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Low Self-control Promotes the Willingness to Sacrifice in Close Relationships

Francesca Righetti and Catrin Finkenauer

Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Eli J. Finkel

Northwestern University

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Abstract

While previous theories and research suggest that human behavior is automatically driven by selfish impulses (e.g., vengeance rather than forgiveness), the present research tested the hypothesis that, in close relationships, people's impulsive inclination is to be pro-social and to sacrifice for their partner—to pursue the partner's or the relationship's interest at some costs for the self. Four studies demonstrated that people with low, rather than high, self-control reported greater willingness to sacrifice for their close others. Furthermore, Study 4 demonstrated that communal orientation is more strongly associated with sacrifice among participants with low rather than high self-control. This moderational pattern supports the hypothesis that communal orientation functions as a default approach to sacrifice in close relationship contexts. Taken together, these findings suggest that, under certain crucial conditions in close relationships, gut-level impulses are more likely than deliberative considerations to promote pro-relationship behavior.

Keywords: self-control, sacrifice, pro-social behavior, close relationships

Low Self-control Promotes the Willingness to Sacrifice in Close Relationships

For decades, psychologists have assumed that people's natural impulse is to be selfish and that it requires self-control to overcome this natural tendency and to act in a pro-social manner (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Interdependence theory, for example, suggests that people's departure from self-interest requires an effortful and deliberative process called *transformation of motivation* (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; also see Dehue, McClintock, & Liebrand, 1993). Thanks to transformation of motivation, individuals frequently forego their immediate self-interested impulses and instead adopt pro-social responses based on broader values and relationship considerations. Supporting this idea, previous research has shown that, when people do not engage in transformation of motivation because they are under time pressure or low in self-control, they are more likely to be selfish and not help strangers (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008). They are also less likely to engage in pro-social behaviors such as accommodation, forgiveness, and nonaggressive conflict-management (Balliet, Li & Joireman, 2011; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994).

Is human behavior always automatically driven by selfish impulses? In the present work we challenge the assumption that human impulses are always selfish and instead propose that in some specific contexts, for example in close relationships, impulsive responses are more pro-social than the self-controlled ones. Specifically, we investigate the effect of self-control on *willingness to sacrifice*—the decision to pursue the partner's or the relationship's interest at some costs for the self. We hypothesized that, because close relationships are generally characterized by a communal orientation (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010; Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004), an impulsive (low self-controlled) decision would lead to greater willingness to sacrifice than a deliberative (high self-controlled) one.

Self-control and Decision Making

Self-control refers to people's ability to change their automatic responses and instead act according to the requirements of the self or of the situation (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994). When people have low self-control, they tend to rely on the impulsive system, which is responsible for behavior based on heuristics and associative mental representations. In contrast, when people have high self-control, they tend to rely on the reflective system, which is responsible for higher order mental operations that provide flexibility and control over the impulsive system (Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

The strength model of self-control suggests that self-control relies on a limited resource, such that prior exertion of self-control on one task depletes the psychological resources that are necessary for subsequent self-control tasks, leaving people in a state of self-control depletion (Baumeister et al., 2007). When making decisions, people depleted of self-control engage in quick, effortless information processing, and follow heuristics and habitual responses. In contrast, people high in self-control engage in deliberative, analytical information processing, and correct for heuristics, by taking broader considerations into account (Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008; Pocheptsova, Amir, Dhar, & Baumeister, 2009).

Although previous research has mostly shown that low self-control promotes self-interested behavior, it has also been shown that if heuristics favor pro-social behavior, depleted participants are likely to be influenced by them and act accordingly. For example, Fennis et al. (2009) found that depleted participants were more likely than nondepleted participants to donate money to charity—because they relied more on contextual heuristics (i.e., liking, reciprocity, or consistency), which favored pro-social behavior.

