

Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes

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We investigated the prospective associations between attitudes about sacrifice and marital outcomes in 38 married couples. Specifically, a measure of satisfaction with sacrifice was proposed to be a potent longitudinal predictor of marital adjustment and distress based on existing cross-sectional studies and also to mediate the association between commitment and marital adjustment. Results demonstrated that attitudes about sacrifice discriminated between couples who would become distressed versus nondistressed over time. Sacrifice attitudes also predicted the maintenance of relationship adjustment over time even better than earlier relationship adjustment. Finally, sacrifice attitudes mediated the link between commitment and relationship adjustment for husbands, but not wives. Implications for intervention are discussed.

Keywords: Sacrifice; Commitment; Marital Adjustment

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An emerging literature suggests that sacrifice is an integral component of intimate relationships. For example, Noller (1996) found that people identify sacrifice, along with caring, trust, respect, and loyalty, as part of their conception of what “love” means. Further, numerous findings from the altruism literature suggest that the more closely a person is related to another, the more likely that person is to give up something in order to help the other (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1976). The study of positive sacrifice has potential to illuminate the ways in which intimate, romantic relationships develop and succeed or fail. Of course, any discussion of the positive nature of sacrifice

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is predicated on the assumption that sacrifices are made willingly, and explicitly excludes situations in which one is coerced or controlled to give to another. To date, a few studies have investigated the nature of sacrifice in romantic relationships, with a particular focus on links between sacrifice, commitment, and relationship adjustment.

RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT AND SACRIFICE

Sacrifice in the context of romantic relationships has consistently been linked with relationship commitment as either a theoretical subconstruct of the domain of commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992) or as a closely related but distinct construct, as analyzed here and elsewhere (Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002). Much of the literature on commitment includes a recognition that, as commitment to a relationship builds, partners begin to exhibit a communal orientation or couple identity, focusing more on the couple and less on two separate individuals trying to maximize their own gains (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Applying this to sacrifice, Stanley and Markman theorized that, in the presence of commitment, acting in the interest of the relationship can be fulfilling and satisfying, even if it means putting aside immediate self-interest. Stanley (1998) further theorized that a person would generally be more inclined to sacrifice for another when there was both a strong couple identity and a long-term view of the relationship.

Van Lange et al. (1997) investigated sacrifice in intimate relationships using a framework based in interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). That theory holds that, with growing interdependence, an individual's motivation undergoes a transformation from self-interest to the interest of the relationship. Building upon this tenet, Van Lange and colleagues proposed that an individual who has gone through this transformation of motivation is more likely to forgo self-interest in favor of what is best for the relationship. In other words, higher levels of commitment should be associated with greater willingness to sacrifice. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found that self-reported willingness to sacrifice was positively associated with stronger overall commitment, healthier couple functioning, and greater relationship satisfaction in several samples of individuals in dating and marital relationships.

Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, and Agnew (1999) used a series of mediation analyses to demonstrate that an individual's willingness to sacrifice serves to increase his or her partner's trust, which in turn leads to greater relationship commitment and willingness to sacrifice on the part of his or her partner. Thus, sacrifice appears to be important in the positive cyclical growth process of relationships.

Whitton, Stanley, and Markman (2002) theorized that interpersonal commitment would not only be linked with greater willingness to sacrifice for one's relationship and greater satisfaction with sacrificing, but also with a perception that the sacrifices one makes for one's relationship are not harmful to the self. That is, the degree to which people had higher levels of overall commitment (including a long-term view of the relationship and a sense of couple identity) was expected to be associated with the perception that sacrifices were not harmful to the self. Consistent with these predictions, relationship commitment variables were negatively associated with perceptions of sacrifice as harmful to the self in two samples. In addition, perceptions of sacrifice

as harmful to the self were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and positively associated with depressive symptomatology (Whitton et al., 2002, 2006).

