

Review

Sacrifices: Costly prosocial behaviors in romantic relationships

Francesca Righetti¹, Mariko L. Visserman² and Emily A. Impett²

Abstract

Although previous research has found that prosocial behavior increases personal and relationship well-being, a particularly costly type of prosocial behavior — sacrifice — can sometimes have aversive effects and is the focus of the current review. We consider effects for both the individual who enacts the sacrifice and the recipient. Sacrifice, can take a toll on the giver's well-being, is a mixed blessing for the recipient (when they perceive the sacrifice), and may have some harmful consequences for relationships in the long-run. We discuss the importance of finding the right strategies (e.g. alternative solutions, comparison of costs and rewards between partners, reappraisals) to navigate these complex interpersonal situations in which partners' goals and preferences conflict.

Addresses

¹ VU, Amsterdam, Netherlands

² University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada

Corresponding author: Righetti, Francesca (f.righetti@vu.nl)

Current Opinion in Psychology 2022, **44**:74–79

This review comes from a themed issue on **Prosociality**

Edited by **Stefan Pfattheicher** and **Isabel Thielmann**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 4 September 2021

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.031>

2352-250X/© 2021 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords

Prosocial behavior, Sacrifice, Well-being, Romantic relationships.

Introduction

Prosocial behavior entails giving benefits to others [1]. Decades of research have shown the positive outcomes derived from this behavior for individuals and relationships. Helping, volunteering, and being kind to others not only provide tangible and symbolic gains for recipients but also benefit givers who are likely to experience increased well-being from these actions [2–5]. Relationships between people also profit from these behaviors as studies have shown that when people help each other in accomplishing goals [6,7], are responsive

to each other's needs [8], and are supportive of each other [9], they also experience elevated relationship well-being. However, not all prosocial behaviors are the same. While sometimes people give to others at no or little, costs to the self, other times prosocial behaviors require people to give up their personal goals and preferences to promote another person's welfare. This form of prosocial behavior, which is particularly costly, is referred to in the literature as 'sacrifice' [10,11]. Sacrifice is often studied in romantic relationships because this behavior is rather common in these contexts [12,13], however, sacrifices also occur between ingroup members [14,15] (e.g. fighting for the welfare of one's own nation), co-workers [16–18] (e.g. working extra hours for a colleague), and even among strangers [19] (e.g. giving up the seat for someone else on a busy train). Does sacrifice exert the same beneficial effects for people and relationships that have been found for other kinds of prosocial behaviors? In this article, we review recent empirical research on the link between sacrifice in romantic relationships and personal and relationship well-being. We examine effects for the giver, the recipient, and their relationship. We then discuss important avenues for future research that may help people and therapists navigate these complex relationship dynamics more successfully.

