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Implicit Delegation of Responsibility: Joint Self-Control in Close Relationships

Michelle R. vanDellen¹ and Evander Baker²

Abstract
In everyday life, people often exert self-control not only for their own sake but also for the sake of close others. Here, the authors examine the specific case of joint self-control—when multiple people must simultaneously exert self-control for mutual success—in the context of close relationships. The authors test the hypothesis that people use situational cues to determine if one member of the relationship bears more responsibility for exerting self-control than the other. In this article, the authors test the specific cue of past behavior and find in two studies that participants who exert self-control on behalf of the relationship on a preliminary task continue to exert self-control on behalf of the relationship on a secondary task compared to those who exerted less self-control on the preliminary task. The authors explain these results by focusing on the role that expectations about behaviors play in contributing effort to a difficult or unpleasant task.

Keywords
close relationships, romantic relationships, self-regulation, social interaction, motivation/goals

Recently psychologists’ attention has turned to how self-control is involved in close relationships. Higher levels of self-control are associated with reduced partner violence and increased willingness to sacrifice for one’s partner (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). Conversely, experiencing a difficult interaction with someone else decreases state self-control (Finkel et al., 2006). Although this work begins to reveal the complicated nature of self-control in an interpersonal context, its focus has been limited to the individual-level effects of close partners on the behaviors of the other partner (for a review, see Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). In this article, we are interested in joint self-control—the case in which members of dyads and groups must simultaneously exert self-control to reach mutual success. Here, we introduce the implicit delegation model, in which relationship partners delegate responsibility for self-control based on situational cues. Specifically, we focus on how recent behaviors serve as informational cues to indicate which member of the dyad bears more responsibility for contributing effort on tasks that require self-control from both members of the dyad. Although delegation may occur in a variety of dyads, we focus here on the case of romantic relationships.

Consider an example of Paul and Marie, a couple who recently decided to save money to take a Caribbean vacation. Each day, Paul and Marie set out to their respective workplaces and run errands. During their daily activities, each person must restrain impulses to spend money on unnecessary items in order for them to meet their shared goal. Marie, who has committed to drinking water rather than soft drinks when she’s out to work lunches, may have to decide whether or not it really matters if she spends an extra $2 at lunch on a soda since Paul is unlikely to know. Paul, likewise, may have to decide whether or not to get a latte on his way to work. Their common goal requires that each person must exert self-control for mutual success. Ultimately, the couple would save the most money for their trip if both members of the couple saved every penny they could. Realistically, however, at least one member of the couple is likely to give in to temptation and spend more than is necessary.

Social psychology offers a standard explanation for how Paul and Marie might go about the process of deciding whether or not they need to exert self-control: social exchange theory. According to social exchange theory, people in relationships give and take in ways that increase both individual and relationship satisfaction (Clark & Mills, 1993; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). In a strict exchange view, one might expect that Paul and Marie would alternate between indulging and exerting self-control. In essence, they might take turns working toward the group goal and indulging in personal temptations. Such a pattern of responding would be wise given what is known about the

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limited nature of self-control resources (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998). According to the resource depletion model, people who have previously exerted self-control are less likely to continue to do so due to a reduction in available self-regulatory resources (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). As a result, if Marie bears the responsibility of exerting self-control at one point in time, the couple may benefit from turning to Paul to exert self-control on a subsequent challenge. This trading back and forth would prevent excessive depletion of one partner’s resources and allow for couples to take advantage of the available resources of the partner who has not recently exerted self-control. Furthermore, this pattern of trading back and forth would fit with an exchange view in which each partner feels that he or she is both benefiting from and giving to the relationship.

Another way to approach joint self-control is to consider how members of a couple might use contextual factors to determine who bears responsibility for exerting self-control. This process, although unstudied in the realm of self-control, is akin to the way that couples naturally delegate responsibility for remembering specific pieces of information. In a study on this delegation of memory, some couples were allowed to attend to presented information the way they normally do, whereas others were given specifications for which partner should attend to specific pieces of information. Despite not discussing who would focus on which pieces of information, couples who followed their natural roles remembered more information than couples who followed the experimenter’s guideline information (Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991). In regards to self-control, we suspect that couples tend to think about contributing effort to joint tasks in similar ways. That is, they assume—based on contextual factors—that either they or their partners bear more responsibility for exerting effort on behalf of the couple, and they respond accordingly. As with transactive memory, we expect that the division of responsibility for self-control occurs without explicit discussion.

