Give and You Shall Receive?
Generosity, Sacrifice, and Marital Quality

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Jeffrey Dew
Utah State University

W. Bradford Wilcox
University of Virginia
Abstract

This study seeks to determine if spouses who reject the individualistic tenor of contemporary life by embracing a spirit of generosity and sacrifice in their marriages enjoy higher-quality marriages than their peers who do not. Relying on data from the new, nationally representative Survey of Marital Generosity (N=3,146), we found that for both husbands and wives, generosity—defined here as small acts of kindness, regular displays of affection and respect, and a willingness to forgive one’s spouse their faults and failings—was positively associated with marital satisfaction and negatively associated with marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood. However, the association between making major sacrifices and marital quality varied by gender. Uniformly, wives who reported making major sacrifices for their husband were less satisfied in their marriages. But for husbands, this association depended on their levels of satisfaction with sacrificing. The more satisfied husbands reported being with sacrificing for their wives, the less making a major sacrifice for their wife was associated with lower marital satisfaction. Overall, then, regular expressions of generosity, but not major acts of sacrifice, are linked to higher quality marriages among contemporary spouses (aged 18-55).

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The increasingly individualistic tenor of modern life has led many Americans to approach relationships in general and marriage in particular in a self-centered light, where each partner is deliberately seeking to maximize his or her own personal fulfillment in the relationship (Amato, 2009; Bellah et al., 1985; Cherlin, 2010). According to the “individualistic” model of marriage, as Amato (2009, p. 79) notes, “Close relationships exist primarily to enhance individual happiness and maximize psychological growth”; spouses bargain with one another to maximize their individual utility, and the best marriages are built around activities and interests that are valued by both partners (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). This individualistic model of married life does not leave much room for virtues like generosity and sacrifice, which require husbands and wives to put the needs of their partner before their own, even if it leads to difficult or unpleasant choices (Fowers, 2000).

Indeed, the increasing popularity of this individualistic model of married life may also influence the way that social scientists study marriage (Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, & Yang, 2007). For example, few studies have examined other-centered attitudes and behaviors within marriage. This is particularly the case with regard to behaviors such as generosity (i.e., going beyond the common obligations of marriage in service of one’s spouse) and sacrifice (i.e., giving up something one desires to support a spouse and/or the relationship). Although scholars have theorized that generosity is potentially beneficial to marital quality (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007), no empirical studies have examined the link between generosity and marital quality. And although a number of important studies have examined sacrifice (e.g., Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997), few have examined actual sacrificial behavior. Rather, most test the construct of being willing to sacrifice for one’s partner, which appears to be positively associated with marital
Generosity, Sacrifice, & Marital Quality

quality (Stanley et al., 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). But it is still unclear how actual sacrificial behaviors are related to marital quality. Finally, few of the studies on sacrifice rely on contemporary couples or nationally representative samples.

Studying generosity and sacrifice is substantively important, because these two virtues may help couples build happy and stable marriages. As individual spouses engage in generous behaviors in their marriage and as they support their spouse and/or relationship through sacrifices, they may be happier and more inclined to continue the marriage. Alternatively, other-regarding behaviors may harm marriages in today’s more individualistic climate—especially if these behaviors amount to major sacrifices (e.g., giving up a promotion to support a spouse) or if they were made without much willingness. Examining how generosity and sacrifice influence marital quality among contemporary couples should help family scholars and professionals, as well as the general public, better understand the role that other-centered behaviors play in today’s marriages.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is consistent with a new focus on healthy processes and behaviors within marriage (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). In fact, given that most first marriages entered into in the United States since the 1980s are not likely to end in divorce (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), it is important to understand the beliefs and behaviors that now undergird today’s increasingly stable marriages. More fundamentally, insofar as marriage functions even today as a relationship centered around the formation and sustenance of solidarity—and not just the satisfaction of individual needs—scholars ought to understand how other-centered behaviors like generosity and sacrifice do or do not deepen the marital bond.
This study relies on the Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG) to examine the associations between generosity, sacrifice, and marital quality among contemporary couples in the United States. The SMG is a nationally representative sample of married individuals who were surveyed in 2010 or 2011. Primary respondents were between 18 and 45 years old (spousal respondents could be up to 55 years old). This survey is particularly advantageous for this study, insofar as the survey encompasses items designed to measure marital constructs such as generosity and sacrifice, a nationally representative sample, and multiple measures of marital quality. It is the first empirical study of generosity in marriage.

