Off My Chest and At It Again: Is Confession a Prelude to Repentance Or Relapse?

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The act of confession brings what might otherwise be a private failure to enact self-control squarely into the social domain. But, does it impact self-control? We propose and find that confession of major transgressions leads to repentance whereas confession of relatively minor missteps instead licenses more goal-inconsistent behavior.

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Motivation in a Social World: Interpersonal Influences on Self-Regulatory Processes
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Paper #1: Off My Chest and At It Again: Is Confession a Prelude to Repentance or Relapse?
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Paper #2: Persuasion by Proxy: Vicarious Self-Control Use Increases Decision Compliance
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Paper #3: In Good Company: Managing Interpersonal Resources that Support Self-Regulation
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Paper #4: The Downside of Winning: Self-Regulatory Consequences of Competitive Standing
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Self-regulation has historically been viewed as an intrapersonal process, influenced by factors such as delay of gratification, strength of will, and self-efficacy (e.g., Baumeister, Schmeichel, and Vohs 2007). However, people do not live in a social vacuum, and a growing number of articles attest to the role of interpersonal influences in self-regulatory behaviors (Finkel and Fitzsimons 2011; Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010). For example, early research found that reminding people of significant others led them to automatically activate goals associated with those others (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003) and that merely observing another person’s behavior can trigger goal-related action (Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin 2004). More recent research demonstrates that social others play a role in motivational processes. Others can have deleterious effects on self-regulation by depleting self-regulatory resources (Ackerman et al. 2009) and allowing people to outsource their efforts (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2011). They can also have positive effects through providing social support (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, and Schultheiss 1996; Uchino 2004) as well as instrumental help (Fitzsimons and Shah 2008).

While recent research highlights the critical role that interpersonal influences play in self-regulatory processes, many questions remain. Building on these recent findings, this session provides new insight into how interpersonal influences shape motivational processes. Four papers tackle two key questions: How do other people influence individuals’ self-regulatory efforts? When do social others promote versus detract from individuals’ self-regulatory success?

First, Lowe and Haws examine how confessing a personal self-regulatory failure to another person influences the likelihood of repeating the same behavior. The findings show that whereas major confessions reduce the likelihood of subsequent transgressions, minor confessions license similar behaviors. Second, Ackerman takes the perspective of the observer, and explores how perceiving another person’s use of self-control affects personal self-regulatory efforts. Four experiments demonstrate that vicarious self-regulatory failure can deplete self-regulatory resources, making consumers more vulnerable to subsequent persuasion attempts. Third, vanDellen and colleagues investigate the strategies used by successful self-regulators to navigate the social environment. Five experiments show that successful self-regulators exhibit stronger preferences for goal-supportive environments, choosing to interact and receive information from others who are also effective self-regulators. Finally, Huang and Etkin examine how others impact self-regulation in competitive contexts. The findings show that early on in a competition, receiving positive competitive feedback (i.e., that one is “winning”) increases subsequent self-regulatory efforts, but later on, the same feedback reduces self-regulatory efforts.

Together these papers connect ongoing research in both marketing and psychology to inform how other people shape personal motivation processes. We hope these papers further conversations and collaborations among scholars interested in research at the intersection of motivation/self-regulation and social factors. This session should have broad appeal to scholars interested in connections between motivation, self-regulation, self-control, social influences, and interpersonal processes.

Off My Chest and At It Again: Is Confession a Prelude to Repentance or Relapse?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Confession is an age-old practice, and in some ways is more common than ever. Social media and other dedicated “confession” websites serve as venues for individuals to publicly disclose their various faults and failures. Confession is a common religious practice, an integral part of addiction recovery programs, a regular part of law enforcement, and a popular topic of tabloids and daytime talk shows. Across this span of contexts, confessions are an almost daily encounter for many consumers. This research examines the role of confession as a response to lapses in self-control in consumption-related contexts as it impacts future goal-directed behaviors. That is, is confession licensing, reinforcing or simply a social act without consequence?

Confessing one’s missteps could serve as an act of public commitment, which could heighten goal commitment and behavioral consistency (Cialdini et al. 1993). For example, smokers who publicly committed to quit smoking were more likely to successfully adhere to that goal (Altman et al. 1987). Confession may also influence the self-view of a confessor. If confession serves as a personal reminder of high goal commitment or a lack of goal progress, it could further motivate goal adherence (Koo 2008). On the other hand, confession may serve as a way to reaffirm one’s moral identity, which could have a licensing effect and actually lead to more indulgent decisions in the future (Sachdeva, Iliev and Medin 2009). For example, social transgressions are often followed by an increased willingness to help (Tedesci and Riordan 1981), but when confession follows a social misstep it can reduce the perceived need to make amends (Wallace and Sadalla 1966). Confession helps confessors to make sense of the event in question (Kelly and McKillop 1996) and can decrease feelings of stress regarding the event (Pennebaker 1989, 1990), which may liberate confessors to relax their standards again.

