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Prayer and satisfaction with sacrifice in close relationships

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Abstract

Three studies document the effect of prayer on satisfaction with sacrifice in close relationship. Study 1 ( $n=771$ ) demonstrated that prayer for partner predicted later satisfaction with sacrifice. In Study 2 ( $n=59$ ), experimentally manipulated prayer, after having discussed a disagreement, and doing so increased satisfaction with sacrifice, couple identity and emergent goals, both of which mediated the relationship between prayer for partner and sacrifice. Study 3 ( $n=37$ ) showed that objective observers rated those who were randomly assigned to pray for a partner over a four week period as being more satisfied with sacrifice than those who daily engaged in positive thoughts about their partner.

### Prayer and satisfaction with sacrifice in close relationships

Prayer is an important activity in most world religions, and approximately 90% of Americans pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999). Given its prevalence and potential impact, prayer is underrepresented in the scientific literature. The relative lack of research on prayer is surprising given its ubiquitous nature. The goal of the current research is to address this oversight and expand upon initial studies that document the impact of prayer on close relationships. For example, Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, (2008) found that praying for a romantic partner predicted later relationship quality and Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach (2010) found that participants who prayed for their partner for a month increased in forgiveness toward that partner compared to control participants. Fincham, Lambert, and Beach (2010) found that participants who prayed for their romantic partners committed less infidelity. Finally, Lambert and Dollahite (2006) found that prayer was something that religious couples used as a way of handling marital conflict.

We endeavored to build upon this research in four distinct ways. First, we extended this research to an important relationship outcome: satisfaction with sacrifice for one's partner. Second, we moved beyond correlational methods to demonstrate that prayer *causes* people to become more satisfied with sacrifice for a partner. Third, we sought to identify mechanisms that might account for the relationship between prayer and sacrifice. And fourth, we offer evidence based not only on self-report, but also on ratings of objective observers.

#### *Importance of Sacrifice in Relationships*

Is sacrifice important in relationship dynamics and outcomes? Some research has demonstrated a relationship between satisfaction sacrifice and constructs such as overall relationship quality and commitment. Sacrifice fosters increased trust between partners (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, and Markman (2006) showed that satisfaction with sacrifice, in early marriage, is a better predictor of future marital adjustment than marital adjustment early in marriage. For example, higher levels of commitment (typically defined in this literature as an intention to have a future with the partner) are associated with several different conceptualizations of sacrifice, such as the number of sacrifices performed (Van Lange, et al., 1997), the degree of satisfaction one gets from sacrificing for their partner (Stanley & Markman, 1992), the willingness to sacrifice personally important activities for the relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999), and the degree to which one perceives making sacrifices for the partner as harmful to the self (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007).

Hence, in a small but robust literature, various constructions of sacrifice are meaningfully and potently related to relationship processes and outcomes. Sacrifice seems integrally related to having a sense of being a team or a couple with a future and promotes couple identity, one of the proposed, fundamental, elements of commitment between partners (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

We specifically focused on satisfaction with sacrifice among individuals that are at least somewhat religious. Being satisfied with sacrifice indicates how much positive emotion one associates with sacrificing for a partner. All individuals in a relationship are required to sacrifice, at least to some degree. Thus, we suggest that one's attitude toward sacrifice is potentially more important than simply frequency of sacrifice. For instance, a

housewife who sacrificed a great job to stay home with children may be sacrificing a great deal, but might not be very satisfied with this sacrificing situation and hence her sacrifice may be negatively related to her couple identity with her husband. Thus, for the current studies we focused on satisfaction with sacrifice.

Also, the current literature on sacrifice focuses almost exclusively on romantic relationships. One purpose of the current studies was to examine sacrifice in the context of friendships as well as romantic relationships. The goal of the present research is to investigate the extent to which prayer increases satisfaction with sacrifice.

