The Burden of Responsibility: Interpersonal Costs of High Self-Control

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The psychological literature on self-control has illustrated the many benefits experienced by people with high self-control, who are more successful both personally and interpersonally. In the current research, we explore the possibility that having high self-control also may have some interpersonal costs, leading individuals to become burdened by others’ reliance. In Studies 1 and 2, we examined the effects of actors’ self-control on observers’ performance expectations and found that observers had higher performance expectations for actors with high (vs. low) self-control. In Study 3, we tested the effect of actors’ self-control on work assigned to actors and found that observers assigned greater workloads to actors with high (vs. low) self-control. In Study 4, we examined how actors and observers differed in their assessments of the effort expended by high and low self-control actors and found that observers (but not actors) reported that high self-control actors expended less effort than low self-control actors. Finally, we found that people high (vs. low) in self-control reported greater burden from the reliance of coworkers (Study 5) and romantic partners (Study 6), and this tendency led them to feel less satisfied with their relationships (Study 6). Together, results from these studies provide novel evidence that individuals’ self-control affects others’ attitudes and behaviors toward them, and suggest that these interpersonal dynamics can have negative consequences for high self-control individuals.

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engage in more prorelationship behaviors and overall, have higher quality relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez, 1989; Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). For example, when people have high self-control resources, they forgive more readily, cheat and deceive less often, and behave more altruistically, compared to people with low self-control resources (Balliet, Li, & Joireman, 2011; DeWall, Finkel, & Denson, 2011; Peetz & Kannrath, 2011; Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011). On the other side of the relationship—that is, examining how self-control is evaluated by partners—research has been more limited, but has demonstrated that people trust, like, and value individuals with high self-control more than they trust, like, and value individuals with low self-control (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Shea, Davisson, & Fitzsimons, 2013).

Thus, the current literature on self-control has illustrated the many benefits experienced by people with high self-control, who tend to successfully pursue their goals and gain the social approval of others. In contrast, people with low self-control tend to pursue their goals with less success and experience less social approval. In this manuscript, we build on these findings by examining how high and low self-control individuals are treated by others and how that in turn affects their experiences in relationships.

**Partner Effects in Interpersonal Perceptions and Action**

The current research takes a dyadic perspective on how self-control affects interpersonal behavior. Rather than examining how people with high and low self-control behave toward others, we examine how others treat people who have high and low self-control, and in turn, how people with high and low self-control feel about this treatment. Using the language of Kenny’s (Kenny & La Voie, 1984; Kenny & Malloy, 1988) social relations model, past research on self-control and interpersonal behavior has primarily examined actor effects, which reflect an individual’s general tendency to behave in a certain way (Kenny & La Voie, 1984; Kenny & Malloy, 1988). For example, people with good self-control resources tend to forgive others more easily than do those with poor resources (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). In contrast, our approach examines partner effects, which reflect an individual’s “general tendency to elicit particular behavior from others” (Cook, Kenny, & Goldstein, 1991, p. 493). For example, we examined whether people with high (vs. low) self-control elicit higher expectations and demands from others. We then examined the downstream consequences of those partner effects on the relationship.

Before we explain our hypotheses in detail, we begin by briefly reviewing prior research on partner effects and their consequences within relationships. First, it is well-established that people’s behavior toward others depends on those others’ characteristics. Partner effects have been most famously demonstrated in research on social stereotypes, which has shown that a partner’s attractiveness, gender, and race shapes how people behave (e.g., Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978; Mulford, Orbell, Shatto, & Stockard, 1998; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977), but it also has been documented in research on personality and the self-concept (Ickes & Barnes, 1977; MacGregor & Holmes, 2011; Strack & Coyne, 1983). For example, when partners are dominant, people behave more submissively (Markey, Funder, & Ozer, 2003; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003) and when partners are agreeable, people respond in a more extraverted fashion (Markey et al., 2003). Most relevant to the present research, Righetti and Finkenauer (2011) showed that when people perceive their interaction partners to have high (vs. low) self-control, they behave in a more trusting way. For example, they allocate more money to high (vs. low) self-control partners in a risky trust game.

Second, it is well-established that partner effects have downstream consequences for both parties (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003; Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010; Snyder et al., 1977; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). For example, when people have partners who view them as successful, they report greater success and come to share their partners’ positive views over time (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). When people have partners who worry about rejection, they ultimately come to feel more negative emotions and to behave in a way that confirms their partners’ worries over time (Downey et al., 1998).

In the current research, this complex interdependence of partners’ perceptions and behavior (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) is the foundation for our theorizing about self-control. We predict that self-control perceptions lead to a cascade of dyadic processes within interactions and relationships. Namely, we predict that perceiving high self-control in partners will in turn lead people to expect and ask more of their partners—essentially, to rely more on high self-control partners. Finally, we predict that this reliance will be recognized by partners and experienced as a sense of burden, which will reduce their relationship satisfaction. Thus, although high self-control undoubtedly leads to both personal and interpersonal benefits, we suggest that as a result of interactive dyadic processes of reliance and burden, high self-control also comes with some interpersonal costs. We elaborate on the rationale for our hypotheses in the following.

**Interpersonal Dynamics of Self-Control: Current Hypotheses**

The most basic premise of the current research—that people rely more on partners with high (vs. low) self-control—was inspired by research on how people look to their social worlds for help with their goal pursuits (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; Shea et al., 2013). This interpersonal perspective on goal pursuit suggests that people not only seek to achieve their goals independently, but also rely on relationships with others. In support of this notion, research has found that people value and draw closer to others who can help them achieve their current goals (Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). The tendency to rely on others may be particularly strong when people are struggling to achieve goals on their own. For example, when people are low in self-control, they particularly value and appreciate partners with high self-control (Shea et al., 2013), suggesting that they are seeking to complement their own individual resources for goal pursuit with interpersonal resources.

As additional evidence that people may look to others for help with their goal pursuits, research has shown that people calibrate how much effort they expend on a given goal pursuit
to how much effort they believe others will expend on that pursuit (Karau & Williams, 1993; vanDellen & Baker, 2011). For example, when one relationship partner exerts relatively high self-control on a first joint task, the other partner tends to continue to exert relatively low self-control on a second joint task, apparently expecting that their partner will continue to pick up the slack (vanDellen & Baker, 2011). Likewise, when individuals think about how a relationship partner helps them with a specific goal pursuit, they reduce their own effort on that pursuit, as though they are outsourcing their pursuit to the helpful partner (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011). Building on this interpersonal perspective, the current research assumes that people attend to the goal relevance of others in the social environment, and calibrate their expectations for and reliance on others’ goal-relevant resources, including their levels of self-control. In the following, we elaborate on our specific hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: People will expect more of high (vs. low) self-control others.

We predict that observers will expect higher levels of performance from others whom they believe to have high (vs. low) self-control. Observers may explicitly reason that others with high self-control have greater capacity to expend effort, persist through obstacles, and deny temptations, and will thus perform better, but even if they do not explicitly engage in such careful analysis, we predict that they will implicitly infer that those who successfully demonstrate high (vs. low) self-control will perform better and accomplish more. This expectation is clearly rational on the part of the observer, who seeks to use the social environment to further goals. However, it may have downstream costs for the high self-control partner who has to expend more effort and time to meet higher expectations, thus potentially being left with less resources for other pursuits, or who may feel these expectations are a burden (see Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 2: People will ask more of high (vs. low) self-control others.

If people expect that others with high self-control can accomplish more than those with low self-control, then people also may ask those high self-control others to contribute more to joint tasks. Although again, this expectation is quite rational for the person allocating work to others, it has potentially negative consequences for the high self-control other because, as time and energy are limited, increased demands on high self-control individuals may hinder their ability to pursue other goals and may feel as a burden (see Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 3: People will estimate that a task takes less effort for high (vs. low) self-control others.