Self-control and the Decision to Sacrifice

Relationships with romantic partners or very close friends are typically characterized by a strong communal orientation (Clark & Jordan, 2002; Mills et al., 2004). In communal

relationships, people feel responsible for each other's welfare and desire to benefit the other when in need; the default is to be responsive to each other's needs without expecting something in return. For example, in communal (vs. non-communal) relationships, people are more likely to help each other (e.g., Clark, Ouellette, Powel, & Milberg, 1987) and to feel happier about having done so (Williamson & Clark, 1992). Most people learn communal behavior from their family (Clark & Jordan, 2002). We argue that when parents behave in a caring and responsive manner with their partners and children, children develop strong communal if-then contingencies (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) in the form of an internalized association: "if close other is in need, then be helpful and responsive." This learned contingency ultimately becomes the default heuristic people adopt when observing close others in need.

How does self-control influence the decision to promote the self's vs. the close other's interests in communal relationships? Because individuals who are depleted of self-control resources tend to rely on non-effortful and intuitive processing, we suggest that they are especially likely to act in accord with their communal orientation heuristic. In contrast, individuals whose self-regulatory resources are intact, when making a decision, tend to engage in careful trade-off comparisons among the alternatives (Pocheptsova et al., 2009). As such, we suggest that individuals with high self-control are likely not only to adopt a communal orientation toward close others, but also to take into account multiple facets of the situation, such as the pursuit of personal goals, self-respect concerns, fear of vulnerability, equity, and reciprocity norms. Indeed, prior research has shown that people who prioritize relationship well-being to the neglect of personal well-being tend to experience less self-respect and poorer personal well-being than people who maintain balance between personal and relationship's needs (Helgeson & Fritz; 1998; Luchies, Finkel, Kumashiro, & McNulty, 2010; Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). Thus, making sure not to neglect one's personal needs, even within close relationships, is likely to be a relevant issue for people, like those with high self-control,

who incorporate diverse features into their decision making. Therefore, in the current studies, we tested the hypothesis that depleted participants should be more likely to choose to sacrifice than non-depleted participants.

Research Overview

A pilot study tested whether people higher (vs. lower) in self-control are indeed more attentive not to neglect personal needs and goals in relationships. In addition, four studies investigated the role of self-control in willingness to sacrifice. In the first two studies, we manipulated self-control and assessed willingness to sacrifice in hypothetical scenarios (Study 1) and in a laboratory task (Study 2). In Study 3, we manipulated impulsive decision making with a time pressure paradigm in which participants made decisions involving sacrifice either as quickly as possible or with no time pressure. Finally, in Study 4, we assessed trait self-control and past sacrifice behavior in a sample of married couples and examined the potential moderating role of communal orientation[1].

Pilot Study

Eighty-two participants (52 women; 20.70 years old, *SD* = 2.17) completed an 11-item, Dutch version of Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone's (2004) self-control scale (e.g., "I wish I had more self-discipline"; 0 = *not at all;* 8 = *completely*; α = .70; Finkenauer, Engels, & Baumeister, 2005) and a novel, 3-item measure of concern with personal goals when in relationships (e.g., "Your personal needs should not be overlooked when you are in a relationship"; 0 = *not at all;* 6 = *completely*; α = .54). As expected, participants' self-control was positively associated with concern for personal needs in relationships (r = .26, p = .019).

Study 1

Study 1 examined how self-control influences the decision to sacrifice for a close other. We manipulated self-control and measured two forms of sacrifice: active sacrifice (doing something undesirable) and passive sacrifice (giving up something desirable).

Method

Participants. Participants were 46 individuals (32 women; 21.63 years old, *SD* = 6.02). Data from 3 participants were excluded from the analyses for not following the instructions. The average relationship duration was 64.43 months (*SD* = 60.22).

Measures and procedure. Participants came to the laboratory and were randomly assigned to a depletion vs. non-depletion condition. Participants reported the name of their partner (if they were in a relationship) or their best friend. Subsequently, participants watched a 7-minute video (without sound) and were asked to form an impression of a woman being interviewed. During the video, some words appeared at the bottom of the screen for 10 seconds each. In the depletion condition, participants were asked to actively ignore the words on the screen, whereas in the non-depletion condition participants did not receive any specific instruction regarding the words (e.g., Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003).

