



Believe you can and you will: The belief in high self-control decreases interest in attractive alternatives



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined whether self-control feedback affects interest in alternative others.
- Participants with positive feedback showed less interest in alternative others.
- Participants with negative feedback showed more interest in alternative others.
- Self-control feedback affected romantically involved, but not single participants.
- Results suggest that positive self-control beliefs increase self-control behavior.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 July 2013

Revised 21 August 2014

Available online 2 September 2014

Keywords:

Self-control

Romantic relationships

Infidelity

ABSTRACT

In the present research, we examined the effects of self-control beliefs on relationship protective behavior. We hypothesized that providing participants with feedback on their level of self-control would help them shield their relationship from attractive alternatives. Study 1 showed that romantically involved participants who received positive feedback on their level of self-control showed less interest in attractive alternatives as compared to participants who did not receive self-control feedback. Study 2 replicated these results and, additionally, showed that negative feedback increased interest in alternative others for romantically involved, but not for single participants. Together, these studies showed that in the context of close relationships, providing people with self-control feedback increases their ability to exercise self-control.

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Introduction

The importance of close relationships is indisputable. Good and stable relationships have extensive positive effects on stress, emotion regulation, mental and physical health, and life expectancy (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). However, protecting and maintaining relationships—particularly in the face of hardship and relationship threats—is no easy task. All couples face arguments, conflicts of interest, and the lure of alternative others. In order to resist destructive impulses in such circumstances and instead behave constructively, one needs to possess both the motivation and the ability to be a good relationship partner (e.g., Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Recent research showed that this ability factor lies in the area of self-control. When dealing with attractive alternatives, for example, people high in self-control report less difficulty in staying faithful (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007), show less

flirting behavior toward an alternative other (Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011) and express less interest in dating alternative others (Ciarocco, Echevarria, & Lewandowski, 2012).

Since self-control is such a powerful predictor of relationship success, we aim to uncover the factors that affect one's level of self-control. Research by Job, Dweck, and Walton (2010) indicated that believing in possessing an unlimited amount of self-control is a strong predictor for the ability to maintain goal-directed effort. This suggests that regardless of actual self-control, the beliefs about one's level of self-control also affect self-regulatory behavior. Building on this idea, we investigate whether having received bogus feedback on a measure of self-control influences the response to a tempting situation. In particular, we propose that the ability to shield one's relationship from attractive alternatives depends not only on actual self-control, but also on the belief that one possesses high or low self-control.

Self-control and interpersonal relationships

Self-control refers to the ability to forego short-term pleasure for the sake of pursuing long-term goals and ambitions (e.g., Baumeister,

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Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). High self-control is associated with higher grades, better impulse control, psychological adjustment, and good interpersonal relationships, whereas low self-control is associated with criminal behavior, aggression, drug abuse, and problems with impulse control (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Self-control also aids in attaining goals in interpersonal relationships. Tangney et al. (2004) posed that people high in self-control make better relationship partners because they are better capable of resisting impulses and temptations. Indeed, research shows that self-control promotes perspective taking (Tangney et al., 2004), anger management (Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000), accommodation (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), and forgiveness (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010). These are all behaviors in which self-control aids in transforming a tempting yet relationship destructive impulse into an act geared toward restoring or maintaining the relationship (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk et al., 2010; Tangney et al., 2004).

One of the most prominent temptations that threaten relationships is the presence of attractive alternatives. In fact, Betzig (1989) found that across 88 societies, adultery is the most common cause of divorce. Research suggests that in order to protect their current relationship, people use self-control to inhibit the desire to be with attractive alternatives. For example, reported faithfulness (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007) and expressed desire to date attractive alternatives (Ciarocco et al., 2012) have both been found to relate to self-control. In line with these findings, Pronk et al. (2011) found that romantically involved participants with low self-control reported more difficulty in staying faithful, flirted more with an attractive confederate, and were more interested in going on a date with an attractive alternative than participants high in self-control. Apparently, inhibiting the impulse to show interest in attractive alternatives is—at least to some extent—dependent upon one's ability for self-control.

