



Does pulling together lead to falling apart? The self-regulatory consequences of cooperative orientations for the self-reliant



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ABSTRACT

Much evidence exists to support the hypothesis that cooperation improves performance outcomes for both organizations and individuals. In spite of this, relatively little attention has been paid to the potential downstream consequences of asking self-reliant individuals to work and pursue goals in a team setting, where their success depends heavily on cooperation and the performance of others. This paper explores these downstream consequences. Across three studies, our results reveal that individuals prompted with self-reliance lose significant self-regulatory capacity after cooperating as opposed to competing individually, which leads them to act dishonestly (Experiments 1 and 3) and quit a task early (Experiment 2). Together, these findings highlight that cooperation, despite the performance advantages it offers teams, can also contribute to unforeseen costs for highly self-reliant individuals.

To be successful you have to be selfish, or else you never achieve. And once you get to your highest level, then you have to be unselfish.

Michael Jordan

1. Introduction

Many successful individuals, from basketball stars to top company employees, often attribute their personal success to their own self-reliance. To them, their achievements result from individual effort in training and practice or long days and sleepless nights laboring in solitude over reports and market forecasts. These individuals possess high levels of self-reliance, defined as “the capacity to rely on oneself or one’s own capabilities to meet one’s personal needs” (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016, p. 5). Self-reliant individuals prefer to control their own decisions, tend to work best on their own, and attribute much of their success to these habits.

When self-reliant individuals are rewarded for achievements accomplished through their individual efforts, these rewards may contradict their self-reliant tendencies. For example, a successful, self-reliant individual might be promoted to a team captain or a manager, who oversees and organizes others’ work. As these individuals advance in their professional lives, continued success often requires collaboration. Essentially, they must put aside their “selfish interests” and navigate the opinions, capabilities, and motivations of others in order to

achieve success. In these situations, the question arises: What happens when self-reliant individuals are placed in situations that depend on the cooperation and performance of others?

This question becomes critical as more organizations restructure themselves to promote greater cooperation. Many researchers (Beersma et al., 2003; Brito, Brito, & Hashiba, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Tjosvold, 1984; Tjosvold & Tsao, 1989; Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007) have shown that cooperation can help individuals and organizations reach goals by boosting organizational productivity, increasing information sharing, and building respect among coworkers. Less understood, though, are the negative consequences for those who cooperate. Kocher, Martinsson, Myrseth, and Wollbrant (2017) propose that since cooperation requires restraining selfish urges, cooperating may trigger personal costs for collaborators. This suggests that cooperation may require more self-control or the expenditure of self-regulatory cognitive resources (Kocher et al., 2017) than if the individual completed the same task individually.

While some research supports this hypothesis that cooperation requires self-regulation (Kocher et al., 2017; Myrseth, Riener, & Wollbrant, 2015; Verkoeijen & Bouwmeester, 2014), other research shows that cooperation does not utilize self-regulatory resources or self-control (e.g. Bear & Rand, 2016; Lotito, Migheli, & Ortona, 2013; Rand, 2016; Rand et al., 2014). One potential explanation for this inconsistency is that not all individuals experience

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cooperation's depleting effects similarly. Our research introduces an important moderator that may help explain why cooperation sometimes appears to require the expenditure of self-regulatory resources, while at other times, self-regulatory resources remain intact. Specifically, we investigate whether cooperation triggers self-reliant individuals to lose self-control.

We employ the theory of ego depletion, which states that acts involving self-control deplete an individual's finite amount of self-regulatory resources, leaving fewer resources available to tackle subsequent tasks that will rely upon self-control or self-regulation (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). We propose that whether or not cooperation depletes an individual's self-control can depend on that individual's level of self-reliance. Cooperation requires relinquishing control to others, switching mindsets, and navigating other perspectives—all behaviors that, for the self-reliant, likely draw on self-regulatory resources and force the individual to engage in counter-attitudinal behaviors that go against their self-reliant preferences (Baumeister et al., 1998). Consistent with this theory, our experimental results suggest that individuals higher in self-reliance succumb to more self-control failure after cooperating on a task rather than completing the task individually. This leads the individual to act more dishonestly and quit tasks sooner. Therefore, for the self-reliant, cooperation may lead to falling apart.

These findings may help explain the inconsistencies in the literature regarding whether or not cooperation draws on self-regulatory resources. Our results suggest that one's ability to cooperate may be more idiosyncratic than previously thought. We show that individual differences in self-reliance, a trait of many business leaders (Cox & Cooper, 1989), can predict the extent to which cooperation draws on self-regulatory resources. Our results also suggest that although the cognitive resource depletion that results from cooperation may not affect performance on the task itself, it may negatively affect performance on subsequent tasks. While past research has explored the choice to cooperate, our research explores how the depletion of self-regulatory resources during cooperation can continue to influence individuals *beyond* the act itself.