After the self-control manipulation, we assessed willingness to sacrifice with a modified version of a measure developed by Van Lange et al. (1997, Study 3). To assess active sacrifice, we presented participants with four moderately undesirable activities and asked them to which extent they would perform each activity for their close other (e.g., "Imagine that it were necessary to go out with your partner/best friend's boring friends in order to maintain and improve your relationship. To what extent would you consider engaging in this activity?; 0 = *I would definitely not engage in this activity;* 6 = *I would certainly engage in this activity*; α = .77). To assess passive sacrifice, we presented participants with four moderately desirable activities and asked them to which extent they would give up each activity for their close other (e.g., "Imagine that, if you were to spend time with one particular friend whom your partner/best friend does not like, it would harm your relationship. To what extent would you consider giving up this activity?"; 0 = *I would definitely not give up this activity*, 6 = *I would certainly give up this activity*; α = .67).

Results and Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, independent-samples t-tests revealed that participants reported greater willingness to actively and passively sacrifice when depleted (M = 4.71, SD = 0.86 and M = 3.41, SD = 1.02, respectively) than when non-depleted (M = 4.10, SD = 0.77 and M = 2.74, SD = 1.07, respectively), $t(41) = 2.45$, $p = .019$, $\omega^2 = .10$, and $t(41) = 2.09$, $p = .043$, $\omega^2 = .07$.

Study 2

Study 1 investigated the role of self-control depletion in the decision to sacrifice in hypothetical scenarios. Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 with a laboratory tasks in which couples were confronted with a real decision. **Method**

Participants. Participants were both members of 30 heterosexual couples (19.93 years old, SD = 2.11). Couples were eligible if they had been dating longer than 4 months. The average relationship duration was 39.96 months (SD = 35.60).

Measures and procedure. Couples were randomly assigned to a depletion vs. non-depletion condition. Upon arrival, members of the couple were separated and led to two different rooms. We told participants that the experiment involved impression making, in that the first part of the experiment investigated whether partners construct a similar or dissimilar impression of other people. We asked participants to watch the same video of Study 1 and to form an impression of a woman being interviewed. The real purpose of this task was to manipulate self-control depletion.

Next, we told participants that, before reporting the impressions of the video, they had to perform the second part of the experiment. In our cover story, the second part was concerned with how strangers form an impression of them. We told participants that they and their partner had to interact with a total of 12 strangers. The task consisted of approaching strangers and saying: “I have an important job interview in a bit, do you think I’m dressed appropriately?”. After this, we told the participants that the experimenter would approach the stranger and ask

for an evaluation of the participant. This task was designed to be moderately embarrassing and, therefore, costly to perform. We also told all the participants that, because they had randomly been chosen to be Partner A, they were the ones to decide with how many strangers they had to interact and with how many strangers their partner had to interact. Participants were asked "With how many strangers do you want to interact?" (13 options; e.g., 0 = *0 for me and 12 for my partner*, 1 = *1 for me and 11 for my partner, … ,* 12 = *12 for me and 0 for my partner*). After participants made the decision, they were not asked to carry on the embarrassing task or to reply to the questions about the video but were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Because the data provided by two partners in an ongoing relationship are nonindependent, we analyzed our data using hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We represented intercept terms as random effects and represented slope terms as fixed effects (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2002).

Participants reported greater willingness to sacrifice when depleted ($M = 6.70$, $SD = 1.68$) than when nondepleted ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(28) = 2.04$, $p = .051$, $\omega^2 = .05$. Interestingly, one sample t-tests revealed that non-depleted participants tended to follow an equity (or equality) norm; their mean did not differ from 6, indicating that they chose an equal number of strangers for them and their partner, $t(14) = -0.46$, $p = .653$. In contrast, depleted participants were more generous; they decided to interact with more than half of the strangers (more than 6), $t(14) = 2.28$, $p = .039$ (see Figure 1).