The link between sacrifice and personal and relationship well-being

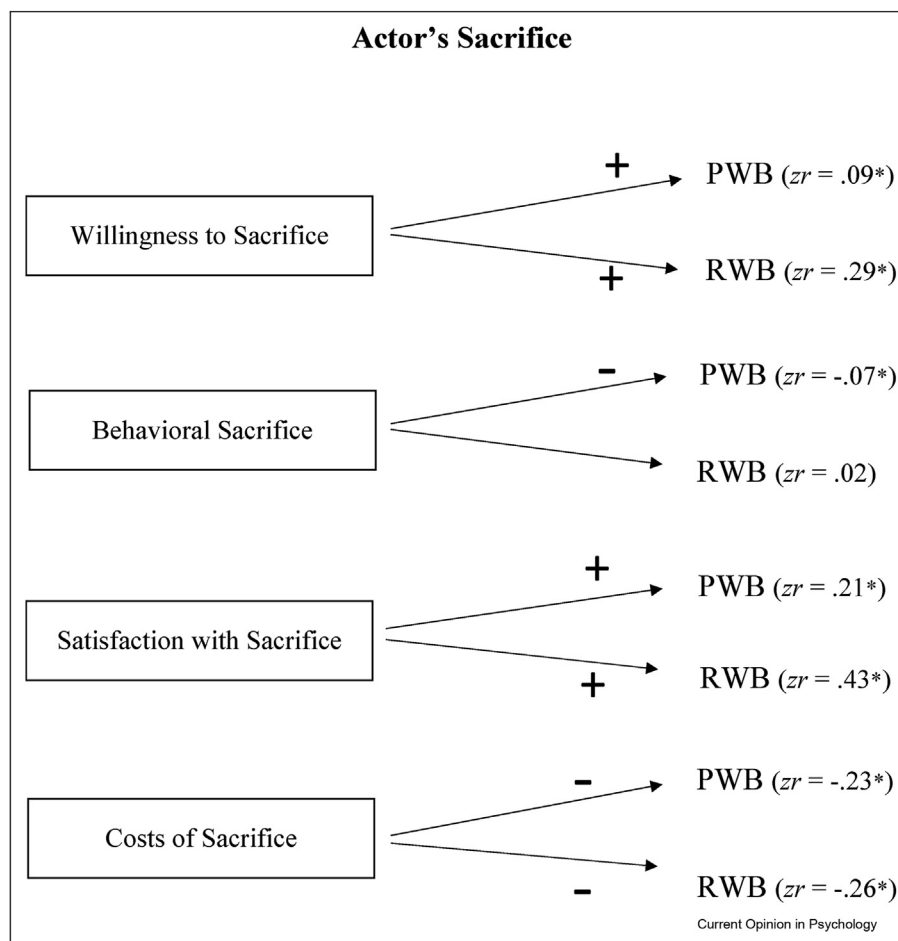
Sacrifices occur in situations in which the goals and preferences of one partner conflict with those of the other partner. For example, one partner wants sushi for dinner, while the other prefers pizza, or one partner wants to buy a house in the city while the other wants to live a quieter lifestyle in the countryside. One way of solving these common and distressing [20] situations is that one partner decides to give up their own goal or preference to accommodate their partner's interest, that is, they decide to sacrifice for their partner or the relationship. Sacrifice is therefore different from other prosocial behaviors because it only occurs when people initially have an immediate self-oriented preference but then decide not to pursue it, after considering outcomes for the partner or the relationship. Sacrifice does not occur when people's immediate self-oriented preference is to help and benefit others, but only when this

choice requires them to give up a personal preference/goal that they initially had. This relationship dynamic is rather frequent [12,13] and, therefore, it is crucial to understand its implications for how people feel (both when they give and receive a sacrifice) and for the relationship.

Some theoretical accounts, such as interdependence theory [21], would predict that sacrifice can be beneficial for relationships because it creates a climate of trust and cooperation [10]. However, other accounts, such as transactive goal dynamics theory [22], would predict that sacrifice can be detrimental for relationships because partners obstruct the fulfilment of personal goals. Empirical studies also show divergent outcomes of sacrifice for relationship well-being. Some have shown a positive association between sacrifice and relationship satisfaction [10,23–27], others have shown a negative one [28–30], and others a null effect [20,31]. To solve this puzzle, Righetti et al. [32] conducted a large meta-

analysis gathering data from 82 independent samples ($N = 32,053$) to examine the link between four different assessments of sacrifice and personal and relationship well-being. First, they examined *willingness to sacrifice*, that is, the general motivation to sacrifice in relationships. Previous research had indeed found a positive association between willingness to sacrifice and relationship well-being [10,33]. Second, they studied *behavioral sacrifice*, that is, what occurs when people actually enact this behavior. As previously mentioned, the results of previous studies were inconsistent, some showing positive and others negative effects [10,23,28,29]. Finally, they also considered *satisfaction with sacrifice*, that is, the extent to which people are happy about having sacrificed, and *costs of sacrifice*, that is, the extent to which people perceive that their sacrifice entailed costs for the self. Previous research had found that satisfaction with sacrifice was positively [29,34,35], and costs of sacrifice were negatively [36–38], associated with relationship well-being.

