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The Sum of Friends' and Lovers' Self-Control Scores Predicts Relationship Quality

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Abstract
What combination of partners' trait self-control levels produces the best relationship outcomes? The authors tested three hypotheses—complementarity (large difference in trait self-control scores), similarity (small difference in self-control scores), and totality (large sum of self-control scores)—in three diverse samples: friends, dating partners, and married couples living in the United States and the Netherlands who were tracked cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Results consistently favored the totality model: the more total self-control, the better the relationship fared. Multiple benefits were found for having mutually high self-control, including relationship satisfaction, forgiveness, secure attachment, accommodation, healthy and committed styles of loving, smooth daily interactions, absence of conflict, and absence of feeling rejected. These effects might be due to high-self-control partners' use of accommodation when there is miscommunication or problems in the relationship. Additionally, partners might "outsource" self-control to each other; hence, having a partner with higher self-control enables more outsourcing.

Keywords
relationships, romantic relationships, self, self-regulation, well-being

To create the best and happiest relationship, should you seek a partner whose traits are the same as yours or the opposite? Or should you simply look for adaptive traits, regardless of where you stand on those dimensions? We studied self-control as the adaptive trait in question. *Self-control* refers to the capacity to override and alter one's responses, especially to behave in socially desirable ways. The current study asked whether the difference or the sum of partners' self-control scores was a better predictor of their relationship outcomes.

The present research tested two familiar theories and a novel one about what pattern of trait self-control between relationship partners is most conducive to relationship success. The two familiar theories focus on differences between partners, with one positing that small differences are best and another positing that large differences are best. A third approach took a new tack and focused on the total of partners' self-control traits as a possible predictor of relationship outcomes.

Three Theories About the Optimal Combination of Partners' Traits

Similarity theory holds that being at the same level of a certain trait is optimal, and so the smaller the difference between the partners' traits, the more satisfying the relationship should be. Similarity theory has much empirical support (Byrne & Nelson, 1965; McGinnis, 1958; Regan, 1998; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000). Similarity appears to

be especially strong in attracting people to one another (e.g., Byrne, 1971). In fact, a comprehensive study (Luo & Klohnen, 2005) found that people by and large marry those who are similar to them in political attitudes, values, and religious preferences. In short, similarity has support as a prominent positive predictor of marital happiness.

Complementarity theory would hold that couples benefit from difference, presumably by such means as division of labor and interaction scripts. Complementarity theory has not fared well in the relationships literature, with some exceptions (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Bem's (1996) "exotic becomes erotic" theory linked sexual attraction to (complementary) differentness. Tiedens and Fragale (2003; also Dryer & Horowitz, 1997) found that interpersonal interactions were more enjoyable when people differed along dominance and submission lines. Despite not having much empirical support, the idea that people seek out or remain with those who offer different

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approaches to life has intuitive appeal and could in principle produce relationship benefits with at least some traits.

Operationally, similarity and complementarity furnish opposite predictions about partner trait score differential. The difference between partners' scores should be either as large as possible (complementarity) or as small as possible (similarity) to produce the best relationship outcomes.

A more novel hypothesis, totality, looks to the sum rather than the difference of partner trait self-control scores. The basic assumption is that some traits are inherently adaptive or maladaptive for relationships. Hence, the less of them (destructive traits) or the more of them (beneficial traits) across partners, the better.

We predicted that the totality of self-control scores is the best predictor of relationship outcomes. This prediction was derived from an understanding of the power of self-control to improve people's lives (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). Knowing that high self-control is good for the self and good for relationships (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), then combining two partners with high self-control, suggests a doubling of the odds in favor of developing a stable and happy relationship.

