

# The Psychological Impact of Sacrifice in Romantic Relationships and Partner Wellbeing

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## Abstract

Prosocial behavior is defined by the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences as voluntary behavior intended to benefit others but also costing the individual. Sacrifice, a type of prosocial behavior, is often called into question in its influence in romantic relationships and partner well-being. In any relationship, whether that be platonic or a more intimate one, two parties usually must perform sacrifices on their own interests to benefit the other party or simply maintain the relationship's wellbeing. Sacrifice has both positive and negative influences in the scope of romantic relationships. There is significant value in making sacrifices for love, whether that be time or energy. Sacrifice can be an incredibly positive thing, showing immense compassion and empathy for the other partner and making the relationship successful. Sacrifice can also present itself with a more negative appearance, acting in more harmful ways than good. Research has found that emotional suppression via sacrifice is associated with decreases in partner well-being. This research was conducted to analyze numerous studies to determine the psychological impact of sacrifice in romantic relationships and its role on partner well-being.

## Introduction

Prosocial behavior is defined by the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences as voluntary behavior intended to benefit others but also costing the individual (Hasenfratz & Knafo, 2015).

Prosocial behavior is seen in empathetic acts of kindness and its aim is to benefit another person's wellbeing. There are two types of behaviors in

western societies: one being the pursuit of individualism and autonomy while the other including prosocial behaviors that consist of altruism and selflessness. This pursuit of individualism is defined as the seeking of one's own self-interest (Allison & Wuthnow, 1992). However, individualism allows people to thrive, making them more altruistic and happier (Kluth, 2021). These altruistic behaviors are prosocial and allow people to experience better moods and are especially crucial in mitigating stress and depression ("Manage Stress: Strengthen Your Support Network," 2022).

Among prosocial behaviors, personal dedication refers to an individual's inclination to improve or maintain the quality of the relationship the individual is in for the common benefit of the partners (Stanley et al., 2010). All kinds of relationships benefit from prosocial behaviors in that they often influence more positive outcomes and promote another person's welfare. However, sacrifice, although defined as a type of prosocial behavior, is often called into question in romantic relationships. In any relationship, whether that be platonic or a more intimate one, two parties usually must perform sacrifices on their own interests to benefit the other party or simply maintain the relationship's wellbeing (Righetti & Impett, n.d.). Sacrifices can be small like spending time with people your partner would like to spend time with or something even bigger like moving to a new city for your partner's job. Stanley et al. continued writing, "It [Sacrifice] is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviors) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own." Specifically, when considering romantic couples, there needs to be a certain amount of sacrifice to preserve the relationship and one partner must decide between pursuing their own interests or sacrificing to promote the overall happiness and well-being of the other partner in the relationship ("The Power of Sacrifice in a Relationship," 2023).

Sacrifice can be an incredibly positive thing, showing immense compassion and empathy for the other partner and making the relationship successful (Day & Impett, 2016). Sacrifice, on the other hand, can also present itself with a more negative appearance, acting in more harmful ways than good. Research has found that emotional suppression via sacrifice is associated with decreases in partner well-being (Impett et al., 2012). These acts of sacrifice also add up, which can have costly consequences if there is a lack of relational support and communication.

Sacrifice is necessary for commitment.

Robert Sternberg proposed the triangular theory of love (Figure 1) which defines love into three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, n.d.). The three components are in constant interaction and present themselves in varying degrees. Usually, greater intimacy will lead to greater passion just as greater commitment may lead to greater intimacy. However, if you consider love and how you define love, love can consist of millions of triangles with so many triplet combinations. Therefore, if an individual wants to obtain some form of consummate love, commitment is an inevitable aspect in this process. In this sense, commitment and sacrifice go hand in hand (Kauppinen, 2021). They are two inseparable ideas where commitment lives in the mind and the thoughts whereas sacrifice represents the heart and the partner's actions.