#### *Indirect Path Through Emergent Goals*

There are several likely reasons why prayer may be related to satisfaction with sacrifice, but one possibility is that it should minimize emergent goals. Fincham and Beach (1999) argue that motivational processes are particularly consequential when couples are striving to reduce their negative relationship transactions and when they are recovering from negative interactions that have already occurred. They hypothesize that during destructive interactions, couples commonly switch from the cooperative goals they profess and believe most of the time, to emergent goals that are adversarial in nature. Emergent goals are characterized by a competitive drive to win or prevail rather than to do what is best for a relationship, essentially shifting from a win-win mentality to a win-lose mentality. It is plausible that prayer leads one to favor cooperative goals rather than emergent goals, which, in turn promotes behaviors that support positive relationship functioning.

#### *Indirect Path Through Couple Identity*

We propose that when couples pray for their partner they will be more likely to experience stronger couple identity. Those who invest the time and effort to pray for another's well-being should feel a stronger connection to this person and identify with them more due to their investment. Furthermore, individuals will be more content with making a sacrifice for another person if they feel like it will, in some way, enhance their own goals in some way. That is why we propose that couple identity will also mediate the association between relationship of prayer for a partner and satisfaction with sacrifice. Couple identity should foster a greater sense that sacrifices for the partner are really not losses to the self, since the self is part of a team (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Whitton et al., 2007). Thus, couple identity, in addition to reduced emergent goals should mediate the relationship between prayer for partner and satisfaction with sacrifice.

#### *Overview of Studies*

The role of prayer for partner in satisfaction with sacrifice was examined in three studies, utilizing a variety of methods. In Study 1 we investigated whether initial prayer for partner predicted sacrifice six weeks later, controlling for initial level of satisfaction with sacrifice. Study 2 investigated whether prayer for partner after discussing disagreements reduced emergent goals and increased satisfaction with sacrifice. In Study 3, we used a daily diary method to test whether objective observers would rate those who prayed for their partner daily as more satisfied with sacrifice than control participants.

#### Study 1: Temporal Association

We investigated whether this relationship holds over time as it is widely accepted that causes precede effects.

#### *Method*

*Participants and Procedure*

The study included 771 undergraduates (637 female) who participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 40, with a median age of 19. Participants completed all measures relevant to the current study at the beginning of an academic semester, and then again six weeks later and were instructed to answer all questions about their romantic partner or most important interpersonal relationship. Relationship status did not moderate the results in any way and so the two groups were collapsed for the analysis. Furthermore, the results were not moderated by sex.

*Measures*

*Prayer for partner.* Prayer for partner was examined in terms of prayer for the person with whom the respondent had their most important relationship. Six items asked about prayer for this person (e.g., “I pray for the well being of this person,” “I ask God to watch over my close interpersonal relation,” “I pray for my partner to reach her goals,” and “I pray that good things will happen for my partner”  $\alpha = .97$ ).

*Satisfaction with sacrifice.* This construct was assessed with a six-item measure developed by Stanley, et al. (2006) (e.g., “It can be personally fulfilling to give up something for my partner/important relation,” “I do not get much fulfillment out of sacrificing for my partner,” “I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself,” “I am not the kind of person that finds satisfaction in putting aside my interests for the sake of my relationship with my partner,” “It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner,” and “Giving something up

for my partner is frequently not worth the trouble.” Coefficient alpha for this measure was .86 at Time 1 and .89 at Time 2.

### *Results and Discussion*

We first examined the stability of the sacrifice measure and found that satisfaction with sacrifice at Time 1 was a strong predictor of satisfaction with sacrifice at Time 2 ( $\beta = .56, p < .01$ ). Although Time 2 prayer for partner was not included in the analysis, this measure demonstrated significant stability as Time 1 prayer for partner predicted Time 2 prayer for partner, ( $\beta = .83, p < .01$ ). Next, we assessed the relationship between Time 1 prayer for partner and Time 1 satisfaction with sacrifice and found that Time 1 prayer for partner was a significant predictor of Time 1 satisfaction with sacrifice ( $\beta = .24, p < .01$ ). We next used hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether initial partner prayer for one's partner predicted later satisfaction with sacrifice. On the first step, we entered the control variable of initial satisfaction with sacrifice and on the second step, we entered initial prayer for partner scores. Higher prayer for partner scores were associated with higher satisfaction with sacrifice scores six weeks later, even when controlling for initial satisfaction with sacrifice scores ( $\beta = .10, p < .01$ ).

