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Short Communication

Examining trait self-control and communication patterns in romantic couples using the actor-partner interaction model

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ABSTRACT

High self-control is associated with positive relationship outcomes. The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between self-control and communication patterns between romantic partners. Dyadic data analyses revealed main effects of actor and partner self-control on mutually constructive communication and demand/withdraw. Additionally, an interaction between actor and partner self-control was related to mutual avoidance. These findings suggest self-control may be related to better communication abilities within relationships, providing one potential explanation for the association of self-control with better relationship outcomes.

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Trait self-control refers to the ability to override dominant—or automatic—responses that hinder long term-goal pursuit (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Trait self-control is associated with greater likelihood of resisting temptations and beginning challenging tasks (Hoyle & Davisson, 2016; Schmeichel & Zell, 2007). The ability to override dominant responses is associated with good outcomes. Individuals with above average self-control have better health, wealth, and public safety outcomes later on in life (Boals, vanDellen, & Banks, 2011; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Moffitt et al., 2011).

1. Benefits of self-control for relationships

Although self-control is an individual difference relevant to individual outcomes, research suggests self-control affects relational outcomes (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). People with high self-control are perceived as more trustworthy and reliable (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Alternatively, people with low (vs. high) self-control compromise less (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Relationship partners report increasing satisfaction as the duo's combined self-control increases (Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). One known mechanism by which self-control facilitates relationship satisfaction is through improving goal outcomes of the partner (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

2. Self-control and communication in relationships

One understudied way trait self-control might improve relationship outcomes is through its relation to communication about conflict. Discussions of conflict are often unpleasant (Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003), and individuals' dominant responses may be to avoid them. Furthermore, during conflict, feelings of blame and guilt often lead individuals to lash out or withdraw from communication (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Trait self-control may predict communication patterns because it involves initiating difficult tasks (Hoyle & Davisson, 2016); people with high self-control may be more willing to address conflicts before they fester undiscussed. Additionally, one domain of self-control is emotion regulation—managing feelings and expression of emotions (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Gross, 2002; Jiang, Zhang, & Tjosvold, 2013). Although emotion regulation is correlated with self-control (e.g., Tangney et al., 2004), the two represent distinct constructs. Certainly, managing one's emotions involves self-control but not all aspects of emotion regulation require self-control and not all self-control requires managing emotions. Emotion regulation has been implicated in positive communication patterns between romantic relationship partners (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008; Zeidner & Kloda, 2013), suggesting trait self-control may also be related to better communication between partners.

Communication during conflict can take many forms (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). One beneficial form of conflict communication is mutually constructive discussion involving discussion of feelings and resolutions to problems. Negative patterns of communication during conflict involve demand/withdraw (e.g., actor persistently places demands on partner and partner steps back from communication) and mutual avoidance (both partners avoid discussion of conflict). Self-control is

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potentially related to each of these patterns. During a conflict, self-control might help override the desire to criticize the partner. Additionally, self-control might help people prioritize the long-term relationship benefits afforded by discussing the conflict instead of withdrawing. Moreover, resisting the influence of emotions during a conflict might promote constructive communication. Although the present study did not investigate relationship satisfaction, communication patterns do predict relationship outcomes (Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Milbury & Badr, 2013; Weger, 2005), suggesting that communication patterns may partially account for the link between self-control and relationship satisfaction.

3. The present study

Relationship processes by which trait self-control promotes positive relationship outcomes have been relatively unexplored. We investigated the relationship between self-control and communication patterns, predicting trait self-control to be positively associated with mutually constructive communication and negatively associated with demand/withdraw and mutually avoidant communication patterns. Partner self-control may also promote better communication patterns and the best outcomes might exist when both members have high self-control (i.e., a synergistic interaction). Thus, we used a dyadic approach, investigating both one's own (i.e., actor) and one's partner's self-control. Given that we collected data from both members of the dyad, the data lent themselves to analyses using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM, cites). In this approach, simultaneous effects of both members of the dyad can be examined (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Actor effects represent relationships between an individual's characteristic (e.g., trait self-control) and another construct (e.g., communication patterns). Partner effects represent a relationship between one's partner's report of the same individual difference factor (e.g., one's partner's self-control) and one's own report of the secondary construct (e.g., one's own perception of communication patterns). When actor and partner effects emerge as significant, they represent unique variance above and beyond the other. In this study, we predicted effects of both actor and partner self-control on communication patterns.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Participants were 38 married or cohabiting couples from a small city in the southeastern United States. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 59 years ($M = 30.21$, $SD = 4.91$). Most participants (N = 67) reported European descent with others reporting being African American (N = 3), Hispanic (N = 2), Native American (N = 1), and mixed race (N = 3). Married or cohabiting couples were eligible to participate. All couples enrolled in the study consisted included one male and one female; both members of one couple indicated being bisexual.

