

Research Report

The Effects of Sacrifice Types and Motives on Romantic Relationship Quality

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Research has shown that willingness to sacrifice is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment. However, few studies have investigated whether type of sacrifice (active vs. passive) or motives for sacrifice (approach vs. avoidance) impact relational variables. In the current study, type of and motives for sacrifice were experimentally primed and satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment were measured. Results indicated that active (but not passive) sacrifice led individuals to perceive their quality of alternatives as more attractive. Motives for sacrificing were unrelated to relationship perceptions. Additionally, type of sacrifice and motives for sacrificing show no interactive effects.

Keywords: romantic relationship, sacrifice, approach, avoidance

Individuals regularly encounter conflict with a romantic partner. Actions of individuals may interfere with those of the partner (Peterson, 1983), and their attitudes (Cahn, 1990, 1992), goals, plans, and aspirations may differ from the partner's (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). To resolve such conflict, individuals may choose to sacrifice their own self-interests for the sake of the partner or the relationship (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). In moving away from immediate self-interests and toward broader, long-term communal goals, individuals experience a transformation of motivation. This transformation of motivation occurs because individuals are committed to their relationship (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). As such, commitment is theorized to drive individuals' willingness to engage in pro-relationship behaviors such as willingness to sacrifice (Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006; Agnew et al., 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996).

Willingness to sacrifice has consistently been found to be associated with positive relational outcomes. Specifically, an increased willingness to sacrifice is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and commitment (Van Lange, Agnew et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Additionally, when transgressions are severe, committed individuals are more willing to sacrifice than non-committed individuals (Powell & Van Vugt, 2003). Moreover, as individuals' romantic commitment becomes more cognitively accessible, the association between willingness to sacrifice and commitment strengthens (Etcheverry & Le, 2005).

Importantly, sacrifice can be either *active*, in which

an individual engages in an undesired activity, or *passive*, in which an individual forgoes a desired activity (Rusbult, Olson, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). These two types of sacrifice are qualitatively distinct, yet no known research has examined whether active sacrifice leads to differing relational consequences (e.g., changes in satisfaction and commitment) than does passive sacrifice. It is conceivable that an individual may interpret his/her own active sacrifices as indicative of a strong relational bond (e.g., "I willingly engaged in an undesired activity because I love my partner") whereas passive sacrifices may be interpreted with resentment (e.g., "Because my partner doesn't like the things that I like, I had to give up what I wanted to do"). Thus, one goal of the current research was to examine the impact of active and passive sacrifice on relationship quality.

Recent research has indicated that individuals' willingness to sacrifice may also be dependent on their motives. There is evidence that individuals are less likely to sacrifice activities that are of high personal importance, and that this activity importance is a stronger predictor of sacrificial behavior than is romantic commitment (Mattingly & Clark, 2008). Similarly, individuals report a decreased willingness to sacrifice as conflict severity increases (Powell & Van Vugt, 2003). In the most direct test of motivated sacrifice on relationship quality, Impett, Gable, and Peplau (2005) found that individuals who sacrificed for an *approach* motive (e.g., those who sacrificed out of a desire to approach positive outcomes such as making the romantic partner happy or strengthening the relational bond) tended to have higher personal well-being and greater relationship satisfaction than those who sacrificed for an *avoidance* motive (e.g., those who sacrificed out of a desire to avoid negative outcomes such as making the partner unhappy).

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However, it is unclear how approach and avoidance motives for sacrifice impact other relational variables, such as commitment (i.e., feelings of emotional attachment to the romantic partner, which is associated with intentions to remain in the relationship), perceived quality of alternatives (i.e., the extent to which an individual's needs could be fulfilled independent of the current relationship, such as alternate relationships, friendships, or independent actions), and investment level (i.e., the amount of resources that have become attached to the relationship and would be lost if the relationship were to end, such as time, money, effort, and shared social networks) (Rusbult, 1980; Le & Agnew, 2003). Thus, a second goal of the current research was to examine the impact of motivated sacrifice on satisfaction, commitment, perceived quality of alternatives, and investment level.