SACRIFICE AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Not only is sacrifice linked with commitment, but there is also evidence that sacrifice is associated with good relationship functioning. Positive attitudes toward sacrifice—including satisfaction with sacrifice, willingness to sacrifice, and perceiving sacrifices to be less harmful to the self—have all demonstrated positive associations with relationship quality (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton et al., 2002). It is important to note that there is evidence that sacrifice may play a role in explaining the positive effects of commitment on relationship quality. Van Lange et al. demonstrated that willingness to sacrifice partially mediated the relationship between commitment levels and overall relationship adjustment. Similarly, Whitton et al. (2005, in press) found that perceptions of sacrifice as less harmful to the self partially mediated the relationship between commitment levels and relationship quality. Together, these two findings suggest that sacrifice may be one mechanism through which commitment exerts a positive effect on relationship adjustment. In other words, sacrifice may be one of the more tangible ways that partners can demonstrate genuine commitment to the relationship in the day-to-day of life together.

SACRIFICE AND LONG-TERM COUPLE OUTCOMES

Although the literature on sacrifice is advancing steadily, the hypothesis that sacrifice is prospectively associated with long-term couple outcomes has not been adequately tested. The majority of research on sacrifice has been conducted using cross-sectional designs, and in both of the two published reports of sacrifice using longitudinal designs, insufficient change in relationship quality was observed to allow for tests of the extent to which sacrifice predicts that change (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). The lack of change in relationship quality may have been due to the short time span examined in these studies (6 weeks to 18 months).

In this study, we investigated the early years of marriage, when risk for divorce is highest. Building on the literature, we proposed that sacrifice would predict marital success over time. This hypothesis was based in two theory-driven beliefs. First, sacrifice is likely to reflect couple interests being placed over self-interest; this is a key component of the transformation of motivation (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Second, as suggested in the research of Wieselquist et al. (1999), sacrificial behaviors may be highly salient symbols of devotion between partners, leading to greater levels of trust and reciprocated sacrifice, ultimately creating greater relationship quality. Here, we measure sacrifice using the Stanley and Markman (1992) Satisfaction with Sacrifice scale, which measures a sentiment about sacrificing for one's partner, not actual sacrifices. Nevertheless, we would expect that one who derives satisfaction from sacrificing for the good of the relationship is likely to be performing sacrifices. The links between sacrifice-related sentiments and sacrificial behaviors is a matter to be teased apart in future research.

The present research extends the emerging sacrifice literature by testing the prospective association between sacrifice and relationship outcomes in a longitudinal sample of married couples (e.g., Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993), beginning approximately 3 1/2 years into marriage. Three main hypotheses were

tested. First, satisfaction with sacrifice was expected to discriminate between couples classified as distressed versus nondistressed. Second, satisfaction with sacrifice scores were expected to predict change in marital adjustment over time. Whereas hypothesis 1 focused on an aggregate, dichotomous summary of longer term marital outcomes (satisfied vs. distressed or divorced based on available outcomes up to 9 years later), hypothesis 2 focused on the prediction of continuous outcomes on a global, self-report measure of marital adjustment over a shorter period of time (approximately 3 years). Third, following the important finding of Van Lange et al. (1997) that the cross-sectional effect of commitment on relationship quality was partially mediated through willingness to sacrifice, we hypothesized that sacrifice would mediate the concurrent and longitudinal associations between relationship commitment and marital adjustment.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 38 couples selected from the Denver Family Development Project, a larger longitudinal study of relationship development. This project began in 1980 with 135 couples planning a first marriage and followed these couples at approximately yearly intervals, for a total of 11 assessment points. We focus on the fifth, sixth, and seventh assessment points, when couples were married for an average of 3.67 years ($SD = 0.96$ years), 4.74 years ($SD = 0.97$ years), and 5.77 years ($SD = 1.00$ years), respectively, as well as all available diverse information. These assessment points are referred to as Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 in this report; they were chosen because the first of these is the earliest time in the larger study when the sacrifice and commitment measures were employed (and therefore, were available for tests involving predictive ability). Because the sacrifice and commitment measures were added midway through Time 1 data collection, only a subsample (38 couples) completed them and are available for testing the hypotheses of this research. Although this sample size is modest, constraining statistical power, prior research suggests the construct of sacrifice to be associated with moderately strong effects.