Totality of self-control means that someone with high self-control is likely to be a good relationship partner and that two people with high self-control may offer the best chances for relationship success. As such, the totality of self-control scores might be optimal for at least two reasons. The first invokes accommodation (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), which means to react to a partner's relationship-threatening behavior by performing a relationship-stabilizing behavior (rather than passively neglecting the relationship, exiting it, or willfully seeking vengeance). Given that some amount of miscommunication or misbehavior between partners is practically inevitable in the long run (Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002), a high level of self-control in both partners means that they both have the capacity—and are likely to use it—to protect the relationship by behaving in an accommodative manner (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Therefore, partners with high self-control can prevent downward spirals of relationship deterioration that might otherwise ensue from ordinary, inevitable frictions.

The second potential advantage of mutually high self-control centers on benefits for efficiency and enhanced goal pursuit. Lemay and Clark (2008a, 2008b) suggested that intimate relationships remove the need for constant vigilance, because someone else is looking out for the self. This effect might be especially strong when one's partner possesses high self-control, because such a partner could better address one's own needs. Work from Fitzsimons and Finkel (2010) offered a roadmap for how such a reduction in monitoring and effort might occur. They proposed that intimate others "outsource" self-control to each other. When a person recognizes that her or his partner is able to assist with achieving a goal (e.g., "I have a statistical problem and my boyfriend is a statistical expert"), then that person puts forth less effort toward achieving that goal. Similar to the idea of transactive memory (Wegner, Erber, & Raymound, 1991), knowing that your partner can handle a task reduces the demand on the self to handle it; then, you can put energy toward that which your partner is incapable of helping you achieve. When outsourcing can aid division of labor, greater strides can be made (Smith, 1776/1908).

In sum, high self-control offers at least two major sources of benefits to strengthen a relationship: It reduces the likelihood that ordinary conflicts will produce lasting damage, and it reduces the constant stressful demands on each partner to cope with everything, thereby enabling partners to make progress toward their goals. The higher self-control that both partners have, the more their relationship can benefit.

A Focus on Self-Control

We chose self-control as the trait to study for two reasons. First, it is broadly influential. Many dimensions of individual well-being, including interpersonal success, have been linked to good self-control (e.g., Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Mischel et al., 1988; Tangney et al., 2004). Second, self-control is amenable to all three predictions. One could imagine that similarity best predicts happiness insofar as two well-disciplined individuals would make suitable mates whereas the more spontaneous, carefree, undisciplined sorts would be best off with each other. Yet, one could also make a case for complementarity, in which happiness emerges from the mix of one person who is sensible, disciplined, and planful with one who contributes spontaneity and fun. The third combination, totality, could be the best predictor of happiness if self-control in general confers relationship-enhancing outcomes, such as promoting reliability, anger control, fidelity, and trustworthiness. Hence, the more self-control in both partners, the better.

The Current Studies

We report results from three samples. Two involved romantic relationships, whereas the third consisted of other friendships. Friendships constitute an important category of human relationships, which has arguably been understudied by relationship researchers, especially in comparison to romantic relationships. Two samples were cross-sectional, and one was longitudinal. Two were student samples, and one was a community sample of married couples. Participants in two studies were from the United States, and participants in the third lived in the Netherlands. We included an assortment of measures of relationship success, including different measures of satisfaction. Hence, we are able to report having tested our three competing hypotheses in multiple ways and under multiple conditions. In all cases, the three hypotheses were as follows: Good relationship outcomes will negatively correlate with the difference in partner scores (similarity), positively correlate with the difference (complementarity), or positively correlate with the sum (totality).

Study 1: University Sample—Friends

Method. For partial course credit or $10, 122 introductory psychology students and their friends participated. All but

two pairs were same sex. The sample consisted of 58 women, 62 men, and 2 participants of unreported gender aged 18 to 52 ($M = 18$), with the majority being White/non-Hispanic ($n = 80$, 67%). Twenty-four (20%) classified themselves as Asian, 6 (5%) as Black, 2 (2%) as Hispanic, and 8 as *other* (6%). Friendship duration ranged from 1.5 to 219.0 months ($M = 22.82$, $SD = 39.59$), and friends spent an average of 28.91 hours a week ($SD = 26.09$) together. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires at their homes, in privacy (i.e., separately from each other). One participant's scales contained missing data; therefore, this participant and his friend were excluded from analyses. The total sample was 120 participants.

