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Dynamics of self-control in egocentric social networks

Michelle R. vanDellen [a,*], Matthew K. Meisel [b], Bridget P. Lynch [a]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, United States
[b] Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Brown University School of Public Health, United States

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ABSTRACT

People with high self-control have frequent short-term and long-term goal success. These successes stem from both reactive and proactive self-regulatory processes, including maneuvering their social relationships to interact more frequently with other people who are also high in self-control. One implication of this idea is that higher levels of self-control should mark the social networks of people with high self-control. The present study tested and found support for this hypothesis. Furthermore, within networks (a) friends with high self-control were more likely to be connected to each other (i.e., homophily) and (b) friends with relatively high (vs. low) self-control were more valued by participants, and particularly by participants with high self-control. The results provide external validity for the idea that individuals with high self-control are more likely to find themselves in and prefer social situations that are characterized by high self-control. These effects may be a result of network contagion or they may reflect strategic development of social networks that support self-control and goal outcomes.

Trait self-control represents chronic tendencies to override prepotent responses in favor of long-term goal outcomes (Hoyle & Davisson, 2016; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). People high in self-control have better mental and physical health outcomes, happier relationships, and more success in academics and careers (Boals, vanDellen, & Banks, 2011; Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Moffitt et al., 2011; Tangney et al., 2004). Presumably, self-control promotes these positive outcomes because people with high self-control are better at resisting temptations that block pursuit of their relational, academic, career, and health goals than are people with low self-control. Indeed, high self-control is associated with resisting temptations (Schmeichel & Zell, 2007; cf., Imhoff, Schmidt, & Gerstenberg, 2014).

Trait self-control is also associated with a broader set of skills useful for pursuing diverse goals (Fujita, 2011; Galla & Duckworth, 2015; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012). Thus, measures of trait self-control seem to assess whether people are generally skilled at self-regulation more broadly—their ability to effectively set, pursue, and monitor goals (Hoyle & Davisson, 2016; Fujita, 2011)—rather than simply whether they are good at the particular strategy of resisting temptations. Moreover, although state self-control is often conceptualized as a reactive process, (e.g., Kotabe & Hofmann, 2015; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009), effective self-control involves *proactive* processes (Fujita, 2011; Hofmann et al., 2012). For example, people with high trait self-control avoid temptations (Ent, Baumeister, & Tice, 2015; Imhoff et al., 2014). Thus, people with high trait self-control may give in to temptations less, not only because they can resist them but also because they maneuver their lives to avoid them in the first place. In addition to changing the frequency of exposure to temptations, trait self-control is associated with changing one's context in order to make resisting temptations easier (vanDellen, Beam, & Fitzsimons, in press). For example, people with high self-control who were preparing to complete a regulatory task showed stronger preferences for partners likely to motivate and contribute to success on that task (vanDellen, Shah, Leander, Delose, & Bornstein, 2015).

1. Self-control and social networks

A growing body of research suggests considering self-control as an interpersonal set of these proactive and reactive processes. For instance, people react to the goals and goal-directed behavior of others who are physically present or psychologically salient (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004; Dik & Aarts, 2007; Shah, 2003). Likewise, people are more likely to engage in self-control themselves when someone else who is chronically high in self-control is salient (vanDellen & Hoyle, 2010). Friends and collaborators can also make it easier to engage in joint goal pursuit (Finkel et al., 2006; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010) and increase motivation to engage in shared goal pursuits (Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011).

People tend to value and trust relationship partners who are high in self-control (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Shea, Davisson, & Fitzsimons, 2013; vanDellen et al., 2015; Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). These preferences for relationship partners with high self-control are malleable: some situations increase preferences whereas others decrease them (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: mvd@uga.edu (M.R. vanDellen).

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Individual differences are also related to preferences for relationship partners higher in self-control. Most notably, trait self-control predicts the magnitude of preferences for relationship partners high in trait self-control (vanDellen et al., 2015).

Why might people with high self-control prefer others who are also high in self-control? One possibility is that similarity drives these preferences (Byrne, 1961). People with high self-control may report having more networks members with high self-control because they tend to like other people who are similar to them. Evidence of this idea also emerges in studies of homophily—people tend to know and associate with others who are like them (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Similarity among friends tends to be driven by selection processes in situations where people are free to select their friends (Kandel, 1978) but similarity may be more likely to emerge due to peer influence in constrained social contexts (e.g., isolated academic cohorts; de Klepper, Sleebos, van de Bunt, & Agneessens, 2010).