Figure 1



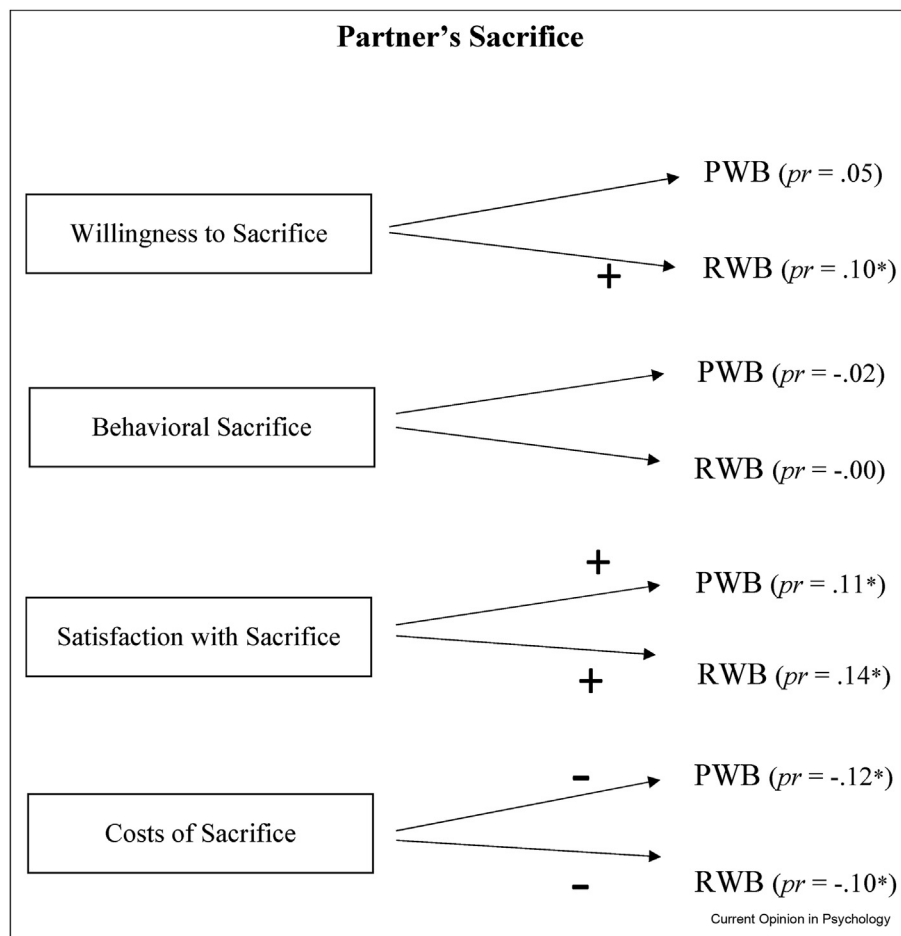
Results of the meta-analysis [31] for actor's effects. Associations between actor's reports of their own sacrifice and their own outcomes. PWB, Personal well-being; RWB, Relationship well-being. * $p < .05$.

In addition to examining the effects for the giver (i.e. the individual reporting on their own sacrifice; actor effects), whenever dyadic data were available, the meta-analysis also considered effects on the recipient (i.e. the partner who received the sacrifices; partner effects). Figures 1 and 2 summarize the results. While willingness to sacrifice and satisfaction with sacrifice were positively linked to well-being for both the actor and their partner, costs of sacrifice were negatively associated with well-being indexes for both partners. Interestingly, behavioral sacrifice was negatively associated with personal well-being for the actor, but those associations were not significant for the actor's relationship well-being and the partner's indexes of well-being. Thus, this meta-analysis highlights that not all forms of prosocial behavior are beneficial for givers, recipients, and relationships. Rather, sacrifices as a costly form of prosocial behavior can take a toll on the giver's well-being. Furthermore, while many people may decide to sacrifice because they think that it is good for the relationship [12], relationship quality does not seem to be affected by these behaviors, at least in the short-term.