**Generosity and Sacrifice as Predictors of Marital Outcomes**

**Generosity**

We define generosity as going beyond the common obligations of marriage. That is, generosity is more than the fidelity, clear communication, and mutual economic support that is commonly expected in marriage. Rather, generosity is defined here as the “virtue of giving good things to [one’s spouse] freely and abundantly” (Science of Generosity Initiative, 2009) and is understood as behaving in ways that are designed to nurture the good of the marital relationship or of one’s spouse. Generosity is operationalized in this study in three ways: giving good things to one’s spouse by regularly engaging in small acts of kindness, frequently expressing affection and respect, and regularly forgiving one’s spouse (Hawkins et al., 2007; Fowers, 2000). Each of these behaviors goes beyond the common obligations of marriage.

Small regular acts of kindness (e.g., making coffee in the morning for your spouse) are generous in that they necessitate knowing one’s spouse’s preferences and making the effort to
signal care and concern for him or her through acts of service that go beyond the basic modicum of spousal performance.

Generous behavior on the part of one spouse is likely to lead the other spouse to report higher marital quality. Being on the receiving end of small favors, expressions of affection and respect, and forgiveness is likely to increase feelings of personal worth, connection with one’s spouse, and happiness in the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Further, in order to express affection and respect and to engage in regular acts of kindness, spouses have to know each other well enough to know what will please the other. This process of getting to know one’s spouse and what makes him or her happy can enhance marital quality on its own (Gottman & Silver, 1999), to say nothing of acting on that knowledge. In addition, these generous acts—especially if they are varied—may introduce novelty into the relationship, and novel experiences in relationships are associated with increased relationship quality (Aron, Aron, Heyman, Norman, & McKenna, 2000). Generous acts are likely to engender a sense of gratitude in the receiving spouse. Gratitude, in turn, is linked to positive emotions, such as happiness (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008).

Even though regular displays of affection and respect are popularly understood to undergird today’s soul-mate model of married life (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001), these behaviors may still be understood as forms of generosity. This is because, in real life, many couples do not regularly offer expressions of affection and respect to one another (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Further, it takes time and effort to engage in this type of emotion work in relationships.

Finally, forgiveness is not understood as a common obligation of contemporary married life in the United States. Moreover, forgiveness—a transformation in which the motivation to
avoid a transgressor or to seek revenge against that person is reduced and positive feelings toward the transgressor are increased—is hard work, insofar as most people respond instinctually to being wronged or hurt by seeking to avoid or retaliate against the person who has transgressed them (McCullough & vanOyen Witvliet, 2002). Forgiving a spouse is particularly generous, because it “absolve[s] him or her of blame for hurting you or failing you in some way” (Fowers, 2000, p. 174), and the intimate nature of the spousal bond can make this particularly hard to do (see also Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Forgiveness has been linked to better conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004), suggesting that generosity may help couples experience less conflict.

Like sacrifice (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), generous behavior on the part of one spouse may signal to the other spouse an interest in maintaining the relationship. For the spouse who receives generous behavior, then, this should decrease perceptions of future divorce likelihood. For all these reasons, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: Participants’ reports of their own regular generosity will be positively associated with their spouses’ reports of marital satisfaction and negatively associated with their spouses’ reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood.

Individuals’ generosity may also benefit their own marital quality. Altruism is generally linked to feelings of personal satisfaction; in other words, giving feels good (Collett & Morrissey, 2007; Nilsson, Sojka, & Sojka, 2003). This may especially be the case when one is giving to one’s spouse (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007). Accordingly, generous behavior should make spouses feel better about their own marriage.
Hypothesis 1b: Participants’ reports of their own regular generosity will be positively associated with their own reports of marital satisfaction and negatively associated with their own reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood.

