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The Interaction between Sacrificing Behaviors and Equity Perception: How Does It Contribute to Marital Intimacy?

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What roles do sacrificing behaviors play in marital life? Does perception of equity influence the association between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy? To examine how sacrificing behaviors, perception of equity, and marital intimacy are connected, we had a sample of 140 married couples (140 females and 140 males) complete three measures—the Measure of Equity Perception (MEP), the Perception of Sacrifice Measure (PSM), and the Intimacy Scale (IS). The results showed a significant relationship between equity perception, sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy. The results also indicated that the relation of sacrificing behaviors with marital intimacy was higher for women with higher equity perception than for women with lower equity perception, whereas this interaction did not occur for men. The implications of the interaction and the gender difference, as well as the importance of enhancing sacrificing behaviors and equity perceptions, are discussed.

***Keywords**:* equity perception, sacrificing behaviors, marital intimacy

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True intimacy with others is one of the highest values of human existence; there may be nothing more important for the well-being and optimal functioning of human than intimate relationships (Prager and Roberts, 2004). The authors argue that the process of achieving deep and abiding relational intimacy is not simple, nor does a marriage guarantee it. According to Daniels (2014), "domestic intimacy" nourishes the family group and assists in creating the feeling of home. Russel & Wells (1994; cited in Pielage, Luteijn, & Arrindell (2005) believe that for most individuals a satisfying intimate relationship is the most important source of happiness and well-being.

Since intimacy is a fundamental human need, enhancing intimate relationships between couples can be the first step toward an optimal married life (Hajian & Mohamadi, 2013). According to Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma (2014), the term "intimacy" refers to partners' general sense of closeness with each other.

Erikson (in Weinberger, Hofstein, & Whitbourne, 2008) emphasized three elements of the capacity for intimacy—willingness to make a commitment to another person, ability to share at a deep personal level, and capacity to communicate inner thoughts and feelings. For Figuerres (2008), many authors believe that individualism is at the foundations of marital confusion and problems today (Fowers, 2000; Furstenbery & Cherlin, 1991; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Whitehead, 1997).

Bahr & Bahr (2001) argue that self-sacrifice is under a cloud these days. They further point out that in an era dominated by rational choice theory, market models of human relationships, and individualism, there is no place for self-sacrifice. In defining

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"sacrifice," Parker and Pattenden (2009) describe situations in which partners experience competing needs or interests. According to them, when this occurs, one or other partner may choose to forgo their preferred activity in order to allow their partners to take priority. Accordingly, sacrifice is described in terms of behaviors—forgoing a desired behavior, enacting an otherwise undesirable behavior, or both (Parker and Pattenden, 2009). Acts of sacrifice can vary in form and magnitude, from being minor, transient, and situation-specific (attending a movie your partner wants to see but you do not) to being major (re-locating for a partner's job) and substantial (Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997).

The interdependence theoretical framework (Kelly, 2003) has been extensively used in sacrifice studies in relationships. According to Figuerres (2008), this theory states that every structure of relationships sometimes requires individuals to forgo their immediate preferences for the sake of the relationship. Therefore, sacrifice will be unnecessary if the partners' interests match and if otherwise, they will be compelled to choose between their own and the partners' interest, or do the sacrifice. In case they do so, as Figuerres writes, "Their self- interests are replaced by a deeper concern for their partner or the relationship" (p.5).

Anderson and Sabatelli (2003) state that in close personal relationships a high degree of interdependence is needed. They further argue that the goal is to obtain and maintain a high level of intimacy; therefore, it is critically important that individuals not act out of self-interest alone. This type of behavior detracts from a deep level of intimacy. Feelings of resentment, mistrust, and complaints about the lack of reciprocity and fairness in

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relationships accompany such selfish behavior. On the other hand, an interdependent relationship is one in which both partners understand that acting in the best interests of each other becomes a way of attaining benefits for oneself. In this type of relationship, trust and commitment, which is continually sustained and developed, can lead to the belief that the relationship is special and has unique qualities that define a lifetime relationship.

