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Article 20

Sacrifice and Marital Satisfaction

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In Western society, values such as individualism, autonomy, personal freedom, and personal gain are prevalent. However, in marriage, these values may cause conflict. In times of conflict it may be necessary for one or both partners to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship. This paper explores the role of sacrifice within a marriage and its impact on marital satisfaction.

Sacrifice Defined

The dictionary gives several definitions for the word sacrifice. It defines sacrifice as "a giving up of something valuable or important for somebody or something else considered to be of more value or importance" (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999). Willingness to sacrifice is described as the tendency to give up immediate self-interest to promote the well being of a partner or relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997). Passive sacrifice is the act of giving up a behavior that would otherwise seem pleasing. Active sacrifice entails enacting in behaviors that might otherwise be undesirable.

Partners may engage in passive sacrifice, active sacrifice, or both (Van Lange et al., 1997). Major acts of sacrifice have been the primary focus of much research. Impett, Gable, and Peplan (2005) attempted to move past hypothetical willingness to sacrifice to the types of sacrifice couples experience in everyday life. They conducted a study in which they classified participants' descriptions of sacrifice into a list of 12 major themes. The 12 categories of sacrifice included: friends (listed by 87% of participants at least once); recreation (86%), errands, chores, and favors (65%); school and work (59%); family (56%); communication and interaction (49%); gifts and money (33%); other- sex interactions (25%); appearance (10%); and intimacy (10%). There were sample items for each theme. For example, the sample item for the theme of friends was "Went to his friend's party" and "Cancelled plans with my friends" (Impett et al., 2005).

Process of Sacrifice

Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, and Agnew (1999) provide a framework to describe the process of engaging pro-relationship behavior. An interdependence dilemma is defined as a situation that involves conflicting motives. In the given situation there may be many reasons to pursue one's immediate self-interest, but there may also be many reasons to pursue the best interest of the relationship. Each partner's immediate preference is referred to as the given situation. One partner's immediate self-interest may conflict with the best interest of the relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

Wieselquist et al. (1999) give the example of John and Mary. Mary acts in a rude behavior towards John. John's immediate preference may be to act rudely in a revengeful way back to Mary in order to defend himself. It is likely that his revengeful act would cause damage to his relationship with Mary. His immediate self interest is in conflict with the interest of his relationship. Transformation of motivation is the process in which a partner moves away from their immediate self-interest and towards the interest of a broader concern, such as the relationship. Transformation of motivation leads to modified preferences (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

In order to deal with conflicting situations, which may be troublesome to the health and vitality of a relationship, there must be some leaning towards pro-relationship transformation of motivation, which produces increased willingness to sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997). Transformation of motivation can become habitual and routine in couples. Some dilemmas or problems may be encountered regularly, and the couple may begin to respond to the problem in a habitual way. Some couples may get into the habit of behaving in a pro-relationship transformation, and other couples may have gotten into the habit of more selfish behaviors (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Marital Satisfaction and Sacrifice

According to a study conducted by Van Lange et al. (1997), willingness to sacrifice is linked with high levels of satisfaction, couple functioning, commitment, and investments. In this research the determinants of sacrifice and the consequences of willingness to sacrifice were examined. Sacrifice in intimate relationships was investigated using an interdependence theory framework. The interdependence theory suggests that when interdependence grows, an individual's motivation transforms from self-interest to interest of the relationship (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, and Markman, 2006).

Van Lange et al. (1997) proposed that an individual who has gone through this transformation of motivation is more likely to choose what is in the best interest to the relationship over self-interest. More specifically, it was hypothesized that commitment is associated with willingness to sacrifice and that enhanced couple functioning is associated with willingness to sacrifice. Consistent with their hypothesis, commitment level was significantly positively correlated with willingness to sacrifice. Willingness to sacrifice was also positively correlated with satisfaction level and investment size. The study also revealed that willingness to sacrifice also partially mediated the relationship between commitment levels and relationship adjustment. (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Stanley et al. (2006) investigated the potential associations between attitudes about sacrifice and marital outcomes in 38 married couples. This study tested the prospective association between sacrifice and relational outcomes. There were three hypotheses. First, it was hypothesized that satisfaction with sacrifice would discriminate between distressed couples and non-distressed couples. Second, it was hypothesized that satisfaction with sacrifice scores would predict change in marital adjustment over time. The findings from this research indicated "higher satisfaction with sacrifice early in marriage predicted both that a couple would remain non-distressed over time and that individuals would maintain marital adjustment one to two years later" (Stanley et al., 2006, p. 297). Third, sacrifice was expected to mediate the longitudinal associations between relationship commitment and marital adjustment. This hypothesis was true for husbands, but not for wives. Husband's satisfaction with sacrifice did mediate the scores between commitment and longitudinal associations (Stanley et al., 2006).

There were several limitations to this study. The study did not actually assess sacrifice, but willingness to sacrifice. The sample for this study was small and not racially diverse. The research was criticized for being about expression in words rather than acts or reported acts (Beels & Newmark, 2006).

