Chapter 5
Me or You? The Role of Self-control in Facing the Daily Dilemmas of Sacrifice

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In a perfect world, people in close relationships would always experience correspondence of the interests: what is good for one partner is also good also for the other. In the imperfect reality of relationships, however, relationship partners often face situations in which there is a divergence of interests, what is good for one partner is not good for the other. In these situations, people need to make a decision between pursuing self-interest and sacrificing to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship. This dilemma is not trivial because people have good reasons for both options. On the one hand research has shown that sacrifice can have positive effects for the relationship and for the individual’s well-being (Kogan et al., 2010; Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Agnew, & Foster, 1999). On the other hand, past research has also shown that sacrificing may elicit unpleasant feelings such as resentment, dependence, and guilt and may lead to depressive symptoms and dissatisfaction with their relationship (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Jack & Dill, 1992; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007).

People do not always have the time and energy to weigh the pros and cons of their alternatives, they often decide impulsively, without much deliberation. When people need to choose between their and their beloved one’s interest, what is people’s impulsive choice? To promote the self’s or the close other’s interest? And does the result of an impulsive decision differ from the one reached by deliberative thinking? The current study addresses these questions by investigating the role of self-control in the decision of sacrificing (or not) for a close other.

Research has shown that, in many circumstances, people’s impulsive response is self-oriented and that it takes self-control to act prosocially (Balliet, Li & Joireman, 2010; DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008; Finkel & Campbell, 2001, Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). However, in certain contexts (e.g. when prosocial heuristics are activated) a lack of self-control may also result in prosocial responses (Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009). In the current studies we hypothesize that situations of small divergence of interests represent close relationship contexts in which the impulsive response favors the well-being of a close other and of the relationship while the self-controlled response is less likely to result in a prosocial preference.

Although the degree of divergence of interests that people in a close relationship experience varies, in the present research we will focus on small sacrifices that people confront daily in a relationship (e.g., going out with the close other’s terribly boring friends). In small sacrifices the partners’ interests differ in minor ways. We will not focus on large sacrifices (e.g., moving to another country to promote the close other’s career) that are less frequent episodes of a relationship life.

Self-control and Decision Making

Self-control is the ability of the self to change its automatic responses and instead act according to the requirements of the self or of the situation (e.g., Baumeister,
Heatherton, & Tice, 1993). The strength model of self-control suggests that self-control relies on a limited resource. Prior exertion of self-control in one task depletes the self-control resources that are necessary for subsequent self-control tasks, leaving people in a state of self-control depletion. When people lack self-control, they tend to rely on automatic processes, such as habitual responses, heuristics, and intuition (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996).

Self-control depletion influences the way people make decisions. Previous research has shown that self-control depletion reduces deliberative, analytical information processing and increases reliance on quick, effortless, and intuitive processing. When making decisions people who are depleted of self-control follow heuristics and intuition, they rely on what is immediately salient and accessible in the situation (Fennis, et al., 2009; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008; Pocheptsova, Amir, Dhar, & Baumeister, 2009). If what is salient in the situation favors prosocial behavior, depleted participants are likely to be influenced by the specific contextual cues and act accordingly. Fennis et al. (2009) found that depleted participants were more likely to donate money to charity than nondepleted participants, because they relied more on contextual heuristics, which favored prosocial behavior.

**Self-control and the Decision to Sacrifice**

The risk regulation system in close relationships suggests that situations that involve interpersonal risk and vulnerability automatically activate two competing goals: the goal of self-protection and the goal of seeking connection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins 2006). High-risk situations, such as situations of large divergence of interests, are likely to trigger self-protection goals, whereas low-risk situations, such as small divergence of interests are likely to automatically activate connectedness goals (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Pinkus, 2010). People in close relationships encounter situations in which there is a small divergence of interest on a daily basis (e.g., Mary wants to have a romantic dinner to celebrate her birthday but John wants to see the championship soccer final). These situations could potentially be harmful for the self or the relationship. However, given that the potential loss for both parties is relatively small, these low-risk situations represent small interpersonal threat and should automatically activate the need to connect.