Individuals' self-concepts become more intertwined as the relationship develops (Slotter et al., 2009). It's almost as if the two partners become a single unit as the levels of intimacy increase with commitment. If you consider commitment in romantic relationships, it can be defined as the motivation and desire to pursue and maintain a relationship over time. In 1980 and later in 2011, Caryl E. Rusbult expanded on the interdependence theory (originally formulated by Kelley and Thibaut in the 1950s) (VanderDrift & Agnew, 2019), also known as the investment model, and linked the model to commitment (Rusbult et al., 2011). It suggests that the dependence in a relationship develops based on the level of satisfaction but also on the investments that both individuals have put into the relationship. These investments can be emotional like a sense of dignity to the partner or structural like with money and possessions. The partners in the relationship will form deep associations and emotions toward one another by linking items or ideas to the relationship. For example, a study conducted in 2008 even found that participants who were assigned to spend money on others experienced greater happiness (Aknin et al., 2020; Dunn et al., 2008). The edited model proposes that investments create increasing interdependence which leads to relationship commitment via stronger connections and greater interpersonal involvement (Stanley et al., 2010). Strong commitment is significant in characterizing partners in a long-lasting relationship and highly committed partners are more inclined to act prosocially to promote the wellbeing of the relationship.

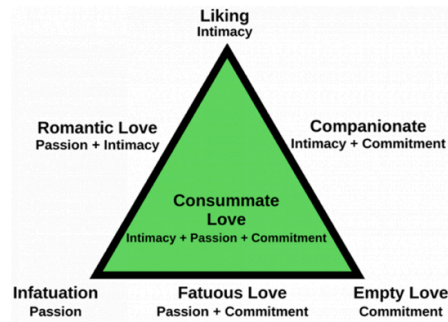


FIGURE 1. Psychologist Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love where a relationship must have three characteristics of high quality in passion, commitment, and intimacy to obtain consummate love.

Differences in attachment influence the sacrifice's effects.

Attachment theories were first developed based on the relationships between infants and their primary caregivers (mostly mothers) (McLeod, 2023b). In the 1980s, attachment theories then began to be used to explain close relationships between adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They explored the idea that romantic love between two individuals is an attachment process, just like the biological process that occurs earlier in life between human infants and their parents. Like John Bowlby's theory with infants (McLeod, 2023), older individuals will develop emotional bonds with romantic partners during adulthood will seek proximity to their primary attachment figure in emotionally challenging times (e.g., stress or sickness).

Moreover, one can observe so-called attachment insecurity in relationships where one partner needs reassurance that their significant other will stay with them. This insecurity can also present itself in the form of avoidance behavior. In fact, some individuals might feel uncomfortable when being emotionally intimate and consequently vulnerable. However, when interdependence increases in a relationship along with higher levels of commitment, research has shown that the negative effects associated with attachment insecurity are diminished. Perceived gratitude from the partner buffered any feelings of anxiety from individuals with this insecurity. They were less likely to feel lower relationship quality as well (Murphy et al., 2022). Sacrifice has a big role in this which is to be explored in this paper.

### Links between sacrifices and power in relationships

In 1938, British mathematician Bertrand Russell said, "The fundamental concept in social science is power, in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics (Russell, 1938)." According to Righetti

et al (2020), social power refers to an interpersonal dynamic able to influence other people's outcomes and behavior, which ultimately affect the level of sacrifice in a relationship. Power has been defined in many various ways, but is generally considered as the ability for a person to exert significant influence on another person to obtain preferred outcomes. The concept of power is significantly correlated with the idea of sacrifice in romantic relationships (Korner & Schutz, 2021). Righetti et al proposed the Selfish Power Hypothesis, a phenomenon in which individuals that experience greater relative power will be less likely to sacrifice for their partner (Righetti et al., 2015). Stanford University psychology professor Jamil Zaki sees an inverse relationship between power and empathy where the more powerful a person is in a situation, the less likely they are to empathize and therefore perform a sacrifice (Zaki, 2020). In a 2008 study, the researchers found that participants with a higher relative power tended to exhibit less compassion and distress when confronting another person's suffering (van Kleef et al., 2008).

### Sacrifice imbalances and mental health

One problem that can be connected to sacrifice is trust. In essence, sacrifices will build greater intimacy and trust in relationships (Righetti et al., 2022). However, if an individual feels that they often find themselves sacrificing too much in a relationship, it may result in a decrease in interpersonal trust levels. If the partner isn't reciprocating, this imbalance of sacrifice would inevitably lead to an imbalance of power that would lead to an unsuccessful relationship and unhappiness (Gordon, 2012). In a 2012 study conducted at the University of Toronto, the researchers found that suppressing your own needs often backfires. As a result, you may feel less authentic and fulfilled and as these feelings add up, depression often takes control. Similarly in another study, suppression had a negative impact on the individual's emotional experience (Butler et al., 2003). However, when people sacrifice for more positive reasons in more positive situations, sacrifice can be incredibly beneficial. When their partners feel more appreciated, the giver tends to become happier. Feelings of mutual understanding and gratitude buffer the negative connotations surrounding the initial sacrifice (Schrage et al., 2022). The concept of sacrifice and its effect on mental health and the ultimate success of a relationship can be seen as a double-edge sword. A mutual understanding and respect of sacrifices can be incredibly positive, but research has proven that most times when people experience interest or value divergence, they experience higher stress and lower relationship satisfaction (Righetti et al.,

