Trait self-control and the avoidance of temptation

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ABSTRACT

High trait self-control has been traditionally described as a keen ability to resist temptation. The present research suggests that high trait self-control is linked to avoiding, rather than merely resisting, temptation. People high in trait self-control reported engaging in behaviors thought to minimize (or avoid) temptation to a greater extent than people low in trait self-control (Study 1). People high in trait self-control were more likely than those low in trait self-control to choose to work in a distraction-free environment rather than in a distracting, yet appealing, one (Studies 2 and 3).

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1. Introduction

The benefits of effective self-control are numerous and important to people. Good self-control has been linked to academic, occupational, and social success, to good mental and physical health, to reductions in crime, and to longer life (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stock, & Baumeister, 2012; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Moffitt et al., 2011; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Effective self-control certainly involves resisting impulses and desires that could create problems, such desires to smoke, drink, take drugs, aggress, steal, and have risky sex. The present research highlights the avoidance of circumstances in which one would face such impulses as strategy for effective self-control.

Some people score higher than others on trait self-control. They would presumably enjoy the advantage of being able to resist problematic impulses frequently and effectively. Yet an experience sampling study by Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, and Vohs (2012) found the seemingly opposite result: People with high self-control reported resisting impulses less frequently than others. The authors of that paper speculated that people with good self-control employ it to avoid temptations and problems, rather than relying on it to resist and solve them. The present investigation was intended as a test of that hypothesis.

2. Vulnerability of self-control

Attempting to resist impulses as they arise (rather than avoiding such impulses) may be a relatively ineffective self-regulatory strategy. The capacity to resist impulses depends on self-regulatory capacity generally. Recent work has suggested that each person's capacity for self-regulation fluctuates across time, presumably because each act expends and depletes a limited resource, so that one's willpower occasionally becomes depleted (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Hence, if people rely solely on their willpower to resist temptation, they are likely to fail periodically, if only because some temptations will be encountered when one's powers of resistance are low.

Effective self-control might therefore involve more than resisting temptation. Fujita (2011) made a persuasive case for broadening the focus of self-regulation research beyond effortful inhibition of impulses. Although resisting temptation and inhibiting problem desires are undoubtedly useful capabilities, avoiding tempting situations so as minimize problematic impulses could reduce the risk of self-regulatory failure.

3. Resisting versus avoiding temptation

Avoiding temptation can prevent many instances of self-regulatory failure caused by depleted willpower. After all, the danger of yielding to impulse is greatly reduced if the impulse never arises. To be sure, avoiding temptation is itself an act of self-regulation, indeed one requiring forethought, effective anticipation, and self-knowledge. Although people with weak self-control might benefit most from the strategy of avoiding temptation, they may be least likely to use it.

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In a sense, avoiding temptation is a meta-regulation strategy that enables the self-regulator to manage self-regulatory resources effectively. By avoiding temptations, one can save oneself the presumably greater expenditure of willpower that would be necessary to resist them, thereby putting oneself less often into a depleted and vulnerable state.

4. Trait self-control

There are stable individual differences in how successful people are at exercising self-control. For example, impulse control in early childhood has been found to predict academic success and ability to cope with frustration during adolescence (Mischel et al., 1988). Tangney et al. (2004) provided a trait measure of self-control and found that high trait self-control was associated with psychological wellbeing, interpersonal success, low levels of binge eating and alcohol abuse, and other desirable outcomes. If self-control relies on a limited resource, then it would be reasonable to suspect that people high in trait self-control either possess more self-regulatory resources or manage them better than people low in trait self-control (or both). Consistent with this view, people high in trait self-control are better than others at inhibiting the impulse to blink and tolerating a painful stimulus for a longer period of time (Schmeichel & Zell, 2007). Such tasks require a one-time expenditure of self-regulatory resources, and people high in trait self-control seemed to have more resources available than people low in trait self-control.