How does self-control influence the decision of promoting the self vs. the close other or relationship interests? Individuals who are depleted of self-control resources rely on intuitive processing and should, therefore, be influenced by the contextualized activation of connectedness goals. Nondepleted individuals are likely to engage in deliberative thinking, they are likely to examine the multiple facets of the situation and should be able to correct for the temporary, contextualized, activation of connectedness goals. Therefore, in the current studies, we tested the hypothesis that
when confronted with a situation of small divergence of interests depleted participants should be more likely to adopt a prosocial response and should be more likely to choose to sacrifice than nondepleted participants.

Study 5.1

Previous research has shown that when a partner has made a transgression, lack of self-control impairs the prosocial tendency of forgiving (Balliet, et al., 2011; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010). In our work, we hypothesized that when a partner faces a situation of small divergence of interests, lack of self-control, on the contrary, promotes the prosocial tendency of sacrificing. Study 5.1 aimed to test this difference. In a longitudinal study among married couples we assessed the different role of self-control in predicting the reaction to situations that call for daily sacrifices and forgiveness. Both situations represent an interpersonal threat for the self and the relationships but they differ qualitatively and quantitatively. Situations of small divergence of interests, such as the ones that call for daily sacrifices, represent low threat situations because the issue at stake is of low value and neither the self, the close other, nor the relationship risk to get significantly hurt. These situations are likely to trigger connectedness goals. On the contrary, situations in which the partner has made a transgression represent high interpersonal threat because the partner has significantly hurt the other. These situations should automatically activate self-protection goals (Murray & Holmes, 2009).

In the current study, we assessed the relationship between participants’ trait self-control and past sacrifices and forgiveness of the partner’s transgression. Because people who are low in self-control are likely to rely on intuitive processing and base their decisions on the goal that is activated in the specific situation (connectedness vs. self-protection), we expected participants low in self-control to have engaged in more daily sacrifice than participants high in self-control. However, replicating previous research (Balliet et al., 2011; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk et al., 2010), we expected participants low in self-control to show less forgiveness of partner’s transgressions than participants high in self-control.

Method

Participants. Participants were Dutch married couples who participated in a survey at Times 3 and 4 of a four-wave longitudinal study. At Time 3, 185 heterosexual couples participated. The mean age of husbands was 34.07 years (SD = 4.86) and the mean age of wives was 31.20 years (SD = 4.28). Couples had been romantically involved for an average of 7.71 years (SD = 3.03), and had been living together for an average of 5.81 years (SD = 2.31). One year later, at Time 4, 155 couples participated. As payment for their participation, couples received €15.00 and a small gift.
Measures and procedure. Partners in each couple independently completed questionnaires at home, in the presence of a trained interviewer. To assess trait self-control participants completed the self-control scale by Tangney et al. (2004; 11 items; “I wish I had more self-discipline”; 0 = do not agree at all, 4 = agree completely; α = .71 for men and .74 for women). To assess active and passive sacrifice using 5-point scales (0 = never, 4 = very often), participants were asked “In the past month, how often have you sacrificed for your partner?”; 1 item for active sacrifice “How often have you done something for your partner that you did not feel like doing (e.g., going out with his friends)?”; and 1 item for passive sacrifice “How often have you refrained from doing something that you felt like doing (e.g., cancel an appointment with friends)?”. To assess forgiveness, we used an adapted version of the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Brown, 2003) (4 items; “When my partner hurts or angers me, I am quick to forgive him or her”; 0 = do not agree at all, 6 = agree completely; α = .69 for men and .64 for women).

Results and Discussion

Analysis strategy. Because the data provided by a given participant on two research times are nonindependent, and the data provided by two partners in an ongoing relationship are nonindependent, we analyzed our data using hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In our analyses, participant and partner self-report questionnaire measures – data obtained at Times 3 and 4 – were nested within participants, and data from the two partners in a given relationship were nested within couple. We represented intercept terms as random effects and represented slope terms as fixed effects as recommended for couples research (Kenny, Mannetti, Pierro, Livi, & Kashy, 2002).