Couples were recruited for the larger study through community-wide advertising for couples planning marriage and were paid for their participation (\$25 to \$35 per session). At Time 1, the average age was 27.5 years for wives ($SD = 3.9$ years, range 21 to 38 years) and 27.9 years for husbands ($SD = 3.6$ years, range 21 to 38 years). The sample was well educated; all participants had completed high school, and 68% of husbands and 73% of wives had a bachelor's degree or higher. The median couple income fell in the \$30,000 to \$39,999 range. Participants were predominantly (96%) European American, with the remainder Latino/Latina. At Time 1, partners had known each other an average of 7.9 years ($SD = 3.3$ years, range 4.7 to 19.7 years), had been romantically involved for 6.6 years ($SD = 1.8$ years, range 4.6 to 14.7 years), and were generally quite satisfied with their relationships, with a mean Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) score of 119.37 ($SD = 14.25$).

Procedures

Details regarding the design and procedures of the overall study have been published elsewhere (e.g., Markman et al., 1993) and are only briefly reviewed here. The larger sample was initially recruited for testing a preventive intervention for couples,

so 13 of the 38 couples analyzed here had received the intervention. An additional 11 couples were offered the intervention but declined to receive it, and 14 couples were controls who never heard about the intervention. The intervention aspect of the larger research project was not seen as relevant to the current study outcomes because the data used here were collected approximately 4 1/2 years following the intervention phase and were thus unlikely to reflect intervention effects; indeed, the sacrifice variable as assessed approximately 4 to 5 years after the intervention was not affected by the intervention, $F(2, 33) = 0.52$, $p = .60$, for men, $F(2, 33) = 0.72$, $p = .50$, for women. Each laboratory visit followed the same basic protocol. After a brief interview, couples completed questionnaires, discussed two of their top relationship problem areas, completed a second set of questionnaires, and closed with a second brief interview.

Measures

Only the measures of interest to the current study are described below.

Marital Adjustment Test. The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) is one of the most widely used indices of marital adjustment. This 15-item self-report questionnaire assesses several aspects of marital functioning, including happiness, disagreements, shared confidences, and potential regrets about marrying. This measure possesses excellent reliability and validity in studies of marital functioning (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Personal History Form. At each assessment point, participants provided basic demographic information on such topics as marital status, age, and religion.

The Satisfaction with Sacrifice Scale. The Satisfaction with Sacrifice Scale, from The Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), assesses the degree to which the individual views sacrifice for the relationship to be rewarding. The scale has three reverse scaled items (“I do not get much fulfillment out of sacrificing for my partner,” “I am not the kind of person who finds satisfaction in putting aside my interests for the sake of my relationship with my partner,” and “Giving something up for my partner is frequently not worth the trouble”) and three positively scaled items (“It can be personally fulfilling to give up something for my partner,” “I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself,” and “It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner”). Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale evidenced good reliability, $\alpha = .74$.

Commitment. Commitment was measured using the Long-Term View scale of the Commitment Inventory (termed *Relationship Agenda* in Stanley & Markman, 1992). This scale represents a relatively pure measure of an individual’s desire that his or her relationship continue into the future, which many researchers consider the fundamental component of commitment (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman). Items are quite similar to the bulk of Rusbult’s commitment items (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and other conceptions of commitment (Johnson et al.), and include “I want to grow old with my partner” and “I may not want to be with my

partner a few years from now” (reverse scored). The scale evidenced very good reliability, $\alpha = .88$.

RESULTS

The results are presented in four sections. In the first section, basic descriptive information and zero-order correlations for the key study variables are presented. In the second section, discriminant function analyses were used to predict long-term marital outcomes from satisfaction with sacrifice and commitment. In the third section, a series of hierarchical multiple regressions were used to test the hypotheses that satisfaction with sacrifice would predict change in marital adjustment over time. In the fourth section, a series of regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis that satisfaction with sacrifice would mediate the association between relationship commitment (long-term view) and subsequent marital adjustment.

