, Chores, & Favors	“Ironing his clothes” and “No laundry when he’s at my apartment”
School & Work	“Editing his papers” and “Spending less time studying”
Health & Lifestyle	“Got him medicine when he was sick” and “Smoke less when I’m around her”
Family	“I went to Thanksgiving with his family” and “I don’t see my sister very much”
Communication & Interaction	“Staying up late to talk to him” and “Gave up seeing him when he was studying”
Gifts and Money	“Bought a necklace for her” and “Provided for him when he was unemployed”
Male-Female Interactions	“I avoid talking to other men” and “Stopped dating other girls”
Appearance	“Wearing things he finds sexy” and “Not wearing revealing clothes”
Intimacy	“Having sex when I don’t want to” and “Gave up physical contact”

Source: Impett et al. (2005).

Sarah has to make an important choice between doing what she really wants to do (go dancing) and doing what will make her boyfriend happy and prevent conflict in her relationship (stay at home). If Sarah decides that avoiding conflict in her relationship is more important than going dancing with her friends, then she transforms her motivation from concerns about her own self-interest to concerns about what is best for her partner and her relationship. Under what circumstances are people willing to sacrifice their own self-interest and act in the best interests of their partner or their relationship? In this section, we consider two factors that promote greater willingness to sacrifice: commitment to one’s relationship and the desire to reciprocate a partner’s sacrifice (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Commitment

Rusbult (1980) defines commitment as having a sense of psychological attachment to one’s relationship including the desire to maintain the relationship “for better or worse.” According to Rusbult’s (1980; 1983) Investment Model of Commitment, people who are high in relationship satisfaction, have few alternatives to their relationship (i.e., few attractive options other than their current partner), and are highly invested in their relationship (both emotionally and materially) will be the most committed

to their relationships. People need not have all three characteristics to feel committed to their relationships. For example, a woman who is unhappy in her marriage may still feel highly committed to her relationship if she thinks she cannot find someone else or if she has already invested a lot in the relationship. If she relies on her husband's income and they have children together, she may feel that the costs of ending the relationship are too great (even though she is dissatisfied), and she may choose to stay married to her husband. Complete the second personal mini-experiment to assess your own commitment to your closest relationship.

Individuals who are highly committed to their relationships are more willing to sacrifice than individuals with lower levels of commitment (Van Lange, Agnew et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). There are several important reasons why high levels of commitment promote a desire to maintain relationships even at the cost of self-interest. First, people who are highly committed to their relationships are often highly *dependent* on their partners and their relationships. Individuals who are highly dependent feel a greater need to stay with their partners and go to great lengths to make sure that the relationship continues. Because these individuals need their relationships, they are more willing to sacrifice in order to maintain the relationship (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). For example, a young college woman who is highly dependent on her relationship may choose to live with her boyfriend rather than in her sorority house in order to please her boyfriend and ensure that their relationship continues.

Second, individuals who are highly committed to their partners have a *long-term orientation* toward their relationships in which they consider not only the immediate outcomes of their actions but also the outcomes of their actions down the road (Van Lange, Agnew et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). Such outcomes include successfully maintaining a relationship over time as well as ensuring that one's partner will sacrifice in similar situations in the future (Axelrod, 1984; Van Lange, Rusbult et al. 1997). For example, a man with a long-term view of his relationship may pass on having a bachelor party weekend in Las Vegas because he knows it will upset his fiancée and believes that promoting her happiness is more important to him than a weekend in Las Vegas. Or, he may sacrifice in the hopes that his fiancée will choose not to have a bachelorette party.

Third, people who are highly committed to their relationships think more communally about their relationships than people with lower levels of commitment. *Communal orientation* refers to a focus on one's relationships rather than a focus on the self (Clark & Mills, 1979). When making decisions, communally oriented people think less often about what is best for "me" and more often about what is best for "us." For example, a woman who views her relationship in a communal context may pass on a job promotion that would require her to move to another city because the job promotion, while great for her ("me"), would not be the best move for her relationship ("us").

Fourth, people who are highly committed may become *psychologically attached* or "linked" to their partners in such a way that their partners' moods, thoughts, and emotions affect them as well. What makes one

partner happy may make the other one happy; what makes one partner sad may make the other one sad. People may choose to sacrifice their own immediate interests because the interests of their partners become their interests as well (Aron & Aron, 1986). For example, a guy may decide to “give in” and go out to a club with his girlfriend even though he is tired after a long day at work simply for the reason that going out will make her happy, and her happiness becomes his own reward.