Study 3

Research has shown that time pressure reduces the operation of controlled, analytical processes, while enhancing the use of heuristics and intuitive processing (e.g., Bargh & Thein, 1985; Finkel et al., 2009; Payne 2001; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). In Study 3, we tested how the decision to sacrifice is differentially affected by automatic and controlled cognitive processes with the use of a time-pressure paradigm.

Method

Participants. Participants were 81 individuals (60 women; 21.42 years old, *SD* = 5.38). The average relationship duration was 63.45 months (*SD* = 67.81).

Measures and procedure. Participants were asked to report the name of their romantic partner (if they were in a relationship) or their best friend. To assess willingness to engage in small sacrifices for close others, we used a modified version of the Van Lange et al. (1997) measure (Studies 1 and 2). First participants listed three of their favorite activities in the evening that they engage in independent of their close other. Subsequently, for each activity, we asked them "Imagine that this evening you have planned to engage in (Activity 1) but (name of close other) now asks you to cancel your plan to help him or her with some homework because tomorrow he or she has an exam (or something very important to deliver at work). To what extent would you consider giving up your activity and instead help him or her with the homework?" (0 = *not at all;* 6 = *certainly*; $\alpha = .70$). Participants in the time pressure condition were asked to reply to the questions as quickly as possible, or at least within four seconds, participants in the no-time pressure condition were asked to take the time they needed before answering.

Results and Discussion

An independent-samples t-test revealed that participants in the time pressure condition reported being more willing to sacrifice ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .81$) than participants in the no-time pressure condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(79) = 2.85$, $p = .006$, $\omega^2 = .08$. Thus, participants were more likely to sacrifice for a close other when they engaged in automatic rather than controlled processing in decision-making.

Study 4

Study 4 had three aims. The first was to investigate whether self-control affects not only the decision to sacrifice but also the behavior. In this study, we assessed whether individuals low in self-control report having sacrificed more in their romantic relationship than

individuals high in self-control. The second aim was to show that individuals low in self-control rely on communal orientation when sacrificing. In this study we assessed participants' trait self-control, communal strength, and actual sacrifice behaviors in the relationship. The strength of the communal orientation can vary according to the degree of responsibility that a partner assumes for the other person's welfare. We expected that, because individuals low in self-control rely on their communal orientation to decide whether to sacrifice, their sacrifice behavior would be influenced by the strength of their orientation. For individuals high in self-control, who correct for their communal heuristic, communal strength would not predict sacrifice.

Finally, the third aim was to show that self-control affects sacrifice and forgiveness in different ways. Previous research has shown that when a partner has made a transgression, lack of self-control impairs the pro-social tendency of forgiving (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk et al., 2010). Sacrificing and forgiving are two qualitative distinctive phenomena. We suggest that when a partner commits a transgression, the harm that the partner has provoked becomes salient in the situation. It takes self-control to override the focus on the harm done by the partner and to take into consideration broader concerns (e.g., the general good time partners have in their relationship). In contrast, we suggest that when partners in a communal relationship encounter a situation of divergence of interests that results from circumstances unrelated to any transgressive behavior (e.g., Mark's desire to watch the football match and Lisa's desire to have him join her to visit her friends), the default is often to be responsive to the other's needs. Therefore we expected self-control to be negatively related to sacrifice but positively related to forgiveness.

Method

Participants. Participants were 190 Dutch married couples who participated in a survey at Time 3 of a five-wave longitudinal study. The mean age was 32.64 years old (*SD* =

4.57). The average relationship duration was 7.71 years (*SD* = 3.03), and they had been living together for an average of 5.81 years (*SD* = 2.31).

Measures. To assess trait self-control, participants completed the same self-control scale as in the pilot study (1 = *not at all;* 5 = *very much;* α = .72). To assess communal orientation, participants completed a 4-item version of the Clark et al. (1987) Communal Orientation scale (e.g., "When making a decision, I take other people's needs and feelings into account"; 1 = *not at all;* 5 = *very much;* α = .63). To assess sacrifice, participants were asked "In the past month, how often have you sacrificed for your partner? How often have you refrained from doing something that you felt like doing (e.g., cancel an appointment with friends)?"; 1 = *never;* 5 = *very often*. Finally, to assess forgiveness, we used Brown's (2003) 4-item Tendency to Forgive Scale (e.g., "When my partner hurts or angers me, I am quick to forgive him or her"; 1 = *not at all;* 5 = *very much;* α = .68).