Because high self-control individuals tend to be more successful goal pursuers than their low self-control counterparts, observers may infer that goal pursuit is easier or less effortful for individuals high in self-control. In contrast, we predict that self-control will be a weaker predictor of perceived ease or effort for those actually pursuing a goal. To be clear, prior research has suggested that at least on a situational basis, self-control resources do predict perceived task difficulty (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). However, because part of the tendency of those high in self-control is to persist despite task difficulty (Delose, vanDellen, & Hoyle, 2014; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012), we suspected that observers may underestimate the extent to which those high in self-control perceive difficult tasks as effortful. Thus, we speculated that an actor–observer asymmetry might emerge on difficult self-control tasks such that observers would underestimate the effort that was required of an actor to the extent that the actor was perceived as having high self-control.

Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c: High (vs. low) self-control partners will experience this reliance as a burden. Namely, they will (a) report that others rely on them to a greater extent; (b) will report feeling more burdened by others’ reliance; and (c) to the extent that they do so, will report reduced satisfaction with the relationship.

If observers do indeed ask and expect more of high self-control partners, how do partners respond? There are certainly a number of possible positive consequences—people with high self-control may feel more trusted and respected by others who ask more of them. They also may simply rise to and even enjoy the challenge presented by the demands of others. Our focus in the current manuscript, however, is on the possibility that there also are some negative consequences that result from these dynamics. Given that regulatory resources such as time, energy, and motivation are limited in everyday life, additional and more demanding tasks should be costly even for individuals with good self-control. At a minimum, meeting higher expectations and doing extra work will consume resources that could have gone toward other goal pursuits. If partners with high self-control perceive that their own goal pursuits are negatively affected, or if they simply feel tired by others’ extra reliance on them, then they may feel that others are burdening them. For example, it may feel unfair or tiresome to always be the one who is asked to step up and do the extra project at work, or who is expected to perform the best, regardless of credit or reward.

Furthermore, although contributions to close personal relationships, such as those with friends, family, and romantic partners, are likely tracked less carefully than those in the workplace (Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986), it is possible that it may be tiring or frustrating to be repeatedly asked to help close partners with their goal pursuits. Indeed, studies of romantic and marital relationships have shown that partners experience dissatisfaction when they feel they have “under-benefitted” from the relationship (Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985; Michaels, Edwards, & Acoc, 1984). We suggest that high self-control partners may feel burdened in both professional and personal relationships, and that this sense of burden may reduce their overall relationship satisfaction. To be sure, we do not predict that these dynamics would erase all of the many positive relationship experiences enjoyed by those with high self-control; however, to the extent that those with high self-control feel burdened by assisting their partners, they should report lower satisfaction with their relationships.
Overview of Studies

We tested our hypotheses across six studies using a diverse set of methodologies, samples, and relationship contexts. In Studies 1 and 2, two simple online experiments, we examined the effects of actors’ displays of self-control on observers’ performance expectations. In Study 3, a laboratory experiment, we tested the effect of actors’ displays of self-control on the amount of work that observers assigned to them. In Study 4, a laboratory experiment, we examined how actors and observers differed in their assessments of the effort expended by high and low self-control actors on a typing task. In Study 5, a one-with-many investigation of employed adults and their coworkers, we explored how individual differences in self-control related to employees’ and coworkers’ reports about employees’ experience of burden. Finally, in Study 6, a dyadic study of romantic relationship partners, we explored how individual differences in self-control related to individuals’ experience of burden and the downstream consequences for relationship satisfaction.

Study 1

Study 1 provides a first exploration of Hypothesis 1, simply seeking to explore whether people hold higher expectations for targets who display high (vs. low) self-control. Participants read about a student who demonstrated either high or low levels of self-control (in a domain unrelated to school) and then rated the extent to which they would rely on the student and how well they thought the student would perform in a group school assignment. We also assessed whether the high self-control target was evaluated more positively on a set of positive characteristics such as likability and competence than the low self-control target to determine if these variables drove any effects of self-control on expectations.

Method

Participants. We recruited 51 undergraduate students from a southeastern university to complete an online study in exchange for $7 (M_age = 21.71, SD_age = 2.84, n_female = 35, 41% White, 37% Asian, 14% African American, 8% other).

Materials and procedure. Participants read a scenario describing a fellow student “Sam,” and were asked to imagine that they worked with Sam on a group project (see Appendix A, see supplemental material online). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (target self-control: high vs. low). We adapted the self-control manipulation from Righetti and Finkenauer (2011, Study 1). This manipulation varied the extent to which the target inhibited an undesired behavior (impulsive spending); inhibition of undesired behaviors is a clear example of self-controlled behavior (Tangney et al., 2004). Participants read that Sam was on iTunes to download a free podcast while browsing, saw some new music. In the low self-control condition, Sam revealed that he ended up spending a lot of money purchasing the new music. In the high self-control condition, Sam revealed that although he was tempted to buy the new music, he resisted the urge to make the purchase.

Participants then completed our main dependent measure of performance expectations on an academic group project. We used seven items1 (see Appendix B, see supplemental material online) to assess performance expectations, using items such as “I think Sam will slack off on his part of the group project” (reverse coded) and “I would expect Sam to do well on his part of the group project.” All items were answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items had high interitem consistency (α = .92), thus, we computed a composite performance expectation index using the mean ratings of these seven items, with higher scores indicating higher performance expectations.

As this was the first investigation of our hypotheses, we also sought to examine variables related to self-control. Because self-control is a predictor of successful outcomes—both in terms of goal pursuit and social success—we speculated that a number of positive characteristics, such as motivation, competence, and likability, might be confounded with any manipulation of self-control. In our experimental manipulation we attempted to avoid inadvertently manipulating these variables, but we also measured these variables to directly explore how they were affected by our self-control manipulation. Participants completed two items measuring Sam’s likability (“I think I would like Sam as a person”; “I think Sam is friendly,” r = .78, p < .001) and two items measuring Sam’s competence (“I think Sam is intelligent”; “I think Sam is good at his academic work,” r = .71, p < .001), as well as one question each about motivation (“I think Sam is motivated to do well at school”), preference for a challenge (“I think Sam likes challenging projects”), and trustworthiness (“I think Sam is trustworthy”). All questions were answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Finally, as manipulation checks, participants responded to two questions about the target’s perceived level of self-control, “I think Sam has good self-control” and “I think Sam has good self-discipline,” r = .79, p < .001, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Results

Manipulation check. To examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, we performed an independent-samples t test on targets’ perceived level of self-control. As intended, participants in the high self-control condition perceived the target to have higher self-control (M = 5.04, SD = 0.98) than did participants in the low self-control condition (M = 3.65, SD = 1.16), t(49) = 4.61, p < .001, η² = .30.

Primary analyses. Next, to examine the effect of the self-control manipulation on our main dependent measure, performance expectations, we performed an independent-samples t test (high self-control vs. low self-control) on our composite performance expectations measure. As predicted, participants had higher performance expectations for the target in the high self-control condition (M = 5.85, SD = 0.70) than for the target in the low

1 We also included two exploratory items related to how Sam would react if problems arose. Because these items (“If someone else in the group can’t do their part because of a family emergency, I would expect Sam to pick up the slack and finish what’s left to do” and “If unexpected additional work arose, I would expect Sam to handle it”) did not load onto the same factor as the performance expectation items, they were not included in analyses.
self-control condition ($M = 5.39, SD = 0.87), t(49) = 2.04, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$.

To test whether participants’ perception of the target’s self-control mediated the effect of the self-control manipulation on performance expectations, we conducted a mediation analysis with the self-control manipulation as the independent variable (low self-control condition coded as 1, high self-control condition coded as 2), perceived target self-control as the mediator, and performance expectations as the dependent variable. Using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2012) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, we found that the self-control manipulation significantly predicted our proposed mediator, perception of self-control (point estimate = 1.39, $SE = .30, p < .001$). Furthermore, perceived self-control predicted performance expectations controlling for the self-control manipulation (point estimate = .29, $SE = .10, p = .005$). Tests of the indirect effect suggested that the mediational pathway of the self-control manipulation on perceived self-control on performance expectation was significant (point estimate = .40, $SE = .19, 95\% CI [.10, .83]$).