Desire to Reciprocate a Partner's Sacrifice

An individual's own commitment is an important factor that promotes willingness to sacrifice, but the partner also plays an important role. Although people dislike thinking about close relationships in exchange (i.e., tit for tat) terms, partners often reciprocate favors and kindnesses toward each other (Foa & Foa, 1974). When people depart from self-interest, their partners may feel compelled to reciprocate (Axelrod, 1984). Research has shown that people are more willing to sacrifice for their partners when they think that the partner is willing to sacrifice for them (Van Lange, Agnew et al. 1997; Wieselquist et al. 1999). One of the reasons for this is that people desire reciprocity. People may be inclined toward equity, expecting a balance between what they give to their partners and what is given back to them. Therefore, the more often that people sacrifice for a partner, the more likely it is that their partner will sacrifice in return.

In summary, a man who is contemplating whether or not to give up his own apartment and move in with his girlfriend will be more likely to make the move if he is highly committed to maintaining his relationship. He will also be more likely to make the move if his partner has shown that she cares about the future of the relationship by making sacrifices of her own. In what ways does sacrifice benefit relationships? In the next section of the chapter, we review research on the personal and interpersonal benefits of sacrifice.

THE POSITIVE SIDE OF SACRIFICE

For it is in giving that we receive.
—Peace Prayer of St. Francis

What are the gifts that we receive when we choose to make a sacrifice in our relationships? In this section, we review available research on the possible benefits of sacrifice—not just for relationships—but also for the person who makes the sacrifice and for the recipient of sacrifice.

Benefits for the Relationship

One way in which sacrifice can benefit relationships is by promoting greater relationship satisfaction and stability over time. Several studies of dating and married couples have shown that willingness to sacrifice was

associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability (Van Lange, Agnew et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). More specifically, people who were more willing to sacrifice for their partners reported more intimacy, better problem-solving, and more shared activities. Willingness to sacrifice also predicted people's abilities to maintain their relationships successfully over time. The more willing people were to make sacrifices, the more likely they were to still be together with their partners six to eight weeks after the research was over.

Another way in which sacrifice can benefit relationships is by increasing individuals' commitment to and trust in their partners (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Trust is defined as the expectation that one's partner can be relied upon to behave benevolently and be responsive to one's needs (Holmes, 1989; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Sorrentino, Holmes, Hanna, & Sharp, 1995). People learn to trust their partners when they see that their partners are caring and responsive enough to make sacrifices. The more that individuals trust their partners, the more committed they become to the relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). The more committed they become, the more likely they are to sacrifice in turn, setting a "mutual cyclical growth" process into motion that leads to more trust, commitment, and sacrifice among both partners in the relationship.

Research has also shown that people's attitudes toward sacrifice can also affect the quality and stability of their relationships. One attitude toward sacrifice concerns the extent to which people derive satisfaction from sacrificing for their partner. Stanley and Markman's (1992) "Satisfaction with Sacrifice" scale assesses the degree to which individuals view sacrifice for the relationship to be rewarding with items such as "I get satisfaction out of doing something for my partner." In a longitudinal study of married couples, the couples who derived more satisfaction from sacrifice were less likely to be distressed or divorced six years later than the couples who reported less satisfaction with sacrifice (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, 2006).

Benefits for the Person Who Sacrifices

The person who makes the sacrifice may also derive important benefits from giving up his or her own self-interest for several reasons. First, engaging in sacrifice may help people maintain images of themselves as good partners who care about their partner's needs (Holmes & Murray, 1996). Second, people may engage in behaviors that they would otherwise find undesirable because by making their partners feel good, they make themselves feel good (Blau, 1964; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976). A woman may give up her own weekend plans in order to attend a work party with her partner because she finds pleasure in being able to do things that make her partner feel happy and loved. A third possible benefit is the increased chance that one's partner will sacrifice in return (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Fourth, by engaging in sacrifice people may be able to promote long-term goals such as reducing conflict or promoting coordination with a partner. In other words, what may be a sacrifice in the moment might actually satisfy one's own self-interest in the future.