1.1. Theoretical development

Effective self-regulation can benefit individuals and organizations. At work, employees exert self-control when they ignore distractions, follow norms and rules, make decisions, start tasks, interact with unpleasant co-workers, and resist the urge to cut corners (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Jonason & O'Connor, 2017; Kanfer, Ackerman, Murtha, Dugdale, & Nelson, 1994; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). According to ego-depletion theory, these behaviors generally require self-regulation because they rely on an individual's limited capacity to override impulses (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Baumeister et al., 1998; DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008). Our research employs the “muscle” model of self-regulation, which proposes that acts of volition can deplete a finite pool of self-regulatory capacity in the same way that increased exertions can tire a muscle (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998). Research shows that when self-regulatory resources become depleted, the resultant ego depletion makes it increasingly difficult to exert self-control in subsequent activities. Such depletion can lead to a range of self-control failures, from quitting a task early to “ethical slips” like cheating. Baumeister et al. (1998) find that when self-regulatory resources become depleted by resisting temptation, individuals spend less time and give up faster on an unsolvable anagram. Other research finds that as their self-control resources are impaired, people are more inclined to act dishonestly and misrepresent their performance to secure financial gain (Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). This is because depletion decreases moral awareness (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). Using ego depletion theory as a guide, our research tests how acts of cooperation affect subsequent acts of self-control in common actions like cheating and task completion.

1.2. Cooperation and self-regulatory resources

Several recent studies have explored the relationship between cooperation and self-control (Bear & Rand, 2016; Kocher et al., 2017; Lotito et al., 2013; Rand, 2016; Rand et al., 2014; Verkoeijen & Bouwmeester, 2014). Rather than investigating how cooperation affects individuals following the act, most of these studies (1) observe the choice to cooperate as more likely to occur among those with low self-control or (2) measure the choice to cooperate under cognitive load and time pressure in economic games. Conclusions from these studies remain mixed, with some findings in support of and others in conflict with the premise that cooperation requires self-control. For example, research by Kocher et al. (2017) finds that when trait self-control is low as measured by the Rosenbaum (1980) Scale, the choice to cooperate decreases in an economic game, but only when people feel conflicted about the decision to cooperate. These results have received criticism since they rely on correlational findings. Related to this, Myrseth et al. (2015) conducted research that found when cash is physically present as opposed to being virtual money on a computer screen, the choice to cooperate decreases because the reward is more viscerally tempting and additional self-control is required.

Another line of research explores the choice to cooperate by manipulating time pressure via economics games. The idea is that under higher time pressure, people do not have the time to resolve the conflict between their initial impulsive response and their longer-term interests. Higher time pressures have been shown to decrease cognitive resources and increase cooperation (Bear & Rand, 2016; Rand, 2016; Rand et al., 2014). The conclusions drawn from these findings are that people are predisposed to cooperate, and cooperation does not rely on self-control through the stifling of one's rational self-interest. However, research by Lohse, Goeschl, and Diederich (2014) finds the opposite: the choice to cooperate requires more time and as a result, relies on self-control. These inconsistencies in the literature have spurred an initiative by the Open Science Framework to find answers (<https://osf.io/scu2f/>). Support for the hypothesis that cooperation requires self-control builds on Deutsch's (2008) work, which posits that adopting a cooperative orientation depletes self-control resources by creating a mixed motive decision. In mixed motive decisions, individuals must navigate both their own and the group's goals, which depletes their self-regulatory resources. Our findings add to this by proposing that cooperating and navigating group goals may not be equally draining for all individuals. Not all employees, for example, may be wired to cooperate with equal facility, and some may experience more costs from cooperating than others. These costs, in turn, may continue to influence individuals following cooperation. We expect that an individual's level of self-reliance will determine whether cooperation requires self-control, and if so, to what extent.

1.3. Self-reliance, cooperation, and self-control

The construct of self-reliance has been explored in cross-cultural research as a specific type of independence likened to horizontal independence and in developmental psychology as a means to growing up and taking personal responsibility for oneself (Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1975; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Interestingly, few studies, with the notable exception of Schaumberg and Flynn (2016), have explored the relationship between self-reliance and managing or leading others despite the prominence of self-reliance as a desirable trait in narratives of how people rise to leadership. Self-reliant individuals do not desire or actively seek help from others, as they feel as if they already possess the ability to attain their goals (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016). In the workplace, this leads to an urge to independently make decisions (Lee & Tsang, 2001) and to avoid offers of help from co-workers (Persson, Cleal, Jakobsen, Villadsen, & Andersen, 2014). However, highly self-reliant individuals are not any more interested in

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