Published in final edited form as:

Psychol Sci. 2013 June ; 24(6): 1031–1036. doi:10.1177/0956797612464890.

Riding Others' Coattails: Low self-control individuals value self-control in others

Catherine T. Shea, Erin K. Davisson, and Gráinne M. Fitzsimons

Duke University

Abstract

Two laboratory experiments and one dyadic study of ongoing romantic partners examine how temporary and chronic deficits in self-control affect evaluations of others. We suggest that when individuals lack self-control resources, they value such resources in others. Supporting this hypothesis, we find that low (but not high) self-control individuals use self-control information when judging others, evaluating others with high self-control more positively than others with low self-control. In Study 1, depleted participants preferred higher (vs. lower) self-control others; control participants did not show this preference. Study 2 conceptually replicated this effect using a behavioral measure of trait self-control. In Study 3, low (but not high) self-control individuals reported greater dependence on ongoing dating partners with high (vs. low) self-control. We theorize that low self-control individuals may use interpersonal relationships to compensate for their lack of personal self-control resources.

Imagine for a moment that you have low self-control. You struggle to persist on unpleasant tasks, you quickly give in to temptations, you behave impulsively. Life, according to a huge body of research, will be challenging for you. High levels of self-control predict a wide range of positive outcomes (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989), including academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), good health outcomes (Crescioni et al., 2011), better personal finance (Moffitt et al., 2011), superior interpersonal relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011), and fewer mental health problems (Moffitt et al., 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). So, how could you, a low self-control individual, cope with your relative disadvantage? Are there strategies you could employ to minimize the costs of this shortcoming?

Psychological research on self-control has historically focused on the individual agent's own characteristics (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Baumeister et al., 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Mischel et al., 1989), and from this *intrapersonal* perspective, individuals with low self-control appear doomed. However, recent research has emphasized the importance of examining interpersonal influences on self-control (Finkel et al., 2006; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; vanDellen & Hoyle, 2010), and from this *interpersonal* perspective, individuals with low self-control may be able to mitigate their personal weaknesses by turning to the social environment. In this paper, we take a first step towards examining this possibility, testing the idea that individuals with low self-control may seek to strategically compensate for their own lack of resources by using the availability of resources in others as a basis for social judgment.

Past work has shown that individuals evaluate others partly based on others' usefulness for ongoing goals, seeking to draw closer to others who advance their goals and to avoid others who obstruct their goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). More broadly, interdependence theory suggests that goal outcomes are contingent on both individuals' own behaviors and on the behaviors of others with whom the individual is interdependent, such as friends, coworkers, and romantic partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). From this perspective, goal outcomes are thus jointly determined by the behaviors of both members of an interdependent relationship. Building on these ideas, we suggest that individuals low in self-control resources will prefer and depend on others with higher (vs. lower) self-control resources. In contrast, we posit that people with high personal self-control resources will not show this preference. Because they do not need to seek additional resources in the social environment—because they are self-sufficient—we predict they will be less attentive to this resource in others. Essentially, we suggest that social evaluations can reflect a self-regulatory mechanism in which individuals value self-control resources in others to the extent that they themselves lack those resources.

In this manuscript, we test this self-regulatory hypothesis against five other plausible hypotheses about self-control and social judgments, based on the psychological literature. First, individuals could show a similarity bias (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Carli, Ganley, & Pierce-Otay, 1991), preferring others with similar levels of self-control. Second, they could show a complementarity bias (Dreyer & Horowitz, 1997; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003), preferring others with opposite levels of self-control. Third, given that self-control is a socially valued trait, all individuals could value self-control in others. Fourth, if individuals high in self-control value these characteristics in themselves, they could also value it in others to a greater extent than those low in self-control. Finally, individuals with low self-control could find high self-control others threatening and thus derogate them (Festinger, 1954).