Sacrifice as a double-edged sword

Upon first glance, the results of the meta-analysis seem to suggest that behavioral sacrifices are not very consequential. Specifically, they do not seem to be strongly associated with positive or negative outcomes for the relationship (at least when assessed concurrently, that is, when sacrifice and well-being indexes are assessed at the same time point) and the recipients do not seem to be particularly affected by them. This might appear especially puzzling from a recipient's perspective because, at first glance, recipients have a lot to gain from their partner's sacrifices. In fact, they can pursue their own goals, and their partner has also signaled to them that they care about the relationship and are willing to occur in costs for them [33,39]. Consistently, previous research has shown that recipients of sacrifices do feel grateful [13,40]. However, gratitude is enhanced only when people perceive that their partner has made a sacrifice, which occurs only about 50% of the time. The other half of the time, people do not notice the sacrifice and miss an opportunity to experience gratitude [13]. The fact that so many sacrifices go unnoticed raises the

Figure 2



Results of the meta-analysis [31] for partner's effects. Associations between partner's reports of their own sacrifice and their actor's outcomes. PWB, Personal well-being; RWB, Relationship well-being. * $p < .05$.

question of what are the consequences of *perceiving* that a sacrifice has occurred and recognizing that one is the recipient of a costly benefit from one's partner. Addressing this question, a recent study combining correlational, longitudinal, and experimental data showed that perceiving a partner's sacrifice was a mixed blessing. This research showed that while people did have positive reactions after receiving a sacrifice (e.g. greater positive mood, higher gratitude, and feeling appreciated), they simultaneously had negative reactions (e.g. greater guilt, indebtedness, and negative mood) [41]. And accordingly, recipients reported feeling ambivalent toward their partners [41]. Furthermore, and consistent with the results of the meta-analysis [32], this study also showed that while people mostly experienced negative reactions after they sacrificed, they also experienced a few specific positive emotions, such as happiness from being able to benefit their partner, and a sense of pride from being a good relationship partner. Just like recipients, people who sacrifice also experienced an increase in ambivalent feelings toward their partner, and this ambivalence, in turn, was longitudinally linked to thoughts of break up and even actual break up one year later [41]. Thus, the studies reviewed so far suggest that sacrifice can harm givers' well-being, can be a mixed blessing for the recipient (when they perceive the sacrifice!) and can have some harmful consequences for relationships in the long run.

Implications and future directions

Conflicts of interest between partners are distressing [20] and have the potential to disrupt the bond between people in irreversible ways [42]. However, given the interdependence that characterizes relationships [21], these situations are inevitable, and people need to learn to navigate these complex interpersonal affairs. One possible solution to these problems is that one of the partners gives up their preferences and goals for the other but sacrifices are not the only possible resolution to these situations. Sometimes, partners could go their own separate ways (e.g. one partner could order sushi and the other pizza), and other times, partners could reach a compromise (e.g. live in the outskirts of a city). While much more research is needed to understand the consequences of these alternative solutions, it is plausible that these alternative solutions may sometimes provide better outcomes for the partners and the relationship. Future research is needed to understand which type of solution is optimal for the couple (partners going their own way, one of the partners sacrificing, or partners reaching a compromise), and under which circumstances. Furthermore, it is possible that, for some couples, some solutions are preferable across situations depending on the partners personality traits. For example, couples in which partners are high in independent self-construal may benefit from going their own

way more often than couples with partners who construe the self in more interdependent ways [43].

There may, however, be situations in which one or both partners need to sacrifice what they want to preserve their relationship. For example, if Jenny receives an important job offer on another continent, she either needs to give up the job offer or her partner, Josh, needs to move across the globe [44]. Which of the two partners should sacrifice then? Future research is needed to uncover the most optimal way for couples to navigate these types of decisions. For example, the best outcome might be achieved if the partner who experiences the least costs from the sacrifice is the one to give up their own preference. For example, Jenny could turn down the job offer because she already has a great job and Josh has a difficult time with change. Alternatively, it could be best for couples if the partner who sacrifices is the one for which the sacrifice may be more rewarding in the long run. For example, although Josh may be disappointed to leave his family and friends behind in the short-term, he is likely to adapt to, and even enjoy, a new country that provides him with novel opportunities for growth over the longer term. Finally, the most adjusted couples may be the ones that are good at taking turns, and while one partner sacrifices their preferences on one occasion, the other sacrifices on the next. In fact, Righetti et al. [41] showed that people seem to expect such turn taking in sacrifices and violation of this implicit norm may be especially distressing.