Sacrifice and Commitment

What makes couples willing to sacrifice? Willingness to sacrifice is associated with high commitment levels (Van Lange et al., 1997). Commitment level signifies the couple's long term orientation towards the relationship. Wieselquist et al. (1999) suggest that commitment and trust play a role in promoting pro-relationship behavior motivation and behavior. More specifically, commitment promotes maintenance acts such as willingness to sacrifice. There are four features of commitment that may explain why commitment promotes pro-relationship behavior. First, individuals who are committed to a relationship are dependent on the relationship. The more an individual has to lose, the more effort they will put forth to keep what they have. Second, in long term involvements, pro-relationship behaviors are beneficial because they encourage reciprocity. These acts of sacrifice may be conscious or unconscious efforts to enhance one's own long-term self-interest (Van Lange et al., 1997). Third, commitment involves psychological attachment, thus sacrifice benefiting the partner may not be personally costly. Fourth, commitment may induce a communal orientation in which partners may engage in pro-relationship behavior unconditionally.

In this study, it was hypothesized that Partner A's commitment level would be positively associated with Partner A's pro-relationship behavior. The research from this study indicates that commitment was positively associated with willingness to sacrifice. It was also hypothesized that Partner A's self report of pro-relationship behavior would be positively associated with Partner B's perceived pro-relationship behavior. The study revealed that this hypothesis was significant (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

Trust and Sacrifice

Sacrifice also has an impact on the couple's trust levels. Trust is made up of three integral parts. The first part is predictability, which is the conviction that the partner's

behavior is consistent. Second is dependability, which is the conviction that the partner consistently will be honest, reliable, and benevolent. The third part is faith, which is belief that the partner is motivated to be both caring and responsive. Wieselquist et al. (1999) suggest that trust is developed through each partner's perception of the other's behavior in interdependence dilemmas. When a partner engages in a commitment inspired maintenance act, such as the willingness to sacrifice in order to resolve an interdependence dilemma, they are demonstrating trustworthy behavior. The individual is able to build trust in their partner when they observe the partner choose the good of the relationship over their immediate self-interest.

The increase in the partner's trust leads to higher levels of relationship commitment and willingness to sacrifice on the part of the other partner. In this study, it was hypothesized that Partner B's perceived partner pro-relationship behavior would be positively associated with Partner B's trust level. The study revealed that this hypothesis was significant (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

Motives of Sacrifice

Impett et al. (2005) examined sacrifice in close relationships from an approach-avoidance motivational perspective. Approach motives center around obtaining positive outcomes, such as a partner's well being or higher levels of closeness in the relationship. On the other hand, avoidance motives focus on avoiding negative outcomes, such as fighting or conflict. Approach and avoidance motives for sacrifice may affect personal well being of the person who sacrifices, the well being of the partner, and the quality of the relationship (Impett et al., 2005).

The person who sacrifices for a partner may have a different experience based on the different motive used. Using an approach motive, such as sacrificing to attempt to enhance a partner's happiness, may lead to positive emotions and enhanced marital satisfaction. Using an avoidance motive, such as sacrificing to prevent the partner from losing interest in the relationship, may lead to resentment or anxiety. Avoidance motives may give some temporary relief, but other negative emotions it may bring may decrease his satisfaction in the marriage. In a study conducted by Neff and Harter (2002), individuals who modified their own interests out of genuine concern for their partner reported more personal and interpersonal benefits. On the other hand, those who modified their own interests in order to avoid negative outcomes reported more negative personal and interpersonal consequences (Neff & Harter, 2002).

Impett et al. (2005) conducted a daily experience study to assess how approach and avoidance methods for sacrifice are associated with day-to-day personal well being and relationship quality. Individuals participating in an ongoing dating relationship filled out a survey measuring sacrifice, personal well being, and relationship quality for 14 consecutive nights. They were given an initial survey measuring relationship quality and a one month follow-up to assess sacrifices and relationship quality over time (Impett et al., 2005).

The results of the study show that in terms of personal well-being, approach motive was significantly and positively associated with higher satisfaction with life and positive affect, but they were not associated with negative affect. In terms of personal well being, the avoidance motive was negatively associated with higher satisfaction with

life, positively associated with negative affect, and not associated with positive affect (Impett et al., 2005).

In terms of interpersonal well being, the study shows that approach motives were significantly and positively related to relational satisfaction, fun, and closeness, and negatively related to relational conflict. The avoidance motives for sacrifice were negatively related to relational satisfaction, fun, and closeness. The avoidance motives were positively associated with relational conflict (Impett et al., 2005).

Impett et al. (2005) hypothesized that increased sacrifice for approach motives during the study would predict higher relationship satisfaction and fewer breakups at the one month follow-up. This hypothesis only received partial support. They also predicted that increased sacrifice for avoidance motives during the study would predict lower relationship satisfaction and more breakups. This hypothesis received strong support (Impett et al., 2005).

According to these studies, there has been a positive correlation between sacrifice and the amount of satisfaction within marriage. After studying these correlations of sacrifice and marriage, one can assume that it would be beneficial to engage in close relationship maintenance acts such as sacrifice. Further research on the negative effects of sacrifice on marriage may be beneficial. Also, more research on the effects of sacrifice within the different stages of marriage may be beneficial.

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