We conducted two laboratory experiments and a dyadic investigation of romantic partners to examine our hypothesis and these alternatives. Studies 1 and 2 experimentally manipulated perceptions of a target's self-control; Study 1 experimentally manipulated individuals' personal self-control and measured evaluations of a manager using a leader evaluation questionnaire; Study 2 used a behavioral measure of chronic individual differences in self-control and measured evaluations of an anticipated interaction partner. Study 3 measured trait self-control reports from both members of romantic couples and measured individuals' dependence on their partners using a standard dependence measure, which assesses individuals' relative preference for their partner over alternative partners.

STUDY 1

Study 1 experimentally manipulated individuals' own self-control resources and their perceptions of targets' self-control resources; it employed a 3×2 design with target self-control (low, medium, high) and participant depletion (low, high) as between-subjects variables. Participants completed a depleting vs. control task, read a vignette about a manager who varied in self-control, and evaluated that manager. We hypothesize that

participants temporarily low in self-control resources will show a greater preference for high (vs. low) self-control leaders than will control participants.

Method

Eighty students (44 females; $M_{age} = 20.59$, $SD_{age} = 1.22$) from a university research pool participated. Participants first completed a standard resource depletion manipulation (Gailliot et al., 2007), evaluating a character in a video while words flashed onscreen; participants randomly assigned to the depletion condition were further told to avoid looking at those words; control participants received no such instructions. Next, participants read vignettes about one of three office managers. In the high self-control vignette, four positive statements adapted from the Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004) were embedded in the target's description; likewise, four negative statements, and two positive and two negative statements, were embedded in the vignettes for the low and moderate self-control managers, respectively. Adapted statements included "I am able to work effectively towards long-term goals" (positive) and "Pleasure and fun sometimes keep me from getting work done" (negative). An independent pre-test with 30 participants found that managers did not differ on perceived outcomes or competence, $ps > .4$. Finally, participants evaluated the manager using an established 4-item scale (Janson, Levy, Sitkin, & Lind, 2008; $\alpha = .85$). Items include "Sam is a good leader" and "I think Sam is an exceptional leader."

Results and Discussion

A 2 (condition: non-depletion, depletion) $\times$ 3 (target self-control: low, medium, high) between-subjects ANOVA on target evaluations revealed no main effect of depletion ($F(1,79) = .21$, ns) but a significant main effect of target self-control, $F(2,78) = 17.93$, $p < .001$ ($\eta_p^2 = .326$). As predicted, this effect was qualified by a significant condition-target interaction, $F(2,78) = 3.19$, $p < .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = .079$) (see Figure 1). Within the non-depletion condition, no significant effect of target self-control emerged, $F(2,37) = 2.23$, $p = .12$. Within the depletion condition, a significant effect of target self-control emerged, $F(2,37) = 25.92$, $p < .001$ ($\eta_p^2 = .584$). Depleted participants rated high self-control managers ($M = 5.54$) more positively than moderate self-control managers ($M = 4.18$; $F(1,25) = 16.9$, $p < .001$) and low self-control managers ($M = 3.18$; $F(1,27) = 56.88$, $p < .001$), and rated moderate self-control managers more positively than low self-control managers ($F(1,22) = 6.18$, $p = .02$). Thus, as predicted, when individuals were temporarily depleted of self-control resources, they preferred others who possessed the resources that they lacked.

STUDY 2

Study 1 demonstrated that the tendency to use self-control cues when evaluating others is stronger when evaluators' self-regulatory resources are depleted rather than intact. Study 2 examines chronic individual differences in self-control (via Stroop performance, a standard behavioral measure of self-control; von Hippel & Gonsalkorale, 2005) among participants anticipating a social interaction. We predict that chronically low self-control participants will give higher ratings to targets with higher (vs. lower) self-control.