Regardless of who sacrifices, it is clear from the data reviewed in this article that, on the whole, enacting sacrifice can take a toll on personal well-being with possible detrimental effects for the relationship in the long run. However, the meta-analysis also showed that to the extent that people feel satisfied with their sacrifice and that they perceived it to be less costly, they also experience higher personal and relationship well-being. Thus, reappraising the sacrifice in a positive light seems key to obtaining the best possible outcome from this behavior. There are certainly ways in which people may try to reappraise a sacrifice to feel better about it. For example, people could underestimate the costs [37], focus on what is gained rather than lost [12,45], and focus on the partner's welfare [46] to feel more satisfied with their decision. Furthermore, there are also ways in which partners can facilitate these reappraisal processes, for example, by showing care, understanding, and validation of the sacrificer's needs and interests when receiving a sacrifice [47].

Before closing, we will discuss some methodological challenges that we believe should guide future research on relational sacrifices. First, most studies to date regard daily, and relatively minor, sacrifices. Much less is known

about the consequences of larger sacrifices (e.g. moving to another country to promote one's partner's career). Such more costly sacrifices are rarer, and therefore more difficult to study, but as the meta-analysis [32] suggests, the larger costs may impact the giver's well-being in more deleterious ways. Second, sacrifices and their outcomes are often assessed through self-report measures, which are susceptible to common method variance and memory biases. To overcome this limitation, future research should also try to gather more observational data as sacrifices unfold in real-time. Finally, sacrifices between romantic partners are hardly ever studied in an experimental setting in the laboratory because of the challenges of developing an appropriate manipulation and because of the difficulties of performing an ecologically valid sacrifice in the laboratory. In fact, while prosocial behavior among strangers can be easily studied in social dilemma games with the use of points and monetary incentives [48], such paradigms may be meaningless for romantic couples (e.g. because they have common financial resources or because they can make different arrangements when the experiment is concluded). Thus, a challenge for future research is to find the right paradigm to study sacrifices among significant others not only in an experimental but also ecologically valid, manner.

Conclusion

While previous research has shown the benefits of prosocial behavior for well-being, this review shows that the consequences of sacrifice, a costly form of prosocial behavior in which people give up their own goals or preferences for another, can be bittersweet, and can impair both personal and relationship well-being. However, research also suggests that the reappraisal of a sacrifice is a key factor in determining its impact. Thus, among investigating other alternative solutions to conflicting interests, it is important for future research to thoroughly investigate which possible ways people can transform what might sometimes feel like a bitter lemon of a sacrifice into sweet lemonade.

Author note

This work was supported by Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research [grant number VI.Vidi.195.010].