Results and Discussion

Analysis strategy. Because the data provided by two partners in an ongoing relationship are nonindependent, we analyzed our data using hierarchical linear modeling as in Study 2 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Data from one participant were excluded from the analyses for being an extreme outlier in the Communal Orientation Scale (more than 3.5 *SD* below the mean).

Key findings. To test the link between self-control and sacrifice, we regressed past sacrifice onto self-control. Consistent with predictions, and with the results of Studies 1-3, self-control was negatively associated with past sacrifice (β = -.15, $t(187) = -2.96$, $p = .003$). Furthermore, we regressed past sacrifice onto self-control, communal orientation, and their interaction. Results revealed a main effect of self-control (β = -.14, $t(185) = -2.80$, $p = .006$) and a significant interaction (β = -.10, $t(185) = -2.04$, $p = .043$). Consistent with the hypotheses, simple slope analyses revealed that for participants low in self-control (1 *SD* below the mean), communal orientation positively predicted sacrifice (β = .17, $t(185) = 2.36$, *p*

= .019). In contrast, for people high in self-control (1 *SD* above the mean), the effect of communal orientation was not significant (β = -.02, $t(185) = -0.39$, $p = .700$) (see Figure 2). Finally, consistent with previous research, self-control was positively associated with forgiveness (β = .34, $t(187) = -6.92$, $p < .001$). [2]

This study showed that low self-control individuals sacrificed more (but forgave less) than high self-control individuals. Furthermore, they relied on their communal orientation when deciding whether to sacrifice, whereas high self-control individuals did not.

Discussion

Relationship partners often face situations in which they need to make a decision between pursuing their self-interest and sacrificing to promote the well-being of their partner or their relationship. Results from four studies revealed that, in communal relationships, the impulsive response is often to opt to sacrifice for the close other. Studies 1 and 2 showed that depletion of self-control promotes sacrifice for close others in both hypothetical scenarios and in a laboratory task. Study 3 showed that when people need to make a decision under time pressure (i.e., impulsively), they are more likely to decide to sacrifice than when they are not under time pressure. Study 4 showed that, in ongoing romantic relationships, people with low trait self-control tend to sacrifice more than people with high self-control. Furthermore, people with low self-control especially sacrifice when their communal orientation is high. People with high self-control do not rely on their communal orientation when deciding to sacrifice. Finally, Study 4 showed that self-control affects sacrifice and forgiveness in different ways. As in Studies 1-3, it is negatively related to sacrifice, but, as in previous research (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk et al., 2010), it is positively related to forgiveness.

The present findings illuminate one of the few cases in which self-control does not favor, but inhibit, pro-social behavior. Our work contributes to the emerging literature demonstrating that, under certain circumstances, self-control depletion may promote smooth interpersonal interactions (Apfelbaum, Krendl, & Ambady, 2010; Apfelbaum & Sommers,

2009). An alternative explanation for our findings might be that individuals low in self-control make sacrifices for their partner to avoid the effort required to engage in interpersonal conflict (Stanton & Finkel, 2012) [3]. Situations in which the interests of two partners do not correspond can provoke conflicts, which can yield potentially exhausting discussions. By sacrificing, partners avoid effortful communication while facilitating smooth interaction. However, in the long-run, the unconditional tendency to sacrifice might backfire on people with low self-control, who might be less able to maintain the balance between personal and relationship concerns (Kumashiro et al., 2008). Future research should investigate which specific concerns different people adopt to correct for the communal impulses. For example, avoidant individuals might be especially wary of extreme interdependence, and individualistic people might be especially concerned with the fulfillment of their own personal needs.