Method

One hundred and six members of a community research pool participated (65 females; $M_{age} = 29.09$, $SD_{age} = 12.33$; 48% Caucasian; 24% Asian American, 22% African American; 6% other). Five individuals did not complete the Stroop task due to reading difficulties (3), color blindness (1), and a stutter (1). Two participants were also eliminated for having Stroop scores more than 2.5 standard deviations above the mean, leaving 99 participants for analysis. After arriving at the laboratory, participants read the low and high self-control vignettes from Study 1, slightly modified to describe a research assistant (“Sam”) with whom they would ostensibly be working later in the study. Next, participants completed a 3-item evaluation of Sam (“I am excited to meet Sam,” “Sam and I could be friends,” “Sam and I will work well together,” $\alpha = .70$) embedded among filler items asking about the upcoming task. Finally, participants moved to another laboratory and completed the Stroop task. Vignette condition did not affect Stroop performance; $F(1,98) = 1.32$, $p = .25$.

Results and Discussion

We regressed target ratings on standardized Stroop scores, effect-coded condition (low vs. high self-control target), and Stroop $\times$ condition interaction. No main effect emerged for Stroop performance, $\beta = -.09$, $p = .38$. A main effect emerged for the manipulation of target self-control, $\beta = .21$, $p = .04$; overall, participants rated the high self-control target more positively ($M = 4.93$) than the low self-control target ($M = 4.54$).

As predicted, a significant interaction between individuals’ trait self-control and target self-control emerged, $\beta = .29$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 2). Participants with low self-control (1 SD below the mean) rated the high self-control target more positively ($M = 5.12$) than the low ($M = 4.18$) self-control target, $B = .42$, $p < .001$. Participants with high self-control (1 SD above the mean) did not differentiate between the targets based on self-control, $B = -.08$, $p = .72$. Findings supported our hypothesis: Those with lower personal self-control, as measured by Stroop performance, showed a stronger preference for high self-control others than did individuals with higher personal self-control. We suggest that low self-control, whether chronic or temporary, leads individuals to prefer others with this resource.

STUDY 3

Study 3 examines our hypothesis in a sample of romantic couples, adding to the validity and generalizability of the experimental laboratory findings. In addition, instead of manipulating *perceptions* of target self-control, Study 3 directly measures targets’ *actual* self-control. Finally, instead of simple evaluations, Study 3 measures *dependence* on the partner. According to interdependence theory (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), dependence is “the extent to which each individual’s personal well-being rests on involvement in the relationship” (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998, p. 940). As commonly conceptualized in this tradition, we measure dependence as a preference for the current partner over alternatives (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Agnew et al., 1998).

Our hypothesis rests on the assumption that low self-control individuals’ personal well-being is enhanced by others with high (vs. low) self-control resources. If this is correct, then, once in relationships, low self-control individuals should feel more dependent on high (vs.

low) self-control partners. If high self-control individuals do not prioritize others' self-control, they should show no such preference.

Method

Participants were 136 heterosexual couples (56.5% Caucasian, 33.5% Asian, 10% mixed or other; $M_{age} = 20.80$; $SD_{age} = 2.16$) with a mean relationship duration of 34.42 ($SD = 29.10$) months. As part of a larger study on relationship processes, participants completed a 13-item self-control scale (Tangney et al., 2004; $\alpha = .80$) and a five-item measure of dependence on the relationship, operationalized as preference for the partner over alternatives (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .84$), which assesses whether individuals view their partners as uniquely satisfying relative to alternatives. For example, items include: "If I weren't dating my partner, I would do fine – I would find another appealing person to date" and "My alternatives are attractive to me (dating another, spending time with friends or on my own, etc.)." Past work has established the use of this measure as a measure of dependence (Agnew et al., 1998; Rusbult et al., 1998): Individuals who depend on their partner see them as uniquely able to meet their needs compared to alternative partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

Results and Discussion

To analyze these dyadic data, we used the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), which estimates actor and partner effects within a multilevel modeling framework, accounting for violations of statistical independence common to dyadic data. Because gender did not moderate any of our effects ($ps > .68$) and a "test of distinguishability" (Kenny, 2012) showed that a model including gender was not a significantly better fit ($\chi^2(5) = 7.89$; $p = .16$), we treated males and females as indistinguishable. Self-control scores were grand-mean-centered (Aiken & West, 1991). APIM analyses regressing dependence on actor and partner self-control scores and their interaction revealed no significant effect of actors' self-control on actors' relationship value, $\beta = .065$, $p = .29$, nor of partners' self-control on actors' relationship value, $\beta = .082$, $p = .18$.