Formation of Distressed Versus Nondistressed Groups

For the prediction tests using discriminant function analyses (DFA), couples were categorized based on all available marital status and marital adjustment data from all time points in the parent study, including yearly assessments up to 9 years into marriage (roughly up to 6 years after the time point we present analyses from [Time 1 here], when the commitment and sacrifice measures were first used in the larger study). Therefore, the DFA presented here include longer term outcomes than the regression analyses. In contrast, the regression analyses are restricted to using data from three time points because attrition or breakup in the later follow-ups reduces the sample size too much to make use of later follow-ups.

Following Clements, Stanley, and Markman (2004), couples were defined as happily married if both partners scored over 100 on the Marital Adjustment Test at all the data collection points ($n = 19$) or if one partner scored below 100 at one time point but subsequently scored in the nondistressed range ($n = 5$). Couples were placed in the distressed group if one or both partners scored below 100 on the Marital Adjustment Test at two or more assessment points ($n = 7$) or if they divorced or permanently separated ($n = 7$). Attempting to discriminate between three categories at once (happily married, distressed, and divorced) was not possible with the relatively small sample size.

Descriptive Information

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for major study variables are presented in Table 1. As might be expected for a maritally satisfied sample, the commitment measure was significantly negatively skewed, so a log transformation was used to reduce skew. The transformed variable ($M = -0.47$, $SD = 0.45$, $Skew = -0.30$ for husbands; $M = -0.21$, $SD = 0.29$, $Skew = -1.11$ for wives) was used in all subsequent analyses.

To examine potential effects of demographic variables, the distressed and satisfied groups were compared on personal income, premarital sexual activity, cohabitation status, educational level, length of time the partners had known each other, and length of time the partners had been dating. No significant differences emerged. Similarly, the potential effects of participant age, total length of relationship, and length

TABLE 1
Zero-Order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Long-Term Marital Outcome	—									
2. Time 1 Marital Adjustment	-.48**	.59***	.40*	.32*	.42*	.60***	-.07	.17	-.09	-.20
3. Time 2 Marital adjustment	-.64***	.76***	.41*	.64***	.60***	.34*	.01	-.17	.01	-.09
4. Time 3 Marital Adjustment	-.73***	.65***	.75***	.45**	.41*	.28	.00	.08	-.08	-.03
5. Satisfaction with Sacrifice	-.49**	.58***	.67***	.71***	.15	.25	-.13	-.08	.08	-.08
6. Commitment	-.48**	.58***	.67***	.60***	.73***	.42*	-.03	.07	-.15	-.10
7. Age	-.13	.07	.21	.09	.08	.15	.82***	.06	.24	.33
8. Years Known	.17	.07	-.12	.04	-.25	-.09	-.01	—	.36*	.08
9. Years Romantically Involved	.21	-.10	-.25	-.24	-.32 ^a	-.42*	.13	.36*	—	-.10
10. Years Married	-.07	-.14	-.15	-.02	-.03	-.02	.19	.08	-.10	—
Husbands' <i>M</i>	.37	118.16	111.80	113.88	33.97	38.05	27.87	7.90	6.61	3.67
<i>SD</i>	.49	18.67	21.20	16.93	5.03	5.11	3.61	3.30	1.79	0.96
<i>n</i>	38	38	35	35	37	37	38	38	38	38
Wives' <i>M</i>	—	120.58	120.87	117.55	31.97	40.89	27.53	—	—	—
<i>SD</i>	—	13.20	12.26	20.44	6.74	1.90	3.90	—	—	—
<i>n</i>	—	38	35	35	36	37	38	—	—	—

Note. Correlations above the diagonal are for wives. Correlations below the diagonal are for husbands. Coefficients in the diagonal represent correlations between wives and husbands. Dashes indicate couple-level variables rather than individual-level variables.
p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

of marriage on the marital adjustment, satisfaction with sacrifice, and commitment were examined. As shown in Table 1, only 1 of these 40 correlations reached significance, half of the number expected by chance. Thus, demographic and length of relationship variables were dropped from further analyses.