Trait self-control. Trait self-control was measured with the 36-item Trait Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004; $\alpha = .59$). Higher scores indicate better self-control. Across several samples, prior research has found that higher scores correlate with good grades in school and low levels of psychopathology (Tangney et al., 2004). Sample items are "I am lazy" and "I have problems with my concentration" (both reverse-scored). Response categories ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Friendship quality. Friendship quality was measured by a six-item measure adapted from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .86$). The items asked about friendship satisfaction (e.g., "How does this friendship compare to your ideal friendship?" and "For how much longer would you like to be friends with this person?"), investment ("Have you put things into your friendship that you would lose if the friendship were to end?"), and centrality of the relationship ("How central is this friendship in your life?").

Results

Relationship constitution. Friends' self-control scores did not significantly correlate with each other, $r = .03$. Thus, in this sample, there was no apparent tendency for people to be friends with those who are either similar to or different from themselves in self-control.

Friendship quality: Totality versus absolute value of the difference. We combined the items into one index to reflect overall relationship quality. As predicted, the correlation between the totality of self-control scores and relationship quality was higher than the correlation between the absolute value of the difference in self-control scores and relationship quality—totality: Partner A, $r(60) = .48$, $p < .001$; Partner B, $r(60) = .61$, $p < .001$; difference: Partner A, $r(60) = -.23$, $p < .10$; Partner B, $r(60) = -.05$, *ns*.

A comparison of correlations indicated that for both partners, the sum was a better predictor than the difference: Partner A, $z = 4.04$, $p < .001$; Partner B, $z = 4.02$, $p < .001$.[1] Thus, the difference between partners' self-control scores had little predictive value, whereas the sum was a strong and consistent predictor. Higher total self-control was linked to higher friendship quality.

Study 2: University Sample—Romantic Partners

Study 2's aims were to replicate the findings on totality versus difference in self-control scores among romantic relationship partners, to broaden our approach with more relationship measures, and to conduct more stringent tests of our hypothesis. Romantic couplings are a style of relationship to which the literature has paid much greater empirical attention, relative to friendships, and so studying romantic relationships will facilitate integration into the literature (including comparison with extant findings). Furthermore, we expanded our measurement of relationship indicators.

We used Rusbult's original Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) to tap commitment, investment, satisfaction, and attention to alternatives. In line with what makes for good relationship behaviors, we predicted that couples' self-control scores in total will be positively related to commitment and satisfaction (because they reflect healthy relationship outcomes) and negatively related to attraction to alternates (because attending to alternative partners is potentially destructive to relationships).

Attachment style relates to numerous romantic relationship outcomes. Attachment styles predict relationship-relevant emotions, trust, interdependence, commitment, and communication patterns (Simpson, 1990). Attachment styles not only vary across relationships but can change over time with the accessibility of positive or negative experiences within the relationship (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). Hence, attachment styles should be a reflection of the quality of the relationship while being important predictors of other indices of and contributing factors to relationship quality. A secure attachment style is considered optimal.

The Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986) measures styles of love, meaning goals and strategies that people have when in love. Some people play games, some people want a friend, some people experience a transcendent love, and so on. Campbell, Foster, and Finkel (2002) found that narcissists show predictable patterns of love styles that are not good for relationships. In particular, the game-playing (ludic) approach to love is attractive to narcissists because it allows them to be the powerful one and is hence a strategy aimed at enhancing self-esteem (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Campbell, 1999).

The ludus style of love is characterized by an immediate, self-gratifying approach to love. Other styles, such as agape and pragma, emphasize reasonable and balanced reactions to love that are focused on the long run (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). These two types of love styles resemble low and high self-control approaches to being in love, with one type being impulsive and the other type being focused on stability. Campbell et al. (2002) reported high prevalence of ludus among narcissists, who incidentally are not known to be highly impulsive (Vazire & Funder, 2006). To test our competing predictions, we considered the more serious, long-range-focused loves (pragma and agape) to be beneficial for relationships, whereas we considered the self-indulgent, game-playing love style (ludus) to be detrimental.

