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## The Art of Sacrifice

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## Summary

Romantic relationships are one of the most important sources of people's well-being, which is no surprise given that romantic partners' lives become highly intertwined. This interdependence comes with a strong motivation to maintain and invest in the relationship, but also brings inevitable dilemmas between pursuing one's own self-interest and benefitting one's partner and the relationship. Couples are regularly confronted with situations in which partners' preferences diverge, and these situations may call for one of the partners (or both) to sacrifice their own self-interests and invest in the relationship instead (Van Lange et al., 1997). Sacrifices can be substantial but rare, such as moving to a new city with your partner to meet their career ambitions, or small and common, such as spending time with your partner's friends rather than your own. The way couples navigate these inevitable conflicts of interests and the related sacrifices may be key to well-functioning and thriving relationships, but has received surprisingly little empirical attention.

The present dissertation aimed to uncover (a) how couples navigate these self-other dilemmas, (b) how partners perceive and appraise each other's sacrifices, and (c) how sacrifices affect gratitude. In Chapter 2 we investigated the role of self-control in balancing partners' dedication to both their personal and relationship concerns. In Chapter 3 we examined how well partners detect each other's sacrifices, and how this detection affects gratitude. In Chapter 4 we investigated perceivers' gratitude in response to the specific sacrifice motives they perceive their partner to pursue. Last, in Chapter 5 we examined how accurately and biased people perceive their partner's costs for sacrifice. We addressed these questions by assessing both partners' experiences and behaviors in their daily lives.

Chapter 2 focused on the inevitable challenge romantic couples face in attending to both their personal and relational needs, and challenged the idea that greater dedication to the relationship unequivocally benefits partners and their relationships. We investigated partners' ability to sustain an optimal balance in attending to the goals and needs they have for themselves, and the goals and needs they have for the relationship. Although people have a strong motivation to attend to both their personal and relational needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000), this is not an easy feat (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). We examined self-control, the ability to direct thoughts, motivations, and behaviors in a goal-directed manner

(Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994), as a key factor in sustaining a healthy personal-relational balance. We hypothesized that self-control should promote romantic partners' experience of personal-relational balance, and prevent imbalance, and in doing so should ultimately promote the well-being of individuals and their relationships.

Results from two studies, using daily experience sampling and laboratory assessments, consistently showed that people high in self-control were more likely to experience an optimal balance between their pursuit of personal and relational concerns. Moreover, results partly supported the idea that self-control prevents people from overdedicating to either personal or relational concerns. Thus, self-control is not merely recruited to invest in one's personal goals, nor to invest in one's relationship. Instead, self-control is key in promoting and maintaining a healthy balance in the pursuit of both these concerns, which are both important for the pursuit of a happy and well-adjusted life.

In Chapter 3 we examined the detection of one's romantic partner's sacrificial acts, and the consequences for gratitude to emerge. *When* people decide to give up their own self-interests and sacrifice for the relationship, their partner may or may not be aware of their costly relationship investments. Thus, opportunities to trigger feelings of gratitude—which are essential to the well-being and stability of relationships (Algoe, 2012)—may or may not be utilized, and may or may not strengthen couples' relationship satisfaction. Just as intriguingly, people may “see” a partner's sacrifice when the partner declares none, but gratitude may be triggered nevertheless.

In two daily experience studies, we used a quasi-signal detection paradigm to directly map both partners' reports of each other's sacrifices onto each other, revealing when people accurately see their partner's sacrifices (i.e., hit), miss them (i.e., miss), or overclaim such acts (i.e., false alarm). Results across both studies consistently showed that partners only recognized each other's sacrifices 50% of the times, meaning that their sacrifices were just as likely to be missed. Interestingly, almost just as often, people “see” a partner's sacrifice, even though their partner reports not having sacrificed that day. Furthermore, findings consistently showed that sacrifices need to be “seen” to elicit gratitude, regardless of whether or not the partner actually sacrificed. However, when partners' sacrifices are missed, these instances constitute

missed opportunities for perceivers to feel grateful and consequently also fail to cultivate greater relationship satisfaction. Importantly, from the sacrificer's perspective, this lack of gratitude leaves them feeling underappreciated for what they have done, and consequently detracts from their satisfaction with the relationship.