The couples' willingness to sacrifice and sacrificing behaviors are useful strategies that can positively affect their sense of satisfaction and well-being, thus ultimately benefitting marital relationships (Van Lange et al., 1997). Wagoner (2014) argues that self-sacrifice is just one of the many behaviors one can engage in to appease one's partner. However, depending on the motivations behind self- sacrificing and how worthwhile one feels sacrificing behavior is, this practice can be constructive or detrimental to couple functioning. For instance, it can have "later psychological costs in feelings of resentment, guilt, dependence, or other psychological costs" (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996; cited in Figuerres, 2008). It can also contribute to one's personal or interpersonal satisfaction and relationship enhancement.

Impett, Gable, & Paplau (2005) have reported that individuals who typically sacrificed their own needs in conflicts out of a genuine concern for their partners' welfare found personal and interpersonal benefits such as personal fulfillment and a strengthened relationship. However, Cramer (2002, cited in Figuerres, 2008) believes that sacrificing to avoid conflict and thus keeping one's "true" feelings bottled up was related to decreased relationship satisfaction. These controversial findings

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reflect the diverging theoretical and empirical conceptualizations that characterize these investigations.

Kogan et al. (2010), in answering to "who benefits most from making sacrifices for others," refer to intrinsic benefits of sacrifice for people who are highly motivated to respond to a specific partner's needs non-contingently, a phenomenon termed "communal strength." According to them, communal strength is positively associated with positive emotions during the sacrifice itself, with feeling appreciated by the partner for the sacrifice and with feelings of relationship satisfaction on the day of the sacrifice.

Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, & Clements (2006) hypothesized that a greater willingness to sacrifice facilitates the growth of relationships, and reinforces a sense of security and safety which is fundamental to marital success. People who are more willing to sacrifice for their partners have reported more intimacy, better problem-solving, and more shared activities (Impett & Gordon, 2008). Moreover, sacrificing behaviors can increase individuals' commitment to and trust in their partners (Weiselquist et al., 1999, cited in Impett & Gordon, 2008). Studies show that couples' attitude toward sacrifice does have an impact on their relationships. Stanley et al. (2006), for instance, argue that positive attitudes toward sacrifice predicts changes in marital adjustment as well as the dichotomous outcome of satisfied versus distressed/divorced.

One of the characteristics of a highly intimate relationship is that the partners are responsive to each other's needs non-contingently. Clark, Lemay, E. Graham, Pataki, & Finkel (2010) support this idea, saying that consistent, non-contingent responsiveness is good for relationships. They, however, believe

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that people frequently fail to reach this ideal. According to them, people are sometimes unresponsive unless a partner promises to reciprocate; they sometimes keep track of benefits, and raise issues of fairness and equity even in the best of relationships.

Studies show an association between equity perception and marital outcomes (Larson, Hammond, & Harper, 1998; Perry, 2004; Sprecher, 2001). Equity is important because it affects many aspects of a relationship. People's perceptions about equity and the amount of partner reciprocity involve their feelings, decisions, and actions toward their relational partners (Adams, 1963). For instance, when a wife feels unfairness in a relationship, she may feel being taken advantage of by the husband. This unpleasant feeling will, in turn, impact her behavior toward husband, her expectations about the future of the relationship, and her commitment to marital life and intimacy, which may ultimately result in divorce. On the contrary, in a fair relationship, the individual who experiences equity will enjoy more satisfaction and marital commitment, which will eventually lead him or her to please and satisfy the other partner. People are motivated to maintain fair relationships, while they find little reason to maintain an involvement where they are treated unfairly (Canary & Yum, 2015). Thus, infidelity (Munsch, 2015), retaliation, and surveillance behaviors (Burdge et al., 2015) may be an attempt to restore fairness.