2016). Interest divergence ultimately must lead to a sacrifice being made and may reduce the quality of an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

Overall, this research was conducted to analyze numerous studies to determine the psychological impact of sacrifice in romantic relationships and its role on partner well-being. Sacrifice present in relationships is hypothesized to be positive or negative depending on the prevalence of such sacrifices and their general influence on the relationship.

### Overview of Current Research on the Impact of Sacrifice in Romantic Relationships

In the first study, the researchers aimed to measure daily sacrifices in romantic relationships by using a 14-day dyadic daily-experience paradigm (Kogan et al., 2010). Each day, 80 couples answered a question, "Today, did you do anything that you did not particularly want to do for your partner? Or, did you give up something that you did not want to do for the sake of your partner?" Participants were also assessed on the level of emotions when they made those sacrifices and the extent to which they felt satisfaction in their relationship. They found that the higher individuals felt that they were in communal strength (an individual's motivation to respond to their partner's needs) with their romantic partner, the more positive they felt about daily sacrifices and more appreciated for their efforts. These individuals were more likely to feel positive emotions like joy and affection. Though this specific study does not determine causality of sacrifice, appreciation of those sacrifices, and relationship satisfaction, there seems to be a significant correlation between the three. The study found that communal strength was not significantly associated with negative emotions during sacrifices. It shows that people who have high communal strength have more caring, responsive relationships and therefore, daily sacrifices are more genuine and provide feelings of relationship authenticity. Additionally, people who had high dispositional motivation to act on their partner's needs for communal reasons had increased satisfaction and closeness with their partner. People who have higher amounts of interdependence experience boosts in well-being even if they suppress their negative thoughts when performing sacrifices (Bonnie & Impett, 2013). However, if there presents a difficulty in performing a sacrifice, there is a negative correlation between relationship satisfaction and those sacrifices (Ruppel & Curran, 2012). This is understandable as hesitation doesn't go unnoticed and that sense of altruism and communal strength is eliminated.

Similarly, it has been shown that, over a period of 14 days, people who feel more appreciated by their partner are more likely to sacrifice for partner-focused motives (Schrage et al., 2022). Additionally, findings revealed that individuals with higher levels of attachment avoidance and greater fear of intimacy, were also more likely to make sacrifices when feeling appreciated even if they presented with lower levels of commitment. It thus appears that the fact of feeling appreciated when making sacrifices can buffer reduced relationship satisfaction in individuals with attachment avoidance (Zhu et al., 2020).

Confirming results have been obtained by Visserman et al who showed that higher perceived partner responsiveness, or a partner's understanding, caring, and validating impressions, caused more positive sacrifice appraisals (i.e., the act was considered as less of a sacrifice and as leading to greater satisfaction and relational benefits) (Visserman et al., 2022). It goes to show that if a partner is positively responsive to a daily or life-changing sacrifice, then the consequences of that sacrifice can be seen less negatively and as causing lower costs. Positively responding to these situations in the form of gratitude mitigate against any aversive consequences or emotions the sacrifice may have caused, like regret and envy. Partners feel more gratitude when there is a cost to the giver for their actions (Aknin et al., 2020; Algoe et al., 2010; Zoppolat et al., 2020). However, this may create an issue too. If a sacrifice is not responded with gratitude, then the person may see a lack of appreciation and feel that the sacrifice was harmful to themselves. Missed sacrifices and lack of gratitude may leave the person less satisfied (Figure 2). Gratitude also becomes increasingly prevalent when the actions have beneficial interpersonal implications and this is something that should be considered before making the sacrifice (Algoe et al., 2008; Tesser et al., 1968). If a partner sees the other partner surrender their own self-interests to benefit the relationship, the partner feels a higher sense of relationship dedication and signals their feelings of gratitude (Okamoto & Peter Robinson, 1997; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2002). Therefore, gratitude is acting as a moral motivator and a moral reinforcer (Frederickson, 2004). Additionally, gratitude predicts increased feelings of indebtedness which could promote more reciprocated sacrifices (Algoe et al., 2010). Sacrifices can be visually seen to boost gratitude but there are benefits to not seeing sacrifices due to potential conflicts of interest. It isn't necessary for the sacrificer to "declare" they made the sacrifice. Another study conducted by Bartlett et al. also found that gratitude shown before any sacrificial behaviors increases the motivation to assist a benefactor even when the

