When Holding Back Helps: Suppressing Negative Emotions During Sacrifice Feels Authentic and Is Beneficial for Highly Interdependent People

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Abstract
Is the suppression of negative emotions ever associated with beneficial outcomes in relationships? The study reported here drew on research and theory on emotion regulation, self-construal, and sacrifice to test the hypothesis that individual differences in interdependent self-construal moderate the association between negative-emotion suppression and the personal and interpersonal outcomes of sacrifice. In a 14-day daily-experience study of people in romantic relationships, people with higher levels of interdependence experienced boosts in personal well-being and relationship quality if they suppressed their negative emotions during sacrifice, whereas those who construed the self in less interdependent terms experienced lower well-being and relationship quality if they suppressed their negative emotions during sacrifice. Feelings of authenticity for the sacrifice mediated these associations. These findings identify a critical condition under which the suppression of negative emotions may be personally and interpersonally beneficial.

Sacrifice—or giving up one's own self-interests—is both necessary and inevitable in close relationships. Most research on sacrifice has focused on the benefits of this important act, showing that people who are more willing to sacrifice are more satisfied and committed to their relationships (for a review, see Impett & Gordon, 2008). Although sacrifice can be good for relationships, not all sacrifices are equal. Whereas some sacrifices inspire feelings of joy (Kogan et al., 2010), others leave lingering feelings of frustration or resentment that detract from relationship quality (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett et al., 2012). How people regulate these emotions may be crucial in determining when sacrifice is beneficial for individuals and their relationships and when it is costly.

One common strategy for regulating emotions is expressive suppression, or inhibiting the overt expression of emotions after they have been elicited (Gross, 1998). Suppression has many negative consequences (for

a review, see English, John, & Gross, 2013), including lower personal well-being (Gross & John, 2003; Kashdan & Steger, 2006; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008), decreased closeness with other people (Gross & John, 2003; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009), and lower responsiveness to an interaction partner's needs (Butler et al., 2003). Suppression has also been associated with decreased authenticity (Gross & John, 2003), defined as the extent to which people feel they behave in ways that are consistent with their internal feelings and sense of self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). Recent research has shown that, compared with people who are less likely to

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suppress their emotions, people who suppress their emotions habitually experience decreased authenticity, which contributes to experiencing lower-quality social relationships (English & John, 2013). Furthermore, the more people suppress their emotions when they sacrifice for a romantic partner, the less authentic they feel and, in turn, the poorer their personal well-being and romantic-relationship quality (Impett et al., 2012). Thus, almost all of the existing research on suppression has focused on identifying its personal and interpersonal costs.

In the study reported here, we sought to examine when the use of suppression might feel authentic and be beneficial. We suggest that people who construe the self as interdependent may actually experience personal and interpersonal benefits if they suppress their negative emotions during a sacrifice for a romantic partner. An interdependent self-construal, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony in valued social relationships, is the prevalent conception of the self in many Eastern cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). In contrast, people in many Western cultures are more likely to have an independent self-construal, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining autonomy and uniqueness from other people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Although cross-cultural research has typically focused on broad differences in self-construal between Eastern and Western cultures, variability in self-construal can occur within a culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), and interdependent and independent self-construals can coexist within the same individual (Singelis, 1994).

Some research suggests that highly interdependent people are buffered against experiencing the costs of suppression. Whereas some research has found no difference in the costs of suppression between people who are highly interdependent (e.g., Asian Americans) and those who are less interdependent (e.g., Caucasian Americans; English & John, 2013), other research suggests that highly interdependent people may not experience the negative consequences of suppression to the same degree as people who are low in interdependence. For instance, people high in interdependence report experiencing less depression when suppressing anger than do those who are low in interdependence (Cheung & Park, 2010). Further, compared with people who are low in interdependence (e.g., those who hold Western values), those who are high in interdependence (e.g., those who hold Asian values) experience decreased negative emotions and are seen as less hostile and withdrawn by others when they suppress their emotions (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). Thus, research suggests that at least in some situations, people who are high in interdependence do not experience the same costs of suppression as those who

are low in interdependence. Missing from this literature, however, is an examination of the particular contexts in which the use of suppression might actually be beneficial for highly interdependent people.

We theorized that in ongoing romantic relationships, the short-term, context-specific use of suppression during sacrifice can be beneficial for highly interdependent people because it is consistent with their valuation of relational harmony as more important than personal concerns. Emotion-regulation theorists have suggested that engaging in suppression for prosocial reasons, such as to avoid harming one's relationships, may be a key motivation for interdependent people (Butler et al., 2007). Given that sacrifice is an important indicator of commitment and investment in a relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997), it is a particularly relevant context in which to investigate the consequences of suppression.

