

How partner-satisfying decisions benefit relationships: An experience sampling study

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Abstract

Sometimes, individuals must choose between acting in a way that satisfies their own desire or acting in a way that satisfies their partner's desire. What are the consequences of choosing one over the other for individuals' well-being and relationship? Using experience sampling data (934 reports by 106 participants) that assessed daily decision conflicts in relationships, we examined consequences of partner-satisfying decisions. A higher proportion of partner-satisfying decisions predicted more perceived needs fulfillment and marginally higher perceived relationship quality over the course of a week. Additionally, immediately after the partner-satisfying decision, participants reported feeling closer to their partner, and reported more positive and less negative affect, even when controlling for the quality of the relationship.

KEYWORDS

goals, pro-relational behavior, relationship maintenance, self-sacrifice

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was preregistered. The aspects of the research that were preregistered were the hypotheses, the exclusions, and the data analysis plan. The registration was submitted to: OSF (<https://osf.io/xh3y7/>). The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained at OSF (<https://osf.io/xh2f5/>). The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained at OSF (<https://osf.io/xh2f5/>).

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, individuals must choose between acting in a way that satisfies their own desire and acting in a way that satisfies their partner's desire. For example, a person may disagree with their partner over which music to play on a road trip, someone may want to go to the gym while their partner wants to go on a nature hike together, or someone may be torn between sleeping in or fixing a breakfast for their partner. There may be several reasons why deciding in favor of the partner might be good for one's relationship. However, deciding to satisfy the partner rather than the self *proportionally* more often across a number of such decision conflicts might also have detriments. We examine consequences of partner-satisfying decisions in naturally occurring decision conflicts in an experience sampling study spanning 1 week in individuals' lives. We examine both the consequences for changes in the relationship over the course of the week as well as in-the-moment consequences for affect and feelings toward the partner.

2 | PARTNER-SATISFYING DECISIONS

There are several areas of research that can speak to potential consequences of making partner-satisfying decisions. The literature on general *prosocial* behavior suggests that acting in ways that promote another's best interests has a variety of benefits for the helper, including better psychological well-being (Rietschlin, 1998; Wheeler et al., 1998), feeling happier (Dunn et al., 2008), more positive mood later that day (Glomb, Bhawe, Miner, & Wall, 2011; Sonnentag & Grant, 2012), and has even be linked to a lower mortality rate in older adults (Brown et al., 2003).

The literature on *prorelational* behavior also suggests that such behaviors may affect feelings toward close others, specifically, the partner. For example, in one study on close relationships, the time spousal caregivers spent actively helping their spouse resulted in more positive affect (but also more negative affect) later that day (Poulin et al., 2010). In another study, participants who were instructed to act friendly and encouraging rather than neutral during an interaction with another participant reported liking their interaction partner marginally more (Lemay Jr. & Clark, 2008). However, there is also evidence that prorelational behavior is not always beneficial: In a sample of spousal caregivers, the amount of help provided across a range of caregiving tasks was not related to feeling closer to the partner (Williamson & Shaffer, 2001).

Prorelational behaviors that specifically pit self-satisfying and partner-satisfying actions against each other have been examined in the literature on *self-sacrificing* behavior. On a general level, self-reported willingness to sacrifice has been linked to general relationship satisfaction (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). For more immediate consequences, one study showed that the number of changes participants reported making to their own preferences in favor of their partner's preferences over the course of a day increased their relationship satisfaction that day (Ruppel & Curran, 2012). Similarly, individuals who were more intrinsically motivated to respond to their partner's needs (i.e., communally oriented) reported more positive affect and more relationship satisfaction on days they made a sacrifice than on days they did not make a sacrifice (Kogan et al., 2010), and greater approach-motivation for sacrifices was linked to more positive affect and greater relationship satisfaction that same day and also over 2 weeks (Impett et al., 2005). In sum, there is plenty of evidence that acting in the partner's rather than one's own interest can be beneficial for the relationship.

However, there is also some evidence of null or negative effects of acting in the partner's rather than one's own interest: When relationship partners sacrifice in the “wrong” way, relationships have been shown to suffer: sacrificing to avoid a negative outcome (i.e., avoidance-motivation) was detrimental to relationships (Impett et al., 2005), and perceiving sacrifice as harmful to one's sense of self was associated with poorer relationship functioning (Whitton et al., 2007). Another study found that the frequency of self-sacrifices during a given day did not affect satisfaction with the relationship that day (Totenhagen et al., 2013), although it did increase commitment to the relationship.

One reason for these mixed results might be that past studies focused on the frequency of sacrifice. Raw counts of partner-satisfying decisions do not factor in the fact that there are likely negative effects of simply experiencing a decision conflict that requires sacrifice. Perceiving close others as hindering personal goals has been linked to reduced closeness to these close others (Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010), and partners who serve fewer (rather than more) goals are evaluated as less interpersonally close (Orehek, Forest, & Wingrove, 2018). Indeed, on days when people encounter a divergence of interests with one's partner, as compared with days when they do not, they experienced higher negative mood and stress and, consequently, lower relationship satisfaction (Righetti et al., 2016). An important facet of studying the effects of making partner-satisfying (vs. self-satisfying) decisions may thus be to examine the *proportion* of partner-satisfying decisions relative to how many decision conflicts the person faced.