We suggest that confession may result in either licensing or reinforcement depending on the severity of the trespass being confessed, such that confessing high-guilt infractions reinforces future goal-directed behavior, while confessing a low-guilt indiscretion creates a licensing effect. In the context of prosocial behavior, Gneezy et al. (2012) find that the costliness of a prosocial behavior moderates whether the prosocial act is licensing or reinforcing, such that
“costly” or difficult prosocial actions are reinforcing while relatively “costless” prosocial behaviors create licensing effects. Similarly, Lowe and Haws (2014) find that the guilt associated with shared self-control decisions moderates the impact of that decision on social relationships. Confessing a guilt-laden self-control failure may feel very costly, and therefore heighten commitment, while a less-guilty confession would be somewhat costless and therefore lead to licensing. We test these predictions in a series of three studies, with additional studies already in progress.

In study 1, participants (87 undergraduate students) imagined coming across a personally desired item (either “major” ($100) or “minor” ($0.75)) and feeling tempted to secretly charge it to the company credit card. In both conditions, participants imagine dishonestly purchasing the item with the company card. Participants were then randomly assigned to either a “confess” condition in which they wrote a confession to a roommate or a control condition where they wrote about an unrelated topic. After writing, participants were asked how likely they would be to do something similar in the future. An ANOVA revealed a two-way interaction (F(1, 81) = 4.84, p < .05), such that confessing the major indiscretion decreased the likelihood of repeating the dishonest act in the future, whereas confessing the more minor indiscretion increased the likelihood of repeating the behavior.

Study 2 entailed an online panel of 83 individuals who were asked to recall an actual occasion that they spent money in a somewhat wasteful manner. Then, participants were asked to rate how guilty they felt about this occasion. Participants were then randomly assigned to either the confession or control condition. Before writing anything, participants in both conditions provided the name of an individual that would ostensibly be emailed their written responses to heighten the perceived consequences of the confession. Next, participants were asked to imagine coming across a tempting but unnecessary item costing around $40-$50. After listing a personally tempting item, participants were asked how likely they would be to splurge and purchase that item. The assessment of guilt was crossed with confession/control conditions in a linear regression predicting each participant’s likelihood of splurging again on the item they imagined. The interaction between level of guilt and confession was significant (β = .650, t = 3.16, p < .01) again demonstrating that, relative to the control condition, confessing incidents of major guilt was reinforcing, while confessing events of minor guilt was licensing.

Study 3 examined real behavior over time following a confession. Participants were 176 undergraduate students participating in a 2-part study. In part 1, all participants were asked to recall some of their recent unhealthy behavior. After recalling specific instances, participants were asked how guilty they felt about the behavior. Participants were then randomly assigned to a confession or control condition. In the confession condition, participants confessed the details of their unhealthy behavior, while in the control condition, participants wrote about their current musical preferences. Two weeks later, participants were asked to recall and rate their health-related behaviors over the previous two weeks on an extremely unhealthy to extremely healthy scale. A linear regression showed a significant interaction between guilt and confession on health-related behaviors, such that confessing high-guilt indiscretions led to better health-related behavior relative to the control condition, whereas confessing low-guilt indiscretions undermined future health-related behavior relative to the control condition (β = .650, t = 3.16, p < .01).

Overall, our studies revealed a consistent pattern such that the severity of the indiscretion was externally manipulated (study 1) or internally perceived (studies 2 and 3), the same pattern emerged such that minor confessions (vs. keeping the behavior to oneself) led to licensing whereas major confessions were reinforcing for goal behavior.

Persuasion by Proxy: Vicarious Self-Control Use Increases Decision Compliance

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on the depleting effects of self-control has spawned a substantial literature focusing primarily on intrapersonal causes and consequences of self-regulatory failure (Baumeister 2002). For instance, people who use self-control for one purpose subsequently suffer deficits in their ability or willingness to resist especially persuasive messages (Burkley 2008). However, work on topics relating to mental connection suggests that interpersonal contexts may offer unique settings in which self-control actions could affect not only those people using self-control, but others in the social environment as well. For instance, during a group shopping trip, a friend with a sweet tooth may avoid temptation by intentionally looking elsewhere while walking by a mall chocolate shop. This simple action has implications for the friend’s subsequent self-control behavior, yet very little is known about how such actions affect an observer’s ability to regulate his or her behavior.