Consider a young couple who is in the process of planning a wedding. Tom wants to get married in their hometown whereas Sally wants to get married in Hawaii. Sally knows how important it is for Tom to get married in their hometown, so she decides to give up her dream of having a destination wedding because she is more interested in having a long and happy married life with Tom (her long-term interest) than she is in getting married on an exotic island (her current self-interest). This example illustrates that one personal benefit of giving up one's immediate self-interest is the promotion of longer-term goals.

Benefits for the Recipient of Sacrifice

The recipient of sacrifice can also benefit. Besides the obvious benefit of having your own desires fulfilled, recognizing that your partner has sacrificed may bolster the perception that your partner is caring and responsive. People often pay attention to whether their partner deviates from self-interest (Kelley, 1979), making important judgments about the meaning behind their partners' actions (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). As reviewed previously, when people perceive that their partner has deviated from self-interest for the sake of the relationship, they develop trust in their partner as a caring, reliable and thoughtful person (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

It is the norm rather than the exception in close relationships to keep a partner's best interests in mind, and research has shown that sacrifice can promote more relationship satisfaction and stability. However, there may be times when sacrificing, rather than being a positive tool for relationship maintenance, can actually be harmful, a possibility to which we now turn.

A WORD ABOUT THE POSSIBLE DANGERS OF SACRIFICE

To thine own self be true.
—William Shakespeare (*Hamlet* 1.3.543)

In Western societies such as the United States, there is a particularly strong value that emphasizes individualism, autonomy, and the relentless pursuit of one's own personal truth. Quotes such as the one above suggest the importance of remaining "true" to our own wishes and desires rather than becoming what our parents, friends, romantic partner, or community tell us we "should" or "ought" to be. In this section, we suggest that sacrifices that are not made in a mutual and reciprocal manner may actually be harmful. In addition, we draw upon feminist research to show that a failure to "speak one's mind" can set the stage for increased depression and decreased well-being.

Unilateral Sacrifice

It is possible that sacrifice may have negative consequences if one partner consistently carries the full burden of sacrifice in the relationship (Drigotas,

Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Whereas some people consistently give up their own interests for the sake of a partner, others often act in a more self-interested manner (Neff & Harter, 2002), reflecting individual differences in willingness to sacrifice. In one example of this imbalance, people who lack power in their relationships may be more likely to routinely engage in sacrifice. Mutuality of dependence refers to the extent to which partners need their relationship to the same degree (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Individuals who are more dependent on their partners may lack power in their relationships and may feel compelled to repeatedly sacrifice to make their partners happy and ensure the continuation of their relationships. For example, in a study of college women in dating relationships, the women who felt that their partners were less committed than them to maintaining the relationships were the most likely to agree to engage in “sexual sacrifice” (Impett & Peplau, 2002).

When people focus on other people at the expense of focusing on themselves, they may experience diminished happiness and well-being (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). *Unmitigated communion* refers to the extent to which people are excessively concerned with others and place others’ needs before their own needs. People who are high in unmitigated communion would agree with such statements as “I always place the needs of others above my own” and “I can’t say no when someone asks me for help.” Research has shown that both men and women who are high in unmitigated communion experience more anxiety, more depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, and poorer physical health than individuals who are low in unmitigated communion (see review by Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). This research does not mean that every person who focuses on other people instead of focusing on themselves is depressed. Some people may derive genuine happiness from putting the needs of other people before their own needs. Nevertheless, the results of this research suggest that sacrifice is not always a beneficial strategy, and that people should proceed with caution when giving up their own interests for the sake of others, particularly if they are involved in relationships in which their sacrifices are not reciprocated.

Failure to “Speak One’s Mind”

In addition, feminist psychologists advance another word of caution about a possible danger of sacrificing or “silencing” one’s own thoughts, opinions, and desires in relationships (Jack & Dill, 1992). While feeling connected to others is an important part of a woman’s (and a man’s) sense of self (Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1986), this desire for connection can come with a cost. Sometimes the desire to feel connected to others makes people reluctant or scared to voice their true thoughts and opinions for fear of making other people angry or upset (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Research conducted with adolescents (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996) and young adults (Harter, Waters, Pettitt, Whitesell, Kofkin, & Jordan, 1997) has shown that not stating one’s “true opinions” is associated with greater depression, more hopelessness, and lower self-esteem. In other studies, the more that adolescent girls agreed with statements such as

“Often I look happy on the outside in order to please others, even if I don’t feel happy on the inside.” and “I express my opinions only if I can think of a nice way of doing it,” the lower their self-esteem and the higher their depressive symptoms (Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006).

