

# Should I Stay or Should I Go? Maximizers versus Satisficers

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*In the present study, university students were presented a scenario in which a married couple was struggling in their marriage. These students were asked how likely it is that they would stay in a difficult marriage like the one described in the scenario. Each student also completed Schwartz's (2004) Maximization Scale. High scorers on this scale (i.e., maximizers) tend to search for "the best" alternative when making a decision. As a result, they are prone to buyers remorse. On the other hand, low scorers (i.e., satisficers) are less likely to experience post-decision regret. In the present study, maximizers (compared to satisficers) reported that they were more likely to leave a difficult marriage.*

Based on the seminal postulations of the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon (1957), Schwartz (2004) has argued for two different orientations employed by individuals when in the process of making a choice. He has suggested that some individuals tend to be "maximizers" when faced with choice situations, whereas others tend to be "satisficers."

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Maximizers are inclined to seek “the best” alternative when they need to make a decision. Whether they are shopping for clothes, searching for a video, or looking for a job, they tend to be motivated to find the absolute best that is available.

Satisficers, on the other hand, seem to make decisions with a threshold of acceptability in mind. Once an alternative has been found that meets this level of acceptability, then this “good enough” alternative is likely to be chosen. It’s not that satisficers lack standards, but rather, their standards are for “a good” choice as opposed to “the absolute best” choice.

Research has revealed that compared to satisficers, maximizers spend more time and effort in the decision-making process (Schwartz, 2004). Furthermore, Schwartz et al. (2002) have reported that once a choice has been made, maximizers tend to ruminate more about their purchasing decision and they tend to be less satisfied (“buyer’s remorse”) with the selected alternative. In fact, even when the outcome of the decision-making process is objectively more successful (i.e., a significantly higher starting salary), maximizers still tend to be less pleased with the outcome than do satisficers (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006). And when the outcome of a decision is less than what had been hoped for, maximizers are especially prone to post-decision disappointments (Schwartz & Ward, 2004).

In discussing the differences between maximizers and satisficers, Schwartz (2004) and Schwartz and Ward (2004) have speculated that the distinct tendencies of these two groups may extend into the domains of love and marriage. Since there are few decisions that have more far-reaching consequences than that of marriage, it is only reasonable to

expect that the way in which maximizers versus satisficers might respond to love and marriage circumstances will be different.

One area that has received special interest in the marriage literature has been that of conflict. As reported by Bradbury, Rogge, and Lawrence (2001), a PSYCInfo search of the term *marital* combined with *conflict* yielded more entries than did the term *marital* combined with any other keywords (including *love*, *communication*, or *social support*). Furthermore, several authors have argued that couples' conflict is a key element in understanding marital dissatisfaction and marital dissolution (see Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007, for a review of this literature).

Yet, some researchers (e.g., Fincham, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) have cited several longitudinal studies in which conflict has accounted for a relatively small proportion of the variance in marital stability and long-term marital satisfaction. Furthermore, several studies have suggested a "reversal effect," situations in which greater levels of conflict have been associated with increased marital quality (e.g., Bradbury, Coan, & Karney, 1998; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1991).

Thus, conflict seems to be an inevitable part of marriage for virtually every couple. Furthermore, for many of these couples, there is a concomitant period of disillusionment that accompanies these marital differences of opinion. And yet, research suggests that conflict in and of itself may not be as powerful a variable in explaining marital dissatisfaction and dissolution as has long been thought. In fact, several authors (e.g., Buri, 2006; Fincham, 2003; Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007) have argued that far more

important than the fact of this conflict (and possible disillusionment) are the personal characteristics brought to bear on this marital reality by the husband and the wife. As stated by Buri (2006), "Disappointment rears its ugly head in virtually every marriage... This is not a reason for despair (or worse yet, desertion). This is simply a statement of reality. The important thing in the face of this disillusionment is not the fact that it is there, but rather, what do we decide to do with it" (p. 20).

In the present study, undergraduates were presented a scenario in which a couple was depicted as either dating or married. This couple was described as having entered an especially difficult time of conflict in their relationship. The research participants were then asked several questions, including: (a) how likely is it that this couple will be happy together in the future? and (b) how likely it is that if they found themselves in a situation like this one, that they would stay in the relationship? We also had the participants complete a scale to measure the extent to which they were maximizers versus satisficers (Schwartz, 2004).