The mental connection literature establishes the possibility that, under certain conditions, perceiving another’s use of self-control can either inspire or deplete the self-control of perceivers. To test the role of self-control in social settings, I contrast predictions derived from three types of mental processes. First, perceiving others may automatically prime similar cognitions and behaviors through the process of mimicry. From this perspective, seeing a person resist a food indulgence is likely to lead an observer to resist food indulgences as well, though this may have little effect on unrelated forms of resistance (such as resisting a persuasion attempt). Second, the goal of using self-control may spread to observers through a goal contagion process. From this perspective, the observer of food resistance actions of another may evoke the entire experience of resistance, including its downstream consequences (see Decety and Grèzes 2006). From this perspective, an observer would likely feel the consequences of the other’s self-control use—depletion—even though the observer has not actually used self-control.

Four studies investigate these ideas by manipulating and measuring the degree of mental connection between actors and observers. Each study tests whether closer connection to actors results in lowered persuasion resistance within observers. In study 1, student participants either simply read about, or actively took the perspective of, a waiter who came to work at a high quality restaurant without having eaten recently and thus had to exert self-control in order to resist eating food on the job (or else risk being fired). In a second task, participants read an essay advocating changing the school grading system to one that the participants initially disliked. Simulating the perspective of the hungry waiter in the first task completely eliminated negativity towards the grading change and led to a doubling of support for this previously disliked system.

Study 2 used a similar first paradigm but measured rather than manipulated mental connection. Subsequently, participants viewed an advertisement for a shaving razor that featured either strong or weak messages. Automatically taking the perspective of the waiter was associated with increased favorability to the product. This occurred primarily when the ad messages were strong, suggesting that
participants were no longer able to effectively resist these persuasion attempts.

Study 3 expanded on these ideas by using visual observation of another’s self-control use and by subtly manipulating mental connection with the actor. Participants learned that they either shared or not the same birthday as a person who, in a video, pushed himself to eat a radish rather than a tempting cookie (or the cookie instead of the radish). They then evaluated an unrelated food advertisement and performed a shopping task with several products. Participants viewing someone with whom they shared a birthday eat a radish (but not someone who ate a cookie) later expressed more favorability to the ad and purchased somewhat more products. Interestingly, having a different birthday increased resistance to the ad when the actor exhibited self-control by eating the radish, suggesting some presence of a goal contagion effect.

Finally, study 4 tested the role of self-control expectancies in a vicarious context. Participants were led to believe that self-control is either limited in capacity or not (Job, Dweck, and Walton 2010), and then they actively took the perspective or not of the actor in the radish-eating video from study 3 (only purchasing was measured as an outcome here). Taking the self-control user’s perspective while also believing that self-control was a limited resource reduced advertisement resistance as indicated by an increase in purchasing of snack foods. This was not the case when participants believed that self-control was unlimited, suggesting that self-control expectancies, and not ability, drop when simulating the self-control experience of others.

In summary, the results of four studies indicate that vicarious self-regulation can deplete resistance to persuasive messages in a manner most consistent with a mental simulation account rather than mimicry or goal contagion (save for one finding from study 3). These findings raise important theoretical questions for models of depletion that rely on the exhaustion of physical resources. They also help to deepen our understanding of social consumption experiences and the situations in which consumers are likely to benefit (or not) from the presence of other consumers.

In Good Company: Managing Interpersonal Resources that Support Self-Regulation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Researchers increasingly recognize goal pursuit involves not only reacting to constraints and affordances as they arise but also anticipating them. Effective self-regulation involves proactively ensuring one is in the right place at the right time and with enough resources to effectively respond to those situations (e.g., Gollwitzer 1993, Moskowitz and Li 2011). Given recent work suggesting that self-regulation extends to interpersonal processes (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2011; Fitzsimons and Shah 2008), we posit that effective self-regulators marshal interpersonal resources to ease the ongoing burdens of self-regulation—that is, they look beyond themselves to consider the affordances of their social environment for goal pursuit. Thus, we propose that effective self-regulation could involve not only managing internal resources for goal pursuit but also the often-fleeting interpersonal resources that can support goal pursuit. Just as effective self-regulators are probably apt to approach goal-supportive and avoid goal-unsupportive environments (Fishbach and Shah 2006) and to preemptively manage their exposure to temptations (Hofmann et al. 2012; Imhoff, Schmidt, and Gerstenberg 2014); successful self-regulators may similarly manage the goal support they receive from others.