Results were consistent with our hypothesis, in that praying for one's close interpersonal relation predicted later satisfaction with sacrifice. These findings provide some support for inferring direction of effects. However, these longitudinal data are still correlational and experimental data are required for demonstrating causality. We therefore sought to obtain such data in Studies 2 and 3.

### Study 2: Mechanisms



The primary objective of Study 2 was to test what variables might be mediating the relationship between prayer for partner and satisfaction with sacrifice. Consistent with a goal theory perspective (Fincham & Beach, 1999), we hypothesized that praying for one's partner would reduce emergent goals and thereby remove a major impediment to satisfaction with sacrifice. Also, prior literature has found that commitment (closely related to couple identity) is important to satisfaction with sacrifice because it fosters a greater sense that sacrifices for the partner are really not losses to the self, since the self is part of a team (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Whitton et al., 2007). We thus hypothesized that prayer for one's partner would increase couple identity and reduce emergent goals, both of which would facilitate greater satisfaction with sacrifice.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

The study included 59 undergraduates (45 female) who received extra credit for their participation in the study. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 25, and the median age was 20. Participants attended the session together with a close friend.

#### *Measures*

*Satisfaction with sacrifice.* We used the same six-item measure to measure satisfaction with sacrifice as in Study 1 (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, et al., 2006;  $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Emergent goals.* To measure emergent goals, we created a four-item measure, (e.g., "Imagine that you are caught up in an argument, to what extent do you want to... Get your way; try not to lose the argument; Make sure you don't lose face in the argument; Win the argument"  $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Couple identity.* To measure couple identity we used two-items, “Right now I feel united with my friend,” and “Right now I feel at one with my friend.” These items correlated at  $r = .92$ .

*Procedure*

Once participants had given informed consent they were randomly assigned to condition. All participants randomly assigned to the prayer for friend condition prayed, because those who were uncomfortable with prayer completed a different study. Participants came to the lab with a close friend and were provided a blank sheet of paper on which they were instructed to write about the “worst unresolved argument/disagreement” they had engaged in with their friend and to write two to three reasons about why they felt the point they were making was justified. They then wrote about the most fundamental issue about which they have had a disagreement with their friend. Participants were given five minutes to complete this task, after which they were brought to the same room with their friend to discuss the issues about which they had previously disagreed. Following a five minute discussion about their disagreements, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following two conditions after which they completed the dependent measures:

*Prayer for friend condition.* Twenty-five participants were directed into a private room where they would be alone and were instructed to say a prayer for the well-being of their close friend and to ring a bell when they were done. They were provided with an example prayer as follows: “Dear Lord, thank you for all the things that are going well in my life and in my relationship. Please continue to protect and guide my friend, providing strength and direction every day. I know you are the source of all good things. Please

bring those good things to my friend and make me a blessing in my friend's life. Amen.”

Following a three minute prayer, the participants completed the relevant dependent variable measures.

*Thoughts of friend condition.* Thirty-four participants were directed to a separate room in which they were given a blank piece of paper and a set of colored pencils and were then instructed to draw a picture of themselves with their friend. Following three minutes of drawing, participants completed dependent variable measures. This condition was designed to ensure that prayer for the friend, as opposed to being distracted by a task that primes thoughts of friend, was responsible for any changes in satisfaction with sacrifice ratings.