The current study employed an experimental method and was guided by the following research questions. First, do active and passive sacrifices differentially impact relational variables? Second, do approach and avoidance motives for sacrifice differentially impact relational variables? Third, is there an interactive effect between type of sacrifice (active vs. passive) and motive of sacrifice (approach vs. avoidance) on relationship satisfaction, commitment, perceived quality of alternatives, and investment level?

Method

Participants

Sixty-seven undergraduate students (59 female, 8 male) currently involved in a dating relationship of at least 1 month in duration participated in the study to receive partial fulfillment of course requirements. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years ($M = 19.9$, $SD = 1.3$). The majority of participants were Caucasian (80.6%) and exclusively dating their partner (82.1%). Participants' romantic

involvement with the current partner ranged from 1 to 78 months ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 18.7$).

Materials and Procedure

Demographic information. A short self-report demographic information form was used to assess participants' age, gender, ethnicity/race, relationship status, and relationship duration.

Priming of types of and motives for sacrifice. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. Participants were instructed to write for 5 minutes about a time at which they sacrificed for their partner. The instructions varied with respect to type of sacrifice and motives for sacrifice. That is, participants were to write either about an active or passive sacrifice (type of sacrifice) which was driven by either approach or avoidance motives (motives for sacrifice), resulting in one of four conditions: active-approach sacrifice, active-avoidance sacrifice, passive-approach sacrifice, or passive-avoidance sacrifice. Active sacrifices were primed by having participants think of when they engaged in an undesired activity. Passive sacrifices were primed by having participants think of when they refrained from engaging in a desired activity. Approach sacrifices were primed by having participants think of when they sacrificed to make their partners happy, become closer to their partners, or improve the quality of their relationship. Avoidance sacrifices were primed by having participants think of when they sacrificed to avoid fighting with their partner, avoid making their partner unhappy, or avoid feeling guilty for not sacrificing. Thus, the design of the experiment was a 2 (type of sacrifice: active, passive) X 2 (motives for sacrifice: approach, avoidance) between-subjects design.

Following the experimental priming manipulation, participants completed the Investment Model Scale (Rus-

Table 1

Means (Standard Deviations) for Satisfaction Level, Quality of Alternatives, Investment Size, and Commitment as a Function of Sacrificing Types and Motives (N = 67)

Measure	SACRIFICING TYPE			
	ACTIVE		PASSIVE	
	Approach Motive	Avoidance Motive	Approach Motive	Avoidance Motive
Satisfaction	6.79 (1.07)	6.58 (1.05)	6.63 (1.06)	6.64 (1.30)
Alternatives	4.22 (0.96)	3.85 (1.22)	3.40 (1.19)	2.89 (1.89)
Investments	5.39 (1.38)	5.68 (1.52)	4.96 (1.46)	5.62 (1.79)
Commitment	6.67 (1.29)	6.30 (1.46)	6.71 (1.13)	6.92 (1.58)

Note. All items are rated on a 9-point scale (0 = do not agree at all, 8 = completely agree).

bult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The Investment Model Scale is a 25-item questionnaire consisting of four subscales: satisfaction level ($\alpha = .89$), quality of alternatives ($\alpha = .74$), investment size ($\alpha = .84$), and commitment ($\alpha = .83$). All items are rated on a 9-point scale (0 = do not agree at all, 8 = completely agree).

Results

Prior to data analysis, composite scores were created for the satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment subscales of the Investment Model Scale. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations for all measures.

Satisfaction level

To assess the impact of type of and motives for sacrifice on satisfaction level, a 2 (type of sacrifice) X 2 (motives for sacrifice) ANOVA was conducted using the satisfaction level subscale as the dependent variable. The main effects of type of sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = .04, ns$] and motives for sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = .13, ns$] were both non-significant. Additionally, the type of sacrifice X motives for sacrifice interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 63) = .16, ns$.