3 | PROPORTION OF PARTNER-SATISFYING DECISIONS

Past studies of adult participants recorded multiple prorelational acts per day (e.g., 1–2 promise enactments, Peetz & Kammrath, 2011; 4–5 sacrifices, Totenhagen et al., 2013; Ruppel & Curran, 2012). However, the frequency of these partner-satisfying decisions does not speak to the relative frequency of partner-satisfying decisions to self-satisfying decisions. Four partner-satisfying decisions out of four decision conflicts (i.e., 100% partner-satisfying decisions) might mean something different than four partner-satisfying decisions out of 12 decision conflicts (i.e., 30% partner-satisfying decisions). In the present study we employ experience sampling techniques to get a sense of participants' *proportion* of partner-satisfying decisions relative to total decisions during a typical week. Although the existing evidence on consequences of prorelational behavior is mixed, making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions may be most similar to self-reported general tendencies to sacrifice in early work (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). These general tendencies have been shown to be correlated with relationship satisfaction. Examining the proportion of partner-satisfying decisions also controls for the potential negative effect of experiencing relatively more decision conflicts, which may have suppressed the positive link of sacrifice and satisfaction in past work (Totenhagen et al., 2013). We thus expect a higher proportion of partner-satisfying decisions over the course of 1 week to be linked to more relationship satisfaction at the end of the week. However, we also acknowledge that an extreme proportion of partner-satisfying decisions might have detrimental effects: Consistently prioritizing the partner's wishes over one's own likely has costs in the long term (McNulty, 2011) and might tip into resentment after some point, reducing relationship satisfaction.

In addition to analyzing the association between proportion of partner-satisfying decisions made over a week and the relationship satisfaction felt by partners over that week, we also

examined closeness toward the partner immediately after each experience sampling decision report. The proportion of partner-satisfying responses might not only affect changes in satisfaction over time but also affect responses in the moment. A person who tends to sacrifice infrequently might feel particularly positive after they choose the partner over themselves, because this act is out of the ordinary. To our knowledge this is the first study examining immediate responses to individual decisions to satisfy the partner rather than the self. Previous research has focused on assessing the aggregated prorelational acts at the end of the day (Impett et al., 2005; Ruppel & Curran, 2012; Totenhagen et al., 2013) or assessing the general tendency to self-sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Thus, another novel contribution of this study is the assessment of the link between partner-satisfying decisions and more immediate (i.e., within an hour of the partner-satisfying decision) feelings toward the partner, as well as immediate affect.

4 | THE PRESENT STUDY

We examine data from an experience sampling (ESM) study that assessed instances where individuals had to decide between acting in the partner's interest or in their own interest, along with a measure of whether participants decided to act on the partner-satisfying or the self-satisfying impulse. First, we examined the consequences of making *proportionally* more partner-satisfying decisions during 1 week on relationship outcomes at the end of that week (accounting for initial differences in these variables). We predicted that deciding more often in favor of the partner when partner and self impulses are in conflict will be associated with increased relationship quality and satisfaction (linear effect), but beyond a certain point (where imbalance is perceived), it will decrease relationship quality/satisfaction (quadratic effect). We further predicted that a higher proportion of partner-satisfying decisions will be associated with decreased life satisfaction. Second, we examined *immediate* reactions to making a single partner-satisfying decision for feeling close to the partner and for general affect. We preregistered the hypotheses and the data analysis plan (<https://osf.io/x83y7/>). The unabridged materials and the data and syntax used for the analyses that are presented here are available (<https://osf.io/xh2f5/>). The study was approved by a university ethics board.

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited via craigslist and kijiji (U.S. and Canadian sites only). Participants were eligible if they could speak English fluently, were in an exclusive romantic relationship, and owned a smart phone. Participants completed an online intake survey, and an ESM protocol for 7 days (via *SurveySignal*; Hofmann & Patel, 2015). The study was conducted in 2012. Participants were compensated with \$15 for the intake, and \$1 for each ESM signal they responded to.

A total of 121 participants were deemed eligible and completed the intake survey. We recruited as many participants as our grant funding would allow. Analyses are based on those 106 participants with usable data (who completed at least one ESM report). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62 ($M = 29.36$ years, $SD = 9.04$), 64% were female, and 81% of the sample was

white (10% Asian, 6% Hispanic, 4% Black). Relationship length varied from 6 months to 38 years ($M = 7$ years, $SD = 6.7$ years), 49% of the sample were married, 50% were cohabitating. Most relationships were heterosexual (86%), and about one-third (34%) had children. Partners in the same relationship could both participate in the study and 55% ($n = 59$) of the sample were in relationships with each other (this variable was controlled for in analyses; see below). Of note, the experience sampling aspect of the study varied the times of the day participants received completion prompts and varied whether participants were prompted to report about relationship-relevant decision conflicts or other decision conflicts. Thus, it is extremely unlikely that participants who were in a relationship with another participant happened to be contacted at the same time and reported on the same decision conflict.

5.2 | Procedure

5.2.1 | Intake survey

In the intake session, participants completed a demographic survey and several other scales, including a measure of the big five personality traits (Big Five Aspects Scale, Goldberg, 1999; see online supplements for a full copy of the survey). This personality measure includes a nine-item subscale measuring agreeableness (e.g., “I am someone who...likes to cooperate with others”; $\alpha = .72$), a trait that is potentially relevant to partner-oriented decisions. They completed a life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985, $\alpha = .85$), which includes five items assessing general satisfaction (e.g., “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal”) on scales from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). Next, participants completed assessments about their relationship. They completed a 6-item measure of perceived relationship quality (Fletcher et al., 2000; $\alpha = .48^1$) assessing satisfaction (e.g., “How much do you love your partner?”), commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love on scales ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Extremely* (7). They also completed the investment model scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). We considered in particular the satisfaction component of the investment model.² On five items ($\alpha = .77$), participants rated the extent to which the relationship fulfills their needs (e.g., “My partner fulfills my needs for intimacy”) on scales from *Do not Agree at all* (1) to *Agree Completely* (4). Then, on five items ($\alpha = .94$), participants rates their satisfaction with the relationship (e.g., “I feel satisfied with our relationship”) on scales ranging from *Do not Agree at all* (1) to *Agree Completely* (9). The three measures of relationship appraisals correlated positively (Table 1). At the end of the intake survey, participants then received training in identifying interpersonal decision conflicts that pitted a partner-satisfying goal against a self-satisfying goal (as compared to personal decision conflicts that pitted two self-satisfying goals against each other). We defined the interpersonal decision conflict as “one in which you have a ‘me’ impulse, which is the desire to satisfy yourself, and a ‘significant other’ impulse, which is the desire to satisfy your significant other.” Participants were shown several examples, including “I want to go out on a dinner date but my partner prefers to eat a home-cooked meal.”