Research has revealed that maximizers tend to search for the best alternative when making a choice, and since conflict may suggest that one's current partner may not be the best choice, we anticipated that maximizers, compared to satisficers, would be: (a) less apt to agree that this couple would be happy together in the future, and (b) less apt to say that they would stay in the relationship. Furthermore, since maximizers are more prone to post-decision regret than are satisficers, and since marriage constitutes a much more clear decision than does dating, we hypothesized that: (a) maximizers would be less apt to say that this couple will be happy together in the future when the couple was described as

married than when described as dating, and (b) maximizers would be more apt to say that they would leave when the couple was described as married than when described as dating.

## Method

### *Participants*

Eighty-four university students (26 men, 58 women; mean age = 19.8 years) were recruited from psychology classes to participate in this study. Nearly 90% of the participants were Caucasian; the remaining 10% were Asian-American. All testing took place in group settings.

### *Materials and Procedure*

The participants who were recruited for the study gathered in a classroom on campus. The size of the testing groups ranged from 10 to 17. The participants were asked to complete a brief demographic information sheet that requested their age, sex, and ethnicity. Each student was also asked to complete Schwartz's (2004) Maximization Scale. They were also instructed to read a scenario about a young couple who was depicted as either dating or married, and to respond to several questions pertaining to the scenario. The order in which these questionnaires were presented was counterbalanced.

*Schwartz's Maximization Scale.* The Schwartz (2004) Maximization Scale consists of 13 items about personal choices, and participants were asked to respond to each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*). Some sample items from this scale are: "When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I really love;" "Whenever I make a choice, I try to imagine what all the

other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment;" and "When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I'm relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to." Schwartz et al. (2002) reported a Cronbach's coefficient alpha value of .71 for the Maximization Scale. The higher the score on this scale, the more maximizing is the individual.

*Young Couple Scenario.* Each participant was presented one of two versions of the following scenario, either with the couple married or dating.

*John and Kari have been married for a little over two years now. During much of this time they have found that they have a lot in common, that they like a lot of the same activities, and that they enjoy each other's company a lot. Recently, however, John and Kari have begun to notice several areas of disagreement in their relationship. They argue quite a bit about a variety of topics, and sometimes these disagreements have become quite heated. It has recently become increasingly clear that although John and Kari have several things in common, they also have some differences that are creating problems in their relationship.*

Each participant was then asked to respond to each of the following four questions on a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *very unlikely* to 6 = *very likely*): (a) "When couples run into problems in their relationship like John and Kari have, how likely is it that they will be able to resolve their differences and make the relationship work?" (b) "How likely is it that John and Kari are feeling frustrated and angry about their relationship?" (c) "If John and Kari decide to stay together and to work on their relationship, how likely is it that they will be happy with each other in the long run?" and (d) "If you found

yourself in a situation like John and Kari's, how likely is it that you would stay in the relationship and try to work out your differences?" It was the last two of these questions that were of particular interest in the present study.

### Results

Initial bivariate correlational analyses for all participants combined revealed that maximizing was related in an expected direction (but not significantly) to participants' responses to the Able to Resolve Differences question ( $r = -.174, p > .10$ ) and to the Feel Frustrated and Angry question ( $r = -.126, p > .20$ ). For the Happy Together in the Future question, the obtained  $r$ -value was  $-.279$  ( $p < .01$ ), and for the Stay in the Relationship question, the resulting  $r$ -value was  $-.312$  ( $p < .004$ ).

Further analyses for the Happy Together in the Future question were then completed based upon whether the couple in the scenario was described as married or dating. These analyses revealed a strong negative correlation between maximizing and the likelihood of the couple being happy together in the future when the couple was depicted as married ( $r = -.441, p < .003$ ). This same correlation was not statistically significant, however, when the couple was described as dating ( $r = -.123, p > .10$ ). Similar analyses were completed for the Stay in the Relationship question. When the couple was depicted as married, the resulting  $r$ -value was statistically significant ( $r = -.462, p < .002$ ), but not when the couple was described as dating ( $r = -.128, p > .10$ ).