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

References

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

- Schroeder DA, Graziano WG: *The Oxford handbook of prosocial behavior*. Oxford University Press; 2015.
 - Dunn EW, Aknin LB, Norton MI: **Spending money on others promotes happiness**. *Science* 2008, **319**:1687–1688.
 - Aknin LB, Dunn EW, Proulx J, Lok I, Norton MI: **Does spending money on others promote happiness?: a registered replication report**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2020, **119**:e15–e26.
 - Chancellor J, Margolis S, Jacobs Bao K, Lyubomirsky S: **Everyday prosociality in the workplace: the reinforcing benefits of giving, getting, and glimpsing**. *Emotion* 2018, **18**:507–517.
 - Jebb AT, Morrison M, Tay L, Diener E: **Subjective well-being around the world: trends and predictors across the life span**. *Psychol Sci* 2020, **31**:293–305.
- This paper shows that prosociality is linked to positive affect in a cross-cultural study involving 166 nations.
- Rusbult CE, Finkel EJ, Kumashiro M: **The michelangelo phenomenon**. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 2009, **18**:305–309.
 - Overall NC, Fletcher GJO, Simpson JA: **Helping each other grow: romantic partner support, self-improvement, and relationship quality**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **36**:1496–1513.
 - Reis HT: **Relationship well-being: the central role of perceived partner responsiveness**. In *Human bonding: the science of affectional ties*. The Guilford Press; 2013:283–307.
 - Jakubiak BK, Feeney BC, Ferrer RA: **Benefits of daily support visibility versus invisibility across the adult life span**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2020, **118**:1018–1043.
 - Van Lange PAM, Rusbult CE, Drigotas SM, Arriaga XB, Wichter BS, Cox CL: **Willingness to sacrifice in close relationships**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1997, **72**:1373–1395.
 - Righetti F, Impett E: **Sacrifice in close relationships: motives, emotions, and relationship outcomes**. *Soc Pers Psychol Comp* 2017, **11**. e12342.
 - Impett EA, Gable SL, Peplau LA: **Giving up and giving in: the costs and benefits of daily sacrifice in intimate relationships**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2005, **89**:327–344.
 - Visserman ML, Impett EA, Righetti F, Muise A, Keltner D, Van Lange PAM: **To “see” is to feel grateful? A quasi-signal detection analysis of romantic partners' sacrifices**. *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2019, **10**:317–325.
- This work shows that people perceive only about 50% of the daily sacrifices that their partners make for them. Perceiving the sacrifices elicits gratitude.
- Atran S, Sheikh H, Gomez A: **Devoted actors sacrifice for close comrades and sacred cause**. *Proc Natl Acad Sci Unit States Am* 2014, **111**:17702–17703.
 - De Dreu CKW, Balliet D, Halevy N: **Chapter one - parochial cooperation in humans: forms and functions of self-sacrifice in intergroup conflict**. In *Advances in motivation science*. Edited by Elliot AJ, Elsevier; 2014:1–47.
 - van Knippenberg B, van Knippenberg D: **Leader self-sacrifice and leadership effectiveness: the moderating role of leader prototypicality**. *J Appl Psychol* 2005, **90**:25–37.
 - De Cremer D, van Knippenberg D: **Cooperation as a function of leader self-sacrifice, trust, and identification**. *Leader Organ Dev J* 2005, **26**:355–369.
 - Singh N, Krishnan VR: **Self-sacrifice and transformational leadership: mediating role of altruism**. *Leader Organ Dev J* 2008, **29**:261–274.
 - Morhenn VB, Park JW, Piper E, Zak PJ: **Monetary sacrifice among strangers is mediated by endogenous oxytocin release after physical contact**. *Evol Hum Behav* 2008, **29**:375–383.
 - Righetti F, Gere J, Hofmann W, Visserman ML, Van Lange PAM: **The burden of empathy: partners' responses to divergence of interests in daily life**. *Emotion* 2016, **16**:684–690.
 - Kelley HH, Thibaut JW: *Interpersonal relations: a theory of interdependence*. Wiley; 1978.
 - Fitzsimons GM, Finkel EJ, vanDellen MR: **Transactive goal dynamics**. *Psychol Rev* 2015, **122**:648–673.