Auxiliary analyses. Next, we tested whether our self-control manipulation affected participants’ judgments of other qualities of the target. Using a series of independent-samples t tests (high self-control vs. low self-control), we found no difference in participants’ perception of the target’s competence, $t(49) = .02, p = .98$, likability, $t(49) = 1.18, p = .25$, motivation, $t(49) = .70, p = .49$, or trustworthiness, $t(49) = 1.06, p = .29$. A marginally significant effect emerged for ratings of preference for a challenge: participants believed the target in the high self-control condition would more strongly prefer a challenge ($M = 4.67, SD = .82$) than the target in the low self-control condition ($M = 4.26, SD = .86$), $t(49) = 1.73, p = .09$. Using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) predicting performance expectations, with the self-control manipulation as the between-subjects factor, we found that the self-control manipulation remained a significant predictor of performance expectations, $F(1, 44) = 13.50, p = .001, \eta^2 = .24$.

Although self-control is likely related to these variables in everyday life, we attempted to manipulate self-control without these variables in the description of Sam, and these findings suggest the manipulation was, for the most part, successfully unconfounded with these other positive qualities. We did see a marginal effect on preference for a challenge, suggesting that participants saw Sam’s ability to resist temptation as predictive of some greater interest in difficult or challenging work. Indeed, preference for difficult work is part of the burden we have theorized that people place on those with high self-control, so this finding fits with our overall thinking about the phenomenon. However, given that this is the only item among this exploratory set that emerged as marginally significant, we hesitate to draw too strong of a conclusion about its role here. We include all these items in Study 2 to again explore their role.

Discussion

Findings from this first experiment provided support for our hypothesis that participants have higher academic performance expectations for actors with high self-control compared to actors with low self-control, even though the domain in which the target displayed self-control was unrelated to academics. Supporting our interpretation of the effects, the effect of our self-control manipulation was mediated by reported perceptions of self-control. Furthermore, this experiment revealed that actors’ self-control elicited an effect on performance expectations that was not driven by evaluations of competence, likability, or other positive characteristics related to goal pursuit. Thus, Study 1 provides initial support for the notion that people may expect more of others who are high in self-control. Although this is a perfectly rational and functional tendency on the part of observers, Studies 4 through 6 will suggest that it may have costs for those high in self-control.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to conceptually replicate Study 1 by introducing a different manipulation of self-control. In Study 1, target’s level of self-control was manipulated by varying the extent to which the target inhibited an undesirable behavior (impulsive spending). In Study 2, we manipulated target’s level of self-control by varying the extent to which the target successfully persisted in pursuing a goal (saving). Furthermore, whereas Study 1 used an undergraduate sample and examined performance expectations among student peers, in Study 2 we used a more general sample and examined expectations in the context of work performance. Finally, we introduced an additional condition—a moderate level of target self-control—in Study 2, for a total of three levels of self-control (high, moderate, low). As in Study 1, the domain of self-control we manipulated in Study 2 (i.e., saving) was distinct from the domain in which we measured performance expectations (i.e., work performance).

Method

Participants. We recruited 258 participants to take part in an online study on Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 29.28, SD_{age} = 10.47, n_{female} = 100, 74\%$ White, 12\% Asian, 5\% African American, 9\% other). We included two attention check questions, which asked participants to identify Sam’s job (i.e., inspector) and why Sam was saving money (i.e., to move into a new apartment). Eight participants failed these attention checks and were thus excluded from subsequent analyses. Our final sample size for this study was 250.

Materials and procedure. Participants read a scenario describing an upcoming performance appraisal for the quality control department at an electronic manufacturing company. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as the department manager who was to evaluate a target employee in the department (see Appendix C, see supplemental material online). Participants were given information about the target employee; embedded in the description about the employee was our self-control manipulation. All participants read that the employee was looking to move to a new apartment and had been trying to save money for it. In the high self-control condition, the employee said, “So far I’ve been saving all that I possibly can; I’m pretty proud of myself for following through with it!” In the moderate self-control condition, the employee said, “I’ve been doing OK with my goal; I’ve been saving some money, but certainly not everything that I could.” In the low self-control version, he said, “I haven’t been able to save all that much so far—there’s just so many other things going on!” This
manipulation targets adherence to goals, another clear example of self-controlled behavior (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011).

After reading this information, participants responded to the main dependent measure—expectations for Sam’s manufacturing performance. In particular, participants were asked to answer the question, “What would you expect Sam’s accuracy rate to be this quarter?” Accuracy rate was described as the percentage of time in which the employee successfully detected defects in equipment parts. Participants were asked to provide their assessment using a sliding scale, where 0 represented an accuracy rate of 0% (i.e., detected defects 0% of the time) and 100 represented an accuracy rate of 100% (i.e., detected defects 100% of the time). Participants were told that the average accuracy rate in the department was 70%.

Next, we measured participants’ perception of the target’s likability, competence, motivation, preference for a challenge, and trustworthiness, using the same items as in Study 1. Finally, participants responded to one question assessing their perception of the target’s level of self-control, “I think Sam has good self-control” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree).

Results

Manipulation check. To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine the effect of our self-control manipulation (low, moderate, high) on perception of the target’s level of self-control. As intended, the self-control manipulation produced a change in participants’ perceptions about the target’s level of self-control, “I think Sam has good self-control” (point estimate = .66, SE = .14, 95% CI [.42, .97]).

Primary analyses. To examine the effect of the self-control manipulation on participants’ performance expectations for the target, we performed a one-way ANOVA with the self-control condition coded as 1, moderate self-control condition coded as 2, and high self-control condition coded as 3), perceived target self-control as the mediator, and accuracy ratings as the dependent variable. Using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2012) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, we found that the self-control manipulation predicted our proposed mediator, perception of self-control (point estimate = .65, SE = .10, p < .001). Furthermore, perceived self-control predicted performance expectations controlling for the self-control manipulation (point estimate = 1.67, SE = .52, p = .002). Tests of the indirect effect suggested that the mediational pathway of the self-control manipulation on perceived self-control on accuracy ratings was significant (point estimate = 1.09, SE = .40, 95% CI [0.42, 1.97]).

Auxiliary analyses. Next, we tested whether our self-control manipulation affected participants’ judgments of the target’s likability, competence, motivation, trustworthiness, and preference for a challenge. Using a series of one-way ANOVAs with the self-control manipulation as the independent variable (high vs. moderate vs. low self-control), we found no significant difference in participants’ perception of the target’s likability, F(2, 247) = .03, p = .97, competence, F(2, 247) = .16, p = .85, motivation, F(2, 247) = .97, p = .38, trustworthiness, F(2, 247) = .42, p = .66, or preference for a challenge, F(2, 247) = 1.14, p = .32. Next, in a one-way ANOVA with the self-control manipulation as the between-subjects factor, likability, competence, motivation, trustworthiness, and preference for a challenge as covariates, and performance expectations as the dependent variable, we found that the self-control manipulation remained a significant predictor, F(2, 242) = 13.29, p < .001, η² = .10.

Discussion

Study 2’s findings replicated the findings of Study 1, providing more support for our hypothesis that people have higher performance expectations for a target to the extent that the target exhibits self-control. The inclusion of a moderate target self-control condition revealed that performance expectations were driven by incremental changes in self-control behavior as exhibited by the target. Again, as in Study 1, follow-up analyses supported our interpretation that perceived self-control drove the effects on expectations, rather than other related variables, such as likability, competence, and preference for a challenge. Thus, Studies 1 and 2 provide support for our most straightforward hypothesis—that people will expect more of others who display high (vs. low) self-control. This is a rational basis to form such expectations, given that self-control does predict good performance, but as explored in Studies 4 through 6, this rational tendency on the part of observers may have potentially negative consequences for high self-control partners.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 provided support for the hypothesis that people have higher performance expectations for individuals who display high (vs. low) self-control. In Study 3, we explored whether people would assign greater workload to those they perceived as having high (vs. low) self-control. We manipulated target self-control (within-subjects) by varying the degree (high, moderate, low) to which the target adhered to a goal, and also added a control condition with no self-control information. In addition, as a sec-
ondary aim, Study 3 described targets’ self-control behavior in four different goal domains, all of which were unrelated to the dependent variable.