Finally, as shown in Table 1, a small number of participants were missing data on one or more variables. To provide conservative estimates while preserving sample size, median substitution was used for sacrifice and commitment variables, and the marital adjustment scores from the prior visit were used for adjustment variables. All analyses were computed with and without participants with missing data replacement. The pattern of results was essentially identical; findings using data with substitution are presented.

Prediction of Long-Term Marital Outcomes

DFA was used to predict the long-term categorical outcome of satisfied or distressed/divorced based on the continuous variables of husbands' and wives' satisfaction with sacrifice at Time 1. The resulting discriminant function was significant with a Canonical correlation of .56, $\lambda = .69$, $\chi^2(2, N = 38) = 12.92$, $p = .002$. Within DFA, structure coefficients represent the correlations between the variables and the discriminant function, and are reported when substantive interpretation of the discriminant function is the goal (Dalglish, 1994). The structure coefficients for husbands' and wives' satisfaction with sacrifice were .86 and .56, respectively. The analysis correctly classified 82% of the sample. The proportion of couples correctly classified by the discriminant function is significantly greater than that obtained by chance alone, $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 10.88$, $p < .001$, with 22 of 24 nondistressed couples (92%) correctly classified and 9 of 14 distressed couples (64%) correctly classified. Both female and male satisfaction with sacrifice added to the classification of couple outcomes.

Change in Marital Adjustment Over Time

Two sets of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to examine the relative efficacy of satisfaction with sacrifice and commitment in predicting change in marital adjustment over time. Separate regression analyses were conducted to predict husbands' marital adjustment and wives' marital adjustment from both their own and their partner's data. In each analysis, marital adjustment at Time 2 or Time 3 was predicted in a three-step hierarchical multiple regression. Marital adjustment at Time 1 was entered on the first step of the regression, self-reported satisfaction with sacrifice was entered on the second step, and the partner's score was entered on the third step. This strategy tests if respondents' sacrifice scores predict their own relationship adjustment scores at later time points, accounting for earlier adjustment scores. To show predictive ability of future marital adjustment scores while controlling for levels of marital adjustment scores at Time 1 reflects a particularly stringent test of surplus explanatory power, especially given the use here of an omnibus measure of marital adjustment (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). The next step of the regression then tests if partner scores add further to the prediction. Cross-partner associations are not otherwise examined because of the limits of this size of a sample for testing complex models.

Time 1 marital adjustment. As would be expected, husbands' marital adjustment at Time 2 and Time 3 was strongly predicted by their marital adjustment at Time 1, $R^2 = .59$, $F(1, 36) = 52.13$, $p < .001$, and $R^2 = .40$, $F(1, 36) = 23.92$, $p < .001$. Wives' adjustment at Time 2 and Time 3 was also significantly predicted by their Time 1 adjustment, $R^2 = .17$, $F(1, 36) = 7.34$, $p = .01$, and $R^2 = .12$, $F(1, 36) = 4.92$, $p = .03$.

Satisfaction with sacrifice. As shown in Table 2, the addition of one's own satisfaction with sacrifice at Time 1 significantly improved the prediction of both Time 2 and Time 3 marital adjustment over that obtained with adjustment at Time 1, for both husbands and wives, accounting for an additional 8%–18% of the variance. Further, addition of wives' satisfaction with sacrifice significantly improved prediction of Time 3 marital adjustment for husbands. The positive coefficients indicate that, consistent with hypotheses, higher satisfaction with sacrifice was associated with the maintenance of marital adjustment over time.

Commitment. In contrast to the analyses above, commitment only significantly improved prediction of Time 2 and Time 3 marital adjustment for husbands and not for wives. Further, the addition of the partner's commitment did not improve prediction for either husbands or wives.