23. Ruppel EK, Curran MA: **Relational sacrifices in romantic relationships: satisfaction and the moderating role of attachment.** *J Soc Pers Relat* 2012, **29**:508–529.
24. Chen F-M, Li T-S, Enqing Marital: **An examination of its relationship to spousal contributions, sacrifices, and family stress in Chinese marriages.** *J Soc Psychol* 2007, **147**:393–412.
25. Lan J, Li X, Cao H, Zhou N, Lin X, Deng L, et al.: **Inequity of sacrifice and marital satisfaction in Chinese young couples.** *J Fam Ther* 2017, **39**:169–192.
26. Zhang H, Li T: **The role of willingness to sacrifice on the relationship between urban Chinese wives' relative income and marital quality.** *J Sex Marital Ther* 2015, **41**:314–324.
27. Zhu W, Wang CDC, Jin L, Lu T: **Adult attachment, sacrifice, and emotional wellbeing of couples: a cross-cultural comparison between the U.S. and China.** *J Soc Pers Relat* 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520963954>.
28. Totenhagen CJ, Curran MA: **Daily hassles, sacrifices, and relationship quality for pregnant cohabiters.** *Fam Sci* 2011, **2**:68–72.
29. Whitton SW, Stanley SM, Markman HJ: **If I help my partner, will it hurt me? Perceptions of sacrifice in romantic relationships.** *J Soc Clin Psychol* 2007, **26**:64–91.
30. Curran MA, Burke TJ, Young VJ, Totenhagen CJ: **Relational sacrifices about intimate behavior and relationship quality for expectant cohabiters.** *Marriage Fam Rev* 2016, **52**:442–460.
31. Totenhagen CJ, Curran MA, Serido J, Butler EA: **Good days, bad days: do sacrifices improve relationship quality?** *J Soc Pers Relat* 2013, **30**:881–900.
32. Righetti F, Sakaluk JK, Faure R, Impett EA: **The link between sacrifice and relational and personal well-being: a meta-analysis.** *Psychol Bull* 2020, **146**:900–921.
- This meta-analysis shows the link between willingness to sacrifice, behavioral sacrifice, satisfaction with sacrifice and costs of sacrifice and personal and relationship well-being. These associations are studied for the person who enacts the sacrifice and for their partner.
33. Wieselquist J, Rusbult CE, Foster CA, Agnew CR: **Commitment, pro-relationship behavior, and trust in close relationships.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1999, **77**:942–965.
34. Stanley SM, Markman HJ: **Assessing commitment in personal relationships.** *J Marriage Fam* 1992, **54**:595–608.
35. Stanley SM, Whitton SW, Sadberry SL, Clements ML, Markman HJ: **Sacrifice as a predictor of marital outcomes.** *Fam Process* 2006, **45**:289–303.
36. Day LC, Impett EA: **Giving when it costs: how interdependent self-construal shapes willingness to sacrifice and satisfaction with sacrifice in romantic relationships.** *J Soc Pers Relat* 2018, **35**:722–742.
37. Visserman ML, Righetti F, Muise A, Impett EA, Joel S, Van Lange PAM: **Taking stock of reality: biased perceptions of the costs of romantic partners' sacrifices.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2021, **12**:54–62.
- This paper shows that people tend to see greater costs in their partner's sacrifices as compared to their own sacrifices. This discrepancy seems driven by people underestimating their own sacrifice costs, which benefits their mood and relationships satisfaction.
38. Cao H, Fang X, Fine MA, Ju X, Lan J, Zhou N: **Sacrifice, commitment, and marital quality in the early years of Chinese marriage: an actor-partner interdependence moderation model.** *J Soc Pers Relat* 2017, **34**:1122–1144.
39. Joel S, Gordon AM, Impett EA, MacDonald G, Keltner D: **The things you do for me: perceptions of a romantic partner's investments promote gratitude and commitment.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2013, **39**:1333–1345.
40. Visserman ML, Righetti F, Impett EA, Keltner D, Van Lange PAM: **It's the motive that counts: perceived sacrifice motives and gratitude in romantic relationships.** *Emotion* 2018, **18**:625–637.
41. Righetti F, Schneider I, Ferrier D, Spiridonova T, Xiang R, Impett EA: **The bittersweet taste of sacrifice: consequences for ambivalence and mixed reactions.** *J Exp Psychol Gen* 2020, **149**:1950–1968.
- This paper shows that both performing and receiving a sacrifice increases ambivalence toward the partner. Ambivalence, in turns, predicts thoughts of break up one year later, at a follow-up. This study also examined the specific positive and negative reactions elicited by sacrifice.
42. Amato PR, Rogers SJ: **A longitudinal study of marital problems and subsequent divorce.** *J Marriage Fam* 1997, **59**:612–624.
43. Singelis TM: **The measurement of independent and interdependent self-construals.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 1994, **20**:580–591.
44. Mandal E: **Sacrifices of women and men in close relationships: the types and structure of sacrifices. The approach and avoidance motives for making sacrifices.** 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5114/cipp.2020.101952>.
45. Impett EA, Gere J, Kogan A, Gordon AM, Keltner D: **How sacrifice impacts the giver and the recipient: insights from approach-avoidance motivational theory.** *J Pers* 2014, **82**:390–401.
46. Kogan A, Impett EA, Oveis C, Hui B, Gordon AM, Keltner D: **When giving feels good: the intrinsic benefits of sacrifice in romantic relationships for the communally motivated.** *Psychol Sci* 2010, **21**:1918–1924.
47. Visserman Mariko L, Amy Muise, Righetti Francesca, Horne Rebecca M, Le Bonnie M, Stéphane Côté, et al.: **Impett: lightning the load: perceived partner responsiveness fosters more positive appraisals of relational sacrifices.** 2021 [paper under revision for publication].
48. Van Lange PAM, Joireman J, Parks CD, Van Dijk E: **The psychology of social dilemmas: a review.** *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2013, **120**:125–141.