**Competing Hypotheses Regarding Sacrifice**

The literature examining sacrifice in marriage is somewhat more established than the literature examining generosity, but few studies have focused explicitly on actual sacrificial behavior. Rather, much of the literature on sacrifice in relationships focuses on a willingness to sacrifice or satisfaction with sacrifice. In this study, we define sacrificial behavior as doing something for someone that the doer finds personally difficult, undesirable, or unappealing, and we focus specifically on spousal reports of making “a major sacrifice for my partner—for example, giving up a job opportunity or doing a big project around the house” in the last year.

In one of the few studies that has focused on sacrifice behavior, social psychologists linked sacrifice to a virtuous cycle of increasing relationship quality. Weiselquist et al. (1999) found that sacrifice served as a signal that the sacrificing spouse wanted the relationship to continue. This enhanced the trust level of the spouse who benefitted from the sacrifice. Finally, enhanced trust levels were found to be associated with higher likelihood that the receiving spouse would sacrifice in the future. Thus, spouses who receive major sacrifices from their spouse may be likely to have higher quality marriages.

Hypothesis 2: Participants’ reports of making major sacrifices for their spouse will be positively associated with their spouses’ reports of marital satisfaction and negatively associated with their spouses’ reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood.
Some studies suggest that sacrifice is positive for the spouse who sacrifices. As noted above, altruism may enhance feelings of well-being (Collett & Morrissey, 2007; Nilsson et al., 2003). More directly, in a small sample using daily-experience methods, individuals who sacrificed for their spouse reported feeling more positive emotions, more appreciation from their spouse, and more satisfaction with their overall relationship on the day of the sacrifice (Kogan, Impett, Oveis, Hui, Gordon, & Keltner, 2010).

Hypothesis 3a: Participants’ reports of making major sacrifices for their spouse will be positively associated with their own reports of marital satisfaction and negatively associated with their own reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood.

Although some studies have found a positive association between sacrifice and marital outcomes, sacrifice may have a negative side. Individual therapists—particularly those working within feminist traditions—have suggested that sacrifice is associated with depression and lower levels of marital satisfaction (Jack & Ali, 2010; Lerner, 1988). Sacrifice does entail personal costs to the spouse who engages in the sacrificial behavior. These costs may include time, money, professional success, other relationships, and even a loss of one’s self-identity (Lerner, 1988).

Further, while some sacrifices may entail small costs, other sacrifices are more profound. The personal costs associated with making major sacrifices may overcome any benefit received from the sacrifice. It may be difficult, for example, for the sacrificing spouse to receive much self-satisfaction from giving up a potential promotion at work. Our measure of sacrifice specifically asked about making such major sacrifices. Thus we propose a competing hypothesis regarding sacrifice.
Hypothesis 3b: Participants’ reports of making major sacrifices for their spouse will be negatively associated with their own reports of marital satisfaction and positively associated with their own reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood.

**Satisfaction with Sacrifice as a Moderator**

It is also possible that the impact of sacrificial behavior on marital quality may depend on spouses’ feelings about sacrificing for their partner. That is, making major sacrifices for one’s spouse may not independently be associated with marital quality. Rather, this association may depend on (i.e., be moderated by) how happy the spouses are with making these sacrifices for their partner.

The idea that the association between sacrifice and marital quality may depend on sacrifice motivation is indirectly supported by the literature. Indeed, most of the studies on sacrifice that we found measured some aspect of willingness to sacrifice. Being willing to sacrifice for one’s spouse/partner, or perceiving that the sacrifice has little personal cost, has been found to be strongly associated with marital quality (Van Lange et al., 1997; Stanley et al., 2006; Whitton et al., 2007). Further, the more happy individuals were to sacrifice for their spouse—the construct we used—the less likely they were to be distressed in their marriage and the more likely they were to maintain their marital quality over time (Stanley et al., 2006).