5.2.2 | Experience sampling

Each participant received a total of 49 ESM signals prompting them to complete a decision conflict report. Signals were sent at irregular intervals seven times a day between the hours of

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for dependent variables used in between-person analyses

	<i>M</i> [95%CI]	Correlations									
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Number of reported partner-satisfying decisions across the week	7.39 [6.63;8.15]	1	.27*	-.02	.12	.12	.22	.06	.18	.11	.14
2. Number of reported self-satisfying decisions across the week	4.48 [3.80;5.16]	1	-.04	-.09	.03	-.07	-.03	-.07	-.07	.19	.14
3. Perceived relationship quality (intake)	5.81 [5.69;5.93]	1	.78*	.72*	.55*	.78*	.78*	.54*	.27*	.36*	.36*
4. Perceived relationship quality (exit)	5.64 [5.50;5.78]	1	.71*	.65*	.77*	.77*	.85*	.71*	.25*	.48*	.48*
5. Needs fulfillment (intake)	3.47 [3.35;3.49]	1	.77*	.85*	.71*	.21	.40*	.46*	.46*	.46*	.46*
6. Needs fulfillment (exit)	3.43 [3.29;3.58]	1	.73*	.80*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*
7. Relationship satisfaction (intake)	7.77 [7.42;8.10]	1	.79*	.22	.41*	.41*	.41*	.41*	.41*	.41*	.41*
8. Relationship satisfaction (exit)	7.50 [7.08;7.90]	1	.73*	.80*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*
9. Life satisfaction (intake)	3.78 [3.59;3.97]	1	.73*	.80*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*
10. Life satisfaction (exit)	3.71 [3.50;3.92]	1	.73*	.80*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*	.24*

Note: Perceived relationship quality on 7-point scales; Needs fulfillment on 4-point scales; relationship satisfaction on 9-point scales; life satisfaction on 5-point scales. * $p < .05$.

9 a.m. and 11 p.m. for each participant (i.e., partners did not receive signals at the same time). Participants had until the next signal to complete each report. Participants responded to the signals in 4,237 cases (71% response rate).

At each signal, participants reported on a recent decision conflict situation they had experienced in the last hour that was either interpersonal (a conflict between a self-satisfying and a partner-satisfying decision) or personal (a conflict between two self-satisfying decisions) or indicated that they had not experienced a conflict. The set up of the survey did not allow for reporting two partner-satisfying impulses. In 1,275 cases, participants reported experiencing no decision conflict in the past hour (and did not complete any other questions), in 1,905 cases, participants reported a personal decision conflict between two self-satisfying impulses in the last hour, and in 1,059 cases, participants reported an interpersonal decision conflict between a self-satisfying and a partner-satisfying impulse. Participants described each of the two goal impulses very briefly. For example, participants reported decision conflicts such as “do the dishes” (partner-satisfying) versus “leave them for her”(self-satisfying), “come home and help with dinner” (partner-satisfying) versus “go out with friends for a beer” (self-satisfying).³ They reported whether or not they acted on the partner-satisfying impulse or the self-satisfying impulse at the time of the decision. Across all interpersonal decision conflict reports, participants reported acting on one of the two impulses in 934 cases (in 27 cases they reported acting on neither and in 98 cases they reported acting on both).

After reporting the two competing impulses and their decision, participants were asked about how close they felt toward their partner right now and how insecure they felt about their relationship right now on scales ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very* (6). Participants also rated their affect right now (positive emotions: *happy, proud*; negative emotions: *guilty, ashamed, frustrated, anxious*) on scales ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very* (6).

5.2.3 | Exit survey

The day after the experience sampling protocol had ended, participants completed an exit survey where they completed the same scales as in the intake survey again. Specifically, participants completed the life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985, $\alpha = .86$), the perceived relationship quality (Fletcher et al., 2000; $\alpha = .49$), fulfillment of needs (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .83$) and satisfaction (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .97$). These scales were highly correlated with the corresponding scales assessed in the intake survey (Table 1).

6 | RESULTS

6.1 | Effects of partner-satisfying decisions over the course of a week

We first examined the effect of making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions over the course of 1 week on relationship outcomes and life satisfaction. For these analyses, we first computed the proportion of decisions in decision conflicts that were made in favor of the partner (i.e., proportion of partner-satisfying decisions) versus in favor of the self. We considered only those participants who returned a sufficient number of reports to allow for a meaningful proportion analysis. In line with our preregistered cut-off criteria, we excluded participants with fewer than five interpersonal conflict reports. The final sample included 71 participants with

5–25 decision conflict reports ($M_{\text{number of reports}} = 11.87$, $SD = 4.94$). Across participants in our sample, 62% of decisions were partner-satisfying (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics), and the proportion score was normally distributed and covered almost the full range from 0.2 (20%) to 1 (100%).

6.1.1 | Preregistered analyses: Link between proportion of partner-satisfying decisions and change in relationship ratings

We entered the proportion score as the predictor variable in a series of linear mixed models predicting perceived relationship quality and relationship satisfaction reported in the exit survey, while controlling for perceived relationship quality and relationship satisfaction reported at intake, respectively. We accounted for the nonindependence of participants (some of whom were in a relationship with each other) by including a random intercept for couple. In a second step of each model, we also entered the squared term of the proportion score to test for curvilinear effects. Coefficients from these models are shown in Table 2. The linear effect of partner-satisfying decisions was marginally significant for change in perceived relationship quality (Model 1), significant for change in the need fulfillment (Model 3), not significant for relationship satisfaction (Model 5); the curvilinear effects were nonsignificant (Models 2, 4, and 6). The higher the proportion of partner-satisfying decisions during the week of the study, the more participants felt their needs were satisfied in their relationship over the course of the week.