The purpose of the current work is to examine whether couples use information about past behaviors to determine who bears more responsibility for exerting self-control on a joint task. Whereas exchange theory would indicate that members of a relationship might alternate bearing responsibility for joint self-control, we suspect that the opposite actually occurs. We expect that without explicit discussion, when individuals have previously exerted self-control for their relationship, this effort serves as a situational cue and suggests an increase in responsibility for contributing to joint self-control tasks. Such reasoning is consistent with evidence that people use their past behaviors to determine what they should do in situations (Bem, 1965; Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). In the case of joint self-control, we believe that if people have recently exerted self-control, especially if in so doing they felt as though they were assisting their relationship partner, they will consider themselves the type of people who exert self-control for their partner and behave accordingly. By exerting self-control on a task that helps their partner, people might therefore become more likely to exert self-control on a subsequent task.

In addition to this self-consistency pattern, we expect that perceptions of the extent to which one’s partner will contribute effort may also contribute to the implicit delegation of self-control. Specifically, we expect that the fundamental attribution error—the tendency to overestimate the extent to which others’ behaviors are due to their dispositions—may explain why members of a couple exert more or less self-control than their partners (Jones & Harris, 1967). When one partner sees the other partner slack on a task, he or she might overestimate the extent to which that is due to a trait rather than a situational constraint and therefore expect the partner to continue to lack in effort contribution. Vice versa, a person who watches his or her partner valiantly contribute to a combined goal may overestimate the extent to which that partner would continue to contribute effort on other tasks.

As a result of these combined informational cues, when an individual exerts self-control on behalf of his or her partner, we expect that he or she will continue to exert self-control on a subsequent task that also involves the partner. Think back to Paul and Marie. If Marie fails to exert self-control by saving for the vacation goal, perhaps by splurging on some new clothing items, Paul may feel as though he has to try even harder in order for them to reach their goal. In turn, Marie sees these efforts and feels that perhaps she doesn’t need to try as hard to save money because she knows Paul is doing a great job of it. As a result of previous behaviors, each partner develops expectations of the other. The next time each has a chance to exert self-control, Marie continues to splurge and Paul continues to restrain his spending.

The Present Experiments
In a series of two experiments, we tested the hypothesis that couples rely on situational cues to implicitly delegate responsibility for exerting effort on behalf of the couple. Because we were specifically interested in the way that past behaviors can serve as a situational cue, we included two tasks in each of two experiments. In Task 1, we randomly assigned one member of a couple to exert more self-control than the other. In Task 2, we measured the extent to which each partner would exert self-control to contribute to a joint task. We expected that random assignment to Task 1 would trigger a pattern of delegation whereby the partner who was initially assigned to exert self-control on Task 1 for the sake of the relationship would continue to exert self-control on Task 2.

Experiment 1
In our first experiment, we set up a situation in which members of couples would either exert more self-control or less self-control on an initial task. Among each couple, one partner was assigned to complete a self-control task (i.e., sampling raw vegetables) and one partner was assigned to complete a task that would take less self-control (i.e., sampling freshly baked
cookies). Both partners knew what task the other partner was completing. After this initial task, participants completed a task in which high performance requires self-control. All participants were told that if the couple attained a certain performance level, they would be eligible for a chance to earn a reward. Given our implicit delegation hypothesis, we expected that the partner who was initially assigned to sample vegetables on Task 1 would contribute more effort on Task 2.

Methods

Participants. Thirty-three couples who had been dating for at least 3 months were recruited for a study on romantic relationships. The mean age of participants was 21.35, with a range of 18 to 35. Relationships had lasted on average 2 years, with a range of 3 months to 7 years. Of the participating couples, 81% were dating, 6% were engaged, and 13% were married. Each couple earned $20 in exchange for their participation.

Procedure. One couple completed the study at a time. After giving informed consent, participants completed questionnaires at separate computers in private cubicles. These questionnaires included the Inclusion of Other in Self-Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and questions asking about participants’ age, relationship length, and relationship type (e.g., dating, engaged, married), and relationship type (e.g., dating, engaged, married), and relationship length.

Task 1. In an adaptation of past research (Baumeister et al., 1998, Study 1), couples were presented with two plates of food: one of freshly baked cookies (sugar, chocolate chip, and oatmeal raisin) and one of raw vegetables (carrots, celery, cucumber, and radishes). Participants drew slips of paper to determine whether they would sample the cookies or the vegetables. One partner from each couple was therefore randomly assigned to sample the cookies and the other to sample the vegetables. To ensure that the couple understood this situation, the experimenter plainly stated that as one partner was sampling the vegetables, the other partner would be sampling the cookies. In past research, eating vegetables takes more self-control than eating cookies (Baumeister et al., 1998). Therefore, we manipulated the situation such that one partner was exerting self-control more than the other partner and that both partners were aware of this situation. Once assigned to their respective tasks, the experimenter separated the couple. All participants were given 4 minutes to sample their respective food and were told to try at least one bite of each type of food and to feel free to eat as much as they would like.