We propose that effective self-regulation involves more than simply rising to meet the challenge of temptations and obstacles are they are encountered; it also involves positioning oneself in social environments that make it easier to pursue goals and resist temptations in the first place. In five studies, we tested a theory of social positioning—that people who are effective self-regulators tend to position themselves in social environments that best afford self-regulatory success. We tested three hypotheses aimed at understanding dynamics behind these expected preferences for supportive social environments. First, we examined a perceptual sensitivity hypothesis—asking whether effective self-regulators better detect self-control in others or are simply more sensitive to others’ goal-directed motivation. Second, we examined a targeted support-seeking hypothesis—asking whether effective self-regulators simply seek more support from anyone or whether they focus their searches for help from specific people. Third, we examined a strategic positioning hypothesis—expecting these stronger preferences to emerge strategically rather than incidentally (e.g., because of greater liking or similarity to others).

In all studies, participants completed measures of self-regulatory effectiveness and then evaluated friends or potential collaborators. In Study 1, participants reported how much time they wanted to spend with a new acquaintance they perceived to have either high or low self-control. In Study 2, participants interacted with confederates who displayed either high or low self-control. Participants then chose a collaborator for an upcoming task that they learned would require effort. In Study 3, participants worked on an individual word task and were asked to evaluate potential sources of help (i.e., advice or information about how a person had scored) from high or low self-regulators. In all three studies, preferences were higher to spend time with (Study 1), collaborate with (Study 2), or receive information from (Study 3) the target with high self-control/self-regulation. However, in each study, participants’ own self-regulatory effectiveness moderated this effect such that preferences for the more supportive target were stronger among participants who were effective at self-regulation.

In Study 4, we examined whether evaluations of goal-supportive friends might be sensitive to changing fluctuations in need for help. Participants evaluated goal-supportive and goal-interfering friends in the context of a particular goal pursuit, performance in a statistics course. Again, effective self-regulators demonstrated stronger preferences for goal-supportive (vs. goal-interfering friends), but only when they reported a need for help (i.e., nervousness about course performance). Finally, in Study 5, we examined self-regulatory mechanisms of these effects, focusing particularly on how task-specific motivation might be driving interpersonal preferences. Again, participants evaluated potential collaborators for a joint task. Participants’ self-regulatory effectiveness predicted their motivation to perform well on this task. Personal task-specific motivation predicted perceiving the collaborators as differentially motivated, and subsequently predicted preferences for the collaborator with high self-control over the collaborator with low self-control.

Across the five studies, results supported our idea that effective self-regulators show stronger preferences than less effective self-regulators for goal-supportive environments. We found limited support for a perceptual sensitivity mechanism. Participants’ self-regulatory effectiveness predicted perceptions of targets’ task-specific motivation (Study 5) but not targets’ self-control (Studies 1 & 2). Thus, perceptual sensitivity may be related to stronger preferences to the extent that it is focused on a specific goal pursuit rather than perceiving general self-regulatory skills in others. We found consistent support for a targeted support-seeking hypothesis. Effective self-
regulators did not rate all support as more useful, rather they rated support from high self-regulators as more useful than support from low self-regulators. Our results also appear to support a strategic positioning hypothesis; the preferences of effective self-regulators were not simply explained by greater liking of supportive others who may be similar to them. In Study 2, participants reported equally liking confederates appearing to have high and low self-control. In Study 4, effective self-regulators (who reported on their friends and should therefore have equally liked them generally) reported more positive evaluations of instrumental over anti-goal friends only when they also reported feeling nervous about pursuing the relevant goal. Finally, in Study 5, task-specific motivation played a mediated role in connecting trait self-control to stronger preferences for supportive versus unsupportive collaborators.

The present research expands notions of effective self-regulation to consider not only how individuals regulate their internal resources but how they regulate their social environments to take advantage of external resources that may support their own self-regulation. In doing so, these findings support recent evidence that self-regulation involves social processes (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010; Fitzsimons and Fishbach 2010; Vohs and Finkel 2006). Our research suggests effective self-regulators are more likely to position themselves in social environments that further their likelihood of successful outcomes and highlights a proactive component of social relationships and self-regulation that has not yet received much empirical attention. That effective self-regulators look to their social environments for potential support suggests they may be more aware of the processes that affect their success at self-regulation.

The Downside of Winning: Self-Regulatory Consequences of Competitive Standing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Competition - contexts where an individual can attain his ends only at the expense of others not attaining theirs (e.g., Johnson and Johnson 1974; Deutsch 1962) - is prevalent in our everyday lives. As children, we compete for better grades in school, for starting roles on sports teams, and for the lead in the school play; in business, colleagues compete for promotions, teams compete for bonus compensation, and firms enter bidding wars to earn contracts (Campbell and Furrer 1995; Deci and Ryan 1985; Epstein and Harackiewicz 1992). Competition is so pervasive in Western culture that the very language of business, politics, and education is filled with “win-lose” terms. For instance, a person “wins” a promotion, “beats” the other candidate, and “outsmarts” her peers (Stanne, Johnson, and Johnson 1999).