6.1.2 | Preregistered analyses: Link between proportion of partner-satisfying decisions and change in life satisfaction

We next examined the proportion score as the predictor of life satisfaction, regressing life satisfaction reported in the exit survey on the proportion of partner-satisfying decisions, while controlling for life satisfaction reported at intake. Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions showed no linear and a marginally significant curvilinear effect, such that those participants who reported particularly low or particularly high proportion of partner-satisfying behaviors were the most satisfied (Model 7a and 8a in Table 2). Since changes in life satisfaction may be driven by changes in relationship quality, we also conducted the same analysis while controlling for relationship quality at exit, as preregistered. Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions had no linear or curvilinear effects on changes in life satisfaction in these models (Model 7b and 8b in Table 2), suggesting that some of the change in life satisfaction may be driven by a change in relationship satisfaction.

6.1.3 | Exploratory analyses: Number of decisions controlling for total decisions

In additional analyses, we also examined the effect of the number of partner-satisfying decisions while controlling for the number of decision conflicts reported on by each participant. This analysis is an alternative way to examine the *relative* frequency of partner-satisfying decisions without relying on a proportion score. Coefficients from these models are shown in Table 3. The linear effect of partner-satisfying decisions was marginally significant for change in

TABLE 2 Regression coefficients for linear mixed models regressing four outcome variables on proportion of partner-satisfying decisions

		<i>B, 95%CI, p</i>
Dependent Variable: Perceived relationship quality (exit)		
Model 1	Perceived relationship quality (intake)	0.93 [0.75;1.11], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.45 [−0.07;0.98], <i>p</i> = .090
Model 2	Perceived relationship quality (intake)	0.92 [0.74;1.11], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.56 [−3.98;2.85], <i>p</i> = .743
	Squared proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.79 [−1.80;3.38], <i>p</i> = .545
Dependent Variable: Needs fulfillment (exit)		
Model 3	Needs fulfillment (intake)	0.80 [0.65;0.96], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.64 [0.12;1.16], <i>p</i> = .016
Model 4	Needs fulfillment (intake)	0.80 [0.65;0.96], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.48 [−2.91;3.86], <i>p</i> = .779
	Squared proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.12 [−2.45;2.70], <i>p</i> = .924
Dependent Variable: Relationship satisfaction (exit)		
Model 5	Relationship satisfaction (intake)	0.92 [0.74;1.10], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	1.21 [−0.31;2.73], <i>p</i> = .118
Model 6	Relationship satisfaction (intake)	0.91 [0.72;1.09], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−2.41 [−12.49;7.67], <i>p</i> = .634
	Squared proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	2.79 [−4.90;10.48], <i>p</i> = .471
Dependent Variable: Life satisfaction (exit)		
Model 7a	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.75 [0.58;0.93], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.20 [−1.06;0.66], <i>p</i> = .646
Model 8a	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.78 [0.60;0.95], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−5.11 [−10.5;.27], <i>p</i> = .062
	Squared proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	3.89 [−0.20;7.99], <i>p</i> = .062
Model 7b	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.70 [0.53;0.87], <i>p</i> < .001
	Perceived relationship quality (exit)	0.46 [0.23;0.69], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.25 [−1.04;0.54], <i>p</i> = .530
Model 8b	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.71 [0.54;0.88], <i>p</i> < .001
	Perceived relationship quality (exit)	0.43 [0.20;0.66], <i>p</i> < .001
	Proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−3.89 [−8.95;1.17], <i>p</i> = .129
	Squared proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	2.83 [−1.04;6.70], <i>p</i> = .148

perceived relationship quality (Model 1) and significant for change in needs fulfillment (Model 3) and relationship satisfaction (Model 5); the curvilinear effects were nonsignificant (Models 2, 4, and 6). The higher the number of partner-satisfying decisions during the week of the study, the more participants felt the relationship fulfilled their needs and the more overall relationship satisfaction participants reported at the end of the study, controlling for total number of decision conflicts. The linear effect of partner-satisfying decisions was not significant for change in

TABLE 3 Regression coefficients for linear mixed models regressing four outcome variables on number of partner-satisfying decisions, controlling number of decision conflicts

		<i>B, 95%CI, p</i>
Dependent Variable: Perceived relationship quality (exit)		
Model 1	Perceived relationship quality (intake)	0.93 [0.75;1.11], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.01 [-0.05;0.02], <i>p</i> = .371
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.04 [-0.01;0.09], <i>p</i> = .098
Model 2	Perceived relationship quality (intake)	0.94 [0.75;1.12], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.01 [-0.05;0.02], <i>p</i> = .371
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.07 [-0.05;0.19], <i>p</i> = .249
	Squared number of partner-satisfying decisions	-0.001 [-.01;.004], <i>p</i> = .577
Dependent Variable: Needs fulfillment (exit)		
Model 3	Needs fulfillment (intake)	0.79 [0.63;0.95], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.03 [-0.06;0.01], <i>p</i> = .110
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.06 [0.01;0.10], <i>p</i> = .024
Model 4	Needs fulfillment (intake)	0.79 [0.63;0.95], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.03 [-0.06;0.01], <i>p</i> = .101
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.09 [-0.03;0.22], <i>p</i> = .147
	Squared number of partner-satisfying decisions	-0.002 [0.01;0.01], <i>p</i> = .525
Dependent Variable: Relationship satisfaction (exit)		
Model 5	Relationship satisfaction (intake)	0.91 [0.73;1.08], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.06 [-0.15;0.04], <i>p</i> = .227
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.14 [0.003;0.28], <i>p</i> = .046
Model 6	Relationship satisfaction (intake)	0.90 [0.72;1.08], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	-0.05 [-0.14;0.04], <i>p</i> = .253
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	0.03 [-0.33;0.39], <i>p</i> = .879
	Squared number of partner-satisfying decisions	0.01[-0.01;0.03], <i>p</i> = .505
Dependent Variable: Life satisfaction (exit)		
Model 7a	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.76 [0.58;0.93], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	0.01 [-0.05;0.06], <i>p</i> = .828
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	-0.01 [-0.07;0.08], <i>p</i> = .880
Model 8a	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.76 [0.58;0.93], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	0.01 [-0.04;0.06], <i>p</i> = .398
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	-0.16 [-0.36;0.03], <i>p</i> = .094
	Squared number of partner-satisfying decisions	0.01 [-0.001;0.02], <i>p</i> = .063
Model 7b	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.69 [0.52;0.86], <i>p</i> < .001
	Perceived relationship quality (exit)	0.45 [0.22;0.69], <i>p</i> < .001
	Total reported decision conflicts	0.01 [-0.03;0.06], <i>p</i> = .548
	Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	-0.01 [-0.08;0.06], <i>p</i> = .756
Model 8b	Life satisfaction (intake)	0.69 [0.52;0.86], <i>p</i> < .001