Method. Fifty-nine heterosexual couples participated in exchange for $10 or partial course credit in introductory psychology. Two couples were dropped because of missing data. Ages ranged from 17 to 52 ($M = 19.90$, $SD = 4.60$), and the sample comprised 97 participants who were White (85%); 5, Black (4%); 7, Asian (6%); and 5, *other*. Mean relationship duration was 18.31 months ($SD = 18.43$). Eight couples reported being casual dating partners; 8, regular dating partners; 37 (65%), steadily dating one another; and 4, engaged or married.

As in Study 1, participants completed questionnaires at home with instructions to do so alone. We again measured trait self-control with the 36-item Self-Control Scale ($\alpha = .63$). We used the original Investment Model Scale to measure relationship quality. This scale has four subscales, representing commitment (α: Partner A = .79, Partner B = .79), satisfaction (α: Partner A = .80, Partner B = .79), attraction to alternatives (i.e., other possible romantic partners; α: Partner A = .77, Partner B = .77), and investment (α: Partner A = .78, Partner B = .79).

To measure attachment styles, we used Simpson's (1990) Attachment Style Measure, which produces scores to represent three attachment tendencies: secure (α: Partner A = .83, Partner B = .81), avoidant (α: Partner A = .79, Partner B = .81), and anxious (α: Partner A = .82, Partner B = .83).

The Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986) was used to measure love styles (the different ways that people behave and feel when in love), and it has subscales representing six love styles: eros measures passionate love (α: Partner A = .72, Partner B = .72); ludus, game-playing love (α: Partner A = .71, Partner B = .81); storge, love as friendship (α: Partner A = .71, Partner B = .73); pragma, finding someone that fits well with the self (α: Partner A = .74, Partner B = .73); mania, love-related dependence and possessiveness (α: Partner A = .69, Partner B = .72); and agape, altruism and putting a partner's needs first (α: Partner A = .72, Partner B = .73).

Results

Relationship constitution. The correlation between partners' self-control scores was significant and negative, $r = -.24$, $z = 7.31$, $p < .001$. Thus, in this sample, partners had apparently chosen each other to be somewhat different in self-control.

Romantic relationship quality: Totality versus difference. As seen in Tables 1–3, the total of partners' self-control scores was a strong and consistent predictor of positive relationship indicators. In contrast, the absolute value of the difference between their scores was not a reliable predictor of relationship outcomes. Moreover, as hypothesized, the summation of self-control scores clearly outperformed difference scores in predicting relationship outcomes. The Investment Model Scale and attachment style outcomes showed clear and consistent effects such that the higher the total of couples' self-control scores, the healthier the relationship. Among love styles, high total self-control was positively related to agape and pragma and negatively related to ludus, all of which suggest that high self-control promotes serious and committed love and discourages game playing. On these outcomes, too, the summation

Table 1. Study 2: Correlations Between Partners' Self-Control Scores (Summed Versus Absolute Value of the Difference) and Investment Model Subscale Scores

| Investment Model Scale | Statistical Model | | r's Significantly Different? |
	Sum	Absolute Value Difference	Z
Commitment			
Partner A	.63**	-.17	4.74**
Partner B	.72**	-.09	5.19**
Satisfaction			
Partner A	.49**	-.29*	6.72**
Partner B	.72**	-.08	5.13**
Alternatives			
Partner A	-.28*	.27*	2.93*
Partner B	-.50**	.25†	4.18**
Investment			
Partner A	.52**	-.10	3.52**
Partner B	.58**	-.05	3.70**

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2. Study 2: Correlations Between Partners' Self-Control Scores (Summed or Absolute Value of the Difference) and Attachment Styles

| Simpson Attachment Scale | Statistical Model | | r's Significantly Different? |
	Sum	Absolute Value Difference	Z
Secure attachment			
Partner A	.49**	-.01	2.84**
Partner B	.59**	-.02	3.63**
Avoidant attachment			
Partner A	-.45**	-.12	3.15**
Partner B	-.39**	.16	2.98**
Anxious attachment			
Partner A	-.40**	.04	2.41*
Partner B	-.53**	.20	4.12**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

of couples' self-control scores was a significantly better predictor than the difference. These results indicate the robustness of the totality of self-control scores as a foundation for a good relationship.