Key findings. To test the link between self-control and sacrifice, we regressed passive and active sacrifice onto self-control. Consistent with predictions, self-control was negatively associated with both active (β = -.11, p = .004) and passive (β = -.12, p = .003) sacrifice. In contrast, and consistent with prediction, self-control was positively associated with forgiveness (β = .32, p < .001). This study showed that for small interpersonal threat, such as daily sacrifices, participants low in self-control were more likely to adopt a pro-social response and make sacrifices for their partner than participants high in self-control. In contrast, for high interpersonal threat, such as partners’ transgressions, participants low in self-control were less likely to adopt a pro-social response and forgive than participants high in self-control.

Study 5.2

Study 5.2 examined how self-control influences the decision to sacrifice for a close vs. a nonclose other. The automatic reaction to a small interpersonal threat, such
as a situation of divergence of interests, should activate the connectedness goal only in relation to close others (Murray et al., 2008). On the contrary, the same situation should automatically trigger self-interested concerns for people who are facing this dilemma with strangers (DeWall et al., 2008) or acquaintances. Thus, we expect self-control depletion to favor a prosocial response in close relationships, but to favor a proself response in nonclose relationships. To test this hypothesis, we manipulated self-control and closeness, and we measured two forms of sacrifice: active sacrifice (doing something undesirable) and passive sacrifice (giving up something desirable).

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 85 individuals (62 women; 21.66 years old, \(SD = 4.99\)). They were recruited on the campus of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

**Measures and procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to a close other vs. nonclose other condition and a depletion vs. nondepletion condition. In the close other condition, participants reported the name of their partner (if they were in a relationship) or their best friend. In the nonclose other condition, participants reported the name of an acquaintance. As a manipulation check, we asked them to report how close they felt to that person (1 item; “How close do you feel to him/her?”; \(0 = not at all, 6 = extremely close\)). Subsequently, participants watched a 7-minute video (without sound) and were asked to form an impression of a woman being interviewed. During the video, some words appeared at the bottom of the screen for 10 seconds each. In the depletion condition, participants were asked to focus their attention only on the woman and to actively ignore the words on the screen, whereas in the nondepletion condition participants did not receive any specific instruction regarding the words (e.g., Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003).

After the self-control manipulation, we assessed willingness to sacrifice with a modified version of a measure developed by Van Lange et al. (1997, Study 5.3; \(0 = not at all, 6 = certainly\)). To assess active sacrifice, we presented participants with four moderately undesirable activities and asked them to which extent they would perform each activity for their close other (\(\alpha = .81\)). To assess passive sacrifice, we presented participants with four moderately desirable activities and asked them to which extent they would give up each activity for their close other (\(\alpha = .70\)).

**Results and Discussion**

An independent-samples t-test revealed that participants in close other condition reported to feel closer to the reported person (\(M = 4.63, SD = 0.18\)) than participants in the nonclose other condition (\(M = 3.14, SD = 0.19\)), \(t(83) = 5.62, p < .001\). A two-way independent ANOVA revealed a main effect of close other vs. nonclose other condition. Participants were more willing to actively and passively sacrifice for a close other (\(M = 4.41, SD = 0.14\) and \(M = 3.07, SD = .15\), respectively)
than a nonclose other \( (M = 3.73, SD = 0.14 \) and \( M = 2.41, SD = .15, \) respectively), \( F(1, 81) = 11.51, p < .001, \omega^2 = .11 \) and \( F(1, 81) = 9.69, p = .003, \omega^2 = .09. \) Results also revealed significant interactions for both active and passive sacrifice, \( F(1, 81) = 3.99, p = .049, \omega^2 = .03 \) and \( F(1, 81) = 9.33, p = .003, \omega^2 = .09. \) Consistent with the hypotheses, participants in the close other condition reported greater willingness to actively and passively sacrifice when depleted \( (M = 4.71, SD = 0.20 \) and \( M = 3.41, SD = 0.22, \) respectively) than when non depleted \( (M = 4.10, SD = 0.20 \) and \( M = 2.74, SD = 0.21, \) respectively), \( F(1, 81) = 4.70, p = .033, \omega^2 = .04 \) and \( F(1, 81) = 4.89, p = .030, \omega^2 = .04. \) Participants in the nonclose other condition were not affected by the depletion manipulation for active sacrifice but reported being more willing to passively sacrifice when nondepleted \( (M = 2.73, SD = 0.22 \) than when depleted \( (M = 2.08, SD = 0.22), F(1, 81) = 4.45, p = .038, \omega^2 = .04. \) These results suggest that participants are more likely to sacrifice for close others when depleted than when nondepleted. Replicating previous findings (DeWall et al., 2008), we found the reverse pattern of results for nonclose others. For passive sacrifice, depleted participants reported to be less willing to sacrifice for a nonclose other than nondepleted participants.