Although trait self-control has been traditionally thought of as a keen ability to resist temptation through the expenditure of self-regulatory resources, there is some preliminary evidence that trait self-control might involve the effective management of such resources. A recent meta-analysis found that trait self-control was more related to automatic behaviors such as forming habits than to consciously controlled behavior (de Ridder et al., 2012). In addition, Imoff, Schmidt, and Gerstenberg (2013) found that people high in trait self-control reported less frequent effortful attempts to exercise self-control in everyday life compared to people low in trait self-control. These findings suggest that people high in trait self-control may form habits that prevent them from having to expend their self-regulatory resources to resist temptations.

5. Present investigation

The present investigation tested the hypothesis that people high in self-control would be more likely than others to avoid temptations and distractions. We report one survey and two experiments to test this hypothesis.

5.1. Study 1

Study 1 relied on self-reports of the degree to which people engage in behaviors thought to minimize (or avoid) temptation. The list of behaviors that we asked about was taken from the review of self-control strategies provided by Baumeister and Tierney (2011). These behaviors include avoiding tempting situations and distractions, seeking goal-facilitating friends, having a clear code of conduct, and forming systematic plans for how to achieve one's goals. People high in trait self-control were expected to report engaging in all of these behaviors more than people low in trait self-control.

We acknowledge that one could have made the opposite prediction. Scoring high on a self-report measure of self-control means rating oneself as good at resisting temptation, controlling impulses, and in other respects managing one's life effectively. Such individuals thus might be highly confident or even overconfident about

their ability to resist temptation, and so they might not feel the need to avoid temptation (for relevant review, see Fujita, 2011). People who know they lack willpower — and therefore score low on a self-report measure of self-control — would be the ones who ideally should avoid temptation, knowing all too well that they often yield.

5.1.1. Method
5.1.1.1. Participants. We did not have any specific expectation for the size of the effect of trait self-control on the avoidance of temptations and distractions. A recent meta-analysis found that trait self-control displayed a medium effect size when predicting a variety of behaviors (de Ridder et al., 2012). For a medium effect size, to achieve power of .80, Cohen (1992) recommended a sample size of 85 for a correlation.

Ninety-one people (47 female) from the United States completed surveys on Amazon's Mechanical Turk website. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 71 years ($M = 36.27$).

5.1.1.2. Procedure. Trait self-control was assessed using the Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004). This scale consists of 13 items that participants rate on a 5-point scale from "not at all" to "very much." Example items are "People would say that I have iron self-discipline," and "I refuse things that are bad for me."

Participants also completed a brief questionnaire about the degree to which they engage in behaviors thought to minimize temptation. The questionnaire contained the following items: "I avoid situations in which I might be tempted to act immorally," "I choose friends who keep me on track to accomplishing my long-term goals," "When I work or study, I deliberately seek out a place with no distractions," "In my life, the line between right and wrong is very clear and sharply drawn," and "When I want something, I work out a systematic plan for how to get it." Participants rated these items on an 11-point scale from "not at all" to "very much."

5.1.1.3. Results and discussion. We combined the items meant to measure avoidance of temptation to form a composite measure, $\alpha = .753$. Trait self-control was positively related to avoiding temptation, $r(91) = .667$, $p < .001$.[1] Although most of the items on the Self-Control Scale deal specifically with resisting temptation, a few of the items could possibly deal with both resisting and avoiding temptation (e.g., "I am able to work effectively toward long-term goals"). Therefore, we calculated the correlation between our avoidance of temptation measure and the Self-Control Scale item "I am good at resisting temptation", $r(91) = .568$, $p < .001$.

People high in trait self-control were more likely than those low in trait self-control to report frequent, systematic avoidance of temptations and distractions. High self-control is often understood in terms of resisting temptation and overcoming distractions that impede goal pursuit. Even though people high in trait self-control are adept at overcoming temptation, they reported that they avoid circumstances in which they would be forced to do so.

5.2. Study 2

Study 2 provided a laboratory test of the hypothesis linking high self-control to avoiding temptations and distractions. Participants were given an opportunity to work with or without distraction. The hypothesis was that people high in trait self-control would be more likely than those low in trait self-control to choose to work without distraction.

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[1] Participants' level of temptation avoidance was unrelated to their age ($r = .08$, $p = .44$) and gender ($r = -.10$, $p = .35$).