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	<i>B</i> , 95%CI, <i>p</i>
Perceived relationship quality (exit)	0.43 [0.20;0.66], <i>p</i> = .001
Total reported decision conflicts	0.02 [−0.03;0.07], <i>p</i> = .424
Total reported partner-satisfying decisions	−0.15 [−0.34;0.03], <i>p</i> = .093
Squared number of partner-satisfying decisions	0.01[−0.001;0.02], <i>p</i> = .093

life satisfaction (Models 7a and 7b), but the curvilinear effect was marginally significant (Models 8a and 8b). In sum, these alternative analyses examining *number* of partner-satisfying decisions controlling for total number of conflict decisions were in the same direction and significance level as the results for the proportion score. The total number of decision conflicts was not a significant predictor of changes in needs fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, perceived relationship quality, or life satisfaction.

6.1.4 | Exploratory analyses: Possible moderators

The effect of making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions on change in relationship outcomes might be moderated by aspects of the person making the decision, or the relationship. For instance, making partner-oriented decisions might affect relationship appraisals differently depending on one's age, relationship length, and trait-level agreeableness. We entered the proportion score, each of the three moderators (in separate models, to examine each in turn), and their interaction term as the predictor variables in a series of linear mixed models predicting perceived relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, and life satisfaction reported in the exit survey, while controlling for these constructs reported at intake, respectively. Results for each of the interaction terms is presented in Table 4. Of the 12 moderation terms tested, only one was significant: Age moderated the link between proportion score and life satisfaction (interaction term: $b = -0.16$ 95%CI[−0.29; −0.02]). Examining simple slopes for this effect revealed that for younger participants (−1SD on age – approximately 20 years old), the proportion of sacrifices did not relate to life satisfaction (although the coefficient was positive, it was nonsignificant, $b = 1.06$ 95%CI[−0.28;2.39]); for older participants (+1SD in age, approximately 38 years old) on the other hand, this was negative, such that a larger proportion of sacrifices was related to reduced life satisfaction, $b = -1.76$ 95%CI[−3.43;−0.09]). In sum, there was no evidence that making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions has different effects for more agreeable individuals, or those in longer relationships, but there was some evidence that making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions had more negative effects on life satisfaction in older individuals.

6.2 | Effects of partner-satisfying decisions in the moment

Next, we examined effects of partner-satisfying decisions in the moment. For these within-participant analyses, we considered all interpersonal decision conflict reports where participants reported making a decision one way or another ($N = 934$ reports by 106 participants).

TABLE 4 Regression coefficients for the interaction terms of the moderator analyses for each of four outcomes at the exit survey, controlling for that variable at intake

	<i>B, 95%CI, p</i>
Dependent Variable: Perceived relationship quality (exit)	
Relationship length × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.01 [−0.003;0.01], <i>p</i> = .210
Agreeableness × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.12 [−0.70;0.94], <i>p</i> = .767
Age × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.03 [−0.05;0.12], <i>p</i> = .449
Dependent Variable: Relationship satisfaction (exit)	
Relationship length × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.02 [−0.01;0.04], <i>p</i> = .112
Agreeableness × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.09 [−2.31;2.14], <i>p</i> = .938
Age × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.15 [−0.10;0.40], <i>p</i> = .235
Dependent Variable: Needs fulfillment (exit)	
Relationship length × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.002 [−0.01;0.01], <i>p</i> = .634
Agreeableness × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.49 [−0.32;1.30], <i>p</i> = .233
Age × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.04 [−0.04;0.12], <i>p</i> = .374
Dependent Variable: Life satisfaction (exit)	
Relationship length × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.002 [−0.02;0.01], <i>p</i> = .776
Agreeableness × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	0.83 [−0.48;2.14], <i>p</i> = .209
Age × proportion of partner-satisfying decisions	−0.16 [−0.29;−0.02], <i>p</i> = .025

TABLE 5 Descriptive statistics for dependent variables used in within-person analyses

	M [95%CI]	Within-person variance (%)	Correlations			
			1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Closeness	4.47 [4.22;4.72]	53	1	−.42*	.48*	−.40*
2. Insecurity	0.83 [0.59;1.07]	49		1	−.19*	.49*
3. Positive affect	3.61 [3.41;3.81]	58			1	−.29*
4. Negative affect	1.28 [1.07;1.48]	54				1

Note: Possible values ranged from 0 to 6.