Quality of alternatives

To assess the impact of type of and motives for sacrifice on perceived quality of alternatives, a 2 (type of sacrifice) X 2 (motives for sacrifice) ANOVA was conducted using the quality of alternatives subscale as the dependent variable. The main effect of type of sacrifice was significant, $F(1, 63) = 7.12, p < .05$, indicating that alternatives were perceived as more attractive if primed with active ($M = 4.04; SD = 1.10$) rather than passive sacrifice ($M = 3.14; SD = 1.59$). The main effect of motives for sacrifice was non-significant, $F(1, 63) = 1.76, ns$. Additionally, the type of sacrifice X motives for sacrifice interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 63) = .04, ns$.

Investment level

To assess the impact of type of and motives for sacrifice on investment level, a 2 (type of sacrifice) X 2 (motives for sacrifice) ANOVA was conducted using the investment level subscale as the dependent variable. The main effects of type of sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = .41, ns$] and motives for sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = 1.60, ns$] were both non-significant. Additionally, the type of sacrifice X motives for sacrifice interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 63) = .24, ns$.

Commitment

To assess the impact of type of and motives for sacrifice on commitment, a 2 (type of sacrifice) X 2 (motives for sacrifice) ANOVA was conducted using the commitment sub-

scale as the dependent variable. The main effects of type of sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = .95, ns$] and motives for sacrifice [$F(1, 63) = .05, ns$] were both non-significant. Additionally, the type of sacrifice X motives for sacrifice interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 63) = .77, ns$.

Discussion

Willingness to sacrifice is defined as the tendency to forego immediate self-interests for the sake of the partner or relationship and is associated with greater satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). The current study experimentally examined how type of sacrifice (active vs. passive) and motives for sacrifice (approach vs. avoidance) are associated with relational variables (i.e., satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment).

The current study found that motives for sacrifice were unrelated to relational variables. This is in contrast to previous studies which found approach motives to be associated with positive outcomes (e.g., increased satisfaction) and avoidance motives to be associated with negative outcomes (e.g., decreased satisfaction) (Impett et al., 2005). It is possible that the priming manipulation employed in this study was ineffective. Additionally, Impett and colleagues measured individuals' tendencies to sacrifice for differing motives rather than prime the construct; therefore, the inconsistent findings may be result of the differing methodologies.

Type of sacrifice was associated with perceived quality of alternatives. Examination of means revealed that individuals primed to recall an active sacrifice perceived their alternatives to be significantly more attractive than those primed to recall a passive sacrifice. It is possible that individuals who actively sacrifice question whether other potential partners would also require engagement of undesired activities. It is much easier to think of alternatives that would entail fewer undesired activities, in turn leading the individual to overestimate the attractiveness of these options. On the other hand, individuals who passively sacrifice are merely foregoing a desired activity, an action over which the individual may perceive himself or herself as having greater personal control. Thus, the individual may be less likely to implicitly attribute blame to the partner. In such cases, the individual is less motivated to seek out alternate partners because the individual still perceives the partner through rose-colored lenses.

The current study has its limitations, however. First, type of and motives for sacrifice were experimentally primed. It is possible that the priming manipulation was unclear, weak, or largely ineffective, as past research examining motives for sacrifice has relied on self-report measures of sacrifice (Impett et al., 2005). Future studies may

either create stronger manipulations or continue use of self-report measures of sacrifice. Second, the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) was designed to measure global evaluations of the relationship. As such, it may be ineffective in assessing current evaluations or may be resistant to experimental manipulations. Measuring relational variables using scales that are more state oriented may be effective in determining the impact of type of and motives for sacrifice. Third, the sample size in the current study was relatively small, which may have led to low power. Thus, it is possible that type of and motives for sacrifice impact relational variables, but that a lack of statistical power led to the inability to find such effects. Fourth, the sample was a convenience sample and thus was biased in terms of age, gender, race, and relationship type. A more representative sample would be beneficial in increasing generalizability of these findings.

Romantic conflict is often unavoidable. The current study indicates that individuals who resolve this conflict by actively sacrificing tend to perceive their quality of alternatives as more attractive, potentially leading the individual to become less committed to a romantic partner. Thus, as much as an individual attempts to preserve the relationship, actively sacrificing may put the relationship in jeopardy as outside factors (i.e., alternatives) become more desirable.

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