Studies show that it is less likely that sacrifice will be seen as negative if it is reciprocated; however, if one partner perceives that they are doing more than their fair share of making sacrifices, dissatisfaction is likely to set in (Whitton et al., 2002, cited in Parker & Pattenden, 2009). It is hypothesized here that

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the perception of equity can moderate the relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy. Besides, the question here is whether each of these two variables can predict marital intimacy separately or there should be an interaction. The following hypotheses have been developed:

1. There is a positive relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy.

2. There is a positive relationship between the perception of equity and marital intimacy.

3. Perception of equity moderates the relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy.

Method

At the time of the study, the participants were parents of primary school children from Borojerd, Iran. Using a random multi-stage sampling, seven primary schools were chosen from which 140 couples (comprising 280 husbands and wives) were selected randomly. Means, standard deviations, the Pearson correlation coefficient, and moderating regression analyses were used in analyzing the data.

The Measure of Equity Perception (Perry, 2004).

The Measure of Equity Perception (MEP) is a four-item measure that assesses fairness in four areas: household chores, working for pay, spending money, and child care. Respondents indicate their perception of equity on a five-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (very unfair to me) to 5 (fair to both) in these areas. According to Perry (2004), the combined Cronbach's alpha for the four measures was .55. Using a separate random

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sample of 60 (30 couples), the reliability of the measure was calculated as .62 and .54 for husbands and wives respectively.

The Perception of Sacrifice Measure (Harpper & Fignerres, 2008).

The Perception of Sacrifice Measure (PSM) comprises 50 - items measuring both the perception of one's (the first 25) and one's partner's sacrificing behaviors (the latter 25). Participants are first asked to identify how often they perform a particular sacrifice such as sacrificing "occupation/house work to be with your partner." The participants rate the frequency of the sacrifice using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). For example, they are asked whether they will do what their partner wants them to sacrificing their own interest. Higher scores indicate an individual's perception of their higher frequencies of sacrifice. The Chronbach's alphas reported by Figuerres (2008) are .84 and .81 for husband and wives respectively. In the current study, the alphas obtained were .90 and .88 for the first 25 items (self-sacrifice behaviors), using a separate sample of 60 couples. Concurrent validity was established by the correlation of the present scale and the Quality of Marriage Index, which was .55 and .51 for men and women respectively at $p< .01$.

The Intimacy Scale (IS) developed by Walker and Thompson (1983) consists of 17 items to assess intimacy between couples. It is a part of a larger instrument that assesses different aspects of intimacy such as sexual satisfaction. Participants express their views regarding the 17 items ranging from 1 (never) to 1 (always). Higher scores show greater levels of intimacy. In terms of reliability, Walker & Thompson (1983) reported Chronbach's alphas of .91 to .97. In a similar vein, Sadr Jahani,

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Etemadi, Sadi Pour, and Aryan (2010) reported an alpha of .92 while confirming the construct validity of the scale. In this study, the alphas calculated for this scale were .97 for males and .96 for females.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the participants' sacrificing behaviors, perception of equity, and marital intimacy.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Sacrificing Behaviors, Perception of Equity, and Marital Intimacy

	Male		Female	
Variable	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Sacrificing behaviors	89.99	12.24	76.22	11.88
Perception of Equity	18.26	2.19	17.68	2.61
Marital Intimacy	105.27	14.97	103.59	15.69

Table 2 shows correlations between the variables in male and females. As can be shown, there is a significantly positive correlation between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy in husbands (r=.49) and wives (r=.33) respectively (P<.001). Moreover, perception of equity and marital intimacy are positively correlated in both husbands (r=.29) and wives (.49), P<.001.

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Table 2
Correlations among Sacrificing Behaviors, Perception of Equity, and Marital Intimacy

Variable	Marital Intimacy in husbands	Marital Intimacy in Wives
Sacrificing Behaviors	.49	.33
Perception of Equity	.29	.49

P<.001

To assess the moderating role of perception of equity in the relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy, a moderated regression analysis was conducted. The results are given in Tables 3 and 4.

As Table 3 shows, interaction between sacrificing behaviors and perception of equity increases the explained variance of marital intimacy in wives from .11 up to .31. Moderated regression coefficients of sacrificing behaviors and perception of equity ($\beta = 1/99$ and p<.01) indicate that this increase is statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that perception of equity can moderate the relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy.