As such, dating relationships seem to consist of partners who differ from each other in self-control, although they are happiest with partners who are high in self-control. We next tested whether similar patterns were to be found among newly married couples.

Study 3: Longitudinal Community Sample—Married Couples

Study 3 improved on the earlier two studies in three major ways. First, the design was longitudinal, thereby allowing us

Table 3. Study 2: Correlations Between Partners' Self-Control Scores (Summed or Absolute Value of the Difference) and Love Styles

| Love Attitudes Scale | Statistical Model | | *r*'s Significantly Different? |
	Sum	Absolute Value Difference	Z
Eros			
Partner A	−.05	−.17	< 1.00
Partner B	.01	−.09	< 1.00
Ludus			
Partner A	−.51**	−.21*	1.75†
Partner B	−.71**	−.08	4.19**
Storge			
Partner A	.18	.27*	< 1.00
Partner B	.28*	.25†	< 1.00
Pragma			
Partner A	.59**	−.10	4.04**
Partner B	.65**	−.05	4.29**
Mania			
Partner A	.15	−.12	1.40
Partner B	−.12	.03	< 1.00
Agape			
Partner A	.67**	−.22†	5.37**
Partner B	.71**	−.15	5.40**

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

to test for the predictability of self-control score combinations over time. Second, the sample was demographically quite different from the university samples used in Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 participants were a community sample of adults residing in the Netherlands. Additionally, these couples were married, whereas the couples in Study 2 were unmarried (with one exception). By adding such a different and diverse sample, we hoped to increase the generalizability of the conclusions. Third, we used different measures of relationship quality. This, too, should increase the robustness of findings that were consistent across the studies.

By this point in our investigation, we clearly favored the totality hypothesis over the similarity and complementarity hypotheses. Hence, our predictions were that desirable relationship outcomes will positively correlate with the sum of partners' self-control scores and that the sum will outperform the difference between partners' self-control scores.

Method. Public records revealed couples who had registered for marriage licenses. Approximately 1 month after getting married, Dutch couples were recruited to the study. Criteria for participation were that this was the participant's first marriage, neither partner had a child, and partners were between 25 and 40 years old. Of couples meeting the criteria, 19% (199 couples) agreed to participate, which is a suitable response rate when recruiting from public records (Kurdek, 1991). At Time 1, husbands (age: $M = 32.06$ years, $SD = 4.84$) and wives ($M = 29.20$ years, $SD = 4.27$) had been romantically involved on average for 5.71 years ($SD = 3.03$). Less than 10% had earned a university degree. At approximately 9 months after

Time 1, Time 2 data were collected. Couples completed questionnaires at home in the presence of a trained interviewer and were paid for participation. The following were measured for this study:

- Trait self-control was assessed by a Dutch translation of the Self-Control Scale (13 items); this version has shown good reliability (Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005) and did in the current sample ($\alpha = .69$).
- The Dyadic Adjustment Scale ($\alpha = .86$) tapped marital satisfaction by measuring conflict management, expressions of love, and agreement regarding important values (Kurdek, 1992; Spanier, 1976).
- Ease of daily coordination was assessed with 10 items ($1 = $ *not at all*, $7 = $ *very much*; $\alpha = .88$) that asked whether daily interactions are smooth versus difficult, such as "My wife (husband) and I are in sync."
- Frequency of conflict was assessed by the frequency with which couples argued about 15 issues, including money, ex-partners, alcohol use, smoking, distribution of household tasks, and appearance (Kurdek, 1994; $\alpha = .83$).
- Partner-specific trust was measured with 12 items from the Trust Scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), which measures three aspects of trust: predictability, or the stability of a partner's behavior; dependability, the qualities that warrant confidence in the face of potential hurt; faith, the expectations that one's partner is responsive ($\alpha = .83$).
- Perceived partner exclusion was assessed with "How often do you experience a lack of companionship in the relationship with your partner?" "Feel excluded from your relationship?" and "Feel separated from your partner?" ($\alpha = .77$).
- Forgiveness was measured with an adapted version of the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Brown, 2003). Example items are "When my partner hurts or angers me, I am quick to forgive him or her" (4 items; $1 = $ *not true at all*, $5 = $ *very true*). Cronbach's alpha was .82 for men and .87 for women.
- An 18-item questionnaire was used to assess partner responsiveness (conceptually modeled consistent with the work of Reis & Shaver, 1988; see Birnbaum & Reis, 2006). Partners rated the degree to which they felt they their partner accepts them (e.g., "My partner values and respects me."), understands them (e.g., "My partner fully understands me."), and cares for them (e.g., "My partner tries to fulfill my needs"). The items were rated on a 5-point scale ($1 = $ *not at all*, $5 = $ *very much*). Responses were averaged to yield a responsiveness score; higher values indicated greater responsiveness (Cronbach's alpha = .94 for husbands and .93 for wives).

Results

Statistical procedures. We tested three models using residualized lagged analyses (Kenny, Kashy, & Cooke, 2006). In the first model, we predicted relationship well-being at Time 2 from each partner's self-control score at Time 1, controlling for

Table 4. Study 3: Residualized Lagged Analyses Predicting Change in Relationship Quality From Self-Control Scores

Relationship Quality: Time 2	Model 1[a]			Model 2[b]		Model 3[c]	
	Relationship Quality: Time 1	Self	Partner	Relationship Quality: Time 1	Sum	Relationship Quality: Time 1	Difference
Forgiveness	.57**	.11**	.05	.58**	.11*	.61**	.02
Responsiveness	.66**	.02	.04	.65**	.04	.65**	.04
Perceived partner exclusion	.58**	−.09*	−.08*	.58**	−.11*	.60**	−.06
Dyadic adjustment scale	.52**	.09*	.05	.53**	.10*	.55**	.01
Frequency of conflict	.56**	−.09*	−.06	.59**	−.10*	.35**	−.10†
Smoothness of daily interaction	.65**	.16**	.05	.67**	.13**	.70**	.01
Partner-specific trust	.66**	.08*	.01	.66**	.06	.67**	−.04

[a]Model 1 = Residualized lagged regression with relationship quality and each partner's self-control scores as predictors.
[b]Model 2 = Residualized lagged regression with relationship quality and sum of self-control as predictors.
[c]Model 3 = Residualized-lagged regression with relationship quality and absolute value of the difference between partners' self-control scores as predictors.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

relationship well-being at Time 1. In the second model, we predicted Time 2 relationship well-being using the sum of both partners' self-control scores at Time 1, controlling for relationship well-being at Time 1. In the third model, we predicted relationship well-being at Time 2 using the absolute difference of partners' self-control scores at Time 1, controlling for relationship well-being at Time 1. All models examined effects on Time 2 criteria controlling for Time 1 scores on each criterion and therefore assessing change over time.

The models we used were particularly difficult tests of our hypotheses because the self-control indices needed to explain variance in relationship well-being in data that were fairly stable from Time 1 to Time 2 (relationship Time 1–Time 2 correlations = .57 to .71). In addition, self-control scores showed considerable stability, $r(385) = .77$, $p < .001$.

Relationship constitution. In terms of participants' scores relative to their partners', we again observed a negative correlation—Time 1: $r(388) = −.12$, $z = 2.26$, $p < .02$; Time 2: $r(385) = −.11$, $z = 2.16$, $p = .03$. Partners were more dissimilar to each other on self-control than to a randomly chosen member of the sample. Thus, people seem to form partnerships with someone different from themselves in self-control.