Interestingly, virtually no studies have examined whether sacrifice attitudes moderate the association between sacrificial behaviors and marital relationship quality. Only one study that we found examined this question, and participants in this study were *dating* partners. Sacrifices that were motivated by a desire to enhance happiness or intimacy in the relationship were positively associated with relationship quality among dating partners, whereas sacrifices that were
motivated by a desire to avoid negative relationship issues like conflict were associated with negative relationship quality (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). In the context of this study, then, satisfaction with making sacrifices should moderate the association between making sacrifices and marital quality. Specifically, the more satisfied individuals are with making sacrifices, the more likely the sacrifices will enhance marital quality or at least harm marital quality less.

Hypothesis 4: Participants’ satisfaction in making sacrifices for their spouse moderates the association between these major sacrifices and their own reports of marital quality.

Method

Data and Sample

The data for this study were drawn from the Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG). We designed the SMG to measure different aspects of married couples’ experiences of generosity, experiences of sacrifice, and the quality of their marriage. The SMG was conducted by a survey research firm (Knowledge Networks) between December 2010 and February 2011. The sampling framework was based on a combination of random-digit dialing using a stratified random sample, and address-based sampling to reach individuals with no land lines. To be included in the SMG, individuals had to be married and between the ages of 18 and 45 (though spouses of the main participant could be up to 55 years old). The initial sample of the SMG had 1,705 husbands and 1,745 wives. Of these participants, 1,630 wives and husbands were married to each other (75 husbands and 115 wives had spouses who did not participate). All of the participants with nonmissing data were used in the analysis, for a total of 3,146 married respondents (see Tables 2–4 for samples sizes for each analysis). We decided not to use multiple imputation,
because we did not want to impute all variables for individuals who did not participate in the study with their spouses. Individuals with missing data were listwise deleted.

**Measures**

**Dependent variables.** The dependent variables were three measures of marital quality. The first measure was marital satisfaction: a sum of four items that asked participants how happy they were with different aspects of their marriage. These items were love, fairness, communication quality, and sexual intimacy. Participants could respond that they were very unhappy (1) to very happy (5) with each of these domains. Chronbach’s alpha for this scale was .88 for wives and .87 for husbands.

The second dependent variable was marital conflict. To construct this variable, we took the mean of three items of conflict frequency in the past year. These items were conflict over household tasks, conflict over money, and conflict over parenthood. We used a mean scale rather than a summed scale, because taking the mean adjusted for the fact that not everyone in the sample was a parent. The response set ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day). The Chronbach’s alpha for this scale was .73 for wives and .75 for husbands.

The last measure of marital quality was perceived divorce likelihood. Participants answered a question that asked about the realistic chances that they would “eventually separate or divorce.” Responses ranged from 1 (very low) to 11 (very high).

**Independent variables.** One of the main independent variables was generosity. We operationalized generosity using the average of four variables that measured generous behaviors. These behaviors were small acts of kindness (e.g., making coffee for one’s spouse), expressions of affection, expressions of respect, and forgiveness (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007). Each of these four items asked spouses how frequently they engaged in that type of behavior.
Participants could respond from *always* (1) to *never* (5) engaging in that behavior. We reverse coded the items so that higher scores meant greater generosity.

Because few measures of generosity exist, we investigated these four items more closely to check whether they formed a coherent scale. We factor analyzed the four variables using principal components and a promax rotation (not shown but available upon request). For both husbands and wives, one factor explained 67% of the variance, and this factor was the only one to have an eigenvalue greater than 1. Residual correlations with just one factor were low, indicating that one factor accounted for much of the correlation between the items. The scree plot suggested retaining only one factor. Chronbach’s alpha was .84 for both the wives’ and husbands’ measures of generosity. These findings all suggest that our measures of generosity are tapping one construct and form a coherent scale.¹

Making major sacrifices for one’s spouse was another main independent variable. We used a question that asked participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “In the last year, I made a major sacrifice for my partner—for example, giving up a job opportunity or doing a big project around the house.” They could strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). We reverse-coded the measure; higher scores represent more agreement that the participant made a major sacrifice.