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Table 3
Results of Moderated Regression Analysis for Sacrificing Behaviors, Perception of Equity, and Marital Intimacy in Wives

Variable	R	R^2	F	P	B	β	t	p
Sacrificing Behaviors	.34	.11	17.67	.001	.44	.34	4.20	.001
Perception of Equity	.52	.27	25.71	.001	.23	.17	2.22	.027
					2.59	.43	5.48	.001
Sacrificing Behaviors × Perception of Equity	.55	.31	20.11	.001	-1.30	-.91	-2.14	.034
					-5.25	-.87	-1.72	.087
					.08	1.99	2.60	.010

In order to investigate this moderating effect, female participants were divided into four groups according to the mean scores of the perception of equity and sacrificing behaviors (high/low sacrificing behaviors; high/low perception of equity). Figure 1 indicates the interactions between these four groups in terms of the means of marital intimacy scores. As can be seen, the slopes of the regression lines are not similar in sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy in high (21.13) and low (-.28) equity perceivers. In other words, among women with low scores on

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perception of equity, those with lower sacrificing scores (95.68) reported higher marital intimacy than those with higher scores in sacrificing behaviors (94.40). On the other hand, among women with higher scores on perception of equity, those with more sacrificing behaviors (112.63) have reported a considerably higher level of marital intimacy than those with fewer sacrificing behaviors (91.50). These findings show that the correlation between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy is higher in women with higher perception of equity scores than those with lower scores.

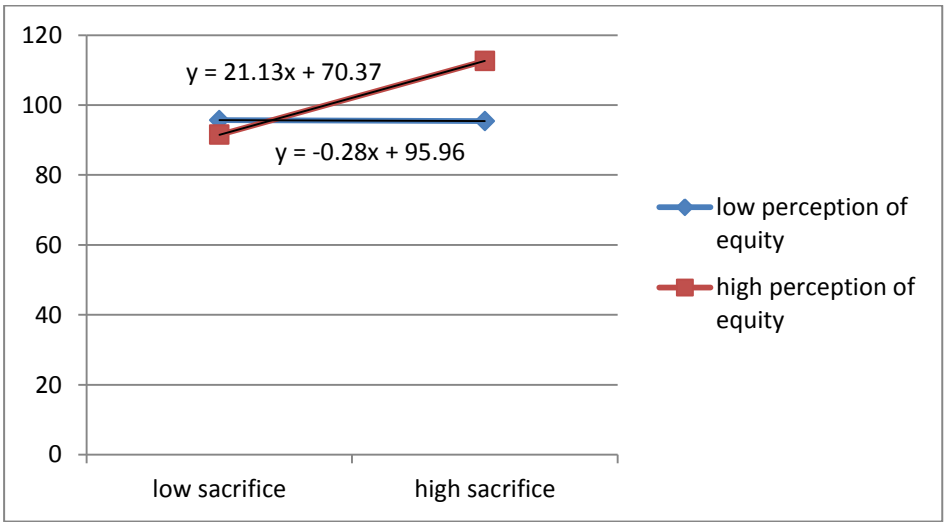


Figure 1. Interactions between sacrificing behaviors, perception of equity, and marital intimacy in women

As indicated in Table 4, while the interaction between sacrificing behaviors and perception of equity has slightly enhanced the explained variance of marital intimacy in men (from .24 to .28), the betas of sacrificing behaviors and

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perception of equity (β =.97, p<.28) show that this increase is not statistically significant.

Table 4

Results of Moderating Regression Analysis of Sacrificing Behaviors, Perception of Equity, and Marital Intimacy in Men

Variable	R	R2	F	P	B	β	t	p
Sacrificing Behaviors	.49	.24	44.43	.001	.60	.49	6.66	.001
Perception of Equity	.52	.27	25.61	.001	.55	.45	5.93	.001
					1.19	.17	2.32	.001
Sacrificing Behaviors × Perception of Equity	.53	.28	17.47	.001	.25	.21	2.34	.74
					-2.68	-.39	-7.37	.46
					.04	.98	1.06	.29