Task 2. Next, participants returned to separate cubicles to complete a computerized point-earning waiting game (based on Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009, Experiment 4). Each participant completed 35 trials in which he or she chose between earning 3 points in exchange for a 3-second delay or 15 points in exchange for a 15-second delay before the next item appeared. The longer delay is unpleasant but offers a greater point reward. Before the task began, the computer program informed participants that their combined number of points as a couple would determine whether they would each earn a chance to enter a drawing for a $5 gift card. Participants were told that only the top half of participants would earn a chance to be in the drawing and that it would take place in 2 months, once the study had been completed. In order to earn more points, participants had to repeatedly exert self-control by inhibiting their desire for the shorter delay. Our dependent variable was the total number of points participants earned on the last 30 trials (the first five were practice trials so that participants could learn which icons were associated with each delay and point value).

Results and Discussion

We used PROC MIXED in SAS to analyze the effect of condition in Task 1 (sampling vegetables or sampling cookies) on self-control on Task 2 (points earned by each individual). Because participants completed the study in couples, their behaviors were not independent. To account for this, we nested the data within couple. The results yielded a significant effect of food condition, \( t(30) = 2.43, p < .05, d = 0.89 \). Participants who had sampled the vegetables \( (M = 409.92, SE = 12.88) \) earned more points than did those who had sampled the cookies \( (M = 372.18, SE = 12.51) \).

One possibility is that these patterns of delegation emerge as couples grow closer together, either emotionally or temporally. We tested this possibility by examining whether relationship length, relationship type, or reported overlap with one’s partner moderated the effect of condition on Task 1 on effort on Task 2. None of these indicators of relationship closeness moderated this effect (all \( p > .39 \)).

These results support our hypothesis that self-control in relationships involves a pattern of delegation whereby partners assume responsibility, at least temporarily, for the exertion of self-control in their relationship. When partners were assigned to exert self-control on behalf of the relationship (e.g., because they did an unpleasant task, their partners were able to do an enjoyable task), they exerted self-control to a greater extent than their partners on a second task that also benefitted the relationship.

On the face of it, this is the opposite pattern one would expect from the resource-depletion framework of self-control. Following from the resource-depletion model, we would have expected that participants who ate the vegetables would earn fewer points on the computerized task. Eating vegetables (in lieu of freshly baked cookies) should have consumed more self-control resources, thereby limiting their later ability to exert self-control. Furthermore, recent research on self-control suggests that the increased glucose in the cookies compared to the vegetables should have increased self-control among participants who ate the cookies (Gailliot et al., 2007). Rather, our data suggest that when partners are jointly working on self-control tasks, those who have previously exerted self-control become more responsible for earning points than those who have not exerted self-control.

One alternate explanation that cannot be ruled out in Experiment 1 is that participants who had previously consumed...
cookies may have been more influenced by the potential for a monetary reward (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003; Schmeichel, Harmon-Jones, & Harmon-Jones, 2010). This is an unlikely explanation given that the reward was also uncertain and required delaying gratification, factors associated with increased, rather than decreased, state self-control (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988).

**Experiment 2**

The purpose of this experiment was to test the hypothesis that continued exertion on subsequent tasks only occurs when that task is framed in the context of the relationship. When a subsequent task benefits the individual—rather than the relationship—we should not expect to see implicit delegation. Without the interpersonal expectations that arise from considering how one’s partner may contribute to a joint task, the situation strongly resembles those found in the resource depletion literature. Therefore, when partners do not draw on these implied cues about delegation of responsibility for joint tasks, we expect that they will evidence reduced self-control on the second task.

To test whether these patterns only occur in close relationships when relational expectations are activated, in Experiment 2, we manipulated whether participants believed that self-control on Task 2 would benefit their relationship partner (as in Experiment 1) or only benefit themselves. Based on the results of Experiment 1, we expected that those who had previously exerted self-control for their relationship partner would continue to exert self-control on the second task if their partner would also benefit from it. However, if performance on Task 2 would not benefit the partner, we did not hypothesize that expectations about the partner’s efforts would be active. Rather, when the task would only benefit the individual—and therefore relational expectations were unlikely to be active—we expected to see a pattern consistent with the resource-depletion model such that participants who had exerted self-control on Task 1 would perform worse on Task 2. Additionally, in this study, we used a different manipulation of self-control on Task 2, and we changed the motivation to exert self-control in Task 2 by making it more subtle and including both an approach and avoidance component.