We theorized that when people high in interdependence engage in the prorelationship behavior of sacrifice for an intimate partner, they may experience personal and interpersonal benefits if they suppress their negative emotions. Because expressing negative emotions can communicate that one feels troubled or inconvenienced, we suggest that suppressing these emotions during a sacrifice will allow highly interdependent people to feel that they have authentically chosen to prioritize their relationship over their own personal concerns. In other words, we expected that suppressing negative emotions in the specific context of sacrifice would enable highly interdependent people to experience a sense of congruence between their outward behavior of sacrificing for the good of the relationship and their internal desires to prioritize interpersonal harmony over their own concerns. In turn, we expected that feeling this authentication of an important aspect of the self would contribute to increased personal well-being and relationship quality for highly interdependent people. In contrast, we expected that when people low in interdependence suppressed their negative emotions when they made a sacrifice, they would feel inauthentic—out of touch with their internal feelings and sense of self while outwardly behaving in a way that might threaten their autonomy or self-interest—and thus experience the typical personal and relationship costs of suppression.

Method

We tested our hypotheses in a 14-day daily-experience study of people in dating relationships. Our sample included 73 undergraduates (47 women, 26 men) from a large Canadian university. Participants received course credit, were between 17 and 29 years old (*M* = 19.5, *SD* = 2.3), and were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds:

36% East, South, or Southeast Asian; 36% eastern or western European; 7% South American; 6% Middle Eastern; and 15% other (including multiple races).

Participants completed the study entirely online, beginning with a background survey with all person-level measures. For the next 14 days, they were prompted to complete daily diaries. Participants completed an average of 10.6 diaries (*SD* = 3.4), for a total of 771; 19% completed all 14 diaries, 70% completed 7 to 13, and 11% completed fewer than 6. All measures were completed on 7-point scales. For the diary, single-item measures were used when possible to increase efficiency and minimize participant attrition.

In the background survey, participants completed a measure of self-construal and several other measures used in control analyses. *Self-construal* was measured with 24 items assessing interdependent (α = .74) and independent (α = .76) self-construal (Singelis, 1994). *Habitual suppression* was measured with 4 items from the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003; α = .82). *Trait authenticity* was assessed with 5 items (adapted from Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005) that capture the tendency to behave in a manner consistent with one's internal feelings and sense of self (α = .75). *Relationship commitment* (α = .84) and *relationship satisfaction* (α = .90) were measured with 12 items from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Each daily diary began with the following question: "Today did you have the opportunity to do anything that you did not particularly want to do for your partner? Or did you have the opportunity to give up something that you did want to do for the sake of your partner?" (Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2012). Each time participants reported making a sacrifice, they were asked to complete measures of suppression and authenticity regarding the sacrifice and of their general personal and interpersonal well-being. *Expressive suppression* was measured with two items from the ERQ (Gross & John, 2003): "When I was feeling *positive emotions*, I made sure not to express them" and "When I was feeling *negative emotions*, I was careful not to express them." *Authenticity* was measured with a single item used in previous research: "I felt authentic (true to myself) while making this sacrifice" (Impett et al., 2012; Kogan et al., 2010). *Personal well-being* (α = .92) was a composite of several measures, including items for four positive and four negative emotions presented as synonym clusters (e.g., "happy/pleased/joyful" and "angry/irritable/frustrated"; Impett et al., 2012; Srivastava et al., 2009) and three items assessing satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). *Relationship quality* was measured with seven items (α = .93) that referred to both positive indicators (satisfaction, closeness, and love) and negative indicators

(conflict, disappointment with the partner, rejection by the partner, and being taken for granted by the partner).

Analysis

We analyzed the data using multilevel modeling (Hierarchical Linear and Nonlinear Modeling 6.08, Scientific Software International, Inc., Skokie, IL); in the models, diaries (Level 1) were nested within people (Level 2). We specified random errors for Level 1 intercepts and report results using robust standard errors. We conducted mediated moderation analyses as outlined by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005). To avoid confounding within- and between-person effects, we used techniques appropriate for a multilevel framework, partitioning all the Level 1 predictors (negative-emotion suppression, positive-emotion suppression, and authenticity) into their within- and between-person variance components, which were person-mean centered and aggregated, respectively; both components were then included as main effects and interactions in the models (Zhang, Zyphur, & Preacher, 2009).