Finally, satisfaction with making sacrifices for one’s spouse was a main independent variable. We summed two variables that asked participants to agree or disagree with statements about deriving satisfaction and fulfillment from sacrificing for their spouse. One of the items had to be reverse coded prior to summing the variables. After reverse coding, the response set ranged

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¹ To further examine the variables, we conducted the analyses of generosity with just one of the generosity variables—small acts of kindness. The results (shown in the appendix) were similar to the results with the scale variable, albeit with lower coefficient magnitudes. Given the lower reliability of a single-item measure versus a multi-item scale, smaller coefficients were expected.
from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Chronbach’s alpha for this scale was .73 for wives and .71 for husbands. Hypothesis 4 specified an interaction between making a major sacrifice and sacrifice satisfaction. To create the interaction term, we first mean-centered both variables. Then we multiplied the variables together.

We also used control covariates in the regression models. These covariates included participants’ marital duration, age, education, total household income, and race/ethnicity. Education was on a scale that ranged from 1 (no formal education) to 14 (professional or doctorate degree). Total household income was measured on a 19-point scale that ranged from 1 (less than $5,000) to 19 ($175,000 or more). Race/ethnicity was self-reported, and we included it in the analyses using three dummy variables—Black, Hispanic, and Other—with White, not Hispanic being the omitted category.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the various measures. The mean age of the participants was in the mid-30s. The mean education level stood at 10.5, which corresponds with having some college experience or an associate’s degree. The mean income level of 12.8 corresponds to an income range of $50,000 to $59,999. Regarding marriage, participants were relatively happy in their marriage (mean of about 15 out of 20), reported little conflict, and did not perceive a very high likelihood that they would divorce (a mean of around 2.5 out of 11). They reported relatively high levels of generosity and moderate levels of making major sacrifices. Sacrifice satisfaction stood at a mean of about 7.6 out of 10 for wives and husbands.

Analysis

The analysis was based on least squares regressions that were weighted using the post-stratification weights. To evaluate Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 2, we regressed wives’ measures of marital quality onto husbands’ reports of generosity and making a major sacrifice. We also
regressed husbands’ measures of marital quality onto wives’ reports of generosity and making a major sacrifice. To evaluate Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we regressed participants’ own reports of marital quality onto their own reports of generosity, making a major sacrifice, and sacrifice satisfaction. Major sacrifice and sacrifice satisfaction were mean-centered in these analyses. To test Hypothesis 4, we added the major sacrifice by sacrifice satisfaction interaction. The control covariates were in all of the models.

We conducted the analyses separately by gender. Because 89% of the participants had their spouse participating in the SMG, the data were highly clustered. Running wives and husbands in the same regression analysis would likely have led to violations of the assumptions of uncorrelated error and might have suppressed the standard errors of the estimate. This could have lead to incorrect statistical decisions and type-I errors.

Results

Spouses’ Reports of Generosity and Marital Quality

The associations between a spouses’ self-reports of regular generosity toward and major sacrifice for participants, participants’ own generosity, and participants’ reports of marital quality are shown in Table 2. Husbands’ reports of their own generosity were positively associated with wives’ reports of marital satisfaction ($b = 1.42, p < .001$) and negatively associated with wives’ reports of marital conflict ($b = -.17, p < .001$) and perceived divorce likelihood ($b = -.42, p < .001$). These associations are independent of wives’ reports of generosity toward their husbands. Further, wives’ reports of their own generosity were positively associated with husbands’ reports of marital satisfaction ($b = 1.65, p < .001$) and negatively associated with husbands’ reports of marital conflict ($b = -.15, p < .001$) and perceived divorce likelihood ($b = -.61, p < .001$). To put these unstandardized coefficients into perspective, a one-
point increase in spouses’ generosity is associated with a .39–.47 standard-deviation increase in marital satisfaction, a .17 standard-deviation decrease in marital conflict, and a .2–.3 standard-deviation decrease in divorce proneness. These relationships support Hypothesis 1a.