**Methods**

**Participants.** Fifty-three couples from an undergraduate research pool who had been dating for at least 3 months and were between the ages of 18 and 25 were recruited for a study on romantic relationships.

**Procedure.** One couple completed the study at a time. After giving informed consent, participants completed the Inclusion of Other in Self-Scale (Aron et al., 1992) and the Perceived Relationship Quality Component Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000).

![Figure 1. The effect of initial task difficulty and performance basis on individual performance on the point-earning task](image)

**Task 1.** Next, the experimenter randomly assigned each member of the couple to complete either a difficult or easy typing task (based on Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Both members of the couple were aware of the level of difficulty of their own task and their partner’s task. The easy task involved retyping a page of text from a psychology book. The difficult task involved retyping the same page, but with the added stipulation that participants had to refrain from typing the letter “e” and from using the space bar. The difficult version of this typing task has been shown to require more self-control than the easy version of the task (Muraven et al., 2006). Participants completed this typing task on separate computers in private cubicles. The computer program timed participants so that everyone completed 5 minutes of the typing task.

**Task 2.** Next, participants played the point-earning waiting game from Experiment 1. Unlike Experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to believe that either their individual or joint performance on the task would determine whether they (as individuals or couples and consistent with the manipulation) would next have to complete a less desirable vegetable taste task or a more desirable cookie taste task (these tasks did not actually occur but offered subtle motivation to earn more points). Our dependent variable was the total number of points participants earned on the last 30 trials.

**Results and Discussion**

We analyzed the data using a 2 (Task 1: Difficult Typing Task; Easy Typing Task) × 2 (Task 2: Individual; Joint) ANOVA. As in Experiment 1, we used PROC MIXED in SAS and nested participants within couple. We found no significant main effects. However, we found an interaction between Task 1 and Task 2 conditions, $F(1, 50) = 4.58, p < .04$. As Figure 1 shows, this interaction was driven by an effect of Task 1 difficulty when performance was construed as joint. When the task was presented as joint, those who had exerted self-control on Task 1 outperformed those who had not, $t(50) = 1.98, p = .05, d = 0.56$. 

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There was not an effect of Task 1 condition when performance was construed as individual, $t(50) = -1.11, p = .27, d = -0.31$. As in Experiment 1, we examined whether variability in relationship quality and closeness moderated this effect. Neither perceived inclusion of other in self nor reported relationship quality moderated the interaction between Task 1 and Task 2 conditions (all $p s > .71$).

This study provides further evidence of a pattern of implicit delegation based on previous behaviors on behalf of the couple. Participants who were asked to exert self-control in a joint task did so to a greater degree if they had previously completed a difficult task while their partner completed an easy task. This pattern did not occur among participants who were asked to exert self-control on an individual task. Furthermore, this study rules out the possibility that reward sensitivity explained the effect found in Experiment 1. All participants in Experiment 2 who had previously completed the difficult Task 1 were exposed to equal amounts of motivation, but only those who were exerting effort in a jointly framed task exhibited increased self-control.

**General Discussion**

In two experiments, we found support for our hypothesis that couples implicitly delegate responsibility. Specifically, we found that couples use past behaviors as a cue to determine who should contribute more effort to a joint task. When one member of the couple has been assigned to a task that requires self-control, that member is perceived to be responsible for continuing to exert effort on difficult tasks. In Experiment 1, participants who had completed the more difficult self-control task of eating vegetables (rather than cookies) continued to exert self-control on behalf of their relationship by earning points in an unpleasant waiting task. In Experiment 2, participants who had completed a difficult typing task while their partners completed an easy typing task continued to exert self-control on a second task, but only when they believed the second task involved joint cooperation. In contrast, when the second task required only individual efforts, those who had previously exerted self-control did not outperform those who had previously completed an easy task. Experiment 2 confirms that interpersonal expectations play a role in the implicit delegation of self-control in close relationships.