6.2.1 | Preregistered analysis: Decision effects on closeness and affect in the moment

Given that decision conflicts were nested within person and persons were nested within relationship, we conducted three-level multilevel analyses using the MIXED command in SPSS with closeness, insecurity, positive affect, and negative affect as separate dependent variables, and the decision (1 = *partner-satisfying*; 0 = *self-satisfying*) as the predictor.⁴ We also controlled for perceived relationship quality at intake in all analyses. This covariate was preregistered. However, effects are unchanged if the analyses do not include this variable. Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for the dependent variables. Analyses showed that after deciding to act on the partner-satisfying impulse, participants reported feeling closer to the partner ($b = 0.44$ 95% CI[0.29;0.60], $t(866.96) = 5.64$, $p < .001$) but only marginally less insecure ($b = -0.12$ 95% CI

$[-0.25;0.01]$, $t(868.25) = -1.85$, $p = .065$) than after deciding to act on the self-satisfying impulse. Additional analyses with general affect as outcome variable showed that after deciding to act on the partner-satisfying impulse, participants also experienced greater positive affect ($b = 0.28$ 95%CI[0.13;0.43], $t(859.01) = 3.73$, $p < .001$), and lower negative affect ($b = -0.37$ 95%CI[-0.50;0.24], $t(860.51) = -5.70$, $p < .001$) than after deciding to act on the self-satisfying impulse.

6.2.2 | Exploratory analysis: Proportion score as moderator

It may be that the effect of making partner-satisfying decisions depends on one's usual tendency to make partner-satisfying over self-satisfying decisions. A person who tends to sacrifice infrequently might feel particularly positive after they choose the partner over themselves, because this act is out of the ordinary. We conducted three-level multilevel analyses using the MIXED command in SPSS with closeness, insecurity, positive affect, and negative affect as separate dependent variables, and the decision (1 = *partner-satisfying*; 0 = *self-satisfying*), the proportion of partner-satisfying decisions over the course of the week, and their interaction term as the predictors. We also controlled for perceived relationship quality at intake in all analyses. The interaction term was marginally significant for feelings of closeness ($b = 0.01$ 95%CI [-0.001;0.02], $t(825.87) = 1.93$, $p = .054$) and negative affect, ($b = -0.01$ 95%CI[-0.02;0.0003], $t(824.48) = -1.90$, $p = .058$), but not for feelings of insecurity ($b = -0.01$ 95%CI[-0.02;0.005], $t(812.10) = -1.03$, $p = .302$), and positive affect $b = 0.003$ 95%CI[-0.01;0.01], $t(818.11) = 0.43$, $p = .665$). To deconstruct the marginal interaction terms, we conducted simple effects tests of the mean difference between partner-satisfying and self-satisfying decisions by proportion score (Table 6). Participants who had generally low proportion scores felt significantly closer to their partner, felt more positive affect and less negative affect after making partner-satisfying decisions. Participants who had generally high proportion scores did not report significantly different outcomes after making a partner-satisfying rather than a self-satisfying decision.

6.2.3 | Exploratory analysis: controlling for previous reports

Feelings toward the partner and general affect might increase pro-relationship behaviors (transformation of motivation; Rusbult et al., 1991). Thus, it is possible that participants who felt close to their partner or who felt positive affect in the moment made more partner-satisfying

TABLE 6 Mean difference in outcome variable after reporting making a partner-satisfying decision (vs. a self-satisfying decision) for those with generally low proportions of partner-satisfying decisions ($-1SD$) and those with generally high proportions of partner-satisfying decisions ($+1SD$)

	Low proportion ($-1SD$)	High proportion ($+1SD$)
Closeness to partner	0.57 [0.36;0.78], $p < .001$	0.18 [-0.13;0.48], $p = .250$
Insecurity about relationship	-0.17 [-0.36;0.01], $p = .064$	0.08 [-0.26;0.27], $p = .953$
Positive affect	0.30 [0.10;0.50], $p = .004$	0.22 [-0.08;0.51], $p = .151$
Negative affect	-0.45 [-0.62;-0.27], $p < .001$	-0.13 [-0.38;0.13], $p = .320$

Note: Coefficients presented are M_{Diff} 95%CI.

decisions (i.e., a reverse causal pathway). To investigate this possibility we also conducted exploratory analyses in which we controlled for closeness, insecurity, positive affect, and negative affect at the previous conflict report to examine whether events occurring between assessments (i.e., the partner-satisfying decisions) predict changes from one assessment to the next. To avoid equating previous assessments that occurred several days ago with those that occurred only a couple of hours ago, we only considered reports where a previous report (of any kind, interpersonal conflicts, personal conflicts, no conflicts) from the same day was available ($n = 728$) for these exploratory analyses.

We conducted three-level multilevel analyses using the MIXED command in SPSS with closeness, insecurity, positive affect, and negative affect as separate dependent variables, and the decision (1 = *partner-satisfying*; 0 = *self-satisfying*) as the predictor, controlling each of the dependent variables from the previous report as well as perceived relationship quality at intake. Feelings reported at the previous report significantly predicted feelings reported at the next report (closeness: $b = 0.48$ 95%CI[0.42;0.54], $t(424.75) = 14.96$, $p < .001$, insecurity: $b = 0.45$ 95%CI[0.38;0.52], $t(614.60) = 13.46$, $p < .001$, positive affect: $b = 0.30$ 95%CI[0.23;0.37], $t(624.24) = 8.64$, $p < .001$, and negative affect: $b = 0.33$ 95%CI[0.26;0.40], $t(645.39) = 9.56$, $p < .001$). However, even after controlling for previous reported closeness, participants reported feeling significantly closer to the partner after deciding to act on the partner-satisfying impulse, ($b = 0.46$ 95%CI[0.28;0.65], $t(673.68) = 4.99$, $p < .001$), feeling significantly more positive affect ($b = 0.21$ 95%CI[0.03;0.38], $t(667.78) = 2.36$, $p = .019$), feeling significantly less insecurity ($b = -0.17$ 95%CI[-0.33;-0.01], $t(686.04) = -2.04$, $p = .042$) and less negative affect ($b = -0.26$ 95%CI[-0.41;-0.10], $t(667.17) = -3.28$, $p = .001$) than after deciding to act on the self-satisfying impulse.