Self-control beliefs

Does this mean that people with low self-control are doomed to be bad relationship partners? Perhaps not: there is some evidence suggesting that, apart from one's actual level of self-control, the *belief* that one possesses self-control also predicts behavior. Mastery experiences raise self-efficacy beliefs and in turn stimulate people to achieve more and set more challenging goals for themselves (Bandura & Locke, 2003). For instance, Ajzen and Madden (1986) found that—independent of attitude and prior behavior—the perception of behavioral control served as a predictor variable for the grades students obtained. Indeed, Bandura and Locke (2003) stated that the belief in self-efficacy—a concept closely related to self-control—is a crucial factor in motivation and performance. Can a belief in self-efficacy or self-control also affect people's performance on self-control tasks? The literature suggests that it might. For example, both preexisting and manipulated self-efficacy beliefs were found to be predictive of weight loss (Weinberg, Hughes, Critelli, England, & Jackson, 1984). Furthermore, manipulated high self-efficacy beliefs led to weight loss independently of preexisting levels of self-efficacy.

Job et al. (2010) found further evidence of the positive effects of self-control beliefs. In particular, they showed that depletion effects only occurred if participants believed that self-control is a limited resource. In one of their studies, participants who were led to believe that self-control is a limited resource made more mistakes on a Stroop test following a depleting task than following a non-depleting task. On the other hand, participants who were led to believe that self-control resources were unlimited actually performed better on the Stroop task following the depleting task than following the non-depleting task. These findings demonstrate that believing one has high self-control can increase one's ability to exercise self-control. What remains unanswered, however, is whether self-control beliefs can translate into relationship protective behavior.

The present research

In the present research, we tested the notion that providing participants with feedback on their level of self-control would alter their response to a tempting situation. In Study 1, we investigated whether providing romantically involved participants with positive feedback on their level of self-control would lead to more relationship protective behavior when faced with attractive alternatives. In Study 2, we tested the effect of positive as well as negative self-control feedback on participants' behavior, for both single and romantically involved participants. We expected romantically involved participants to be less successful in shielding their relationship from alternatives after receiving negative feedback on their level of self-control and more successful after receiving positive feedback. Because singles are not restrained, we expected them not to rely on their ability for self-control while interacting with people they find attractive. We therefore hypothesized that our feedback manipulation would not influence the behavior of singles. In both studies, we controlled for gender since previous research has shown that men are generally more likely to pursue short-term mating strategies than women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to examine whether providing participants with positive feedback on their level of self-control enhances their ability to protect their relationship from alternative others. To test whether different levels of self-control beliefs would lead to different behavioral outcomes, we provided participants with bogus feedback that was either positive or average. We expected that receiving positive feedback would lead to less interest in attractive alternatives as compared to receiving average feedback or no feedback at all.

Methods

Participants and design

Participants consisted of 81 romantically involved heterosexual men (33) and women (48). Ages ranged from 17 to 48 years, with a mean age of 21.36 ($SD = 4.53$). All participants were in a relationship; the average relationship length was 1–3 years. We used a 3×1 between-subjects design, with bogus feedback on level of self-control as independent variable (positive feedback versus average feedback versus no feedback), and an indicator of interest in alternative others as dependent variable.

Materials and procedure

For our cover story, participants were photographed with a digital camera connected to the lab computer. Participants were then told that their picture would be uploaded for other participants to see and that they in turn would see the pictures of other participants in order to play an interactive game with their lab partners. Participants were seated at individual computers and completed a bogus task supposedly measuring their level of self-control—followed by bogus performance feedback. The bogus task consisted of determining the valence of 12 words that were flashed on the screen in random order (e.g., “boring,” “sweet,” “sympathetic”). Participants were told that both accuracy and speed would play a role in performance. Participants categorized valence words as either “positive” or “negative” by key press. Words were flashed on the screen for 600 milliseconds. Repeatedly and randomly, the “positive” and “negative” anchors would be switched in order to increase the difficulty level and thereby enhance ambiguity about task performance. The task lasted for a total of 24 trials. Having completed the task, participants received false feedback on their performance. In the positive feedback condition, participants were told that

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