In short, there may be some circumstances under which it is costly to sacrifice, such as in relationships in which partners do not share power equally. Further, not “speaking up” and communicating the truth about how you feel to another person may also be harmful. Next, we consider people’s motives or reasons for making sacrifices as an important determinant of when sacrifice is beneficial and when it is costly for people and their relationships.

TO SACRIFICE OR NOT TO SACRIFICE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION

Can you think of times when you sacrificed to make another person happy, to feel closer to your partner, or to feel good about yourself? These are approach-motivated sacrifices (Impett et al., 2005). Avoidance-motivated sacrifices were those sacrifices that you made to avoid feeling guilty, to prevent a fight, or to prevent your partner from losing interest in the relationship. In this section, we introduce “approach-avoidance theory” and apply it to the study of sacrifice.

Approach-Avoidance Motivation

A distinction made by many theories of motivation is whether a person acts to obtain a positive outcome (an *approach motive*) or to avoid a negative outcome (an *avoidance motive*) (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1987). For instance, you could stay up late studying for an exam because you strive for academic success and recognition from fellow classmates (approach motives) or you could stay up late studying to avoid looking inferior to your classmates or disappointing your teacher (avoidance motives). Applied to sacrifice, an individual can sacrifice for approach motives, such as to make a partner happy or promote intimacy in the relationship; or for avoidance motives, such as to avoid conflict or feeling guilty (Impett et al., 2005). Consider these comments made by women who were asked why they engaged in sexual activity when they did not particularly want to do so (Impett & Peplau, 2000).

1. I am in a very loving and nurturing relationship with the person I will eventually marry and I wanted to satisfy the desire for intimacy. I believe that sexual intercourse is one way that we can express love rather than only physical desire. So, even though I am tired, I want to show him my love constantly. He would do the same for me (p. 7).
2. He told me that one thing he hated about his ex-girlfriend was the fact that she wasn’t sexual. I am afraid that if I am not sexual, he won’t want to be with me (p. 7).

Although both of these women's reasons for "sexual sacrifice" center on desires to maintain important relationships, they differ in their focus. The first woman emphasized wanting to share positive experiences with her partner, such as intimacy, desire, and love. The second woman, in contrast, focused on avoiding appearing uninterested in sex and possibly jeopardizing her relationship. Complete the third personal mini-experiment to measure your own motives for sacrifice.

Sacrifice Motives, Relationship Satisfaction, and Well-Being

Recent research has applied the approach-avoidance distinction to understand the costs and benefits of sacrifice. In one study, college students in dating relationships reported on their sacrifices at the end of each day for 14 consecutive days (Impett et al., 2005). For each sacrifice, participants completed measure of approach and avoidance motives. The results of this study showed that on days when participants sacrificed for approach motives, they experienced more positive emotions, greater satisfaction with life, and greater relationship satisfaction. In contrast, on days when they sacrificed for avoidance motives, they experienced more negative emotions, less relationship satisfaction, and more relationship conflict. Some of the most striking findings from this study concerned what happened to the relationships one month after the study. Sacrificing for approach motives over the course of the study led to participants being twice as likely to still be together at the one-month follow-up, whereas sacrificing for avoidance motives led to participants being two and a half times as likely to have broken up by the one-month follow-up. The results of this study suggest that giving up one's interests and desires may only be beneficial for relationships when people sacrifice for approach, as opposed to avoidance, motives.

Let's apply the results of this research to a real life example. John and Mary are trying to decide where to go on their next vacation. John wants to go skiing, but Mary wants to go somewhere tropical. After spending an hour arguing over their vacation choice, John acquiesces and tells Mary that they can go on a tropical trip. Why did John sacrifice his vacation choice? Perhaps he sacrificed for approach reasons because he knew how much the vacation meant to Mary and wanted to do something that would make her happy. Or, perhaps he sacrificed for avoidance reasons because he was sick of arguing with Mary about the vacation and wanted to avoid further conflict. At first glance, the motivation behind his sacrifice may not seem that important; no matter his motivation, he still gets to go on a tropical vacation with his partner. However, the results of the study described previously suggest that his motivation is crucial. If John sacrificed because he wanted to make Mary happy, his sacrifice will probably increase his personal well-being and the well-being of the relationship. However, if he sacrificed in order to avoid fighting, his sacrifice may detract from his own relationship satisfaction, and potentially his girlfriend's satisfaction as well.