Discussion

The present study was carried out to investigate the moderating role of perception of equity in the connection between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy. The first hypothesis of the study was the existence of a positive correlation between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy in both men and

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women. This hypothesis was statistically confirmed in line with Figuerres (2008) and Impett & Gordon (2008), who also suggested that sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy are positively correlated. Impett & Gordon (2008) found that those who show more sacrificing behaviors toward their spouse have also reported greater levels of marital intimacy. Individuals' willingness to volunteer for sacrificing behaviors can be regarded a good predictor of their ability to achieve relational success and maintain intimate relationships. Positive attitude toward sacrifice can also influence the quality of relationships. In other words, a partner's perception of their own sacrificing behaviors, which create cheerfulness in the other, will eventually lead to their feeling valuable. This feeling will, in turn, impact the quality of the relationship with their partner in such a way that they will have a positive self-image and thus experience more satisfaction from their married life. Intimacy will also be affected positively, and consequently, the person's perception of the partner's sacrificing behaviors will give him/her an emotional closeness, ultimately contributing to sustaining a qualified married life.

Also, our results showed a positive correlation between the perception of equity and marital intimacy in both men and women. This finding is congruent with Larson, Hammond, & Harper (1998), Perry (2004), and Sprecher (2001). Walster, Traumpman, & Walster (1978) have pointed out that marriages with equity lead to more satisfaction. They found that fair relations are in fact adjusting relations. Couples in fair relations will seek intimate and personal relationships. According to the Equity Theory, couples will experience helplessness and negative feelings in unfair marital relationships. These negative

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feelings, arising from anger or a sense of guilt, may inhibit the feeling of satisfaction in couples. Moreover, a partner who feels being misbehaved by the other partner will think to himself that he would be behaved otherwise if he was loved more. This feeling of unhappiness will ignite and strengthen more negative feelings and decrease satisfaction in the person. Therefore, positive and happy feelings which are produced as a result of the perception of equity in marital relationship can enhance couples' marital intimacy.

In women, the results of the regression analysis indicated that the perception of equity moderates the connection between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy. In other words, this correlation varies depending on how or to what extent they perceive equity in their marital relationships. As was discussed earlier, equity seems to be of greater importance to women. One plausible explanation for this finding is that women identify themselves with their relationship achievements and may feel less powerful in marital life than men, and as such, may have ongoing concerns about fairness and equity issues. On the other hand, men usually identify themselves with vocational achievements and tend to be less sensitive toward equity matters (Thompson & Walker, 1989; in Larson et al, 1998). The results of the present study suggest that women will show a greater tendency to sacrificing and helping behaviors if they perceive equity in their marital life.

In men, however, the results of the regression analysis indicated that perception of equity did not moderate the relationship between sacrificing behaviors and marital intimacy. In other words, this correlation is not higher in men with a higher perception of equity than with those with lower

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perceptions. No study has so far reported any moderating role for the perception of equity in the connection between sacrificing behaviors and intimacy in men or women. This finding, however, can be explained by that part of the literature that suggests that equity is not as important to men as it is to women. Although equity and fairness are indeed important to all, they do not seem to be so influential as to exert any effect on the relationship between sacrifice and marital intimacy.

Theoretically speaking, the results of the current study underscore the moderating effect of the perception of equity on the relationship between sacrifice and marital intimacy. Practical suggestions of this study also make it clear that family therapy procedures should address couples' sacrificing behaviors and perceptions of equity, and when necessary, plan treatments for enhancing sacrificing behaviors in each partner. Moreover, family therapists and counselors can use these findings in their treatments of distressed couples as well as marrying ones, and remind them of the importance of equity in increasing helping behaviors and the positive effects that these behaviors can have on marital satisfaction.

Although the results of the current investigation were largely consistent with the hypotheses, they should be interpreted with care, considering the limited and special sample of participants used in this study (they were all primary schoolers' parents in Borojerd). To investigate the generalizability of the findings, further studies with more varied samples are suggested. Moreover, the effectiveness of equity-focused life skills training in enhancing marital intimacy can be investigated.

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