Undergraduate participants came to the laboratory where they were asked to imagine that they worked as a coordinator for a peer mentorship program at their local university. They were asked to delegate essays that needed proofreading to a group of students. We manipulated both the level of self-control of each of the students and the contexts in which these self-control behaviors were demonstrated. We predicted that participants would assign a greater workload—more essays—to the high self-control student, compared to both students who exhibited lower levels of self-control and to the student in the control condition, who displayed no behavior relevant to self-control.

Method

Participants. We recruited 125 undergraduate students from two southeastern universities to participate in a study in exchange for $6 ($M_{age} = 21.94, SD_{age} = 5.06, n_{female} = 81, 41% White, 14% Asian, 34% African American, 11% other).

Materials and procedure. Participants came into the lab for what was described as a decision-making study. Participants were asked to play the role of the coordinator at a peer mentorship program at their local university. One of the services that the mentorship program provides was an essay proofreading service, where freshmen students could solicit feedback on essays that they had written for classes. The coordinator was tasked with assigning these essays to senior students who volunteered to be mentors in the program. To minimize variance in perceived competence, we informed participants that the senior students had maintained their academic standing on the dean’s list as an eligibility requirement for mentorship. The mentorship program received 10 essays from freshmen students and had four senior student volunteers available to provide proofreading services. As the coordinator, our participants were asked to allocate the 10 essays to these four senior student volunteers for proofreading (see Appendix D, see supplemental material online).

After participants read the instructions, they were given a brief profile of the four senior student volunteers, including their name, major, hobbies, and New Year’s resolution. Embedded in the New Year’s resolution was our manipulation of target’s self-control. We included three levels of self-control (high, moderate, low), as well as a control condition where no information about the target’s self-control was given. The levels of self-control were expressed in terms of the targets’ adherence to their New Year’s resolutions.

In the high self-control condition, the students revealed that they had been closely adhering to their New Year’s resolution (e.g., “My New Year’s resolution is to save up some money so I can move to a place closer to campus.”).

We also manipulated the context of the New Year’s resolutions. In particular, the four New Year’s resolutions were about flossing, going to the gym, saving money, and writing letters to grandma. We chose these domains because these were behaviors that required active effort and persistence, and were therefore a good indication of one’s self-control. Thus, each participant read about four student mentors, one at each level of self-control (high, moderate, low, control) and one in each goal domain (flossing, gym, saving, letter writing); across participants, these two manipulations were fully crossed, creating 24 unique combinations. For example, one participant would read about a high self-control target who had a flossing goal, while another would read about a high self-control target who had a savings goal (see Appendix E, for examples, see supplemental material online).

Next, participants were asked to make their essay allocation decision. The quantity of essays assigned to each target served as our main dependent measure. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, participants also answered a follow-up questionnaire that assessed related variables—namely, the extent to which they perceived each of the four students to be likable (“To what extent would you like each of the following students?”: “To what extent do you think each of the following students is friendly?”: $r_{high} = .31, r_{moderate} = .33, r_{low} = .34, r_{control} = .41, p < .001”), competent (“To what extent do you think each of the following students is intelligent?”: “To what extent do you think each of the following persons is good at his or her academic work?”: $r_{high} = .52, r_{moderate} = .46, r_{low} = .52, r_{control} = .21, p < .05”), trustworthy (“To what extent do you think each of the following persons is trustworthy?”), and to prefer a challenge (“To what extent do you think each of the following persons likes a challenge?”).

Finally, participants responded to two questions about their perception of the target’s level of self-control, “To what extent do you think each of the following persons has good self-control?” and “To what extent do you think each of the following persons has good self-discipline?” on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). These two items were strongly correlated in all conditions, $r_{high} = .57, r_{moderate} = .58, r_{low} = .63, r_{control} = .66, p < .001. Thus, we created a composite score of self-control using the mean of these two items for each level of self-control.

Results

Manipulation check. First, to assess whether our manipulation of self-control was successful, we performed a repeated-measures ANOVA treating self-control condition (high, moderate, low, control) as the within-subjects factor, and target self-control ratings as the dependent measure. As intended, the self-control manipulation significantly predicted participants’ perceived target self-control ratings, Greenhouse–Geisser, $F(3, 357) = 83.44, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .40$. Tests of means revealed that participants perceived the target who exhibited high self-control behavior ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.70$) to have higher self-control than the target who exhibited moderate self-control ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.79), $t(124) = 7.34, p < .001$, low self-control, ($M = 2.82, SD = 0.98), $t(124) =$...
14.43, \( p < .001 \), and the control target, \( M = 3.66, SD = 0.89 \), \( t(124) = 7.91, p < .001 \). The moderate self-control target and the control target were perceived to have higher self-control than the target who exhibited low self-control, \( t(124) = 8.26, p < .001 \) and \( t(124) = 8.32, p < .001 \), respectively. Finally, the target in the control condition was perceived to have a similar level of self-control as the target in the moderate self-control condition, \( p > .60 \).

**Primary analyses.** Because the outcome variable in these analyses—essay allocation—is proportional, we tested the effects of self-control on essay allocation using a nonparametric test. Using the Friedman test for nonparametric data, we observed a significant effect of target self-control on essay allocation, Friedman, \( \chi^2(3) = 49.26, p < .001 \). We were unable to compare the specific conditions to each other using this method because the Friedman test does not allow for contrast tests. We thus performed a repeated-measures ANOVA with self-control condition as the within-subjects factor. Consistent with our hypothesis and with the nonparametric test results, analyses revealed a significant difference in the number of essays allocated, Greenhouse–Geisser, \( F(3, 347) = 17.18, p < .001 \). Tests of means revealed that participants assigned greater number of essays to the target who exhibited high self-control (\( M = 2.86, SD = 0.67 \)) than the moderate self-control target, (\( M = 2.54, SD = 0.68 \)), \( t(124) = 3.37, p = .001 \), the low self-control target, (\( M = 2.16, SD = 0.63 \)), \( t(124) = 6.82, p < .001 \), and the target in the control condition, (\( M = 2.45, SD = 0.71 \)), \( t(124) = 4.25, p < .001 \). The target who exhibited moderate self-control and the target in the control condition were assigned a greater number of essays than the target who exhibited low self-control, (\( t(124) = 4.27, p < .001 \)) and \( t(124) = 3.06, p = .003 \), respectively. Finally, the target in the control condition received a similar number of essays as the target in the moderate self-control condition, \( p > .40 \).

**Auxiliary analyses.** Next, we examined whether our self-control manipulation affected participants’ perception of the targets’ other characteristics. Repeated-measure ANOVAs found no significant differences in participants’ perception of the target’s competence, \( p > .15 \). However, the manipulation did affect participants’ perception of the target’s likability, Greenhouse–Geisser, \( F(3, 346) = 7.02, p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .05 \), preference for challenge, Greenhouse–Geisser, \( F(3, 365) = 20.89, p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .14 \), and trustworthiness, Greenhouse–Geisser, \( F(3, 336) = 13.37, p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .10 \). However, including these variables as covariates, our self-control manipulation remained a significant predictor of essay allocation, \( F(3, 361) = 16.46, p < .001 \). Thus, this manipulation was not as successful as the manipulation in Studies 1 and 2, in that it also affected these other perceptions; nonetheless, the fact that our predicted effect emerges with or without the inclusion of these covariates suggests that it is not driven by any one of them. (Nonparametric tests do not handle linear covariates and thus we could not confirm these analyses using the Friedman test).