4.2. Procedure

Couples completed two discussion tasks in a campus laboratory (because these interaction tasks did not involve conflict they are not discussed in the present manuscript). Following the discussions, participants privately completed measures assessing personality and relationship variables.

4.3. Measures

4.3.1. Self-control

Participants answered 13 items measuring self-control using the scale 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*) (Tangney et al., 2004).

4.3.2. Communication

Communication patterns during conflict were measured using the 35-item Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ, Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). Participants responded using 1 (*very unlikely*) to 9 (*very likely*) scale. We calculated subscales following the recommendations of Christensen and Sullaway (1984). Six items contributed to the demand/withdraw subscale, three items to the mutual avoidance subscale, and seven items to the mutually constructive communication subscale. Descriptive statistics for each scale are presented in Table 1.

5. Results

Analyses were conducted using multi-level modeling within the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006). APIM allows for an investigation of actor and partner effects, each while controlling for the other. In these models, all individuals are treated as both actor and partner. We also explored interactive actor and partner effects. Bivariate correlations between each independent variable are presented in Table 1. The intra-class correlation for self-control was negative ($r = -0.21$) but nonsignificant ($p = 0.20$).[1] Trait self-control was treated as a continuous variable. To probe significant interactions, we examined simple effects at high ($+1$ *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels of trait self-control (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

Each model included main effects for actor self-control and partner self-control (both standardized prior to analyses) and an interaction term representing the product of actor and partner self-control. Satterthwaite degrees of freedom were used to account for non-independence of dyad members. In order to determine whether we should model effects separately for males and females, we conducted tests of distinguishability (Kenny, 2013). In these tests, models treating effects as distinguishable (i.e., different for males and females) and indistinguishable (i.e., similar for males and females) were compared. Across all tests, our data were better modeled by treating the dyads as indistinguishable (all $\chi^2 < 5.4$, p's > 0.05), and thus we do not report separate effects for each sex. Our sample size had power ($\beta = 0.80$) to detect medium effect sizes (i.e., $d > 0.40$) if dyads were indistinguishable (Ackerman, Ledermann, & Kenny, 2015).

We first examined the effects of trait self-control on mutually constructive communication. Both actor, B = 2.61, $t(47.2) = 2.61$, $p = 0.01$, and partner self-control, B = 2.26, $t(47.1) = 2.26$, $p = 0.03$, were positively related to mutually constructive communication. Actor and partner self-control did not interact to predict mutually constructive communication, B = 1.22, $t(35) = 0.88$, $p = 0.39$. Next, we examined the effects of actor and partner self-control on demand/withdraw communication. Both actor, B = −4.05, $t(49.8) = -4.05$, $p < 0.001$, and partner self-control, B = −2.03, $t(48.8) = -2.13$, $p = 0.04$, were negatively related to demand/withdraw behavior. Actor and partner self-control did not interact to predict demand/withdraw communication, B = −1.59, $t(35) = -1.46$, $p = 0.15$.

Finally, we examined the effects of self-control on mutual avoidance. We observed negative relationships between mutual avoidance and both actor, B = −2.71, $t(53.1) = -4.92$, $p < 0.0001$, and partner self-control, B = −1.66, $t(54) = -3.00$, $p = 0.004$. A marginal interaction between actor and partner self-control predicted mutual avoidance, B = −1.17, $t(35) = -1.93$, $p = 0.06$. As shown in Fig. 1, the positive effect of actor self-control was greater when the partner had high self-control, $t(41.5) = -4.30$, $p < 0.001$, compared to low self-control, $t(43.7) = -2.11$, $p = 0.04$.

We additionally explored whether age might have interactive effects with self-control. For both mutually constructive communication and demand/withdraw behaviors, we observed significant age × actor self-control × partner self-control interactions (t_{MC} (51.9) = 2.78, p-0-

[1] This surprising finding is consistent with past research (e.g., Vohs et al., 2011). One possibility is that specific self-regulatory skills matter more than whether couples are matched on general self-regulatory skills such as trait self-control (Fitzsimons et al., 2015).