The association between participants’ generosity and their own marital quality, net of their spouses’ generosity, is also shown in Table 2. Wives’ own generosity was positively associated with their reported marital satisfaction (b = 2.03, p < .001) and negatively associated with marital conflict (b = -.38, p < .001) and perceived divorce likelihood (b = -1.05, p < .001). Husbands’ own generosity was positively associated with their marital satisfaction (b = 1.48, p < .001) and negatively associated with marital conflict (b = -.27, p < .001) and perceived divorce likelihood (b = -.80, p < .001). These coefficients correspond to a .42–.56 standard-deviation change in marital satisfaction, a -.3–-.4 change in marital conflict and a -.39–-.5 standard-deviation change in perceived divorce likelihood. These associations support Hypothesis 1b.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, however, husbands’ reports of making major sacrifices were positively associated with wives’ reports of marital conflict (b = .05, p < .01). Additionally, wives’ reports of making major sacrifices were positively associated with husbands’ reports of conflict (b = .05, p < .01) and perceived divorce likelihood (b = .13, p < .01). The effect sizes in the models with significant coefficients were between .05 and .06 of a standard deviation. Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 2, reports of major sacrifice were either not related or negatively related to a spouse’s marital quality.

Table 3 shows how wives’ reports of sacrifices and willingness to sacrifice are related to their relationship quality. Making major sacrifices for their husbands was negatively associated with marital satisfaction (b = -.31, p < .001) and positively associated with their reports of marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood (b = .09 and .12, respectively, both p < .001).
The effect sizes for these coefficients were between .06 and .10 of a standard deviation. These findings contradict Hypothesis 3a and support Hypothesis 3b. As has been shown in previous studies, however, satisfaction with sacrificing for one’s spouse was positively associated with marital satisfaction ($b = .26, p < .001$) and negatively associated with marital conflict and subjective divorce likelihood ($b = -.06$ and -.25, respectively, both $p < .001$).

Finally, the interaction model in Table 3 shows the test of Hypothesis 4, namely, that sacrifice satisfaction would moderate the association between making a major sacrifice and marital quality. None of the interaction terms were significant predictors of the marital-quality outcomes. Thus, the satisfaction wives derived from making sacrifices for their husbands did not moderate the association between making major sacrifices and reporting lower levels of marital quality.

Table 4 shows the results of the same tests for husbands. Major sacrifice and satisfaction with sacrifice were generally associated with marital quality in the same way for husbands as for wives. Husbands’ reports of making major sacrifices for their wives were negatively associated with their own marital satisfaction ($b = -.40, p < .001$) and positively associated with marital conflict ($b = .04, p < .05$) and perceived divorce likelihood ($b = .16, p < .001$). The effect sizes ranged from .04 to .11 in standard-deviation terms of the outcome variables. Hypothesis 3b was thus supported for both husbands and wives, and we rejected Hypothesis 3a.

Unlike wives, however, husbands’ satisfaction with sacrifice proved to be a moderator for marital satisfaction and subjective divorce likelihood. The major-sacrifice–by–sacrifice-satisfaction term was positive for marital satisfaction ($b = .09, p < .05$) and negative for subjective divorce likelihood ($b = -.06, p < .05$). Figures 1 and 2 show predicted values for individuals at $\pm 1$ standard deviation on values of major sacrifice and sacrifice satisfaction. Both
the figures show that husbands’ marital quality declines upon making major sacrifices for their spouse; marital-satisfaction levels decline, and perceived divorce likelihood increases. However, these declines in marital quality are stronger for husbands who are less satisfied with sacrificing for their wives than for husbands who report satisfaction with such sacrificing. Indeed, the predicted marital-quality scores for husbands who have high levels of sacrifice satisfaction were hardly different, regardless of whether they made major sacrifices for their wives.