behaviors are costly or negative to the giver (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). However, if the benefactor is made aware of an ulterior cause of the behavior, the gratitude effect dissipates. Visserman and colleagues found that people need to perceive the sacrifices as motivated by pure altruism, rather than driven by self-interest. Therefore, the receiver feels that the sacrifice was genuine and made for the well-being of the relationship and the partner. Furthermore, research suggests that one's willingness to sacrifice also even shows a better relationship outlook and success. According to Van Lange et al, the willingness to sacrifice is correlated with strong commitment, high investments, and high relationship satisfaction (Van Lange et al., 1997). Additionally perceived responsiveness to an individual's actions through sacrifice is crucial to feelings of intimacy with a partner (Reis et al., 2004).

One problem with this reasoning is that partners tend to develop norms on how to behave in situations that require sacrifice to solve conflicts of interests. The norms then in turn create expectations on partners and their emotional responses to specific situations. According to the Expectancy Violation Theory, people interpret and evaluate others, relational history, and past knowledge to create expectations, and in turn these expectations can be violated. If a partner decides to deviate from the usual expected behavior, the other partner then will unconsciously pay more attention and form judgements. In a positive sense, researchers found that partner sacrifice can lead to increased feelings of gratitude when the partner exceeds their normal expectations. This increase in gratitude would promote increased relationship satisfaction and the partner would render the sacrificer more valuable and attractive (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000). Additionally, the receiver would feel a greater sense of respect to their partner. Again, this is the case with a positive violation where the sacrifice exceeded expectations. However, oftentimes there may be expectations where an individual believes that the other partner will continuously sacrifice for the relationship. The issue with this is that there is an expectation present that a partner may always get their way. The partner is used to this because it has become a pattern. But when you sacrifice too much, the partner feels entitled to it. They expect the sacrifice to occur and therefore, they expect that they'll get their way. This is how sacrifice becomes dangerous.

A 2016 study by Lin and colleagues revealed that within romantic relationships, individuals who regularly suppress their desires and needs for the benefit of their partner are usually less satisfied with their marriages and more depressed. Consistent with this, a study found that



men's increased sacrifices during pregnancy were associated with decreased feelings of satisfaction. When women experienced more hassles during their day, their sacrifices that day were associated with declines in relationship quality for the male partners. Women didn't appear to see this decline if they had communicated their frustrations to their partner but once hearing these frustrations, the males felt upset or guilty (Totenhagen & Curran, 2011). To some, the concept of sacrifice conveys the idea that an individual must lose sight of their immediate interests and stops pursuing them, which can leave a person depressed or frustrated. Similarly, findings revealed showed that people who make regular sacrifices, experience increased ambivalence towards their partner later and think more frequently about ending the relationship (Righetti et al., 2020).

Several studies showed that individuals with fear of rejection make more sacrifices for avoidance motives and to follow their self-protection goals (Impett et al., 2005; Righetti & Visserman, 2017). Consequently, these individuals experience more negative emotions and poorer relational well-being (Leary, 2015). Additionally, this type of avoidance motivated behavior has been shown to negatively impact the partner who the sacrifice was done for. In fact, having your own needs met in a relationship can be experienced as personally and interpersonally costly if you perceive that your partner has sacrificed for avoidance motives. In essence, individuals who feel that their partner has been making sacrifices just to avoid problems or other issues, may experience fewer positive emotions, such as happiness. Research also shows that low self-esteem is associated with greater regret of past sacrifices, creating negative moods and increased stress. These individuals, who do desire strong interpersonal connections, feel less supported by the partner after they sacrifice. They put themselves in a vulnerable position when sacrificing their own interests. They have these preconceptions that their costs will be ignored with no support or appreciation. This research does make sense. People benefit when partners display supportive responses to a prosocial or pro-relationship behavior. Receiving support and an empathetic response to the sacrifices of an individual with low self-esteem allows them to feel understood and relationship satisfaction will only increase. They'll begin to get a better understanding of their partner's perceptions of them since these individuals usually underestimate how positively they are viewed (Murray et al., 2001).