7 | DISCUSSION

In close relationships, people might sometimes be faced with a decision of whether to act in the partner's or in their own interest. This research proportionally quantifies the likelihood of acting in a partner's interest rather than one's own over the course of a week, rather than focusing on the total number of partner-satisfying decisions over the course of the week. Both types of measures are important to fully understand the consequences of making partner-satisfying decisions when faced with conflicting goals. A high *frequency* of partner-satisfying decisions can speak to the overall prosocial effort or amount of sacrifice made during a given time period relationships. A high *proportion* of partner-satisfying decisions can speak to the relative willingness to step back for the partner. This study examined the latter.

The higher the proportion of partner-satisfying decisions over the week, the more participants felt their needs were fulfilled in their relationship at the end of the week (and reported marginally higher relationship quality). This effect did not extend to their general life satisfaction, however. Contrary to our expectations, we did not detect a detrimental effect for very high proportions of partner-satisfying decisions for relationship satisfaction. However, this may be due to the relatively short time frame: one week's worth of decision conflicts might not yet capture extreme ends of overprioritizing the partner's goals. A more extended time frame might yet show a downturn for extremely high proportions of partner-satisfying decisions. Notably, we did detect a detrimental effect of high proportions of partner-satisfying decisions during the week on changes in life satisfaction for only the older individuals in the sample.

In the second part of this paper, we examine immediate in-the-moment effects of individual partner-satisfying decisions (i.e., within an hour of the actual decision rather than at the end of the day). Immediately after the partner-satisfying decision, participants tended to report feeling closer to their partner and felt more positive affect and less negative affect than after self-satisfying decisions.⁵ Arguably these differences were driven by the partner-satisfying decision participants made—although our data cannot fully rule out that this change simply reflects a tendency to make partner-satisfying decisions when feeling temporarily closer to the partner and when feeling more positive affect. Notably, the effects of partner-satisfying decisions remained significant when controlling for the previous assessment's outcome variables (i.e., the report just before on the same day), which increases our confidence that it was the decision affecting feelings rather than vice versa. However, we caution that these results cannot speak to *change* in the in-the-moment analyses, as participants only reported on decisions in the hour prior to the ESM assessment, but assessments were more than an hour apart.

Both the results for proportion of partner-satisfying decisions over the course of a week and those examining immediate responses following individual decisions are in line with some of the existing work on the benefits of self-sacrificing in relationships (Ruppel & Curran, 2012; Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999) and with classic theories about interdependence among romantic relationship partners (Kelley & Thibault, 1978; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1991). The decision to put a partner's interest ahead of one's own might reflect a successful transformation of motivation (the shift away from self-interest to a broader goal for partner or relationship-interests), with the positive relationship consequences associated with this transformation (Rusbult et al., 1991).

7.1 | Limitations

7.1.1 | Motivated responding

This study relied on self-report and therefore may be biased by motivated biases in memory and reporting. Such self-serving biases may be evident in participants' reports of prioritizing their partner's interest over their own 62% of the time. However, it is important to note that it is possible for each partner to accurately report that they made more than 50% partner-satisfying decisions, as both individuals may be reporting decision conflicts experienced solely by one of them. Decision conflicts can be felt by one partner and not by the other (i.e., a form of "invisible support," Bolger et al., 2000). For example, a person might have to decide between telling their partner that they do not want to eat pizza or staying quiet and eating the pizza. This person would report this decision as a partner-favoring decision, but their partner would not report this as a self-favoring decision, because he or she was not aware of the decision conflict. Thus it is possible for an individual to decide in favor of their partner 60% of the time and their partner to decide in favor of the individual 60% of the time—the two partners are reporting some conflicts experienced solely by one of them.

7.1.2 | Nondyadic data

Or data is limited to the perspective of one partner, and thus cannot speak to dyadic effects.⁶ For example, it might be that decision makers felt close to their partner because the partner-

satisfying decision made their partner feel positive and closer to them (an indirect effect). It might be that the partner-satisfying decision inspired the partner to reciprocate and also make partner-satisfying decisions which led to greater feelings of closeness (a different indirect effect). These are important questions that underline the necessity of studies with dyadic data in the field of prorelational behavior. Future studies might recruit a fully dyadic sample and examine how decisions by one individual affect their partner's decision.

7.1.3 | Restriction in range

The analyses of between-subject effects focused on change in outcome over the course of a week. This time frame is very limited, and results might not extend to longer time frames. It is also possible that because participants already perceived their relationships to be of high quality and were very satisfied at the beginning of the week, there was not much opportunity for them to improve further. Future studies might examine different measures or recruit less satisfied samples to avoid ceiling effects and allow for more range in the outcome measures.

7.1.4 | Measurement

In this study, we assessed relationship quality and satisfaction using established measures (Fletcher et al., 2000; Rusbult et al., 1998). However, our results showed that the reliability of the brief perceived relationship quality measure was very low, which may be the reason that the effects for relationship quality were only marginal—with such poor reliability, most of the variance is due to measurement error, and so little is left that can be predicted by the independent variables. It is also possible that such global relationship appraisals are hard to shift and would not undergo much change in just 1 week, so that more specific (rather than broader) measures would be needed to detect stronger effects. An additional issue related to measurement is that our in-the-moment outcomes of relationship satisfaction and insecurity were assessed using only one item each. This is common in experience sampling research, where the need for appropriate measurement must be balanced with a necessity for brevity to reduce participant fatigue and increase compliance (Kosovich et al., 2019). In our case, we ensured that the items were face valid, and each assessed a narrow/specific construct; some research suggests that under these circumstances, single-items are particularly appropriate (Gabriel et al., 2019).