Using the married versus dating scenario as one variable, the data were then broken down into the top 30% of scores on the Maximization Scale (maximizers) and the bottom 30% (satisficers). Responses to the Happy Together in the Future question were entered

as the DV for a 2 x 2 ANOVA. The summary of this ANOVA has been presented in Table 1.

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Table 1

Summary of 2 x 2 ANOVA for Happy Together in the Future Question

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Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Married/Dating (STATUS)	.039	1	.039	.063	.803
Maximizing/Satisficing (MAX)	2.234	1	2.234	3.606	.064
STATUS x MAX	1.471	1	1.471	2.374	.130
Error	29.117	47	.620		
Total	32.980	50			

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As can be seen in Table 1, the difference in the responses for maximizers versus satisficers on the Happy Together in the Future question approached significance at the .05 level. While the interaction effect was in the predicted direction (see Figure 1), this analysis did not yield statistical significance.

Responses to the Stay in the Relationship question were also entered as the DV in a 2 x 2 (married/dating x maximizing/satisficing) ANOVA. The results of these analyses have been presented in Table 2.



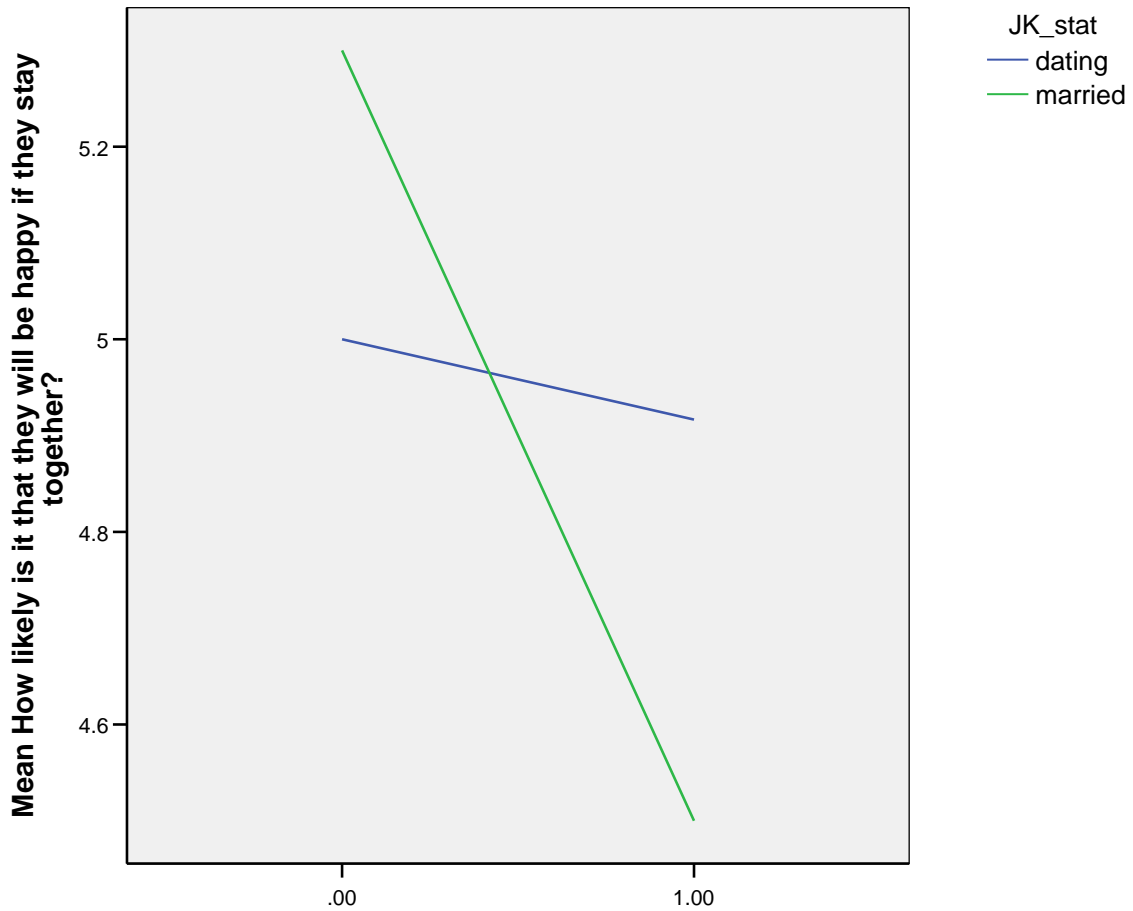


Figure 1. Mean response to the Happy Together in the Future Question as a function of maximizing/satisficing and married/dating scenario status.