**Discussion**

This study examined the association between generosity, major sacrifices, and marital quality among a nationally representative sample of contemporary married individuals between the ages of 18 and 55. Regular generosity was positively associated with the participants’ marital satisfaction and negatively associated with conflict in their marriage and their perceived likelihood of divorce. For marital satisfaction and perceived divorce likelihood, the effect sizes of generosity were large. These findings held up whether we used spouses’ reports of their own generosity toward the participant, or participants’ reports of their generosity toward their spouse. These findings also remained when participants’ reports of their own generosity and spousal reports of *their* own generosity were in the same model. Moreover, the extension and receipt of generosity proved to be about an equally powerful predictor of marital quality for wives and husbands.

Interestingly, the participants’ coefficients were larger than the spouses’ coefficients were. On the one hand, this is to be expected because of the common variance that links participants’ reports of their own generosity with their reports of their own marital quality. But this may also suggest that the generosity that one gives is a stronger predictor of marital quality than is the generosity that one receives. This interesting possibility awaits future tests.
Generosity may be associated with marital quality for a number of reasons. Generosity in marriage necessitates learning more about what makes one’s spouse happy and then acting on it. It may boost spouses’ feelings of self-worth and love toward the generous spouse. Alternatively, generosity may introduce more novelty into the relationship. Or it may boost feelings of gratitude and appreciation toward one’s spouse. The fact that generosity was associated with three measures of marital outcomes—satisfaction, conflict, and perceived divorce likelihood—suggests that there may be multiple mechanisms. Unfortunately, we were unable to directly test these mechanisms, because they were not measured in the data. Thus, future research should examine the reasons that generosity and marital quality are related.

Some might argue that generosity is simply a type of positive reinforcement, or part of a system of exchanges. That is, the case might be made that individuals use generous behavior such as small acts of kindness or expressions of affection as a self-interested way to positively reinforce a spouse’s behavior that they want to encourage (Fowers, 2000). Alternatively, under social-exchange theory, as spouses receive generosity, they may receive more of a relationship benefit than they expected. Those who receive more benefits in a relationship than they expected would be more satisfied with the relationship (Nye, 1982). The receiving spouse might then be motivated to maintain the cycle of exchange.

Although being on the receiving end of generosity is associated with enhanced marital quality, generosity is neither positive reinforcement nor a system of exchanges. One can be generous in the absence of behaviors that one wants to modify in one’s spouse. Thus by definition, it is not necessarily positive reinforcement. Further, generosity is often motivated by a desire to benefit one’s spouse (Fowers, 2000), not to receive reciprocal benefits. Indeed,
behavior motivated by a quid pro quo system of behavioral exchanges does not seem particularly generous.

Further, the findings from this study suggest that one’s own generosity can enhance one’s own marital quality; exchanges are not necessary for individuals to benefit from generosity. The fact that participants’ report of their own generosity—Independent of spousal reports of generosity—was predictive of their own marital quality suggests that generosity is not a zero-sum game. Rather, both the giver and the receiver of the generosity may experience enhanced marital quality. This is consistent with at least one study on sacrifice that found benefits for both spouses (Kogan et al., 2010).

Another interesting idea that emerges from the findings is that generosity does not need to consist of grand gestures to be associated with marital quality. Our measure used small acts of generosity—the expression of affection and respect, forgiveness, and small kindnesses. That is, small positive actions were associated with marital quality. These findings support clinical observations and insights that small positive marital acts that are frequently performed may relate to marital quality more strongly than large gestures that are irregularly enacted (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

In contrast to our findings about generosity, making major sacrifices was negatively associated with marital quality. For wives, making major sacrifices was negatively associated with marital satisfaction and positively associated with conflict and perceived divorce likelihood. These findings were strongest when wives’ own reports of making major sacrifices were used. This suggests that the personal costs of making a major sacrifice for one’s spouse may translate into lower marital quality—at least among younger married couples in today’s society.