As predicted, however, a significant interaction of actor and partner self-control emerged, $\beta = -.13$, $p = .04$ (see Figure 3). All reported actor effects were robust controlling for partner effects. Individuals with lower self-control ($-1SD$) reported greater dependence if their partners have high self-control ($M = 5.13$) than if their partners have low self-control ($M = 4.58$), $B = .31$, $p = .01$. In contrast, individuals with higher self-control (SD) reported similar dependence regardless of their partners' self-control, $B = -.07$, $p = .58$. Thus, in a sample of dating couples, partners' actual self-control scores predicted the value that low-self-control actors placed on the relationship, but did not predict the value that high-self-control actors placed on the relationship. This study thus provides a conceptual replication of the laboratory effects demonstrated in Studies 1 and 2, with real relationships and both partners' reports of self-control.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies, low self-control individuals preferred others with high self-control, while high self-control individuals showed no such preference. Our findings were thus consistent with our self-regulatory hypothesis and inconsistent with other plausible hypotheses about how self-control may affect social judgments. Namely, we failed to find evidence for similarity or complementarity biases, a universal valuing of self-control, a derogation of high self-control targets by threatened low self-control individuals, nor a self-favoring process whereby those high in self-control see self-control as a more valuable characteristic.

Instead, we found consistent support for what we believe reflects a social self-regulatory process, in which those low in self-control attempt to compensate for their shortcomings by drawing closer to high self-control others. We do not mean to imply that relying on others will completely outweigh the drawbacks of low self-control resources. Indeed, research reliably finds that low self-control predicts poor outcomes (Tangney et al., 2004), suggesting that for low self-control individuals overall, social self-regulatory processes cannot fully overcome individual deficits. Use of the strategy, and its benefits for the individual's outcomes, likely vary with the quality of both the partner's support and the relationship, as well as contextual factors like individuals' focus on goal outcomes versus positive self-regard. Future research should clarify the role of these variables and examine downstream consequences for individuals' own success, as well as their relationship outcomes. Nonetheless, these novel findings suggest that individuals with low self-control may play an active role in attempting to overcome their individual weaknesses: Rather than accepting their poor fate, they may strategically seek social partners who compensate for their own self-regulatory shortcomings.

REFERENCES

- Agnew CR, Van Lange PAM, Rusbult CE, Langston CA. Cognitive interdependence: Commitment and the mental representation of close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1998; 74:939–954.
- Aiken, LS.; West, SG. Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1991.
- Bandura A. Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*. 1977; 84:191–215. [PubMed: 847061]
- Baumeister RF, Bratslavsky E, Muraven M, Tice DM. Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1998; 74:1252–1265. [PubMed: 9599441]
- Berscheid, E.; Reis, H. Attraction and close relationships. In: Gilbert, D.; Fiske, S.; Lindzey, G., editors. *The handbook of social psychology*. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw-Hill; 1998. p. 193-281.
- Carli L, Ganley R, Pierce-Otay A. Similarity and satisfaction in roommate relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 1991; 17:419–426.
- Carver, CS.; Scheier, MF. Attention and self-regulation: A control theory approach to human behavior. New York: Springer-Verlag; 1981.
- Crescioni AW, Ehrlinger J, Alquist JL, Conlon KE, Baumeister RF, Schatschneider C, Dutton GR. High trait self-control predicts positive health behaviors and success in weight loss. *Journal of Health Psychology*. 2011; 16:750–759. [PubMed: 21421645]
- Dryer DC, Horowitz LM. When do opposites attract? Interpersonal complementarity versus similarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1997; 72:592–603.