## Discussion

In any relationship, whether that be one present in the workplace or one between friends, party interests may be at odds. It's not easy to coordinate behaviors so that both partners' wishes would align. In romantic relationships, specifically, oftentimes partners may disagree on whose family to visit for Thanksgiving or even something more significant like converting to another religion. Partner preferences don't always coordinate, resulting in significant conflicts that put stress on both parties and reduce relationship satisfaction. Such differences may call for a sacrifice to mediate the tension. This may entail surrendering personal desires and behaving in ways to advance the well-being of the relationship or partner. This process, also known as, transformation of motivation leads individuals to abandon their self-interests and proceed towards broader goals that benefit and maintain the relationship (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Sacrifices make the receiver feel cared for and loved but also may harm the giver.

The review of research clearly shows that for every positive effect, there is a negative one. In the case of sacrifice, it can be agreed that there are obviously negative and positive consequences to sacrifices in romantic intimate relationships. Sacrifice is incredibly complex. It even goes back to McCrae and Costa's Big Five Personality Theory. The theory analyzes people's behavior in terms of five broad personality traits: neuroticism, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness. Every individual will have varying levels of the five traits based on their certain interests and behaviors which shape their personality (Woo, 2019). Everyone is different and therefore, sacrifice is observed differently in different relationships and different people. For example, people who were high in the conscientiousness trait scored high in other areas like public interest and self-sacrifice. Personality traits are strong predictors of motivation to sacrifice but since everyone has different levels of the five traits, sacrifice is present differently in each romantic couple.

Sacrifices usually have a beneficial connotation in that when people make sacrifices for their romantic partner, they tend to feel more appreciated which leads to increased relationship satisfaction, or a person's positive feelings of their relationship. All relationships are generally built from exchanging social behaviors to maximize benefits. The willingness to sacrifice shows an increased level of commitment to another individual. Even outside the scope of romantic relationships, as humans, it is necessary to sometimes put the needs of someone else on the same level as our own. As humans, we must set aside our desires to aid others. Sacrifice builds a good mentality, intimacy, and trust. Professor of

psychiatry at Harvard Robert Waldinger even found that embracing community and sacrificing in relationships makes us happier (Mineo, 2017).

Sacrifice can become dangerous for the giver if it becomes a continuous pattern with high prevalence. When it's a continuous pattern, the costs to the sacrifice add up and people begin to back away from the relationship (Cherry, 2023). Before making the sacrifice, it is necessary to consider several things. Firstly, sacrifice is two-sided. It goes both ways. If one partner doesn't accommodate for the other but expects the other to change their life for them, then that should pick up some red flags. It is important to consider the partner's commitment to the relationship before making the sacrifice. Commitment means that both partners must put in effort, where both partners pull equal weight. Commitment is important to consider before you act with your heart and perform sacrifices. Secondly, it's also important to consider other solutions. Sometimes to reduce the negative impacts of sacrifice, there are situations where you can compromise. Compromising includes accommodating and sacrificing and it can be a beneficial mechanism when solving interpersonal conflicts (Lin et al., 2014).

Additionally, acts of sacrifice need to be accurately detected to promote the well-being of the relationship and the partners in the relationship. The sacrificer may feel dissatisfied if the sacrifice is missed by the receiver and therefore, it shows perception holds a huge role in relationships and the consequences of the sacrifice. In the future, more research should be conducted on motivational processes that affect distorted perceptions of sacrifice in romantic relationships. For a sacrifice to really be meaningful and have an impact, it needs to be responded to with gratitude and appreciation. Otherwise, relationship satisfaction will inevitably decline (Visserman et al., 2018). Individuals can debate, however, that some sacrifices are better when they're made in private. But overall, to really elicit gratitude, sacrifices free of self-interest are essential. They are essential pro-social behaviors in relationships where commitment is high.

There is significant value in making sacrifices for love, whether that be time or energy. When participating in sacrifices, a group of people or individual must give up something to benefit someone else. More research needs to be conducted in sacrifice in specific age groups to analyze if the ability to sacrifice and perceived responsiveness varies among age. This would allow researchers to see if the motivation and ability to sacrifice depends on maturity. It would also be crucial to

researchers to study sacrifice more in depth with strangers with goes beyond the depth of this research which pertains to romantic relationships. Researchers would be able to study the true connections with intimacy and attachment and its role in sacrifices as that seems to be a major contributor to sacrifice motivation. Sacrifices also tend to go unnoticed at times by the partner so more research should study the effects of private sacrifices compared to more apparent ones.

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