Our hypotheses concerned the cross-level interaction between interdependence (Level 2) and negative-emotion suppression (Level 1), that is, the within-person effects of negative-emotion suppression for people of varying levels of interdependence. We also controlled for this interaction at the between-subjects level in all mediated moderation analyses. Other effects we controlled for were the main effects of negative-emotion suppression, positive-emotion suppression, independence, and interdependence, and the interactions between independence and negative-emotion suppression, independence and positive-emotion suppression, and interdependence and positive-emotion suppression. We controlled for independence because it can coexist with interdependence within a person (Singelis, 1994) and because suppression may be particularly harmful for independent people given that one core facet of independence is self-expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We controlled for positive-emotion suppression because positive emotions are personally and interpersonally beneficial (Fredrickson, 2001; Le, Impett, Kogan, Webster, & Cheng, 2012), and the suppression of these emotions can be detrimental to well-being (Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008). We tested simple slopes at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of interdependence.

Results

Our first hypothesis concerned a predicted interaction between interdependence and negative-emotion suppression during sacrifice. Interdependence and negative-emotion suppression during sacrifice interacted significantly to predict daily personal well-being (Fig. 1) and

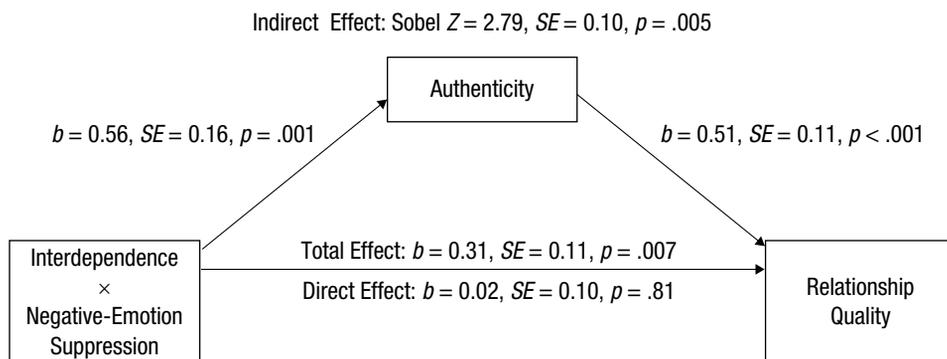Indirect Effect: Sobel $Z = 2.63$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .009$
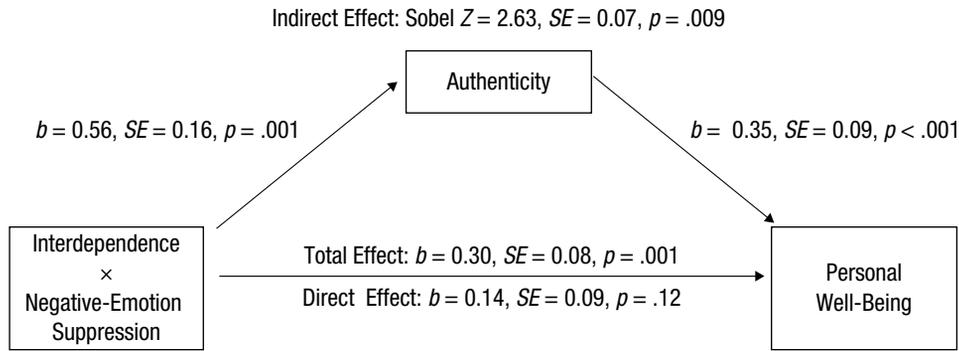
Fig. 1. Authenticity as a mediator of the interactive effect of interdependence and negative-emotion suppression during sacrifice on personal well-being. In this model, negative-emotion suppression and authenticity represent their person-mean centered components.

relationship quality (Fig. 2). Specifically, people low in interdependence experienced lower daily well-being, $b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .02$, and marginally lower relationship quality, $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .10$, when they suppressed their negative emotions, whereas people high in interdependence experienced higher daily well-being, $b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .002$, and relationship quality, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .002$.