Commitment, Satisfaction With Sacrifice, and Marital Adjustment: A Mediated Model

Following Van Lange et al. (1997), we hypothesized that satisfaction with sacrifice would partially mediate the association between commitment and marital quality. Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure for estimating mediational effects using a series of regression analyses, we found that, for husbands, the strength of the association between Time 1 commitment and later marital adjustment significantly decreased when satisfaction with sacrifice was included in the equation. As shown in Figure 1, once satisfaction with sacrifice was included in the model, the effect of commitment on Time 2 marital adjustment was reduced to nonsignificance ($p = .13$), indicating full mediation, and the effect of commitment on Time 3 marital adjustment was reduced but remained significant ($p = .02$). As recommended by Baron and Kenny, the Sobel test was used to determine if the reduction in prediction was statistically significant. Satisfaction with sacrifice significantly mediated the effect of commitment on marital adjustment, Time 2 $z' = 2.59$, $p = .01$, and Time 3 $z' = 2.11$, $p = .03$.

For wives, the data did not meet the prerequisites for mediation. Time 1 commitment did not predict satisfaction with sacrifice ($\beta = .25$, $p = .13$), and commitment also did not predict Time 3 marital adjustment ($\beta = .30$, $p = .06$).

DISCUSSION

The present findings indicate that attitudes about sacrifice predict marital success and the maintenance of relationship adjustment in the early years of marriage. Specifically, higher satisfaction with sacrifice early in marriage predicted both that a couple would remain nondistressed over time and that individuals would maintain marital adjustment 1 and 2 years later. The present longitudinal study extends previous evidence that positive sentiments about sacrifice (e.g., reported willingness to sacrifice) are concurrently associated with healthy relationship functioning by demonstrating that satisfaction with sacrifice predicts marital outcomes and change in

TABLE 2
Prediction of Change in Marital Adjustment by Satisfaction with Sacrifice and Commitment

	Husbands			Wives				
	Total R ²	β	R ² Δ	F(1, 35)Δ	Total R ²	β	R ² Δ	F(1, 35)Δ
	Time 2							
Step 2 Own Satisfaction with Sacrifice	.67***	.34**	.08**	8.22**	.35***	.46**	.18**	9.44**
Step 3 Partner's Satisfaction with Sacrifice	.69***	.14	.02	2.07	.37**	.16	.02	1.23
Step 2 Own Commitment	.65***	.28*	.06*	5.59*	.19*	.18	.02	0.93
Step 3 Partner's Commitment	.68***	-.22	.04	3.94	.19	-.00	.00	0.00
	Time 3							
Step 2 Own Satisfaction with Sacrifice	.52***	.42**	.12**	8.71**	.22*	.34*	.10*	4.36*
Step 3 Partner's Satisfaction with Sacrifice	.58***	.25*	.06*	4.64*	.22*	.03	.00	0.05
Step 2 Own Commitment	.54***	.44**	.14**	11.09**	.14	.16	.02	0.70
Step 3 Partner's Commitment	.56***	-.12	.01	0.88	.14	-.05	.00	0.08

Note. Marital adjustment was entered in Step 1 Time 1, as described in the text; not presented here for space.
 p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

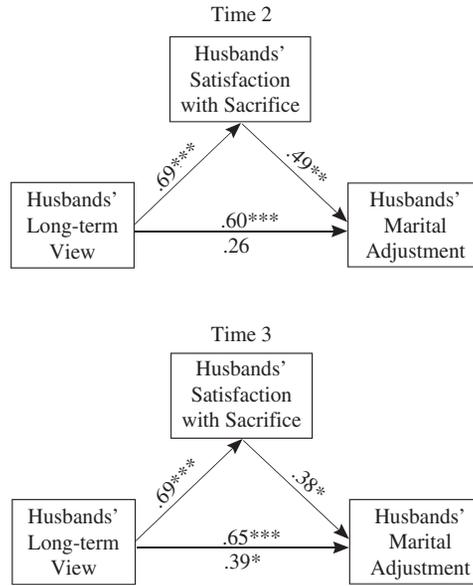


FIGURE 1 Mediated models for long-term view, satisfaction with sacrifice, and marital adjustment at Time 2 and Time 3. β coefficients for long-term view are direct effects above the path and mediated effects below the path.

marital adjustment over time. This temporal evidence is suggestive of directionality; specifically, sacrifice may exert a beneficial effect on relationship quality, which is consistent with the theory that choosing to act in the interest of the relationship at the expense of immediate self-interest tends to promote relationship health (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange et al., 1997).