### Study 5.3

If depletion of self-control promotes the reliance on intuitive processing in decision making, directly manipulating the way participants make decisions (following intuitive vs. controlled processing) should affect the decision to sacrifice in the same way as the manipulation of self-control. Research has shown that time pressure reduces the operation of controlled, analytical processes, while enhancing the use of heuristics and intuitive processing (e.g., Bargh & Thein, 1985; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Payne 2001). In Study 5.3, we tested how the decision to sacrifice is differentially affected by automatic and controlled cognitive processes with the use of a time-pressure paradigm.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants were 42 individuals (34 women; 19.93 years old, on average \( SD = 2.11 \). They were recruited on the campus of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

**Measures and procedure.** Participants were asked to report the name of their partner (if they were in a relationship) or of their best friend. To assess willingness to engage in small sacrifices for close others, we used a modified version of the Van Lange et al. (1997) measure (Studies 5.1 and 5.2). First participants listed their favorite activities in the evening that they do not do engage in with their close other. Subsequently, for each activity we asked them “Imagine that this evening you have planned to engage in (Activity 1) but (name of close other) now asks you to cancel your
program to help him or her out with some homework because tomorrow he or she has an exam (or something very important to deliver at work). To which extent would you consider giving up your activity and instead help him or her out with the homework? (0 = definitely I would not give up my activity, 6 = I would certainly give up my activity to help him/her; α = .70). Participants in time pressure condition were asked to reply to the questions as quickly as possible, or at least within four seconds, participants in the no-time pressure condition were asked to take the time they needed before answering.

Results and Discussion

An independent-samples t-test revealed that participants in the time pressure condition reported to be more willing to sacrifice (M = 5.11, SD = 0.80) than participants in the no-time pressure condition (M = 4.17, SD = 1.23), t(40) = 2.93, p = .006, ω² = .15. Thus, participants were more likely to sacrifice for a close other when they adopted automatic than controlled processing in decision making.

Study 5.4

Study 5.4 aimed to replicate previous findings on the relation between self-control and the decision to sacrifice in close relationships, and test the hypothesis that connectedness is the mechanisms responsible for this relation. A small relationship threat, such as a situation of small divergence of interests, automatically activates and increases the goal of connectedness (Murray et al., 2008; 2010). Therefore, we expected that depleted participants would show this contextualized activation, reporting more connectedness and, as a result, decide to sacrifice more than nondepleted participants.

Method

Participants. Participants were 81 individuals (55 women; 21.09 years old, on average (SD = 2.57)). They were recruited on the campus of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Measures and procedure. Participants were asked to report the name of their partner (if they were in a relationship) or of their best friend. To manipulate depletion, we adapted a procedure used by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998. Participants watched a 7-minutes video of an episode of the Dutch X-factor, a singing contest which is often enriched with personal stories. The video evoked both positive and negative emotions. In the depletion condition, they were asked to try not to feel any emotion. In the nondepletion condition, they were asked to let their emotions flow while watching the video. Subsequently, we assessed willingness to sacrifice like in Study 5.1 and connectedness with a composite measure of two assessments (α = .70): the inclusion of the other in the self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and one item from
Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg, 1997 (“to which extent would you use the term “we” to describe your relationship with your close other?”; 0 = not at all, 6 = completely).

