Should Birds of a Feather Flock Together? Navigating Self-Control Decisions in Dyads

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Opposites may attract, but do they succeed together? This research compares the self-control performance of three different dyad types - homogenous high self-control, homogeneous low self-control, and mixed, to determine which lead to better self-control within the dyad and which prove detrimental to the achievement of shared long-term goals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While the bulk of research in consumer behavior focuses on self-control tasks undertaken independently, our tendency to exercise self-control is often socially-determined. For example, a pair of friends may decide together whether to study or go to a movie. Similarly, a couple may go grocery shopping or create a household budget together. Moreover, individuals in work environments may have little choice about the self-control levels of the people with whom they need to make decisions. How will different types of dyads make these decisions together, and how can these patterns be altered?

To answer this question, we examine how different dyad types, formed on the basis of different combinations of partners’ self-control levels, perform on joint self-control tasks. We examine the following dyad types: dyads containing two low self-control individuals (homogeneous low self-control), dyads composed of one low self-control and one high self-control individual (mixed self-control), and dyads of two high self-control partners (homogeneous high self-control). Our objective is to determine which dyads would lead to better self-control and what can be done to improve self-control outcomes for non-optimally-constructed dyads.

We predict that homogeneous high self-control dyads will perform better on joint self-control tasks than both homogeneous low self-control and mixed dyads. However, we propose that there will be no difference in the self-control performance of the latter two dyad types. The rationale for this proposition is based on past research that conceptualizes working with other people on a shared task as an activity that requires self-regulatory resources since it involves sacrificing individual to group interests (Baumeister and Exline 2000; Glance and Huberman 1994). Since forgoing individual for collective interests demands self-control, high self-control individuals will be more likely to do this than will low self-control individuals, for whom this would be too demanding. Therefore, within a mixed dyad, the low self-control individual will play a more determining role in the dyad’s decisions, which would cause the dyad’s self-control performance to be comparable to that of a homogeneous low self-control pair. However, if primed to maintain their independent mindset, we would expect high self-control individuals to decrease their likelihood to capitulate to the low self-control individuals’ preference. In such cases, mixed dyads should perform like homogeneous high self-control pairs rather than homogeneous low self-control pairs.

In Experiment 1, couples (married for 1-60 years) completed a brief questionnaire. The outcome of interest was the extent to which the couple was successful at meeting long-term goals. We also asked both spouses to respond individually to the Tangney et al. self-control scale. Based on the partners’ self-control levels, we categorized the couples into three types: homogeneous low self-control, mixed, and homogeneous high self-control couples. Results demonstrated that homogeneous high self-control couples were more successful at achieving long-term goals than both homogeneous low self-control and mixed couples (p=.03; p=.02). However, there was no difference between the long-term goal performance of the latter two dyad types (p=.98), which reveals that one high-self-control spouse might not be enough to ensure a couple’s long-term success.

Experiment 2 replicated these findings using artificially-created dyads working on a self-control task in the lab. In this study, individuals first completed the Tangney et al. self-control scale and several filler tasks. Then the experimenter paired participants to create the three dyad types. All dyads worked on a menu selection task. The self-control measures were the amount of calories and fat in each pair’s menu. Results revealed that homogeneous high self-control dyads chose menus that contained fewer calories and fewer grams of fat than did both homogeneous low self-control (p=.03; p=.02) and mixed self-control dyads (p=.06; p=.05). Nevertheless, there was no difference in the amount of calories and fat in the menus of homogeneous low self-control and mixed dyads (p=.74; p=.76). Both pairs chose equally unhealthy menus and exhibited poorer self-control than did homogeneous high self-control pairs.

Experiment 3 tested the proposed mechanism. Participants were paired based on their responses to the Tangney et al. self-control scale, included in a prescreening questionnaire. On arriving at the lab, participants were primed with independence using a sentence unscrambling task. Then, working in pairs, participants planned together their time for the upcoming week, by allocating 84 hours to time for studying, fun, and errands. The percentages of hours allocated to fun and studying were our DVs. Results showed that priming independence switched the pattern of effects observed in our first two studies, such that mixed dyads now exhibited self-control comparable to that of homogeneous high self-control pairs (p’s>.70 for the two DVs). Specifically, both mixed and homogeneous high self-control dyads allocated less time for fun than homogeneous low self-control pairs (p=.01; p=.02). Similarly, these two dyad types allotted more time to studying than did homogeneous low self-control dyads (p=.02; p=.03). This experiment provides support for our proposed mechanism by showing that making high self-control individuals more individualistic led them to be the driving person of the mixed dyad’s decision-making and elevated the mixed pairs’ self-control performance to that of homogeneous high self-control dyads.

The present work contributes to our understanding of both dyad decision-making and self-regulation. Theoretically, we build on findings by Rick, Small and Finkel (2011), who suggest that a tendency toward mixed tightwad/spendthrift combinations in marriage leads to conflict and marital unhappiness. While our first study similarly focuses on married couples, we generalize this investigation beyond financial outcomes. Moreover, we demonstrate that mixed dyads also show general self-control lapses when created artificially and in the short-term. Finally, we illustrate the mechanism underlying these effects and how they can be reversed. These findings are also of practical importance. Many individuals who struggle with self-control place themselves in groups or “accountability pairs” in an effort to improve their behaviors. For example, Weight Watchers encourages individuals to sign up in a “buddy system,” and Alcoholics Anonymous recovering individuals with those who have already completed treatment. These strategies, however, may only work in certain circumstances, with appropriate reminders to maintain one’s independent goals, or given a certain combination of partners’ self-control levels in the dyad.

REFERENCES