The study described above also included data from the participants' partners, enabling the researchers to see how sacrifice impacts the recipient

of sacrifice. When people thought that their partner sacrificed for approach motives such as to create intimacy and to express their love, they experienced more positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, and more relationship satisfaction. In contrast, when people thought that their partner sacrificed for avoidance motives such as to avoid conflict and tension in the relationship, they felt more negative emotions, less life satisfaction, and less relationship satisfaction. This research finding further emphasizes the importance of John's motivation when sacrificing his vacation choice. His motives for sacrifice may affect not only his own happiness, but his partner's happiness and well-being as well. If Mary thinks that John agreed to her vacation choice because he wanted to make her happy, she may experience greater happiness. If, however, she thinks that he gave in merely because he didn't want to deal with the conflict of making a decision, she may feel less satisfaction, both personally and in her relationship.

This research has helped us to understand when it benefits people to give up their own self-interest for a partner as well as the particular importance of approach motives. Why do people choose to sacrifice for approach or avoidance motives? Next, we consider personal as well as situational influences on people's motives for sacrifice.

Dispositional Influences on Sacrifice Motives

Research has shown that there are important individual differences in people's tendencies to pursue approach and avoidance motives in their interpersonal relationships (Carver & White, 1994; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). Some people are predisposed to enter interactions with other individuals with the intent of gaining positive social outcomes such as feeling close to others or having a good time. These people are high in "hope for affiliation" (Mehrabian, 1976). Other people, in contrast, are predisposed to enter social interactions with the intent of avoiding negative outcomes such as rejection or conflict with others. These people are high in "fear of rejection." One study showed that individual differences in hope for affiliation and fear of rejection predicted people's motives for making sacrifices (Impett et al., 2005). More specifically, people who were higher in hope for affiliation were more likely to sacrifice for approach motives, whereas people who were higher in fear of rejection were more likely to sacrifice for avoidance motives.

Imagine a couple at the theater trying to pick which movie to watch. The guy, high in hope for affiliation, graciously allows his girlfriend to pick the movie, looking forward to making her happy and enjoying a pleasurable evening together. His sacrifice lifts both their moods and they enter the theater feeling happy and excited about the evening ahead. In the theater across town, another couple is also trying to pick a movie, and once again the guy allows his girlfriend to make the final choice. This guy, however, is high in fear of rejection. He allows his girlfriend to choose the movie because he is afraid that his girlfriend will be angry or upset if she doesn't get to pick. His sacrifice leaves him in a sour mood, and his girlfriend picks

up on his negativity, so they enter the theater dreading the long evening ahead. Although both couples were in a similar situation, the two guys' differing dispositions led the couples to have very different experiences for the evening.

Situational Influences on Sacrifice Motives

People sometimes sacrifice for different reasons depending on the situation. Certain aspects of people's current relationships may call out for approach- or avoidance-motivated behaviors (or both). For instance, feeling highly satisfied with a relationship may lead people to focus on the positive incentives (e.g., affection, happiness) that they can attain by maintaining their relationships (Frank & Brandstatter, 2002; Strachman & Gable, 2006). In contrast, focusing on investments in a relationship or the fact that one has few alternatives to a current relationship may lead people to pay attention to the negative incentives (e.g., losing valuable investments, feeling lonely) that are generally connected to the dissolution of a relationship. In short, certain aspects of relationships may influence people's motives for making sacrifices in their relationships. What other aspects or traits of individuals influence their willingness to sacrifice? Next, we consider how an individual's gender and cultural background might affect sacrifice.

THE ROLE OF GENDER AND CULTURE IN SACRIFICE

A discussion about sacrifice and romantic relationships would be incomplete without talking about the roles of gender and culture. Beginning with gender, it may be reasonable to assume that women are relatively more interested in men in taking their partners needs and desires into account, given that maintaining successful relationships is an important part of a woman's role in this society (Miller, 1986; Wood, 1993). One possibility is that women may be more willing than men to sacrifice or may sacrifice more frequently than do men. However, research has not consistently supported this popular idea. For example, one study showed that while women rated marriage and close family ties as more important than did men, men and women were equally likely to indicate that they would sacrifice their most important life goals for the good of their relationships (Hammersla & Frease-McMahan, 1990). Other research has looked at the ways in which men and women typically resolve conflicts in their relationships. In a study of dating and married couples, Neff and Harter (2002) found that the majority of men (62%) and women (61%) reported the use of compromise to solve their problems. Smaller, but relatively equal numbers of men and women reported using the other strategies (14% of men and 19% of women prioritized their own needs over the needs of their partners; 24% of men and 20% of women subordinated their own needs to the needs of their partners). Bishop (2004) also found no gender differences in frequency of daily sacrifice among college students in dating relationships. One fairly consistent gender difference that has been found, however, is in