**Discussion**

Study 3’s findings provided support for our hypothesis that people ask more of those who display high (vs. low) self-control. As in Study 2, participants appeared to be sensitive to the levels of self-control in the manipulation, such that perception of self-control and the number of essays assigned increased linearly with the level of self-control exhibited by the target. That is, people asked more of high self-control targets than moderate self-control targets, and more of moderate self-control targets than low self-control targets. Results also suggested that levels of self-control could be readily inferred from different behavioral domains, suggesting that people’s lay theories of self-control are consistent with the field’s conceptualization of self-control as a general resource used for many kinds of goal pursuit (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). The findings here support the notion that people may rely more on others with high self-control, asking them to contribute more than their share of the work. This is a rational tendency on the part of observers, who expect that high self-control others will perform better (as shown in Studies 1 and 2), but the remaining studies in the manuscript explore the notion that this tendency may have some costs for those high in self-control.

**Study 4**

Studies 1 through 3 demonstrated that people expect more and ask more of others who are high (vs. low) in self-control. As a first step toward examining the notion that these tendencies may have interpersonal consequences, Study 4 explored how observers and actors might view perceptions of ease of goal pursuit for high and low self-control actors. We predicted that observers, based on their expectations that self-control facilitates goal pursuit, would perceive goal pursuit to be easier and less effortful for high (vs. low) self-control actors, or goal pursuers, to a greater extent than would actors. Thus, we speculated that we would find an asymmetry in observer’s perception of effort exerted by high and low self-control actors, such that observers would underestimate the effort that was required of actors to the extent that actors were perceived as having high self-control. Such a perception asymmetry could contribute to the effects we found in Studies 1 through 3, in which people asked and expected more of high self-control others.

Methodologically, Study 4 differed from Studies 1 through 3 in several ways. Instead of using a scenario such as the previous experiments, in Study 4, two naive participants were asked to either pursue a goal, or to evaluate the goal pursuer. In addition, unlike Studies 1 to 3, which used descriptions of self-control relevant behavior to manipulate observers’ perceptions of actors’ self-control, Study 4 manipulated observers’ perceptions by providing explicit information about actors’ self-control. Most important, we examined both the actors’ and observers’ perspectives in Study 4 as our first attempt to explore the dyadic processes that emerge from self-control perceptions in social interactions and relationships.

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2 Due to the nature of our study design, we were unable to conduct a mediation analysis examining the mediating role of perceived self-control on the relationship between the self-control manipulation and essay allocation using mediation methods such as the PROCESS model.

3 Due to missing data, the denominators of our repeated-measures analyses vary.

4 We used multilevel modeling to conduct this analysis because repeated-measures ANOVA did not allow analyses with all covariates.
Method

Participants. We recruited 81 undergraduate students to participate in a lab study in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement (M_age = 20.06, SD_age = 2.60, n_female = 59, 65% White, 11% Asian, 17% African American, 7% other). Due to an administrative error, one additional participant did not receive the experimental manipulation and was excluded from all analyses.

Materials and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the role of either the goal pursuer (e.g., the actor) or the observer. Participants in the pursuer condition were told that the purpose of the study was to examine how personality affects task performance; participants in the observer condition were told that the purpose of the study was to examine how people form impressions about others. Thus, participants in the two roles were led to believe that they were participating in two separate studies.

Procedure for goal pursuers. Participants assigned to the goal pursuer condition first completed a personality questionnaire that included the 13-item Trait Self-Control Scale (TT; Tangney et al., 2004; α = .79). In this scale, participants were asked to rate their agreement based on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly) with statements such as, “I have a hard time breaking bad habits” (reverse-coded) and “I have trouble concentrating” (reverse-coded). This measure of self-control has been used in a variety of populations and with different types of behavioral outcomes (de Ridder et al., 2012). For example, it has been shown to predict outcomes such as academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), eating behavior (Friese & Hofmann, 2009), accommodative tendencies in close relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), emotional responses (TT; Tangney et al., 2004), death thoughts accessibility and anxiety (Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006), intention to inflict physical harm (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007), and sexual constraint (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). Furthermore, this measure has been established as a validated measure that predicts performance on behavioral tests of self-control (Schmeichel & Zell, 2007). After completing the questionnaire, participants were told that we were interested in how well people complete tasks and how they think about those tasks once they are done. In particular, they were asked to retype two paragraphs taken from an introductory psychology textbook into a text box on the computer screen. While completing the typing task, participants were asked to avoid both typing the letter e and hitting the space bar. Previous research has shown that this task requires the use of self-control (Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). All participants were allotted 8 min on the typing task. After 8 min, the computer screen automatically advanced to the next page of the study. At this point, participants in the goal pursuer condition completed a seven-item questionnaire assessing the extent to which they found it difficult to complete the typing task, answering questions such as, “I thought the task was difficult” and “It took a lot of effort for me to follow the instructions” (see Appendix F, see supplemental material online; α = .81). All items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly).

Procedure for observers. The experimenter first explained that another student was working on a typing task in an adjacent lab room, and the observers’ goal was to assess how effortful the task was for this other student, as part of a study on forming impressions of others. The experimenter then explained to participants that they would be given some information about this other student and would do a small portion of the task to get a feel for it, before reporting their impressions. While participants typed out the first two sentences of the typing task, following the same rules as the goal pursuer (i.e., not typing the letter e or using the space bar), the experimenter left the room ostensibly to retrieve information from the other student.

After a few minutes, the experimenter returned with a scoring sheet and what appeared to be the responses to a scale labeled as measuring self-control. To facilitate the ease with which participants assigned to the observer role could interpret this information, we presented them with a slightly modified version of the Brief Trait Self-Control Scale (TT; Tangney et al., 2004) — it had 10 items (vs. 13 on the original scale) and no reverse-coded items (see Appendix G, see supplemental material online). The scoring sheet contained information about the ranges of scores that would reflect high and low self-control; this served as a comparison standard so that observers could get a sense of the other student’s relative level of self-control. The self-control scores shown to observers were in fact manipulated by the researchers to create a continuous range of low to high scores of self-control that reflected the approximate characteristics of the scores obtained by participants (after reverse coding items) in the goal pursuer condition.

Observers then completed the same seven-item questionnaire as goal pursuers assessing the extent to which they thought the goal pursuer found it difficult to complete the typing task, answering questions such as, “The other student thought the task was difficult” and “It took a lot of effort for the other student to follow the instructions” (α = .88). All items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly).

Results

To examine how difficult goal pursuers and observers thought the task was, we conducted a regression analysis on perceived effort with role (dummy coded as goal pursuer vs. observer), scores for self-control (standardized within role), and the two-way interaction between role and standardized self-control scores. The regression analysis revealed a significant main effect of role such that observers perceived the task as requiring less effort than did goal pursuers, β = −.49, t(76) = −5.23, p < .001, η² = .26. No main effect of self-control emerged, β = .01, t(76) = 0.10, p = .92. Consistent with our prediction, the interaction between role and self-control scores was significant, β = −.30, t(76) = −2.17, p = .03, η² = .06. Simple slope analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) revealed the predicted pattern (see Figure 1). As expected, among observers, perceived self-control negatively predicted perceived effort on the typing task, β = −.40, t(76) = −3.12, p = .003, η² = .12, such that observers estimated that less effort was needed for the typing task to the extent that the actors were perceived to have high (vs. low) self-control. Among actors, however, this relationship was not significant, β = .01, t(76) = 0.10, ns. Regardless of self-
control, goal pursuers found the task to require the same level of effort.\(^5\)

### Discussion

In Study 4, observers perceived goal pursuit to be significantly less effortful for pursuers who they believed to have relatively high (vs. low) self-control. In contrast, goal pursuers with high and low self-control found the task equally effortful. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the reported experience of goal pursuers and the presumptions made by observers, such that observers appear to underestimate the amount of effort that is expended and the difficulty of goal pursuit for pursuers who are seen as high in self-control. This discrepancy, we suggest, could potentially lead to conflict and resentment on the part of high self-control individuals, who may feel that others are downplaying their effort or failing to give them sufficient credit. It is important to note, however, that prior research has demonstrated that those who temporarily feel lower self-control resources do perceive tasks as more effortful (Hagger et al., 2010), which suggests that individuals with chronically high self-control resources may indeed perceive tasks as less effortful. Thus, we must interpret the current finding with caution until it is examined in future research. Such an asymmetry, along with observers’ higher performance expectations and tendency to assign greater workload to high self-control individuals, could lead high self-control individuals to feel a greater sense of burden from others. We explore this potential burden in Studies 5 and 6.