Theoretically, these results have implications for understanding how self-processes such as self-control operate in the context of close relationships. Previously, research has focused on how relationships affect individual-level goal pursuit and how self-control affects relationships (Finkel et al., 2009; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Here, we examine how close relationships influence the extent to which individuals are willing to exert self-control on a task that requires joint effort. Previous work on joint effort suggests that people will generally contribute less to a task that they believe they are working with others (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). However, the research conducted on social loafing has largely ignored the situation of interdependent individuals, such as those in close relationships. Here, we show that when couples must work together on a joint task in which contributing effort involves self-control, they tend to rely on situational cues about who should contribute more effort. Furthermore, our results suggest that self-control in the context of close relationships plays out differently than self-control by individuals. Whereas past research has consistently found that after exerting self-control on their own behalf, individuals become less likely to exert self-control (for a review, see Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010), we find that when individuals have previously exerted self-control for their relationships (e.g., because they did a difficult/pleasant task, their partners were able to do an easy/enjoyable task), they actually become more likely to continue exerting self-control for their relationship.

Practically, these results also carry implications for the goal pursuits of couples. In the day-to-day life of close relationships, opportunities to pursue joint goals abound. Some of these goals, such as completing daily household chores, may be thrust upon couples. Other goals, such as saving for a big vacation or planning nutritious meals, may be activities that couples decide to pursue together. In the course of completing these tasks, whether it is dividing up household labor, saving money, or making healthy food choices and requests, couples may find that they aren’t always contributing as much as they could.

The experiments presented here provide an initial test of the implicit delegation model. Because this is the first study of how couples jointly exert self-control, much future research is needed. The studies presented here show clear behavioral evidence of implicit delegation. However, more research needs to be conducted to understand and evaluate the cognitive mechanism by which these behavioral patterns emerge. We have suggested that the informational cues that come from potentially public self-consistency motivation and patterns of social cognition consistent with the fundamental attribution error may account for these behavioral patterns. Empirical work needs to examine whether these mechanisms do account for the effect. An additional early step that needs to be taken is to understand whether the patterns observed in these experiments are equally due to loafing among the partner who had previously engaged in an easy task or additional effort contributed by the partner who had previously engaged in a difficult task. Based on the results of Experiment 2, we expect that the implicit delegation of responsibility involves both loafing by one partner and increased contribution by the other. However, future research must include a control condition of a moderate or neutral task in order to test this possibility.

Future research should assess the extent to which short-term patterns of behavior have long-term implications for self-control among couples and for relationship conflict, as well as other situational factors that may alter perceptions of which partners bear responsibility for contributing effort. For instance, allowing couples to communicate and make explicit delegations for responsibility may mitigate the natural patterns...
we observed in our experiments. In fact, explicit discussion may alter the pattern entirely, reminding individuals that they would ideally like to contribute equally. Thus, explicit conversation about the delegation of effort may result in a pattern that resembles taking turns contributing effort. Research should also find ways for couples to recover from situations of ineffective delegation. Additionally, we address here only situational factors. Chronic patterns of behavior and individual differences, such as conscientiousness, impulsivity, and trait self-control, may also play a role in the perceptions of partners’ likelihood of contributing to joint tasks (e.g., someone whose partner is always stingy may underestimate his or her need to contribute to a joint savings goal).

Although the participants used in our studies were involved in romantic relationships, it is also possible that these patterns of delegation might be found among other dyads. For instance, two people working on a project for an office might find themselves contributing more or less to the project based on the past behaviors of their partner. Evidence for this comes from the fact that in the experiments we report here, we found a pattern of implicit delegation that was consistent across relationships of various length, type (i.e., dating vs. married or engaged), closeness, and satisfaction. If these patterns of delegation were ones that developed as people got to know each other or developed habits of interacting, we might expect a stronger effect of condition on Task 1 on self-control on Task 2. Future research should address the extent to which these patterns of delegation occur among other dyads, including roommates, friends, family members, and even strangers who are assigned to work jointly.

In conclusion, the findings presented here point to the importance of understanding how self-control plays out in the context of close relationships. We studied here one particular type of close relationships—people in romantic relationships. Established patterns of behavior among individuals exercising self-control (i.e., resource depletion) may not best explain how couples behave when situations require that both partners contribute self-control efforts. Rather, as our implicit delegation model suggests, without explicit discussion, couples appear to use past behaviors as evidence of likely future behaviors. As a result, partners who have previously exerted self-control for the relationship become more likely to continue exerting self-control for the relationship.

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Note
1. Typically, manipulations of state self-control using the cookie versus vegetable task additionally ask participants not to eat anything for 2 to 3 hours prior to arriving in the laboratory. Although we did not stipulate this for our participants, we did ask participants to rate the appeal of the food items they tasted using a 1 (not at all good) to 4 (excellent) scale. Analyses revealed that there was an effect of food condition, t(27) = 3.13, p < .01, such that cookies were rated as more appealing (M = 3.10, SE = 0.10) than vegetables (M = 2.67, SE = 0.10).

References


**Bios**

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