Variability in Daily Relationship Quality: Roles of Daily Sacrifice Motives and Gender

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Background

Understanding the sacrifice motives by which individuals choose to forego their self-interest and make relational sacrifices is important in understanding how such choices can benefit or undermine the romantic relationship (Impett & Gordon, 2008).

Using interdependence theory (Kelly, 1979), Impett and colleagues (2005, 2008, 2010) have documented that sacrifice motives differently impact relationship quality such that:

- Approach motives (i.e., focus on obtaining positive outcomes like a partner's happiness or enhanced relational intimacy) often have positive effects for relationship quality.
- Avoidance motives (i.e., focus on evading negative outcomes like relational conflict) often have negative effects for relationship quality.

Additionally, individuals differ in the degree to which their relationship quality fluctuates over time, such that greater variability reflects instability and uncertainty about the relationship, signaling cross-sectional differences by gender (Whitton, 2014).

We consider gender in examinations of variability (i.e., within-person change over 14 days) in relationship quality (Hoffman, 2007), versus a common focus on fixed effects (i.e., average effects for all individuals).

Hypotheses

We examined individual’s daily approach and avoidance motives about relationship sacrifice, and variability in daily relationship quality constructs (satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, passion, and love), testing for gender differences.

RQ1: What is the influence of gender on associations between daily approach motives for individuals and partners and variability in daily relationship quality constructs?

RQ2: What is the influence of gender on associations between daily avoidance motives for individuals and partners and variability in daily relationship quality constructs?

Method

Participants

We recruited 110 heterosexual couples (N = 220 individuals) through undergraduate PSHD and Communication classes at a large southwestern university. Students were offered extra credit to participate with their partner, or they could recruit a couple to participate (parents, friends, roommates).

Participants were at least 18 years old and in a romantic relationship for at least six weeks. Most were Caucasian (80.67%), 32.96% were married and 16.08% were cohabitating. We have diversity on both age (Mdn = 22, SD = 14.60, range: 18-81 years) and length of relationships in months (Mdn = 42, or ~166.51 months (~14 years), SD = 252.25, range: 6 months-76 years).

Variables

Participants completed demographic information, followed by 14 days of daily surveys about relational sacrifice motives and relationship quality. We retained only those couples who completed the daily survey and matched on at least 3 days (Tutenhagen et al., 2013). Couples completed an average of 10.66 days.

IVs: We assessed individuals’ daily approach (n=80), 3 items) and avoidance (n=93; 5 items) motives about sacrifice using Impett et al.'s (2005) scale. We person-centered individuals’ and partners’ daily approach and avoidance scores prior to analyses so that these variables could be interpreted as being above or below one's own average (Enders & Tofghi, 2007).

DV: We assessed daily relationship quality of six scales with three items per scale: satisfaction (n=93), commitment (n=91), intimacy (n=80), trust (n=91), passion (n=89), and love (n=87).

Controls: Gender (women = 0), relationship length (in months), children (yes = 1)

Results Table

Table: Multilevel Models of Daily Satisfaction, Commitment, Intimacy, Passion, and Love Predicted by Daily Sacrifice Motives

Results Explained

- Satisfaction

For approach motives, we found that individuals experienced lower variability in satisfaction when they (β = -0.38, p < .001) and their partners (β = -0.20, p < .001) reported greater use of approach motives for sacrifice. For avoidance motives, across gender, we found that individuals experienced higher variability in satisfaction when they reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice (β = 0.23, p < .001). Specific to gender, both women (β = 0.09, p < .01) and men (β = 0.08, p < .001) experienced higher variability in satisfaction when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives.

- Commitment

For approach motives, specific to gender, both women (β = -0.67, p < .001) and men (β = -0.31, p < .001) experienced lower variability in commitment when they reported greater use of approach motives as well as when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives (β = -0.12, p < .01, for women and b = 0.29, p < .001, for men).

For avoidance motives, we found that individuals experienced higher variability in commitment when they (β = 0.30, p < .001) and their partners (β = 0.15, p < .001) reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice.

- Intimacy

For approach motives, we found that individuals experienced lower variability in intimacy when they (β = -0.33, p < .001) and their partners (β = -0.15, p < .001) reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice (β = 0.15, p < .001) but this effect was not significant for men (β = 0.03, ns.). For partner effects, we found that men experienced higher variability in intimacy when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice (β = 0.15, p < .001) but this effect was not significant for women (β = 0.03, ns.).

- Passion

For approach motives, we found that both women (β = -0.28, p < .001) and men (β = -0.48, p < .001) experienced lower variability in passion when they reported greater use of approach motives for sacrifice. No partner effects were found significant.

For avoidance motives, we found that women experienced higher variability in passion when they reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice (β = 0.19, p < .001) but this effect was not significant for men (β = 0.02, ns.). In terms of partner effects, we found that women experienced lower variability in passion when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice (β = 0.19, p < .001) but this effect was not significant for men (β = 0.06, ns.).

- Love

For approach motives of sacrifice, we found that individuals experienced lower variability in love when they (β = -0.63, p < .001) and their partners (β = -0.15, p < .001) reported greater use of approach motives for sacrifice. On the other hand, individuals experienced higher variability in love when their partners (β = 0.17, p < .001) reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice.

For avoidance motives, we found that both women (β = 0.29, p < .001) and men (β = 0.40, p < .001) experienced higher variability in love when they reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice.

Conclusions & Implications

- Summary

Individuals experienced lower variability in Satisfaction, Intimacy, and Love when both they and their partners reported greater use of approach motives for sacrifice.

- Individuals experienced higher variability in Satisfaction and Commitment when they reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice.

- Individuals experienced higher variability in Love and Commitment when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives for sacrifice.

- Both women and men experienced lower variability in Commitment and Passion when they reported greater use of approach motives for sacrifice.

- Women experienced lower variability in Passion when their partners reported greater use of avoidance motives.

- These findings are significant in a number of ways.

First, both types of sacrifice motives influence variability or within-person change over 14 days in relationship quality, extending previous research focused on fixed effects in relationship quality (e.g., Author citation, in press; Impett et al., 2008).

Second, we find patterns specific to both individuals and their partners (although more common of approach than avoidance motives), illustrating the importance of including data from both members of the couple.

Third, the inclusion of gender was influential, as some results emerged across individuals, while others were specific to either men or women (latter more illustrative in results for avoidance motives).

For family therapists: Greater approach motives signify relational benefits, whereas greater avoidance motives signal relational difficulties. Thus, practitioners can work with both members of the couple to inquire as to why one or both members are using more sacrificing motives. Practitioners can also help guide members toward greater motives of approach for sacrifice, which should offer less variability in relationship quality.

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