### Study 5

If people are asking and expecting more of high than low self-control partners, then high self-control partners are likely spending more time on others’ goal pursuits and joint goal pursuits, perhaps leaving less time and energy for their own pursuits. Study 5’s primary aim is to explore these ideas, examining the hypotheses that individuals high in self-control report making more sacrifices of their own goal pursuits for others, and report feeling more burdened by others, than do individuals low in self-control.

Study 5 also seeks to explore whether relationship partners agree about how much high and low individuals are burdened. It is possible, on the one hand, that people may recognize the sacrifice and burden that high self-control individuals experience but nonetheless continue to ask and expect more, given that they feel high self-control partners have sufficient capacity. In other words, people may know they are asking others to make a personal sacrifice to help with their goal pursuits, but feel it is acceptable because people with high self-control can handle the demands. On the other hand, it is also possible that people may not even recognize the sacrifice of and burden on high self-control partners. Just as they underestimate the effort expended by high (vs. low) self-control partners, they also may fail to see that these partners feel burdened.

We explored these ideas in a one-with-many design using a large sample of employees and their coworkers and managers. Data were collected through a 360-degree feedback survey, a widely used leadership exercise and performance appraisal tool (London & Smither, 1995). The survey collects ratings from the target person and a number of that person’s subordinates, peers, and supervisors about his or her performance and leadership qualities. By using the 360-degree feedback survey, Study 5 allowed us to examine multiple partners’ perspectives on the target, and also allowed us to capture these dynamics in everyday work relationships without experimental manipulation.

### Method

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 424 incoming students in a master’s of business administration (MBA) program who participated in the 360-degree feedback survey, and their supervisors and coworkers (\(M_\text{age} = 29.58, SD = 12.38, 38\% \text{ female}, 64\% \text{ White}, 21\% \text{ Asian}, 15\% \text{ other})\). The incoming students are the “target” participants in our analyses, whereas supervisors, peers, and coworkers are “observers.” Participants worked in a diverse range of professional industries, including sales and marketing (28\%), finance (17\%), general management (12\%), and others (43\%, e.g., research and design, engineering, human resource, manufacturing, accounting). Of the 424 target participants, we were unable to identify the role of the rater (i.e., target vs. observer) because of a computer program error for nine participants; another 12 did not provide observer ratings. Thus, our analyses included responses from a final sample of 403 target participants, and 2,266 observers, leaving a total of 2,669 observations for analyses. On average, 5.62 observers provided ratings for each participant.

**Materials and procedure.** Incoming MBA students completed the 360-degree feedback survey as a personal growth and leadership exercise. The survey was e-mailed to students while they were still employed at their pre-MBA companies before they arrived on campus to begin their studies. Survey completion was not required for class, and participants received no credit or com-

\(^5\) In creating observer materials, we attempted to mimic the range of the goal pursuer self-control scale, to make the two variables as comparable as possible. Indeed, means were nearly identical (\(M = 3.48 \text{ vs. } M = 3.49\)). However, due to experimenter error, the observer condition had higher variability (\(SD = 1.05\)) than the goal pursuer condition (\(SD = 0.60\)). Variables were thus standardized within role before use in all analyses. To ensure that effects did not depend on differences in variability, we conducted a separate set of analyses, in which we excluded the 22 observers who were mistakenly given scores outside the range of the pursuers’ actual responses. In this analysis, the link between observers’ perceived self-control and effort remained strong (\(\beta = -.38 \text{ vs. } \beta = -.40\) with the full dataset).
pensation; it was recommended by faculty as a way for students to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Incoming students were asked to send the questionnaire link to multiple coworkers, peers, and supervisors within their companies; these observers completed the same questionnaire as the target participant, but with reference only to the target participant. Observers knew that their feedback would be shared with the target in an aggregated, anonymized fashion. Within the larger (92-item) survey, which primarily focused on leadership qualities, participants completed three items of relevance to the current hypothesis; these items tapped self-control, personal sacrifice, and burden. All items were measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (almost always). Self-control was measured by the item “I have (X has) good self-control.” Sacrifice was measured by the item “I make (X makes) personal sacrifices for the good of the team.” Burden was measured by the item “I feel (X feels) burdened by how much I (h/she) need(s) to do for the team.”

Results

The target’s view. First, we examined whether targets’ self-control predicted their reports of sacrifice and burden by regressing sacrifice and burden onto self-control in two separate multiple regression analyses. Consistent with our predictions, analyses revealed that targets’ self-control positively predicted their reports of sacrifice, $\beta = .24, SE = .05, p < .001$, and burden, $\beta = .14, SE = .06, p = .03$. Thus, individuals with higher self-control reported making sacrifices for their work team and feeling burdened by the team to a greater extent than did individuals with lower self-control.

The observers’ view. Second, we sought to explore the observers’ perspective on target sacrifice and burden. Because data from the observers are nested within a group, we conducted these analyses using a multilevel modeling approach (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This technique accounts for the nonindependence of observations by simultaneously examining variance associated with each level of nesting. Following Raudenbush and Bryk’s (2002) recommendations, we represented intercept terms as random effects and slope terms as fixed effects. We analyzed our data using the proc mixed procedure in SAS. We conducted three sets of analyses to explore the relationship between actor self-control and observer ratings of target and burden: (1) using the target’s own report of self-control (a level two variable), (2) using each observer’s report of target self-control (a level one variable), and (3) using the mean of the observers’ reports of target self-control (a level two variable).

First, we first examined whether the target’s report of his or her own self-control predicted the observers’ mean rating of target sacrifice and burden. This analysis tests whether individuals who perceive themselves as higher in self-control tend to be perceived by others as sacrificing more and experiencing more burden. Following Raudenbush and Bryk’s (2002) recommendations, we treated targets’ self-control as a Level 2 predictor and observers’ reports of target sacrifice and burden as Level 1 variables. We grand-mean-centered the Level 2 variable and group-mean-centered the Level 1 variables. Analyses revealed that targets’ ratings of their own self-control did not predict observers’ report that the targets made sacrifices for the good of team, $\beta = .03, SE = .03, p = .26$, nor observers’ report that the targets felt burdened by the team, $\beta = -.02, SE = .05, p = .61$. Thus, individuals who perceived themselves as higher in self-control were not seen by their peers, coworkers, and supervisors as making greater sacrifices or feeling greater burden.

Second, we next examined whether each observer’s rating of target self-control predicted their reports of target sacrifice and burden. This analysis tests whether individuals who are seen by others as having higher self-control tend to be seen by those others as making more sacrifices and experiencing more burden. Observers’ ratings of target self-control positively predicted their report that the target makes sacrifices for the good of the team, $\beta = .42, SE = .03, p < .001$. However, their ratings of target self-control did not predict their report that the target felt burdened by the team, $\beta = .01, SE = .04, p = .79$. Thus, when observers perceived others as high in self-control, they saw those others as making greater sacrifices for the team, but they did not see them as feeling burdened by the team.

Finally, we examined whether the mean of the observer ratings of target self-control predicted mean reports of target sacrifice and burden. The mean of the observer ratings is a Level 2 variable; it captures how people, on average, view the target. Thus, this analysis tests whether individuals who are broadly seen as higher in self-control tend to be perceived as making more sacrifices and experiencing more burden. Following Raudenbush and Bryk’s (2002) recommendations, we treated the mean observer rating as a Level 2 variable and observer ratings of target sacrifice and burden as Level 1 variables. We grand-mean-centered the Level 2 variable and group-mean-centered the Level 1 variables. The mean rating of target self-control positively predicted observers’ report that the target made sacrifices for the good of the team, $\beta = .37, SE = .04, p < .001$, but did not predict observers’ report that the target felt burdened by the team, $\beta = -.03, SE = .08, p = .68$. This analysis replicates the second analysis, finding that individuals who are generally seen by others as being higher in self-control tend to be viewed as making greater sacrifices, but not as experiencing greater burden, than those seen as being lower in self-control.