These findings suggest that there is something potent about the nature of sacrifice in predicting couple outcomes. Although we did not measure sacrifice behaviors, we speculate that performing sacrifices for the relationship may be a salient symbol of devotion to the partner, inspiring trust and increased commitment in the partner (Wieselquist et al., 1999). In other words, sacrifice may play a particularly important role because it has a high signal-to-noise ratio in relationships, with the denial of self standing out from among many other positive behaviors that come to be taken for granted.

Though challenging to accomplish, examining the relative roles of behaviors and perceptions related to sacrifice in the maintenance of relationship quality would be an important future research direction. One of the greatest difficulties in doing such work is that it is very difficult to get reliable behavioral data on sacrifices in feasible designs. One possible method that may be most suited to such research would be diary studies that allow behavioral (and perceptual) ratings close in time to relationship events. Although not allowing for objective measurement, such methods at least allow for more time-sensitive self-reports of both behaviors and feelings about those behaviors. In contrast, objective, behavioral measures of sacrifice may be pragmatically restricted to laboratory settings; for example, couples could be structured to discuss current or upcoming incidents of incongruence between their wishes, with some press to reach a solution. With such methods, one may at least assess the degree to which

“solutions” agreed upon were more a sacrifice for one partner or the other. Perceptions based on self-report and follow-up interviews about the plan could yield information about the complex interplay between behavior and perception in this area. Designs such as this that could capture actual behavioral indices would also allow researchers to examine the degree to which some individuals report being “sacrificial” but who behaviorally show no real evidence of the behavior.

Related to behavior, in another study, we asked partners to report the degree to which they performed common day-to-day behaviors that often called for putting aside personal interest for the sake of the partner or relationship. We also asked the respondents to rate the degree to which they perceived such sacrifices as harmful to the self (Whitton et al., 2006; see also Whitton et al., 2002). We found a small positive correlation between the self-reported behavioral ratings and the perception of harmfulness. This highlights the complex relationship between behavior and perception. Predictably, and consistent with the results here, higher levels of commitment (especially for men) were associated with perceiving sacrificial behaviors less negatively. Conversely, perceiving sacrifices as personally negative was not only associated with negative relationship characteristics but also with depressive symptomatology for both men and women. Furthermore, although we suspected that some types of personality (e.g., those scoring high on agreeableness) might explain some of the relationship between perceptions of sacrifice and relationship quality, we have not found this to be the case.

The current findings add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that positive attitudes about sacrifice may be an important dimension through which partners communicate about the relationship and the degree to which one can trust the other to “be there” for them. In other words, these findings suggest that individuals’ willingness to sacrifice may be important in the growth of relationships and may reinforce an overall sense of safety and security that is hypothesized to be fundamental to marital success (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

The current findings also provide information about how commitment affects the quality of relationships over time. Our third hypothesis, that sacrifice would mediate the link between commitment and relationship adjustment, was supported for husbands but not for wives. Although wives’ satisfaction with sacrifice was prospectively related to their own relationship adjustment, it was not related to commitment, and commitment was only inconsistently related to later adjustment. However, husbands’ satisfaction with sacrifice did mediate the longitudinal association between commitment and adjustment scores, suggesting that, in men, a long-term commitment is related to greater willingness to sacrifice. This finding for husbands is consistent with the findings of Rusbult and colleagues that commitment leads to prorelationship behaviors that serve to maintain and improve relationship quality over time (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Van Lange et al., 1997).

The mediation for males but not for females underscores the emerging probability that there is something fundamentally different about how men and women view sacrifices in marriage, and the role that long-term commitment may play in explaining a willingness to sacrifice. Whitton et al. (2002) suggested that men’s beliefs and behaviors about sacrifice are strongly linked to long-term commitment, but less so for women. They speculated that women are more uniformly socialized to sacrifice, regardless of the level of commitment, in relationships with men; however, men’s

sacrificial behavior toward women may be strongly linked to commitment that entails a long-term view—a factor that may have much more important implications for male versus female behavior (for example, see Stanley, 2002, and Kline, Stanley, & Markman, in press).