“unmitigated communion,” defined earlier as the tendency to be excessively concerned with others and to place others’ needs before one’s own needs (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Research has shown that women score higher than men on measures of unmitigated communion (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Taken together with the previously reviewed findings, it is possible that, in most relationships, men and women sacrifice with relatively equal frequency. However, women may be more likely than men to take sacrifice to the extreme—to focus on other people so much that they neglect themselves in the process.

Although women and men may not differ in their overall frequency of sacrifice, research has shown that women are more likely than men to sacrifice in the particular domains of career, sexuality, and health. For example, in long-term marriages, women are also more likely to be in the role of “trailing spouse,” adopting their career plans to the needs of their spouses (Bielby & Bielby, 1992). In the domain of sexuality, roughly twice as many women as men in dating and married relationships indicate that they have engaged in “sexual sacrifice” (i.e., consenting to engage in sex when one has little or no desire) (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Research has also shown that women were also more likely than men to make sacrifices that involved promoting the health and lifestyle of their partner such as picking up prescriptions or scheduling appointments, consistent with previous research (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). In contrast to sacrifice measured more generally, sacrifices in the domains of career, sexuality and health are more likely to be made by women. Future research is needed to explore the kinds of sacrifices that men may be more likely than women to make for a romantic partner.

Research also suggests that willingness to sacrifice may have less to do with whether a person is a man or a woman and more to do with whether people identify with and enact conventional gender roles. Regardless of their gender, people who possess stereotypically feminine personality characteristics such as understanding and sensitivity are the most willing to sacrifice, whereas people who possess stereotypically masculine personality traits such as independence and assertiveness are the least willing to sacrifice (Hammersla & Frease-McMahon, 1990; Stafford, Dainton, & Hass, 2000). Another reason why studies may have failed to find consistent gender differences in frequency of sacrifice is the possibility that women may be less likely to label their actions as sacrifice. Despite the fact that many married women work outside of the home, they continue to do the majority of the housework and, if they have children, the majority of the childcare (Coltrane, 2002; Shelton & John, 1996). It is possible that women do more “nice” or “helpful” things for their partners (particularly in the domains of housework and childcare) but are less likely to define these things as “sacrifices” since doing things for and taking care of others is an expected part of women’s role in this society (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). Future research is needed to explore this intriguing possibility.

Sacrifice may also have different meanings to people from different cultural backgrounds, especially to people who come from backgrounds that place more emphasis on maintaining harmony in relationships.

“Collectivist” cultures place great emphasis on the subordination of personal goals to goals for the group as a whole (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). “Individualistic” cultures, on the other hand, place great emphasis on personal goals, even at the inconvenience of the group. People from collectivist and individualistic cultures may approach situations of conflict in different ways. Individuals with a collectivist orientation are more likely to sacrifice their own goals for the good of the group (e.g., to maintain harmony, to help others, and to show respect) than individuals with more individualist orientations (Briley & Wyer, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Research on sacrifice in romantic relationships, thus far, has focused on the role of sacrifice in Western (i.e., individualistic) cultures. Future research examining the role of sacrifice in collectivist cultures is needed.

CONCLUSION, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Sacrifice is an important and positive tool that people can use to maintain their relationships over time. In every relationship, people have to navigate situations in which their wants or needs do not match their partner’s interests. People are more likely to sacrifice when they are highly committed to the relationship, when they trust their partner, and when they feel that their partner would be willing to sacrifice in return. For the most part, sacrifice is a highly useful strategy that couples can use to demonstrate their love for each other, promote happiness, and ensure the success of their relationships. However, when sacrifice is not reciprocal or when people sacrifice a core aspect of themselves, sacrifice may actually be harmful. An individual’s endorsement of conventional gender roles and cultural background may also influence willingness to sacrifice or the meaning of sacrifice. Understanding people’s reasons or motives for sacrifice is critical. Sacrificing is an act of the utmost generosity, and when done for approach (as opposed to avoidance) reasons, these actions have the power to enhance both the stability and quality of interpersonal relationships.