Change in marital quality: Totality versus absolute value of the difference. As in the first two studies, the best predictor of relationship outcomes was the total of each couple's self-control scores, which consistently offered significant and substantial effects (Table 4). The difference between partners' self-control scores generally failed to yield significant outcomes. There was also no sign of similarity or difference in self-control increasing over time nor of change in the predictive power of the sum or difference in trait self-control.

General Discussion

We tested two combinations of partners' self-control scores (summation versus difference) to ascertain which was a stronger predictor of relationship outcomes. Converging evidence

from three investigations provided consistent support for the totality hypothesis, some signs of complementarity, and no evidence for the similarity hypothesis. The main thrust of these data indicates that the more self-control that two partners have, the better their relationship will be—which represents a dramatic departure from long-standing assumptions that similarity is the key to relationship success.

The difference between partners' scores on trait self-control failed to correlate with any of a broad set of outcome measures designed to assess satisfaction and relationship quality. Instead, the sum of their scores consistently predicted relationship success on most outcome measures. In Studies 1 and 2, the difference between correlations was significant, indicating that sum fared as a significantly better predictor than the difference between partners' self-control scores at predicting relationship success. (Such analyses were not performed for Study 3.) Across all three studies, the higher the total self-control across both partners, the more satisfied they were with the relationship.

Although we failed to find evidence that complementarity predicts relationship outcomes, we did repeatedly find a negative correlation between romantic partners' self-control scores. The literal meaning is that those relationship partners tended to be more different than similar in their trait self-control and that they resembled each other less than they resembled a randomly chosen member of the sample. Degree of complementarity varied with type of relationship. Bem's (1996) theory that exotic becomes erotic seems to fit our data such that people who differ from each other (on self-control) find each other mutually attractive as romantic partners but might not be most suitable as long-term companions. However, the present findings of complementarity could arise from either opposites attracting each other or partners becoming more different over the course of the relationship.

The most successful relationships in these samples were marked by high self-control in both partners, but the romantic dyads also included as large a discrepancy as could be reconciled with both scores being relatively high. Thus, the optimal picture of a lasting romantic relationship involves one person

being extremely high in self-control and the other being low enough to seem different but high enough to provide or maintain the broad benefits of self-control.

How does self-control benefit relationships? High self-control fosters accommodation and good behaviors in the face of relationship stressors (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). It enables people to resist aggression (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Vohs, Glass, Maddox, & Markman, 2010), including abusive treatment (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). Self-control aids achieving weight and shape goals (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000), which could boost self-confidence and enhance one's attractiveness. It reduces impulsive spending (Vohs & Faber, 2007) and enables people to put forth a good impression (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005), all of which could contribute to relationship success.

Having a partner with high self-control could aid in the success of the relationship because high-self-control partners will curb impulses to respond to hurtful acts in kind (whether real or perceived). It could be too that people who have high self-control are able to help their partners achieve goals, which allows the couple to reach new and loftier goals if this leads to a division of labor.

In sum, the present results suggest an important exception to the broad tendency for trait similarity to dominate theorizing about relationship success. Romantic partners, but not friends, may choose each other on the basis of being different in self-control (as correlations between self-control scores of partners suggest), but the quality of both romance and friendship is highest to the extent that both partners have high self-control. Future work might profitably examine whether traits other than self-control influence relationship success via totality rather than similarity or complementarity.

Most important, our findings provide a vital extension of the view that self-control is a broadly beneficial and adaptive trait. The success and quality of romantic relationships and friendships do not depend on similarity or complementarity of trait self-control. Rather, the more that both partners have self-control, the better the relationship is likely to be. Choosing a partner with good self-control is thus a promising recipe for a successful, happy relationship. Although this may seem obvious to some researchers, it is manifestly not apparent to the ordinary people who made up our samples insofar as there was a broad tendency across all romantic relationships to consist of people somewhat different from one another on self-control.

Notes

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1. For all three studies, we confirmed that the summation of self-control scores predicts relationship outcomes after controlling for the self-control score of the person evaluating the relationship. Details can be obtained from the first author.

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