In Chapter 4 we investigated more closely how gratitude emerges in response to perceiving a romantic partner's sacrifice, by focusing on people's perceptions of *why* their partner sacrificed. Given the importance of genuine and altruistic intentions in eliciting gratitude, we distinguished between partner-, relationship-, and self-focused motives, and how they are guided by approach or avoidance orientations. We hypothesized that partner-focused motives, that are approach oriented (i.e., to promote the partner's well-being), should reflect sacrificers' intentions as most free from self-interest and thus should be the prime candidate for eliciting gratitude, as these motives signal that the partner is responsive to one's needs.

Results from two daily experience studies and a couple's conversation about a major sacrifice in the laboratory, consistently showed that only perceived partner-focused motives elicited gratitude in the perceiver, and only when these motives were guided by an approach orientation (e.g., to make the partner happy). Such intentions may clearly signal a genuine departure from self-interest, and elicit gratitude in part because people perceive their partner to be responsive to their needs. Thus, *when* people perceive their partner to have sacrificed, the emergence of gratitude greatly depends on how genuine and selfless their partner's intentions are perceived to be.

Finally, in Chapter 5, we investigated romantic partners' perceptions of the inherent costs that their partner incurs when they give up their own self-interest. As there is often ambiguity about the extent to which a sacrifice is beneficial or costly for the individual who sacrifices, and the costs for sacrifice are often experienced privately, there can be considerable room for perceivers to evaluate partners' costs in a biased manner. We set out to examine competing hypotheses as to whether people *underperceive* partners' costs for sacrifice (e.g., to reduce cognitive dissonance arising from seeing these costs and to maintain a rosy image of the relationship), or *overperceive* these costs (e.g., driven by the motivation to capitalize on partners' investments in the relationship rather than missing the importance of what they did).

We conducted a multimethod dyadic study using bi-hourly and daily experience sampling and a couple's conversation about a major sacrifice in the laboratory, and

replicated findings with an pre-registered experimental study. Using Truth and Bias modeling, we disentangled the extent which people accurately track their partner's costs, and at the same, whether they do so in a biased manner by either under- or overperceiving these costs. Results consistently showed that, while people perceived partners' sacrifice costs somewhat accurately, they also *overperceived* them while underestimating the benefits. Thus, we uncovered a new perceptual bias in romantic relationships: partners exhibit a general tendency to *overperceive* the costs that their partner incurs for sacrifice.

All in all, we may conclude that there may be an art to sacrifice, as illustrated by the following three insights. First, our findings demonstrated the importance of optimally balancing one's dedication to both personal and relationship concerns, and importantly, the role of self-control in providing the ability to successfully deal with this inevitable challenge. These insights may provide tools for couples therapy, as couples could be helped in how to monitor and regulate their personal-relational balance in less effortful ways. Second, our findings suggest that there may be an art to "seeing" partners' sacrifices. People miss many of their partner's sacrifices and are only "somewhat" accurate in perceiving their partner's costs for sacrifice. Moreover, people "see" sacrifices that are not there, and overestimate the costly experience of partners' sacrifices. These findings illustrate romantic partners' biased construction of their "own realities" in their lives together. Ultimately, such biased "realities" might positively serve the relationship by creating opportunities to capitalize on partners' costly relationship investments, such as by being appreciative of them. Third, our findings showed that the essential experience of gratitude emerges under two conditions: (a) when people—accurately or inaccurately—believe their partner to have sacrificed, and (b) when they attribute altruistic intentions to guide their partner's decision to sacrifice. However, failing to see partners' costly investments fails to elicit gratitude, and ultimately fails to cultivate a high quality relationship. Together, these findings illustrate the power that perception holds in romantic couples' daily lives.

While research on sacrifice is still young, with the present dissertation we hope to have provided comprehensive insights into how couples can optimally deal with the inevitable conflicts of interests in their daily lives. Ultimately, with these insights, we aim to have contributed to a greater understanding of individuals' happiness and the well-being and thriving of relationships.