Our second hypothesis was that authenticity would mediate the interactive effects of interdependence and negative-emotion suppression on personal well-being and relationship quality. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, interdependence and negative-emotion suppression interacted significantly to predict authenticity; people low in interdependence felt less authentic when they suppressed their negative emotions, $b = -0.42$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = .006$, and people high in interdependence felt more authentic, $b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .002$. Furthermore, greater authenticity predicted greater personal well-being, $b = 0.35$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, and relationship quality, $b = 0.51$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$. Most critically, authenticity

mediated the interactive effect of interdependence and negative-emotion suppression on both personal well-being, Sobel $Z = 2.63$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .009$, and relationship quality, Sobel $Z = 2.79$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .005$. Thus, the results are consistent with our prediction that people high in interdependence would experience greater personal well-being and relationship quality if they suppressed their negative emotions during sacrifice because they would feel more authentic, whereas people low in interdependence would experience lower personal well-being and relationship quality if they suppressed their negative emotions during sacrifice because they would feel less authentic.[1,2]

Finally, we examined several alternative explanations for our results. First, we sought to rule out the influence of individual differences in habitual suppression and trait authenticity (which covary with well-being; Impett et al., 2012; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and of race (which covaries with interdependence; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). After controlling for each of these variables (race coded: 1 = White, 0 = non-White), we found that all of the

Indirect Effect: Sobel $Z = 2.79$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .005$

Fig. 2. Authenticity as a mediator of the interactive effect of interdependence and negative-emotion suppression during sacrifice on relationship quality. In this model, negative-emotion suppression and authenticity represent their person-mean centered components.

reported results remained significant. Second, we assessed whether any of the effects we observed could be attributed to differences in frequency of sacrifice. Controlling for independence, we found that frequency of sacrifice was not associated with the degree to which people construed the self as interdependent. Last, we ruled out the possibility that people high in interdependence experienced fewer negative emotions during sacrifice and thus had fewer negative emotions to suppress. After controlling for independence, we found that interdependence did not predict negative emotions experienced during sacrifice. Thus, our results cannot be attributed to differences in habitual suppression, trait authenticity, race, frequency of sacrifice, or negative emotions felt during sacrifice.

Discussion

The findings reported here contribute to the literature on emotion regulation by identifying a rare instance in which suppression is associated with positive personal and interpersonal outcomes. Our findings are consistent with the notion that for highly interdependent people—those who prioritize maintaining social harmony over their own personal concerns—suppression is a way to regulate emotions that feels authentic and ultimately promotes personal well-being and relationship quality. That is, when people who construe the self as interdependent with others sacrifice for the good of their partner or relationship, they benefit from inhibiting the expression of emotions that might disrupt social harmony or burden a romantic partner. Thus, suppression can be beneficial when it serves a prosocial function for people who construe the self as interdependent.

A dyadic approach can provide several interesting directions for future research in this area. For example, do romantic partners of highly interdependent people experience similar benefits when their partners suppress their emotions during sacrifice? Such investigations would further test the idea that suppressing negative emotions can promote social harmony for some couples. We expect that when highly interdependent people withhold the negative emotions they feel when making a sacrifice, their partners may also feel more positive about the relationship. This possibility is consistent with previous research on interdependent people (e.g., those with Asian values) and independent people (e.g., those with European values) who engaged in suppression. The study found that when participants suppressed their emotions, more interdependent participants were seen as less hostile and withdrawn by an interaction partner than were less interdependent participants because they were more responsive despite engaging in suppression (Butler et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible that in ongoing romantic relationships and in the context of sacrifice, the suppression of negative emotions might be appreciated by the partners of highly interdependent people, who may recognize that their partners are attempting to conceal or at least dampen potentially harmful emotions for the good of the relationship.

In conclusion, although the costs of suppression have been widely documented (English et al., 2013) and the expression of negative emotions in close relationships can be important for signaling one's needs and eliciting social support (Clark & Finkel, 2005; Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008), our findings highlight that suppression is not always harmful and, in some situations, can even have important benefits. Whereas the overwhelming majority of research has focused on the habitual use of suppression and the use of suppression with a new acquaintance, we found that in ongoing close relationships and in the specific context of sacrifice, suppression can be beneficial when one's partner is in need and one values placing the relationship above one's own self-interest. We hope that the findings from this study will inspire researchers to examine the conditions under which suppression is a beneficial, rather than harmful, strategy to regulate unwanted negative emotions in interpersonal relationships.

Notes

1. Independence interacted with negative-emotion suppression to significantly predict personal well-being and authenticity, with greater negative-emotion suppression predicting lower well-being and authenticity for people high in independence.

Independence did not significantly interact with negative-emotion suppression to predict relationship quality.

2. Interdependence interacted with positive-emotion suppression to significantly predict personal well-being, with greater positive-emotion suppression predicting lower well-being for people high in interdependence. Positive-emotion suppression did not significantly interact with independence in predicting personal well-being, relationship quality, or authenticity, or with interdependence in predicting relationship quality or authenticity.

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