7.1.5 | Characteristics of the sample

Our sample was a convenience rather than a representative sample. As such, the descriptive information in our sample (such as the average proportion of decision conflicts resolved in favor of the partner) might not be representative of the general population or might change depending on sample characteristics. Furthermore, it is possible that some people tend to notice decision conflicts more than other people. Thus, results in this study may have been driven by this subset of the people who were sensitive to identifying potential decision conflicts. However, our data showed no evidence of individual differences in reporting on interpersonal decision conflicts: The majority of variance in whether people reported on interpersonal or personal decision conflicts when contacted was within-person (96%), with very little variance attributable

to between-person differences (3%) or between-couple differences (1%). We conclude that reports on interpersonal decision conflicts were made equally by all participants in the sample—although it is possible that being in the study and receiving prompts to complete these reports led to people noticing both types of decision conflicts more than usual.

7.2 | Different kinds of partner-satisfying decisions

A partner-satisfying decision might be characterized either generally as prosocial behavior, more specifically as prorrelational behavior, or might be characterized as self-sacrifice for the partner. There is indeed considerable overlap between these concepts: prosocial behavior frequently requires giving up a self-interest (e.g., spending money on others rather than on oneself, Dunn et al., 2008). Prosocial behavior in relationships—prorrelational behavior—also often requires overcoming a selfish impulse in order to do something nice for someone else (e.g., taking the time to write a love note rather than finishing the experiment early, Kammrath & Peetz, 2011). Self-sacrifice has been defined as “foregoing self-interest to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship” (Righetti & Impett, 2017; Van Lange et al., 1997) and thus, almost all prorrelational behavior or indeed most prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteering time that could be spent on selfish pursuits, spending money on others that could be spent on the self, organizational citizenship behaviors that heighten time pressure for one’s own work) would fit this definition as well. Future research is needed to integrate or differentiate the literature on prosocial behavior, prorrelational behavior, and sacrifices in relationships. In the present paper, we used the term partner-satisfying decisions rather than sacrifices to (a) reflect the language in the study materials, (b) reflect that the cost to participants relative to the benefit to their partner varied widely (e.g., some partner-satisfying decisions seemed to increase well-being of both partners, such as “stay in bed with him,” and some self-satisfying decisions sacrificed comfort, even if they served self-interest in the long term, such as “do my gym routine”), and (c) reflect that a small number of the decision conflicts referred to more reactive accommodation behaviors (i.e., reacting constructively when a partner has engaged in a potentially destructive act, Rusbult et al., 1991).

7.2.1 | Lingering influence of prior actions and cumulative effects of sacrifice

The time course of reactions to partner-satisfying decisions might matter. We focused on immediate reactions and changes over the course of 1 week. It is also possible that previous decisions affect later decisions or their consequences. Someone who has acted on behalf of the partner’s interests several times already in a given day might be less likely to choose the partner’s interest over their own or might not derive the same benefit from it as someone who has made several self-gratifying decisions earlier in the day. The present data cannot speak to how prior self-sacrifices might change the likelihood or the effects of subsequent self-sacrifices, since the experience sampling methods used in this study *sampled* individual interpersonal conflict reports (and thus might have missed a number of interpersonal conflicts each day). Future studies might assess exhaustive reports of all interpersonal conflicts over the day to capture all instances of both partner-satisfying and self-satisfying decisions or assess cumulative self-reports of the prior decisions before assessing responses to the most recent interpersonal conflict decision.

7.3 | Conclusion

This study examined the consequences of choosing a romantic partner's preferences, desires, or goals over the pursuit of personal preferences, desires, or goals. Making proportionally more partner-satisfying decisions was linked with clear benefits to relationships, including more relationship satisfaction and higher perceived relationship quality over the course of a week. Additionally, a short time after making the decision to act in the partner's interest rather than one's own, participants felt better, and also felt closer to their partner—especially when they had a tendency to make proportionally fewer partner-satisfying decisions generally. Thus, just like other pro-social behavior (e.g., spending money on others, Dunn et al., 2008, volunteering, Rietschlin, 1998; Wheeler et al., 1998), acting in a relationship partner's interest was linked with positive mood and relationship closeness.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://tinyurl.com/ygehn8bk>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ As recommended by Fletcher et al. (2000) for assessing global relationship quality, we use the six-item version rather than the full scale. The reliability of this scale was very low in this sample, due to one item (trust). We report analyses without this item (i.e., a five-item scale) in the online supplemental file; results were unchanged.
- ² We preregistered the focus on the satisfaction subscale. Rusbult et al. (1998) recommend that only the latter five items of the satisfaction subscale are aggregated as a measure of relationship satisfaction. We also analyzed the initial five items of the scale assessing needs fulfillment, as additional measure of relationship appraisal.
- ³ An examination of participants' brief descriptions of their decision conflicts revealed nearly all to be “self-sacrifice” type decisions, in which they were torn between satisfying themselves or their partner. There were also a very few “accommodation” type decisions, in which they had to decide whether to respond constructively or destructively during an interpersonal conflict. There were also very few “goal conflict” type decisions, in which the participant's goal was being hindered by a partner behavior. This distribution is not surprising given that participants were instructed to report on conflicts of the self-sacrificing type.
- ⁴ We did not person-center our dichotomous predictor (partner-satisfying/self-satisfying decision) variable. For immediate outcome predictions we were primarily concerned with responses to each individual decision rather than responses to deviations from a person's average decision. In later analyses, we also explore responses to individual responses while putting it in the context of the general tendency to make partner-satisfying decisions.
- ⁵ Exploratory analyses also suggested that participants felt generally closer after making partner-oriented decisions than after making relationship-unrelated decisions (see results in online supplements.)
- ⁶ Even though some of our participants were parts of a couple, they were assessed at different times in the ESM protocol and thus their decision instances should be considered independent rather than interdependent.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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