Discussion

In Study 5, we explored whether similar dynamics to those explored within Studies 1 through 4’s experimental and laboratory settings emerged in real, everyday relationships among coworkers in a diverse array of work settings. As predicted, employees who saw themselves as high in self-control reported that they made more sacrifices for their coworkers than did employees who saw themselves as low in self-control. More important, they also reported that they felt a greater sense of burden from these work relationships than did those individuals low in self-control. Thus, in everyday life, people with high self-control experienced some interpersonal costs—they took on more work for the team and they felt more burdened by their teams. Feeling like one is sacrificing and feeling burdened by the team likely reduces satisfaction at work, and perhaps even job performance in the long run.

The consequences may be especially negative if the burden goes unrecognized by others, as tentatively suggested by these findings. With all three measures of target self-control, we found a discrepancy between targets and observers. Analyses using two of the three measures showed that observers also saw targets with high self-control as making more sacrifices for the team, but none of the
three analyses showed that observers saw targets with high self-control as experiencing a greater sense of burden. It seems that even if observers noted the sacrifices that individuals with high self-control were making, they may conclude that those individuals are not bothered by going the extra mile. Thus, at best, these findings suggest that observers are only partially aware of the strain they are placing on individuals with high self-control.

**Study 6**

Study 5 provided evidence that there may be some negative consequences for high self-control individuals in the workplace. Targets high in self-control reported making more personal sacrifices for the good of their work team and feeling burdened by how much they do for their coworkers. Study 6 had two major purposes. First, we aimed to explore whether our hypotheses are relevant in the context of close relationships. Study 5 examined relationships with coworkers and supervisors in the workplace, and Studies 1 to 4 used a mix of hypothetical targets and laboratory partners. We believe that the same processes also are likely to emerge within very close relationships; thus, in Study 6, we examined dynamics within close relationships, namely, romantic relationship partners.

Second, we aimed to further explore the downstream consequences of the tendency for people to rely more on high self-control partners than on low self-control partners. In particular, Study 6 tested a mediational model of the role of self-control and reliance, exploring the links between self-control, reliance, fatigue, and relationship satisfaction. We predicted that self-control would positively predict reports of partners’ reliance, which in turn would predict a feeling of fatigue from helping partners, which would negatively predict relationship satisfaction.

Past research has made it clear that overall, individuals who are high in self-control tend to report that their relationships with others are more satisfying, perhaps because of the more positive interactions that result when people have better control over their reactions to interpersonal transgressions (Vohs et al., 2011). We expected to replicate that positive overall association between self-control and relationship satisfaction. The scale asked participants to report their agreement based on 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale with statements such as, “People would say I have iron self-discipline” and “I am good at resisting temptation.” Internal consistency for this scale was high (α = .80). Two items measured the extent to which individuals felt that their partners relied on them on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) scale: “In general, my partner depends strongly on me for help with his or her goals,” and “In general, I am a real source of strength for my partner in pursuing his or her goals.” The two items were highly correlated, r = .58, p < .001. One item measured the extent to which individuals felt fatigued by providing this help to their partners on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) scale: “Sometimes I feel tired by having to help my partner with his or her goals.” Finally, Rusbult’s five-item relationship satisfaction measure (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) served as our measure of relationship satisfaction. The scale asks participants to rate their agreement based on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale with statements such as, “I feel satisfied with our relationship” and “My relationship is close to ideal.” Internal consistency of the scale was high (α = .86). Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all constructs are presented in Table 1.

**Results**

**Primary analyses.** We tested a mediation model examining the effects of trait self-control on partner reliance, partner reliance on fatigue, and fatigue on relationship satisfaction (see Figure 2). We employed a structural equation modeling approach using Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) to estimate the models required for the test of the total effect of trait self-control on relationship satisfaction and our specific mediated effect. This approach allowed for the test of the hypothesized mediated effect that was transmitted through two sequential mediators and a comparison of the mediated effect to the total effect. Because we used

<table>
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*Note. N = 278. When appropriate, coefficient alpha or composite reliability estimates are listed on the diagonal. The intercorrelations are based on the scale scores of the variables.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
data from both partners in a relationship, we conducted our analyses at the individual level but controlled for clustering at the couple level. In particular, couple level nesting of data was controlled using the CLUSTER = COUPLE command in Mplus, which corrects the standard errors according to the intraclass correlations among couples. This hierarchical clustering of persons within couples was controlled so as to yield accurate tests of inference (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We used missing data estimation techniques in our models such that partially complete data were included in the analysis under the missing-at-random assumption; less than 5% of participants had missing scores on any single variable. Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) estimation was employed which is robust to nonnormality and nonindependence of observations when used with the TYPE = COMPLEX command in Mplus.

Our first model estimated the total effect of trait self-control on relationship satisfaction. This model was just identified therefore no overall fit statistics were produced. A significant total effect was observed (β = .14, SE = .06, p = .02), indicating that individuals with high trait self-control reported being more satisfied with their relationships. Next, we estimated the model that included the two hypothesized mediators of reliance from partner and fatigue from reliance. This model exhibited adequate overall fit, χ²(2) = 4.26, ns; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07, comparative fit index (CFI) = .93, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .04. As predicted, self-control positively predicted reliance from partner such that individuals with high self-control reported feeling as if their partners relied on them to a greater extent than did individuals with low self-control (β = .17, SE = .06, p = .008). In turn, reliance from partner positively predicted fatigue such that individuals whose partners relied on them more reported feeling a greater sense of burden due to that reliance (β = .21, SE = .06, p = .001). Finally, fatigue from reliance negatively predicted relationship satisfaction such that individuals who experienced more fatigue from partner reliance were less satisfied with their relationships (β = −.23, SE = .06, p < .001). With the inclusion of these mediators, a significant direct effect from self-control to relationship satisfaction still existed (β = .13, SE = .06, p < .05), showing that in addition to the negative mediated effect of self-control on relationship satisfaction that is transmitted through reliance and burden, a positive effect of self-control on relationship satisfaction also exists (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Graphical representation of the mediation model in Study 6. On the lower path, the coefficient inside the bracket indicates the direct relationship between trait self-control and relationship satisfaction; the coefficient outside the bracket indicates the effect of trait self-control on relationship satisfaction after controlling for partner reliance and fatigue. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

The joint significance test (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheats, 2002), a test of mediation in which all paths in a causal chain are examined for significance, was used to evaluate the hypothesized mediated effect. Taylor, MacKinnon, and Tein (2008) showed that the joint significance is the preferred test for three-path mediated effects—effects transmitted through two sequential mediators—when the test of a specific hypothesis is of interest. Using this criterion, we find support for our hypothesis that a negative effect of self-control on relationship satisfaction was transmitted through greater reliance from one’s partner and subsequent fatigue.

Secondary analyses. Although the primary purpose in this paper was to examine how people generally respond to individuals with high self-control, the current study provides the opportunity to also test whether the self-control of the partner moderates these effects. Thus, using an actor–partner interaction model (APIM) in multilevel modeling (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), we tested whether the strength of these actor effects of self-control on reliance or fatigue depended on the level of their partner’s self-control. We found no significant interaction of actor and partner self-control on reliance (b = −.19, p = .20) or fatigue (b = .08, p = .71). Further, we found no significant partner effect on reliance (b = −.19, p = .11) or fatigue (b = .05, p = .78). The APIM approach replicated the significant actor effect on reliance (b = .34, p = .005).

Discussion

The primary results from Study 6 suggest that the tendency to ask and expect more of partners with high self-control than those with low self-control may indeed have interpersonal consequences. In particular, compared to those with relatively low self-control, high self-control romantic partners reported being relied on more, which in turn predicted their feelings of fatigue to a greater extent. Finally, a known interpersonal benefit of high self-control—higher relationship satisfaction (Vohs et al., 2011)—was lessened to the extent that high self-control individuals felt burdened by their partner’s reliance. Individuals with high self-control tend to be happier with their relationships (Vohs et al., 2011), with their jobs (Siedor, vanDellen, & Carter, 2014), and with their lives in general (Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014), and our findings suggest that they would be even happier if they did not feel burdened by others’ reliance.