- Duckworth AL, Seligman MEP. Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science*. 2005; 16:939–944. [PubMed: 16313657]
- Festinger L. A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*. 1954; 7:117–140.
- Finkel EJ, Campbell W. Self-control and accommodation in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2001; 81:263–277. [PubMed: 11519931]
- Finkel EJ, Campbell WK, Brunell AB, Dalton AN, Chartrand TL, Scarbeck SJ. High-maintenance interaction: Inefficient social coordination impairs self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2006; 91:456–475. [PubMed: 16938030]
- Fitzsimons GM, Finkel EJ. Interpersonal influences on self-regulation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2010; 19:101–105.
- Fitzsimons GM, Shah JY. How goal instrumentality shapes relationship evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2008; 95:319–337. [PubMed: 18665705]
- Gailliot MT, Baumeister RF, DeWall CN, Maner JK, Plant EA, Tice DM, Brewer LE, Schmeichel BJ. Self-control relies on glucose as a limited energy source: Willpower is more than a metaphor. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2007; 92:325–336. [PubMed: 17279852]
- Gruenfeld DH, Inesi ME, Magee JC, Galinsky AD. Power and the objectification of social targets. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2008; 95:111–127. [PubMed: 18605855]
- Janson A, Levy L, Sitkin S, Lind EA. Fairness and other leadership heuristics: A four-nation study. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. 2008; 17:251–272.
- Kelley, HH.; Thibaut, J. *Interpersonal relations: A theory of interdependence*. New York: Wiley; 1978.
- Kenny, DA. Test of Distinguishability using Multilevel Modeling. 2012. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from http://davidakenny.net/doc/indistinguishability_mlm.pdf.
- Kenny, DA.; Kashy, DA.; Cook, WL. *Dyadic data analysis*. New York: Guilford; 2006.
- Mischel W, Shoda Y, Rodriguez ML. Delay of gratification in children. *Science*. 1989; 244:933–938. [PubMed: 2658056]
- Moffitt TE, Arseneault L, Belsky D, Dickson N, Hancox RJ, Harrington H, Houts R, Poulton R, Roberts B, Ross S, Sears M, Thomson WM, Caspi A. A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2011; 108:2693–2698.
- Rusbult CE, Buunk BP. Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 1993; 10:175–204.
- Rusbult CE, Van Lange PAM. Interdependence, interaction, and relationships. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2003; 54(1):351–375.
- Tangney JP, Baumeister RF, Boone AI. High self-control predicts good adjustment, less pathology, better grades, and interpersonal success. *Journal of Personality*. 2004; 72:271–322. [PubMed: 15016066]
- Tiedens LZ, Fragale AR. Power moves: Complementarity in submissive and dominant nonverbal behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2003; 84:558–568. [PubMed: 12635916]
- vanDellen MR, Hoyle RH. Regulatory accessibility and social influences on state self-control. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 2010; 36:251–263. [PubMed: 20008967]
- Vohs KD, Finkenauer C, Baumeister RF. The sum of friends' and lovers' self-control scores predicts relationship quality. *Social and Personality Psychology Science*. 2011; 2:138–145.
- von Hippel W, Gonsalkorale K. "That is bloody revolting!": Inhibitory control of thoughts better left unsaid. *Psychological Science*. 2005; 16:497–500. [PubMed: 16008778]

Figure 1. Ratings of leadership ability in Study 1, by self-control condition (control vs. depletion) and target self-control condition (low, moderate, high).

Figure 2.

Ratings of anticipated interaction partner in Study 2, by trait self-control (± 1 SD) and partner self-control condition.

Figure 3. Rated preference for romantic partner compared to alternative partners in Study 3, by actor and partner trait self-control (both ± 1 SD).