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Does Pulling Together Lead to Falling Apart? the Self-Regulatory Consequences of Cooperative Orientations For the Self-Reliant

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Three different studies reveal that individuals prompted with self-reliance lose significant self-regulatory capacity after cooperating as opposed to competing individually, leading them to act dishonestly and quit a task early. Findings highlight that cooperation, despite the performance advantages it offers teams, can also contribute to unforeseen costs for self-reliant individuals.

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Does Pulling Together Lead to Falling Apart? The Self-Regulatory Consequences of Cooperative Orientations for the Self-Reliant

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

*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*

Many successful individuals often attribute their personal success to their own self-reliance and individual effort in training and practice. As these individuals advance to managers who oversee others' work, for example, or team captains, continued success often requires collaboration. Essentially, they must put their "selfish interests" aside and navigate the opinions and capabilities of others in order to achieve. In these situations, the question arises: what happens when self-reliant individuals are placed in situations that depend on cooperation and others' performance?

Past research shows cooperation can help individuals and organizations reach their goals (Johnson and Johnson 1986). Less understood, though, are the consequences for those involved in cooperation. Research has proposed that cooperation triggers personal costs for collaborators since cooperation requires restraining selfish urges (Kocher et al. 2017), but support for this hypothesis is mixed with findings in support of this relationship (Kocher et al. 2017; Verkoeijen and Bouwmeester 2014) and in conflict (e.g. Bear and Rand 2016; Lotito, Migheli, and Ortona 2013). One explanation for this inconsistency is that not all individuals may experience cooperation's depleting effects. Our research introduces an important moderator, self-reliance, that we believe may help explain why cooperation sometimes appears to require the expenditure of self-regulatory resources, while at other times, self-regulatory resources remain intact.

We employ ego depletion theory (Baumeister et al. 1998) and suggest that whether cooperation depletes an individual's self-control depends on that individual's level of self-reliance. Since the self-reliant believe they can, and prefer to, succeed through their own efforts, ego depletion theory would suggest that for the self-reliant, cooperating may be taxing. Cooperation requires relinquishing control to others, switching mindsets, navigating other perspectives, and acting against one's preferences—behaviors that, for the self-reliant, likely draw on self-regulation and force counter-attitudinal behaviors (Baumeister et al. 1998).

Experiment 1 predicts that individuals primed with self-reliance (vs. no-prime control condition) show more unethical behavior, a measure of self-control, when cooperating versus competing individually. 172 undergraduates participated in an online study. Participants first completed a writing task to prime self-reliance (vs. control). In the self-reliance condition, participants wrote about an experience in their life when they felt self-reliant, while in the control condition, participants wrote about any experience in their life.

Participants then saw a string of letters ("hdskltiwoertbca") and had three minutes to make as many words as possible out of the letters (e.g. ski). Participants believed that they were either (1) cooperating with others online (cooperation condition), or (2) competing against other individuals (individual competition condition). Participants in both conditions were entered into a lottery based on their performance. For the dependent variable, participants received 20 number matrices, containing 12, 3-digit numbers (e.g. 2.17) and

were told the matrices contained two numbers summing to 10, and to mark "got it" when they solved the matrix (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008). Since participants did not need to indicate which two numbers summed to ten, participants could cheat and win; however, 10 of the 20 matrices did not contain two numbers summing to 10. This allowed us to measure dishonest behavior by the number of unsolvable matrices participants dishonestly checked as solved.

Contrasts show that individuals primed with self-reliance and asked to cooperate showed more unethical behavior than those asked to compete individually ($M_{\text{cooperation, self-reliance}} = 4.27$; $M_{\text{competition, self-reliance}} = 2.63$; $F(1, 168) = 3.87, p = .05$), demonstrating that for individuals primed with self-reliance, participating in a cooperative (vs. competitive individual) task led to more unethical behavior.

Experiment 2 uses a novel online shopping task to create a "real" cooperative task. 174 undergraduates took part in a lab study. Participants first completed the writing task from Experiment 1 to prime self-reliance (vs. control). Next, participants were assigned a partner or competitor and either cooperated with or competed against their partner for five minutes to earn the highest score on the online search task. Participants received a shopping list of products and were to find those items on the retailer's website using *only* their mouse, no keyboard. Last, participants completed a series of four anagrams—but unbeknownst to participants, the fourth anagram was unsolvable (Baumeister et al. 1998). The time spent on the anagram served as our measure of restraint.

Individuals who cooperated and were primed with self-reliance persisted for less time than those who competed individually ($M_{\text{cooperation, self-reliance}} = 101.54$ seconds; $M_{\text{competition, self-reliance}} = 143.20$ seconds; $F(1, 170) = 4.23, p = .04$), demonstrating that for individuals primed with self-reliance, participating in a cooperative (vs. competitive individual) task led to less persistence on a subsequent task.

Experiment 3 tests self-regulation as the underlying mechanism and demonstrates that declines in self-regulation trigger these effects. 172 participants were recruited on M-Turk. The experiment consisted of a between subjects design with one manipulated factor (cooperation or individual competition) and one measured variable (trait self-reliance). Participants first saw the same cooperative and competitive individual manipulations from Experiment 1 and after, the number-summing task from Experiment 1, which served as our measure of restraint toward dishonest behavior. Last, participants completed a filler task, Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) self-reliance scale, and Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone's (2004) self-control scale.

Analysis shows a significant two-way interaction of the cooperative/individual competitive prime and self-reliance and a significant three-way interaction of cooperative/individual competitive prime, self-reliance, and self-control. The same pattern of results from the previous studies emerged among lower self-control individuals. Here, low self-control, high self-reliant individuals engaged in more unethical behavior under cooperation as opposed to individual competition (Effect = 1.92, $t = 2.59, p = .01$). The effect did not emerge among those higher in self-control.

Overall, our results show that whether cooperation requires self-control depends on an individual's level of self-reliance. We find that self-reliant individuals show diminished self-control when co-

operating as opposed to competing individually. Our results delve deeper into why *pulling together* may lead to *falling apart* for self-reliant individuals.

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