A limitation of this work is that we have studied sacrifices that people confront daily in a relationship (e.g., going out with the close other's boring friends). We did not focus on large sacrifices (e.g., moving to another country to promote the close other's career) that are likely to be less frequent in relationships. It might be that, when people face decisions on large sacrifices, low self-control individuals might be driven by a self-protective rather than a communal heuristic and might decide to sacrifice less than high self-control individuals. This might occur because in those contexts, the large potential losses for the individual become immediately salient in the situation, overriding any other pro-social tendency.

A strength of this work is that the effect of self-control on willingness to sacrifice replicated in four studies that used different manipulations and measures of self-control (ego-depletion, time pressure paradigm, trait self-control), using different measures of sacrifice (scenarios, a laboratory task, reports of actual sacrifice in one's relationship), and in different samples (close friends, dating couples, married couples).

Conclusions

Although psychologists have assumed that much relationship behavior is driven by automatic selfish impulses, the current work suggests that, under certain conditions, automatic processes are more likely than deliberative processes to foster pro-social responses. In communal relationships, the first impulse may frequently be to be responsive to the partner's needs, even at the cost of personal interest.

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Footnotes

[1] In all studies we explored possible main effects and interactions with participant sex. Results revealed no systematic sex differences.

[2] We also tested whether the relation between self-control and sacrifice was moderated by couple well-being, which was assessed with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). There was no evidence that our key processes were stronger among individuals with high or low well-being, ($\beta = .01$, $t(185) = 0.94$, $p = .348$). Finally, we assessed whether trait agreeableness moderated the relationship between self-control and sacrifice. Agreeableness was assessed at wave 1 using 6 items of the Big Five Scale (Goldberg, 1992). The moderation was not significant, $\beta = .01$, $t(183) = 0.13$, $p = .893$.

[3] However this explanation might not apply to Study 2 where it is unlikely that, if depleted participants had followed an equality norm like the non-depleted participants (i.e., choosing 6 for themselves and 6 for their partner), they would have encountered a conflict with their partner.

Figure 1. Mean values of sacrifice as a function depletion vs. non-depletion condition, Study 2

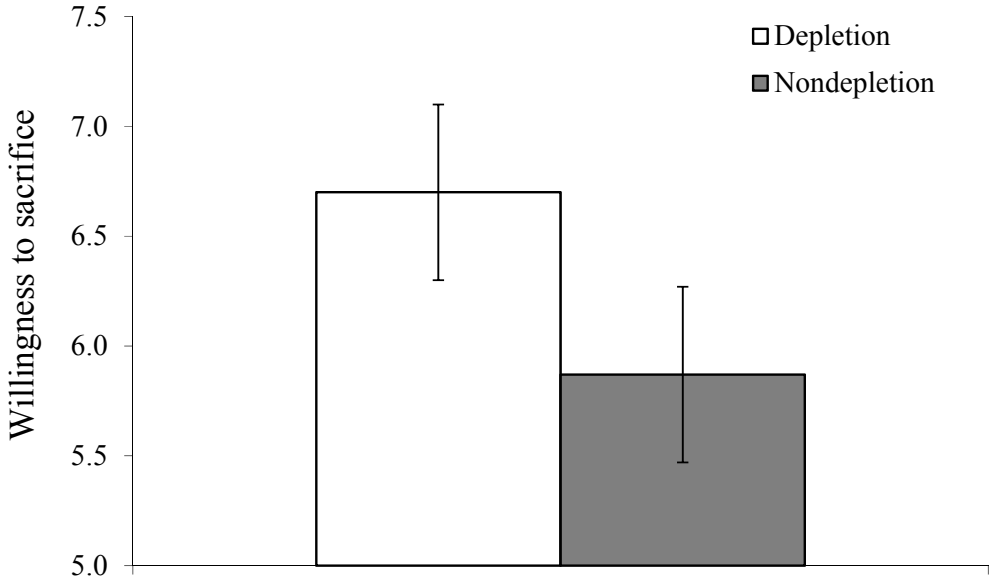

Figure 2. Standardized value of sacrifice as a function of participants' self-control and communal orientation, Study 4