As can be seen in Table 2, maximizers were much more likely to state that they would leave the relationship than were satisficers ( $F = 6.132, p < .02$ ). Furthermore, despite the admittedly small sample size, the interaction of the maximizing variable with the

married/dating variable approached significance ( $F = 3.017, p < .09$ ). These findings have been presented in Figure 2.

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Table 2

Summary of 2 x 2 ANOVA for Stay in the Relationship Question

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Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Married/Dating (STATUS)	1.089	1	1.089	1.870	.178
Maximizing/Satisficing	3.570	1	3.570	6.132	.017
STATUS x MAX	1.757	1	1.757	3.017	.089
Error	27.367	47	.582		
Total	36.039	50			

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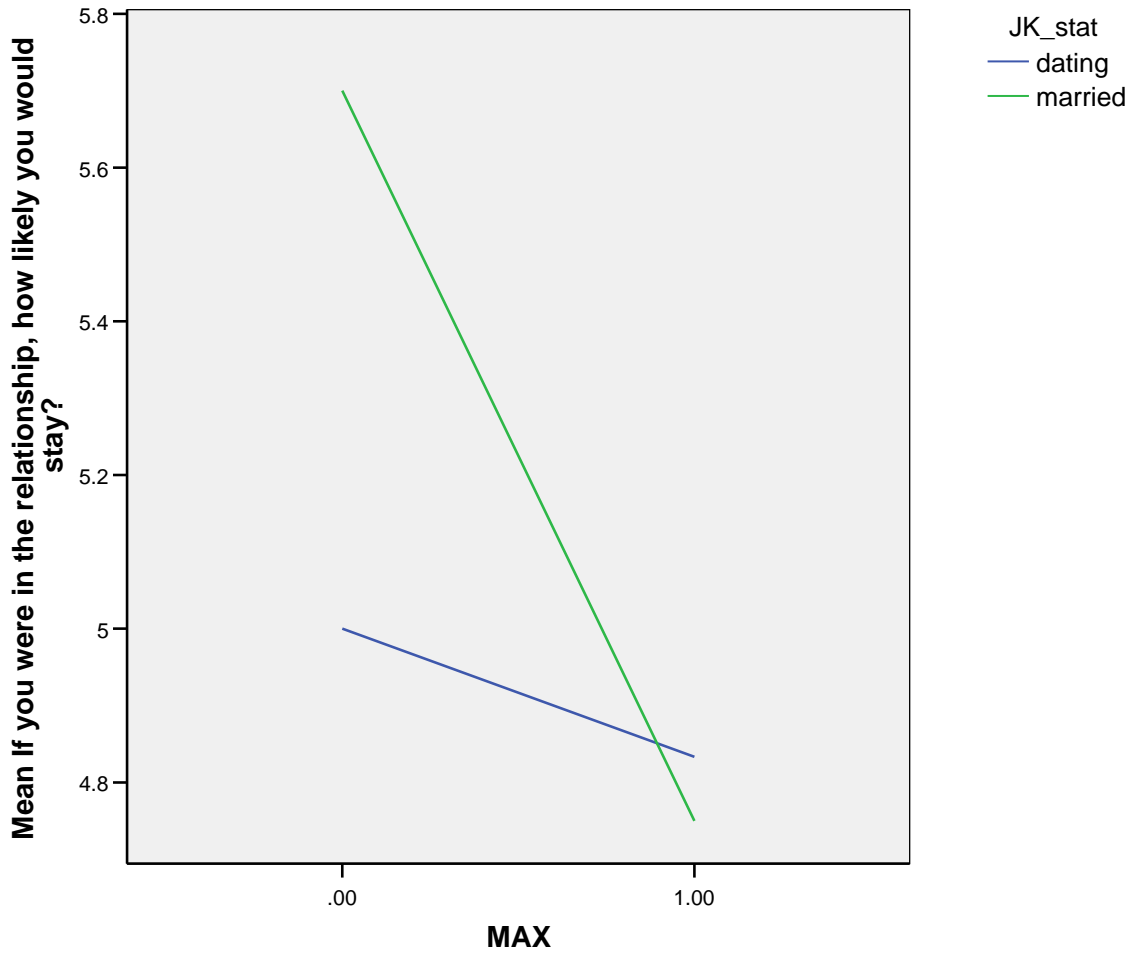