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2 See Appendix for a more detailed examination of small, regular acts of kindness.
To be sure, wives’ sacrifice satisfaction was positively associated with marital quality. This supports previous studies on sacrifice that suggest that willingness to sacrifice or sacrifice satisfaction are strong predictors of positive marital quality (Stanley et al., 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997). It is interesting that actually making large sacrifices would be negatively associated with marital quality whereas sacrifice satisfaction was positively associated with it. We thought that one explanation might be that wives who reported sacrifice satisfaction may not have been the ones actually making major sacrifices. In a follow-up regression (not shown), however, wives’ sacrifice satisfaction did not predict their reports of making major sacrifices.

The association between husbands’ reports of making major sacrifices and their marital quality was somewhat more complex. A major-sacrifice–by–sacrifice-satisfaction interaction predicted both marital satisfaction and perceived divorce likelihood. Men who were satisfied with making sacrifices for their wives had more stable levels of marital satisfaction and perceived divorce likelihood when they actually had to make those sacrifices relative to their counterparts who made major sacrifices but had lower levels of sacrifice satisfaction.

This study has some limitations that future research may be able to correct. First, the SMG is a cross-sectional sample. Consequently, we cannot make any claims about the directionality of effects. We tested whether marital quality would predict generosity, for example, and found that marital satisfaction positively predicted it whereas conflict and perceived divorce likelihood negatively predicted it (regressions not shown). Thus, although we derived our hypotheses from existing theory, it may be that individuals who are in higher quality marriages are more likely to engage in generous behavior, or the relationship may be reciprocal. We suspect that the relationship is endogenous, such that an ethic of generosity fosters higher-
quality marriages, and higher-quality marriages are also more conducive to an ethic of generosity.

Second, our measurement of sacrifice behavior relied only on one variable—making major sacrifices. Although we found that making major sacrifices was negatively associated with wives’ marital quality and was moderated for husbands by sacrifice satisfaction, this one variable only measures one type of sacrifice. The finding that major sacrifice behaviors were negatively associated with marital quality runs contrary to other studies on sacrifice and suggests that sacrifices in close personal relationships would be best studied by using many different measures of the actual behaviors as well as the attitudes that motivate and accompany the behavior. Future research might profitably replicate this finding on major sacrifice and expand the literature by measuring sacrifice in many different ways.

Moreover, we are also not entirely sure of the direction of causality when it comes to the association between major sacrifices and lower-quality marriages. It could be that people in difficult marriages are more likely to also think of themselves as making major sacrifices for their spouse. Future research, using longitudinal data, will have to determine if major sacrifices predict lower marital quality, vice versa, or some combination thereof.

In spite of these limitations, this study adds to the literature in a number of ways. It is the first study, to our knowledge, to test the relationship between generosity and marital quality. Further, it lends additional empirical support to earlier research showing that spouses who embrace an ethic of sacrifice also enjoy happier marriages. In these ways, then, this study suggests that an other-centered approach to marriage can foster a spirit of solidarity that redounds to the benefit of both husbands and wives. Clearly, even today, wives and husbands are
more likely to flourish when they see marriage as an opportunity to make a regular gift of themselves to their spouse.

At the same time, an other-centered approach to marriage also has its limits for contemporary husbands and wives. In a day and age when a high level of happiness and comfort is expected by most Americans (Oishi et al., 2007), and the individualistic model of married life exerts greater power in the minds and hearts of ordinary Americans than it once did (Amato, 2009), making a major sacrifice for one’s spouse seems to exert a drag on the quality of married life for today’s husbands and wives in the United States. And, perhaps because they do not wish to return to a day when wives were expected to make major sacrifices on a regular basis, the negative impacts of a major sacrifice seems to be true for today’s wives no matter how positively inclined to a spirit of sacrifice they are in the abstract.

Thus, for today’s husbands and wives, the recipe for marital success runs something like this: Give, but only up to a point, and you shall receive.
References


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Psychology, 77*, 942–966.

Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2007). If I help my partner, will it hurt me?
Perceptions of sacrifice in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Clinical
Psychology, 26*, 64–92.
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wives</th>
<th>Husbands</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M or %</td>
<td>Std</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>15.24</td>
<td>3.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Conflict</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Divorce</td>
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<td>Likelihood</td>
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<td>Regular Generosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major Sacrifice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacrifice Satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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