**Comment [f1]:** Seems a poor descriptor of condition which is more like a distraction control condition

### *Results*

#### *Prayer and Satisfaction with Sacrifice*

As hypothesized, analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants in the prayer for friend condition had higher satisfaction with sacrifice scores ( $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than those in the thoughts of friend condition ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ),  $F(1, 57) = 7.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .12$ .

#### *Prayer for Friend, Emergent Goals, and Couple Identity*

As hypothesized, analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants in the prayer for friend condition reported significantly lower emergent goals ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) than those in the thoughts of friend condition ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ),  $F(1, 57) = 5.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .09$ .

Also as predicted, analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants in the prayer for friend condition reported significantly higher couple unity ( $M = 5.74$ ,  $SD =$

1.47) than those in the thoughts of friend condition ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $F(1, 57) = 6.93$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .11$ .

#### *Emergent Goals and Couple Identity as Mediators*

To test emergent goals and couple identity as mediators between prayer for friend condition and satisfaction with sacrifice, we used a bootstrapping method developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test multiple mediator models. Mediation is typically tested using the Sobel (1982) which assumes that the product of coefficients constituting the indirect effect is normally distributed. However, this distribution tends to be skewed and leptokurtic (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As a result, resampling or bootstrapping methods are replacing prior methods for testing mediation (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). A confidence interval for the size of the indirect path is generated and if the values between the upper and lower confidence limit do not include zero, this indicates a statistically significant mediation effect. Both hypothesized mediators were entered simultaneously into the mediation analysis. The indirect path of emergent goals was statistically significant, as indicated by finding that the 95% confidence interval (bias corrected) for the indirect path through this mediator did not include zero,  $CI = -.51$  to  $-.05$ . Similarly, the indirect path through couple identity showed that it also mediated the relation between experimental condition and satisfaction with sacrifice,  $CI = -.80$  to  $-.11$ . Thus, both indirect paths were significant mediators. We also examined whether the strengths of the mediational paths differed from each other. The contrast between these two mediators did not pass through zero, ( $-.61$  to  $.19$ ) indicating that neither mediator was significantly stronger than the other.

#### *Discussion*

When confronted with disagreement, prayer for a friend seems to have bolstered participants' satisfaction with sacrifice for one another. The results also indicate that praying for one's close friend increased perceived couple identity in the relationship. The subsequent increase in satisfaction with sacrifice makes a great deal of sense in light of this finding given that self-interested adults should be more willing to sacrifice when they see this sacrifice as benefiting themselves down the road and increased couple identity should increase the perception of sacrificing for the friend as benefitting the self. Indeed, research indicates that when couple identity is strong, sacrificing one's personal agenda is not perceived as a loss as it benefits the team (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Whitton et al., 2007).

The data also indicate that prayer for a friend may be causing individuals to place less value on winning an argument and more on protecting the relationship. Such a perspective appears to be instrumental in participants' subsequent satisfaction with sacrifice for their friend. Again, this may be explained by the idea that, through prayer, as a participant comes to value the relationship over the emergent goals of winning an argument, they are consequently more satisfied with sacrificing for such a relationship.

### Study 3: Daily Journal and Observer Reports

The previous studies describe a consistent pattern of results, yet are somewhat limited because they were all self-reports of participants' satisfaction with sacrifice. The limitations of self-report methods have been extensively documented (e.g., see Stone, Turkhan, Bachrach, Jobe, Kurtzman, & Cain, 2000) and include impression management, motivated distortion, and the limits of self-awareness (Fincham & Rogge, 2010). The objective of this final study was to move beyond the limitations of self-report data and to

test whether the effects of praying for the partner on satisfaction with sacrifice could be perceived by objective observers.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Thirty-seven individuals participated in the study for extra credit and ranged in age from 18 to 37 with a median age of 19. They were instructed to choose a close friend or romantic partner about whom to answer all questions. We examined whether any of the results were moderated by relationship status and as relationship status did not moderate any of the results the two categories were collapsed for all analyses. Only participants that reported being comfortable with prayer were invited to participate and all others were informed of an alternative extra credit opportunity.