Figure 2. Mean response to the Stay in the Relationship question as a function of maximizing/satisficing and married/dating scenario.

## Discussion

Schwartz (2004) and Schwartz and Ward (2004) have asserted that one might reasonably expect the variable of maximizing / satisficing to predict individuals' responses within love and marriage contexts. The results of the present study have provided some preliminary evidence in support of this assertion.

When judging the prospective happiness of a couple whose relationship has fallen on difficult times, maximizers were much less apt to think that this couple would be happy in the future if they stayed together. Similarly, maximizers stated that they themselves would be less apt to stay in such a relationship if this were to happen to them. Possibly most telling, though, were the findings that if they found their own relationship in an especially difficult time of conflict, maximizers reported that they would be less apt to stay in the relationship if they were married than if they were dating. (Please note: this last set of findings approached statistical significance; an extended investigation of these findings is currently underway.)

As pointed out by Schwartz (2004), maximizers are more prone to post-decision regret ("buyer's remorse") than are satisficers, and the extent of this regret seems to be exacerbated when the quality of the choice appears to be compromised. When couples are merely dating, a choice has not yet actually been made — in many ways, it is more like shopping than purchasing. But once someone marries, a clear decision has been reached. As a result, it was quite reasonable in the present study to find that the

likelihood of leaving the relationship for maximizers was considerably higher when the couple was described as married as opposed to dating. The degree of dissatisfaction with the choice was predictably greater for such maximizers when considering a potentially disappointing marriage choice than when merely considering a poor dating decision.

For the past 35 years, marriage scholars have focused much of their empirical and theoretical efforts on factors external to the individuals involved (e.g., degree of conflict in the relationship, communication, problem-solving skills, expressed social support for one another). For example, in a review of more than 2,200 studies, Fowers, Bucker, Calbeck, and Harrigan (2003) reported that it was rare to find any mention of the personal characteristics of husbands and the wives and how these characteristics might contribute to marital stability and marital demise. Recently, however, some authors have suggested the need to focus greater attention on the strengths (and the weaknesses) brought to the marriage by the individuals involved. These characteristics of the husband and the wife have variously been referred to as spousal strengths (Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, & Yang, 2007), personal strengths (Buri, 2006), character strengths (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004), transformative processes (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007), marital virtues (Fowers, 1998), and personal characteristics (Fincham, 2003).

In the present study, evidence suggested that the personal characteristic of maximizing versus satisficing may serve just such a role in the development of marital unions (and dis-unions). Clearly, conflict in marriage is fairly common, but this state of affairs alone does not predict marital demise — if it did, the divorce rate would be much greater than it is. For some couples, conflict seems to be an impetus for change, whereas for others, it

becomes a reason for despair. Maximizing versus satisficing may provide one moderating variable that might help to explain these differences.

Admittedly, the findings in the present study are quite speculative. For one thing, the sample size employed is too small for extensive generalizations of the results.

Furthermore, prospective judgments of what college students think they would do in the future if they found themselves in a challenging relationship (i.e., a marriage with considerable levels of conflict) may not accurately reflect what they actually would do. Future research will need to investigate questions like the following with actual married couples: (a) Do maximizers experience more post-decision regret about marrying than do satisficers? (b) Are maximizers less satisfied with their marriage partner than are satisficers? and (c) Are maximizers more likely to divorce than are satisficers?

Nonetheless, the present findings provide some interesting support for the growing speculation that character strengths / virtues comprise a vital component in understanding marital stability and satisfaction. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

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