In secondary analyses, we explored the dyadic perspective. Prior research has demonstrated that low self-control partners evaluate high self-control partners more positively and feel greater psychological dependence on those partners (Shea et al., 2013). And it seems quite logical that high self-control actors would feel particularly burdened by low self-control partners, who would have greater need for the kind of help and support that high self-control allows. We thus expected that high self-control actors would feel particularly burdened when they had low self-control partners. However, we did not find evidence for this interaction, instead finding that high self-control actors feel equally burdened whether their partners are low or high in self-control. We were surprised by this null finding. The data appear to suggest that high self-control individuals perceive that they are relied on and burdened equally by low and high self-control partners. It is possible that this reflects a biased view by high self-control individuals—perhaps they as-
sume their utility to all partners, regardless of actual need. Given that Study 6 provides only one test of this interaction, however, we cannot state definite conclusions about the true relationship between actor and partner self-control in actor perceptions of burden.

**General Discussion**

In everyday life, people rely on others to achieve their goals. Bosses rely on their subordinates to accomplish delegated work, of course, but coworkers, classmates, friends, romantic partners, and family members also rely on each other for support and assistance with goal pursuit. And despite the lack of psychological research on factors that predict how much people rely on any specific other, everyday life experience suggests that not all people are relied on equally. In any given academic department, some faculty members are asked to serve on more committees, and in any given family, some family members are expected to host more holiday parties. Although many factors likely predict who is asked to do what (e.g., collegiality; cooking skills), the current research suggests that one robust predictor of being relied on is being high in self-control: People tend to rely more on—to expect and ask more of—others with high self-control. They also view the work of others with high self-control as easier and requiring less effort. Furthermore, the current research suggests that despite their capable nature, people high in self-control feel burdened by others’ reliance.

Across six studies, we found evidence for four related hypotheses about the interpersonal dynamics of self-control and reliance. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that observers had higher performance expectations for target with high (vs. low) levels of self-control, and Study 3 found that observers assigned greater workloads to targets with high (vs. low) levels of self-control. Study 4 showed that observers viewed high self-control targets as expending less effort on a draining task, believing that the task was easier and less effortful for high self-control targets. More important, though, participants actually working on the task found it equally difficult and draining, regardless of their own self-control. And finally, in two correlational studies of ongoing relationships, we found that individuals high (vs. low) in self-control report feeling fatigued and burdened as a result of doing more than his share of reviews, just as our romantic partners in Study 6 felt less satisfied with their relationships to the extent that they felt fatigued from helping their partner.

Indeed, research in organizational behavior has suggested that a large number of high performing employees are overworked, burned out, and dissatisfied with their work (Oldroyd & Morris, 2012). The current findings may provide one reason for this phenomenon if it can be assumed that these high performing employees are also high in self-control. Managers may assign greater workload, hold higher expectations, and underestimate the energy and effort required for high self-control employees to accomplish a task. These dynamics may result in management failure to recognize and reward high self-control employees to the extent that it is commensurate with their investment of resources. And thus, over time, these dynamics may increase the likelihood that employees who are high in self-control come to feel burned out and unhappy at work. Likewise, high self-control spouses may take on more and more of the domestic responsibilities over time, and the burden of this extra work may go relatively unnoticed by their partners, who may assume they can handle it and even thrive on it.

On the other hand, even the potential costs we have demonstrated here may have corresponding benefits. Although those with high self-control report feeling fatigued and burdened by others’ reliance, we suspect that they may also feel more respected and valued by others. They may also enjoy others’ high expectations because it makes work perhaps optimally challenging. They may even attain better goal outcomes and ultimately aim higher themselves as a result of others’ high expectations. Thus, these dynamics of reliance could feed into high self-control individuals’ cycle of success, even as they perpetuate feelings of burden.

In this article, we emphasized the implications for high self-control partners, but of course, our analyses reflect equally on low self-control partners. Our studies showed that people ask and expect less of partners with low (vs. high) self-control, and that low self-control partners feel less fatigued and less burdened as a result. The findings suggest that people may give their low self-control partners somewhat of a free pass. This tendency could emerge for practical reasons (i.e., if you want something done, do not ask someone with low capacity) but it could also emerge for compassionate reasons (i.e., if you see someone struggling, do not add to their troubles). The tendency to have low self-control certainly leads to poorer outcomes both individually and socially, as it is well established in the literature, but these findings suggest a tiny silver lining—to the extent that low self-control is visible by others, they may ask and expect less of you. Of course, the corresponding benefits for those high in self-control we speculated about in the previous paragraph would be corresponding costs for those low in self-control—people low in self-control may not feel as respected by others, and may be less ambitious, given others’ low expectations.

**Implications for People High and Low in Self-Control**

The current findings do not negate the fact that high self-control leads to good personal and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Baumeister & Alquist, 2009; Zabelina, Robinson & Anicha, 2007), but suggest that there are some downsides to having high self-control. Individuals with high self-control may feel tired, annoyed, and perhaps even resentful of the fact that others ask and expect more of them. The reviewer who is thanked for a timely review by the prompt receipt of another review request likely feels more burdened by service to the field than the reviewer who turns in a review a month late, and is not asked for another for months. The timely reviewer may even come to feel more negatively about the field as a result of doing more than his share of reviews, just as our romantic partners in Study 6 felt less satisfied with their relationships to the extent that they felt fatigued from helping their partner.

**Future Directions**

Given prior research on the positive outcomes of high self-control individuals (e.g., Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Shoda et al., 1990; Tangney et al., 2004), our findings may seem counterintuitive at first glance. High self-control should promote the tendency to regulate oneself effectively
to avoid both underperformance and overburden. Thus, individuals with high self-control, it seems, should be able to regulate their own actions to attain the optimal balance of effort. So why do our participants allow themselves to become overburdened? One possibility is that we have captured dynamics that are relatively short-term, and that over longer stretches of time in stable relationship settings, this tendency may weaken, as those high in self-control learn to manage the situation to avoid burden. For instance, high self-control partners may exit relationships with heavily reliant partners, learn to say no to demands, or develop strategies to mitigate the feelings of burden. Future research exploring these phenomena over time could thus be particularly fruitful.

Exploring moderators of these effects would also be useful. Partners who are low in agreeableness seem to be unlikely targets for extra work and higher expectations, given the likelihood that such partners would refuse and/or complain. Thus, it may well be the combination of agreeableness and self-control that leads to the greatest overreliance. For example, the reviewer who agrees to a large number of reviews and then does them promptly is likely to be doubly rewarded with extra requests. If agreeableness were found to moderate the association between self-control and reliance, it would point to the role of relational and cooperative tendencies in our findings. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that self-control promotes altruism and other-oriented tendencies (Seeley & Gardner, 2003). Thus, this may partly account for the current findings: People high in self-control may prioritize their relationships with others over protecting their own time and energy. So what appears to be a “failure” to effectively self-regulate may instead reflect a difference in priorities.

Finally, it would be valuable in future research to disentangle the effect of actors’ self-control and their actual goal outcomes on observers’ expectations and reliance. A limitation of some of our experimental studies is that self-control and likelihood of success are confounded. Although the two are often related in everyday life, they are certainly distinct, and it would be useful to compare their two roles in interpersonal relationships. Do people rely on successful others whose success is due to chance factors or talent, but who display low self-control? Do they rely on unsuccessful others whose failure is due to chance or lack of talent, but who display high self-control? Future research should examine how others treat individuals whose self-control does not result in personal success.

Conclusions

The findings reported here raise an intriguing question about whether revealing high levels of self-control is in people’s best interest. Although high self-control comes with more trust and liking from others (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), it also comes with more work and higher expectations. If so, it may be wise to avoid gratuitous displays of self-control in some situations. For example, if employees want to minimize how much work they are asked to take home over the weekend, they may want to rethink those “26.2” bumper stickers.

References


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