#### *Procedure*

All participants completed pretest measures and were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions. They were instructed that they would need to complete their assigned activity every day and keep a log of how many minutes they engaged in their activity each day. Participants were also required to log on to an online journal twice a week to report their log and provide written descriptions about their assigned activity. For instance, they wrote how much time they spent engaging in their assigned activity and wrote what they prayed about or the positive thoughts they had about their partner.

*Prayer for partner condition.* This was the experimental condition and the 17 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions: “Over the next four weeks we would like you to set aside at least one time each day to pray for the well-being of your partner. Keep track of how much time you spend doing this, as we will ask you to report it for each day.” To help participants understand the type of prayer we had intended them to pray, we provided them with a sample prayer and requested that

they generate their own prayer and report what they prayed about during each online session. The sample prayer was the same as that provided in Study 2.

*Positive-thoughts condition.* Given that we requested participants in the prayer condition to pray for positive things for their partner, the goal of this control condition was to help rule out the alternative hypothesis that it was simply the frequency of positive thoughts people had toward their partner while they prayed that caused any between-group differences on follow-up measures (cf. Tesser, et al., 1995). The 20 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions: “Over the next four weeks, please set aside at least one time each day to think positive thoughts about your partner. Keep track of how much time you spend doing this as we will ask you to report it for each day.”

At the conclusion of the four week period, participants came into the laboratory with their romantic partner or close friend and engaged in a videotaped interaction. The question posed to the study participants that was relevant to the current study was, “Please describe something you have given up, or would be willing to give up, for your partner or for your relationship.” Their responses to this question were coded by a group of five trained research assistant coders, blind to study hypotheses, and the condition to which the participant was assigned. After watching the participants’ response to this question, the research assistants coded their response based on the question, “How would you rate the satisfaction with sacrificing the participant demonstrated to the partner during this interaction?” on a scale from (1= “Not at all satisfied” to 7= “Extremely satisfied”). The inter-rater reliability of the coders’ responses to this question was high with an intraclass correlation of .85.

### *Results and Discussion*

#### *Effect of Prayer for Partner on Satisfaction with Sacrifice*

We tested our hypothesis that praying for a close partner every day for four weeks would affect participants' satisfaction with sacrifice. Our hypothesis was supported as comparisons revealed higher observer reports of satisfaction with sacrifice for those in the prayer for partner condition ( $M=4.64$ ,  $SD=.86$ ) than among those in the positive-thought condition ( $M=4.01$ ,  $SD=.90$ ),  $F(1, 35)=4.76$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $\eta^2_p=.12$ . These results remained significant when controlling for relationship length  $F(1, 34)=4.78$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $\eta^2_p=.12$  and prayer frequency  $F(1, 34)=4.00$ ,  $p=.05$ ;  $\eta^2_p=.11$ , demonstrating the robustness of the findings. Overall, these results indicate that the effect of praying for one's partner on one's satisfaction with sacrifice is apparent even to objective observers.

#### General Discussion

The results of three studies indicate that praying for a close partner is related to greater satisfaction with sacrificing for that person. In Study 1 we demonstrated that the relationship between partner-focused prayer and satisfaction with sacrifice persisted over time: Time 1 prayer for the partner predicted Time 2 satisfaction with sacrifice (six weeks later) over and beyond earlier, baseline satisfaction with sacrifice scores. In Studies 2 and 3 we sought to expand upon these correlational findings by testing for a causal relationship through use of experimental designs.

In Study 2 we examined the effect of prayer for friend on friendship pairs immediately after they discussed issues about which they had fundamental disagreement. In the face of such circumstances, prayer for friend increased participants' satisfaction



with sacrifice relative to a control group of participants who were primed with thoughts of their partner as they drew a picture of themselves together with their friend.