There are many interesting directions for future research on sacrifice. First, most of the existing research on sacrifice has focused on adult romantic relationships in which the participants are either dating or married and are almost always heterosexual. Future research is needed to explore the salience of sacrifice in different types of relationships. A particularly interesting direction would be to explore sacrifice in relationships where the caregiving dynamic is unequal, such as parents caring for a child or people caring for an aging parent. Second, the majority of research has focused on sacrifice only from the perspective of one partner. It is important to point out that motives for sacrifice are inherently different from motives in other domains such as achievement and other life tasks in that they, by default, involve coordination with another person who has his or her own motives. This complexity requires the collection of data from both members of the couple, sampled at specific moments in their daily lives as well as over longer periods of time. Third, previous research on sacrifice in romantic

relationships has been conducted in Western cultures. Cross-cultural research on sacrifice presents an important and exciting direction for future work.

Finally, the results of the research reviewed in this chapter have important implications for clinicians and counselors who work with distressed couples. People who are in unhappy or distressed relationships often focus on the ways they want their partners to change and how they can go about instituting change. Research on sacrifice suggests that couples therapists could shift the focus away from something that partners have no control over (each other's behaviors) to something that they can in fact control (their own behavior). People can be taught the importance of learning how to give to their partner in unselfish yet healthy ways. Indeed, commitment is more than just toughing it out "through thick and thin" or "for better or worse." True commitment involves genuinely giving to one's partner for the greater good of the relationship. This kind of love and commitment is typified by such short stories as "The Gift of the Magi" in which a young married couple, Jim and Della, sell their most prized possessions to buy each other Christmas gifts (O. Henry, date unknown). Della sells her own hair to buy Jim a chain for his grandfather's watch, while Jim sells his watch to buy Della tortoise shell combs that she has long admired for her hair. This story is at the same time both tragic and touching. On the one hand, Jim and Della have sacrificed their most cherished possessions to give each other gifts which, in a matter of moments, have become obsolete. On the other hand, Della and Jim's sacrifices are but small prices to pay to demonstrate their love and devotion. Though outwardly foolish, Jim and Della knew the true and lasting value of their gifts.

PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENT

Measuring Your Willingness to Sacrifice

What would you give up?: On the following three lines, please list the three parts of your life—the three activities in your life—that are the most important to you (other than your relationship with your partner).

Most important activity is: _____

Second most important activity is: _____

Third most important activity is: _____

Imagine that it were not possible to engage in these activities and maintain your relationship (impossible for reasons unrelated to your partner's needs or wishes; that is, it wasn't your partner's fault).

To what extent would you consider giving up Activity 1? Circle the appropriate response.

I definitely would not consider giving up activity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *I would definitely consider giving up activity*

To what extent would you consider giving up Activity 2? Circle the appropriate response.

I definitely would not consider giving up activity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *I would definitely consider giving up activity*

To what extent would you consider giving up Activity 3? Circle the appropriate response.

I definitely would not consider giving up activity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *I would definitely consider giving up activity*

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PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENT

Measuring Your Commitment

How committed are you? Think about your closest relationship (if not romantic, then with a best friend, family member, etc.) and then answer the questions below by circling the corresponding number.

1. I feel satisfied with our relationship.
Do not agree at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *Agree completely*
2. My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could *not* easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship.
Do not agree at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *Agree completely*
3. I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end.
Do not agree at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *Agree completely*
4. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.
Do not agree at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *Agree completely*
5. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now).
Do not agree at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *Agree completely*

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PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENT

Measuring Your Sacrifice Motives

Why did you sacrifice? Think of a recent time you made a sacrifice for your partner, a friend or a family member. Check all that apply to measure your approach and avoidance motives for sacrifice.

Approach Motives

- To express love for my partner
- To enhance intimacy in my relationship
- To make my partner happy

Avoidance Motives

- To avoid conflict in my relationship
- To prevent my partner from getting upset
- To avoid feeling guilty

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| ___ To feel good about myself | ___ To prevent my partner from getting angry |
| ___ To gain my partner's appreciation | ___ To prevent my partner from losing interest |

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