If similarity is the only factor driving preferences for others with self-control, we would expect individuals with high self-control to like others with high self-control more than others with low self-control. Likewise, we would expect individuals with low self-control to like others with low self-control more than others with high self-control. Instead, prior research suggests people with high self-control are generally valued (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; vanDellen et al., 2015). As this general preference for others with self-control combines with expectations based on similarity, we might expect to see all (or most) individuals show a preference for others with high self-control, and for these preferences to be particularly strong among individuals who have high self-control themselves. Although this pattern may emerge solely due to similarity, individuals with high self-control may prefer others with high self-control not only incidentally (i.e., due to similarity) but also strategically, because they are more likely to maneuver through their social relationships to maintain or increase their likelihood of reaching goals. Some evidence supporting these preferences as strategic in addition to incidental comes from the fact that in prior work, trait self-control was associated with greater preferences for collaborators high (vs. low) in self-control even though trait self-control was not associated with different degrees of liking each collaborator (vanDellen et al., 2015). Furthermore, preferences for others high in self-control were stronger among individuals with high self-control only when there was a specific need for help.

Preferences for relationship partners based on self-control (both relationship seeker and potential partner) are generally investigated in laboratory paradigms and brief interactions to assess shift in preferences (Shea et al., 2013; vanDellen et al., 2015). A target is presented as having high, average, or low self-control, and participants evaluate that target. To date, findings differ as to whether it is individuals with high or low self-control who demonstrate stronger preferences for relationship partners high in self-control (Shea et al., 2013; vanDellen et al., 2015). Exploring preferences for relationship partners in naturally-occurring social networks allows for an examination of these preferences across many relationships, including friends, acquaintances, and significant others, and may clarify these mixed findings.

2. The present study

We used an egocentric social network analysis to test hypotheses related to preferences for friends with high self-control. Although some studies investigated closeness to romantic relationship partners (Shea et al., 2013) and valuation of a recent acquaintance (vanDellen et al., 2015), research has not yet assessed preferences for and closeness to many relationship partners in participants' everyday lives as a function of self-control. In social network paradigms, participants report on a large—rather than narrow—number of their friends and acquaintances, addressing this limitation of previous research. In the present study, we asked participants to identify friends and report on the connections between those friends. Additionally, participants reported on their own attributes as well as attributes of each network member.

Data collected in a social network analysis allow for an examination of interpersonal preferences in a variety of ways. Preferences emerge in the likelihood that an acquaintance or friend perceived to have high self-control is named in the social network. Additionally, participants report whether friends are connected to each other, allowing for an investigation of friends' preferences. Finally, participants can evaluate social network members. In this study, we asked participants to report their closeness to and perceived value of each social network member. We test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. People with high self-control will generate social networks with higher average self-control levels. If participants' trait self-control affects with whom they spend time in the real world, participants with high self-control should report network members with higher levels of self-control. Thus, on average, their networks should have higher perceived trait self-control.

Hypothesis 2. Social networks will be characterized by homophily of self-control. If people tend to associate with others with similar levels of self-control, we should also see evidence of homophily in the networks. That is, participants should be more likely to say that their friends know each other when those friends share similar levels of self-control.

Hypothesis 3. Participants will value and feel closer to friends they perceive as high in self-control. We expect friends' self-control to be related to valuing that friend (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; vanDellen et al., 2015). Value may be expressed in related but potentially different ways: through reported relational closeness and directly through perceived value (Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Shea et al., 2013).

Hypothesis 4. The association between friend self-control and value (i.e., value, closeness) will be moderated by participant self-control. Preferences for friends with high self-control may be a means by which high self-control individuals chronically support their goal-pursuits, an idea not yet tested in the context of broad social networks. Thus, in addition to reporting social networks characterized by greater levels of self-control (H1), participants with high (vs. low) self-control should also demonstrate stronger preferences *within* their networks—valuing friends with relatively high (vs. low) self-control.

3. Exploratory questions

In addition to considering these hypotheses, we explored questions related to them. First, we considered the potential distinction between friends and romantic partners. Not all participants reported having a romantic partner but several (25.5% did). Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4, were accordingly examined by considering participants' romantic partner. Second, we considered the question of how unique self-control might be in affecting social network dynamics. That is, we asked whether participants with more self-control might be more likely to value any positive trait (i.e., not just self-control) in others. Because this was a secondary research question, the study was not designed to examine it. However, because the study was conducted for multiple purposes (see Footnote 1), collected data permit an exploration of this question. Specifically, all participants were asked how much they thought their network members would be likely to tell other people positive information about the participant. In other words, how likely would their friends be to promote the participant. Although not a traditional personality trait, this surely reflects a positive quality in friends by providing potential self-enhancement and support (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Tesser & Moore, 1990; Wills, 1981). Finally, we examined the potential moderating role of gender.