Results and Discussion

An independent-samples t-test revealed that depleted participants reported being more willing to actively and passively sacrifice ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.79$ and $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.11$) than nondepleted participants ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.29$ and $M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(79) = 2.02$, $p = .047$, $\omega^2 = .04$ and $t(79) = 2.07$, $p = .042$, $\omega^2 = .04$. Mediation analyses using the bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) examined whether inclusion of the other in the self underlies the effect of depletion vs. nondepletion on active and passive sacrifice. The bootstrap estimates are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. The results revealed that the total effect of depletion vs. nondepletion on active and passive sacrifice (total effect = 0.48, $p = .047$ and total effect = 0.53, $p = .042$) became non-significant when connectedness was included in the model (direct effect of depletion vs. nondepletion = .27, $p = .243$ and .36, $p = .165$). Furthermore, the analyses revealed that the total indirect effect was significant with a point estimate of 0.20 and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of 0.04 to 0.42 for active sacrifice and a point estimate of 0.17 and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of 0.01 to 0.38 for passive sacrifice.

In sum, replicating the previous findings, this study showed that depleted participants were more likely to decide to sacrifice for close others than nondepleted participants. Furthermore, this study showed that connectedness is the mechanism responsible for this association. Because depleted participants relied on the contextualized activation of connectedness they reported to be more willing to sacrifice than nondepleted participants.

Discussion

Situations in which partners’ interests are at odds are potentially harmful for a relationship. They represent small interpersonal threats that automatically trigger connectedness goals for people in close relationships (Murray, 2008; 2010). Across four studies, we found that the impulsive response to such situations is to opt to sacrifice for the close other and the relationship. Study 5.1 showed that depletion of self-control facilitated sacrifice for close relationship partners. Study 5.2 showed that, in ongoing romantic relationships, people low in trait self-control tend to sacrifice more than people high in self-control. Study 5.3 showed that when people need to make a decision under time pressure (i.e., in an automatic fashion), they are more prone to decide to sacrifice for close others than when they are not under time pressure. Finally, Study 5.4 showed that self-control depletion favors the reliance on the contextualized
activation of the connectedness goal increasing the willingness to sacrifice for the other.

Our work also showed that self-control depletion promotes daily sacrifices (i.e., a process that is triggered by a situation of small divergence of interests) but impairs forgiveness (i.e. a process that is triggered by a big divergence of interests) (Balliet et al., 2010, Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk et al., 2010). Furthermore, self-control depletion promotes sacrifice in close relationships, but, in line with previous research, decreases sacrifice in nonclose relationships (Study 5.2) (DeWall et al., 2008).

Our work illuminates one of the few cases in which self-control does not favor, but inhibit, prosocial behavior. Previous research has emphasized the benefits of self-control for interpersonal life (Balliet et al., 2010; De Wall et al., 2008, Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel et al., 2009; Peetz, J., Kammrath, L.; Pronk et al., 2010; Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Ritter, Karremans, van Schie, 2010; Tangney et al., 2004). Our work contributes to the literature that demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, self-control depletion may have positive consequences for interpersonal interactions (Apfelbaum, Krendl & Ambady, 2010; Apfelbaum & Sommers, 2009).

As a limitation of this work, we should acknowledge that we have studied daily sacrifices that are characterized by small divergence of interests. Future research should investigate the role of self-control on dilemmas that involve big sacrifices. Situations of big divergence of interests (e.g., having different preferences in which country to live) might involve high interpersonal risk and people might impulsively react in a self-protective fashion. In such cases, just like when confronted with a partner’s transgression, people low in self-control might react in a self-oriented way, while self-control resources are necessary to act prosocially.

**Conclusions**

Relationships are challenging, the interests of two individuals do not always correspond and these situations represent potential for conflicts. If both people focus on their self-interest, and they still want their relationship to survive, they need to start a process of negotiation to reach compromises that accommodate both parties’ desires. These negotiations may take a lot of energy and may be potentially harmful for the relationship (i.e., they might not result in a suitable solution for both, leaving partners with feelings of anger, resentment or guilt). However, our findings showed that in close relationships, in situations of small divergence of interests, people’s impulsive decision is to sacrifice, thereby solving the interdependence dilemma on behalf of the close other. Our work suggests that sometimes close relationships might not require a lot of effortful negotiations. The impulsive response is to sacrifice, a solution that facilitates and smoothen interpersonal interactions.