Finally, in Study 3 we went a step further and used a journal method over a period of four weeks in which participants prayed for their partner each day to test whether doing so would yield an effect on their responses to a question about what they would give up for their partner that would be noticed by objective observers blind to study hypotheses. Indeed, our hypothesis was confirmed in that objective coders rated those who prayed each day for a partner for four weeks as having a greater satisfaction with sacrifice than those who engaged in positive thoughts about their partner for four weeks. These three studies provide evidence for a relationship between praying for a close interpersonal relation and being satisfied with sacrificing for that partner. But what mechanisms link prayer for partner to satisfaction with sacrifice?

*Mechanisms in the Relationship of Prayer for Partner and Satisfaction With Sacrifice*

We hypothesized that prayer for partner would increase participants' perceived couple identity and decrease the occurrence of emergent goals in their relationship, both of which would mediate the relationship between prayer for partner and satisfaction with sacrifice. Study 2 yielded results consistent with this hypothesis and showed that neither mediator was stronger than the other.

The finding that prayer for partner reduced emergent goals is consistent with Fincham & Beach's (1999) goal theory perspective; it suggests that prayer for a partner brings about a motivational shift, perhaps by refocusing attention on cooperative relationship goals and away from emergent goals. This finding is also consistent with a previous demonstration that praying for a partner increased selfless concern for others

(Lambert, et al., 2009). Similarly, it could be that praying for a partner helped participants to transcend the self, something that Crocker and colleagues (2008) have found reduces self-focus. This finding needs to be probed in greater detail by future research.

By facilitating couple identity prayer can be viewed as fostering the type of transformation of motivation posited by Kelley and Thibaut (1978), wherein the broader goals of the relationship ascend in contrast to individual goals. Hence, behaviors with the potential to have a negative impact on relationships (i.e., retaliatory impulses, withdrawal) are chosen less often, even if they are not less tempting or less salient as options, and outcomes facilitated by cooperative goals (i.e., sacrifice) are more frequently endorsed. In this case, it seems that endorsing cooperative goals makes individuals more inclined to sacrifice for their partner, perhaps because they focus more on long-term well-being of the relationship and therefore sacrificing seems like more of a logical step.

A heightened sense of couple identity also appears to directly influence attitudes toward satisfaction with sacrifice. This concept of couple identity appears to have some overlap with more established constructs such as inclusion of other in the self (Aron, Aron, & Smolan, 1992) and cognitive interdependence (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998), both of which assess the degree of overlap and connection to a partner. Future studies should examine how praying for a partner may affect these related constructs.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Some limitations of this study are that the sample was restricted to college-aged relationships that may not be representative of more mature relationships or even

relationships in the general population. Also, these results may only apply to individuals who pray. . In addition, the control condition of the experimental studies did not include a religious activity that wasn't a relationship promoting activity. Thus, it could be that simply thinking about a higher power, rather than specifically praying for a partner, may generate a similar effect and this should be ruled out by future research.

Although a large majority of Americans pray at least sometimes (90% according to some estimates), this practice is limited to religious and/or spiritual individuals and may not easily be applied to less religious individuals. Also, the current set of research findings should be replicated in different kinds of relationships (e.g., married couples) or among older participants. We have identified two mediators in the relationship between prayer for partner and satisfaction with sacrifice—emergent goals and couple identity. However, future research ought to replicate these findings and test additional mechanisms. For instance, it could be that when individuals pray for their partner they invite God into their relationship and perhaps having a sense of God's presence could motivate individuals to be more satisfied with sacrifice.

### *Conclusion*

Evidence is beginning to accrue that demonstrates the importance of prayer for partner in the context of relationships. Given that prayer is a naturally occurring, high frequency behavior it could, for religious individuals, be a useful tool in relationship education, intervention programs, or in therapy. Satisfaction with sacrifice for a relationship partner has been shown to have beneficial outcomes on relationships, and praying for one's partner has been demonstrated, using a variety of methods, to be an important aspect of one's satisfaction with sacrifice.

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