As prevalent as competition is, recent years have witnessed little advancement to our theoretical understanding of self-regulation in competitive contexts. In the current research, we adopt a longitudinal perspective (Gaudreau et al. 2002; Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2007) to explore the dynamic self-regulatory effects of competition-based feedback. Specifically, we propose that being ahead in a competition can both enhance and detract from subsequent self-regulation effort. Which effect emerges depends on the stage (early vs. late) of the competition in which competitive feedback is received.

A defining feature of competition is the inherent uncertainty about the outcome (Johnson and Johnson 1989). This uncertainty should be particularly pronounced at the early stages of a competition. When people first join a competition, they have little information about their opponent, which limits their ability to judge their likelihood of success. As a result, they should seek signals to help alleviate uncertainty surrounding whether they will win. Because competitions make social comparison salient (Johnson and Johnson 1989), competitors should rely on their current standing (i.e., whether they are ahead or behind) to infer their ultimate chance of winning. Therefore, receiving feedback that one is ahead at the early stages of a competition should increase the perceived likelihood of success, thereby enhancing subsequent self-regulation.

Notably, whereas concerns about whether winning is possible should be pronounced at early competition stages, later on, the focus on what one needs to do to win would dominate. Unlike individual pursuits, in competitive contexts, successful goal attainment (i.e., “winning”) depends on one’s own and one’s opponent’s performance (Locke et al. 1981). To assess what ground remains to be covered, competitors should thus refer to the discrepancy between their current standing and their competitor’s standing. As a result, receiving feedback that one is ahead at the later stages of a competition signals a positive discrepancy, reducing the perceived amount of effort required to win, thereby reducing subsequent self-regulation.

Four experiments demonstrate that whereas positive competitive feedback enhances self-regulation effort when received early on in a competition, the same feedback received later on reduces self-regulation. All experiments involved one-on-one competitions between a participant and an opponent. We employed competitive feedback discrepancies of moderate size, given concerns that too small of a difference would fail to produce a meaningful signal and too large of a difference would suggest winning is ensured (or impossible), precluding the necessity of subsequent efforts.

Experiment 1 examines how competitive feedback impacts subsequent self-regulation at different stages of the competition. Participants (N = 294) competed in a five-round dice game. After two (early stage) or four (late stage) rounds, they received feedback about their current standing in the competition. Half received feedback that they were ahead of their competitor, and the remaining half received feedback that they were behind their opponent. Then, participants were given a bonus roll, in which the longer they waited to roll the dice, the more points they could earn. The time they spent waiting served as our measure of self-regulation. Results revealed the predicted interaction (F(1, 286) = 8.65, p < .01). After two rounds, being ahead led to greater self-regulation (Mahead = 68.33 vs. Mbehind = 42.90). After four rounds, however, being ahead led to lower self-regulation (Mhead = 50.39 vs. Mbehind = 76.98).

Experiment 2 replicated this effect and tested the underlying process. The procedure was similar to Experiment 1. After receiving competitive feedback, participants reported the perceived difficulty of winning (1 = Not difficult at all, 7 = Very difficult), as well as the number of points they needed in order to earn, and then entered the next round of the game (time spent in this round again served as our measure of self-regulation). Results revealed the predicted interaction (F(1, 138) = 6.53, p = .01). At the early stage, being ahead led to greater subsequent self-regulation (Mahead = 82.79 vs. Mbehind = 65.27) because of the lower perceived difficulty of winning, but at the later stage, being ahead led to lower subsequent self-regulation (Mahead = 61.22 vs. Mbehind = 84.34) due to a lower estimated discrepancy/amount of effort required.

Experiments 3 and 4 provide additional support for the underlying process through moderation. Experiment 3 focused on the early stage, manipulating the relevance of competitive feedback to the likelihood of winning; experiment 4 focused on the later stage, manipulating the presence of definitive information about the remaining discrepancy. The experiments utilized different competitive contexts (a sales competition and a memory competition) to increase the generalizability of our findings.
In sum, we adopt a dynamic, longitudinal approach to examine the self-regulatory consequences of temporary standing during a competition. Whereas being ahead increases self-regulatory efforts when a competition first begins, the same feedback conversely decreases efforts towards the competition’s end. The findings connect research on social psychology, educational psychology, athletic motivation, and business management to inform how competition can help or hinder self-regulation.

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