Limitations and Strengths

There are several limitations of this study. First, as noted, we did not assess actual sacrifice behaviors but satisfaction with sacrifice, which is essentially a global evaluation of how an individual feels about giving up things for the relationship. Second, the sample available for these analyses is relatively small. Generally, this would limit the power to detect effects. Among various limitations, the sample size precluded meaningful analysis and comparison of cross-partner effects, including analyses of asymmetry in perceptions. Nevertheless, consistent with the robustness of the effects of sacrifice and commitment dynamics seen in other studies, we were able to obtain significant results, even with the current small sample testing theoretically driven hypotheses. Third, this sample is not diverse with regard to race, so the findings may or may not generalize to ethnically diverse couples.

In addition to the future directions that research in this area could take regarding behavior versus perception, qualitative research could add greatly to the conceptualization and hypotheses of future quantitative studies. It would also be useful to see studies adding the dimension of attachment styles to this line of research (e.g., Davila, 2003). It would be straightforward to posit that those who are insecurely attached would be more likely to engage in sacrifices detrimentally.

On the other hand, this study had several strengths. First, it made use of longitudinal data over 3 years. Second, the findings were consistent across analyses using two different types of outcomes. Sacrifice predicted not only changes in self-reported, continuously scored marital adjustment, but also the dichotomous outcome of satisfied versus distressed/divorced, based on several years of data tapping marital adjustment of both partners and divorce status. The latter represents a measure of relationship success with strong external validity. Third, in contrast to several previous studies, participants were married couples from the community rather than individual college students, thus enhancing generalizability and applicability to marital therapy and divorce prevention.

Practice Implications and Conclusions

We are in the early phases of the emerging literature on sacrifice. However, studies reviewed here, along with the present findings, suggest that sacrifice can add to our understandings of marital success. The studies in this area use very different types of samples and measures, yet all reveal theoretically meaningful and consistent results. Although firm conclusions await additional research, the existing studies suggest practical implications for both marital therapy and relationship education. For example, those doing clinical or educational work with couples could help their clients to understand how accommodation between partners is part of satisfying marriages. While individuals, especially in distressed relationships, focus on how their partner can change, clinicians can encourage a shift in focus to something that one has more control over than their partner's behavior: how they can give to their partner in meaningful and salient ways. In other words, individuals could be taught the im-

portance of being willing to give unselfishly (in healthy ways) to their partners—that commitment is not merely the behavior of hanging in there through thick and thin, but true commitment leads to genuine acts of giving between partners. In some ways, findings in the literature on sacrifice can help those clinicians who may otherwise feel reticent about emphasizing altruism to teach clients that it is part of the pathway to satisfying and loving relationships that last.

Clinicians could also teach couples how their relationships suffer when partners take for granted the positive things that each already gives. Indeed, in reasonably healthy relationships that are going through harder times, we have noticed how unaware each partner can become of all the positive things the other is already doing that are no longer noticed. One way to counter this is to help clients engage in meaningful sacrifices as a way to make more visible the ongoing love and commitment between partners. In other words, individuals might come to see that although continuing ongoing investment and positive behavior in marriage is important, there may be a particularly positive effect when one's behavior stands out because it reflects the putting aside of one's own agenda for the good of the partner or the relationship.

The literature on sacrifice also highlights the value of clinicians being nuanced in their views of how sacrifice can function in relationships. Although generally a positive thing—and much research already is showing this—there are undoubtedly situations in which sacrifices are objectively harmful. Although future research can address this more fully, we posit that sacrifices are likely harmful and worth addressing as such in clinical work when the sacrifices are frequent or large, and relatively unilateral (e.g., asymmetrical), or perceived by one or both partners to be damaging to their sense of self. Further, if motivated in part by fear of verbal or physical abuse sacrifices likely would be strongly associated with depression and physical danger.

Overall, we are confident that this line of research has great potential for producing many findings of significant utility for understanding relationships, healthy and unhealthy, and for strengthening relationships and marriages.

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