SHORT PAPER

Choosing goals that express the true self: A novel mechanism of the effect of self-control on goal attainment

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Conflict of Interest Statement
There is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Statement
This research was approved by the Ethical Review Board of Tilburg University (protocol number EC-2018.EX28).

Transparency Statement
The study materials and data can be accessed at the project's open science framework page: https://osf.io/nmb4d/?view_only=f0bda1a6c1c4493684df85b713ffee4f

Abstract

Why is trait self-control associated with successful goal progress? Existing research has attempted to answer this question by focusing on individual differences in the process of goal pursuit. Herein, we propose and test a novel mechanism suggesting that self-control facilitates goal attainment not only by affecting the process of goal pursuit but also the type of goals people select in the first place. Three studies showed that high (vs. low) self-control individuals are more likely to report successful goal attainment and this association was mediated by their tendency to select the goals that reflect their true/authentic self. These results were obtained using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs and were robust against controlling for previously established mechanisms of the effect of trait self-control on goal attainment (habit strength, experiences of goal-conflicting desires). Overall, there findings contribute to the literatures on self-regulation, authenticity and goal management.

Keywords: self-control, self-regulation, goal attainment, true self, authenticity

Trait self-control reflects individual differences in the ability to engage in goal-directed behaviors (Hagger, 2013). Not surprisingly, higher levels of trait self-control have been associated with successful goal pursuit, resulting in a multitude of positive life outcomes, from academic success to better health (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). But how exactly does trait self-control facilitate goal attainment?

Two major mechanisms have been discussed in the literature so far. First, given that high self-control individuals have been shown to experience less goal conflicting desires (Haynes, Kemps, & Moffitt, 2016; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012), it has been proposed that trait self-control can facilitate goal attainment via a less intense experience of temptations (Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015; Gillebaart, Schneider, & De Ridder, 2016). Second, it has been suggested that the success of high self-control individuals may lie in their propensity to use adaptive behavioral strategies, such as developing beneficial habits and daily routines (De Ridder & Gillebaart, 2017; Galla & Duckworth, 2015).

Herein, we propose and test an additional, novel mechanism through which trait self-control might facilitate goal attainment. While existing theoretical approaches focus on individual differences in the process of goal pursuit, we propose that high self-control individuals might differ from their low self-control counterparts not only in *how* they pursue their goals but in *what kind of goals* they set in the first place.

The importance of different goal characteristics for successful goal pursuit has been recognized in theoretical and empirical literature for decades. For example, in line with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), individuals are more successful in pursuing goals that reflect their genuine interests and values (Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, Hope, & Koestner, 2015; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) as well as their intrinsic or true self (Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). The true self represents a person's belief about who he/she "really is regardless of his or her outward behavior" (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011, p. 745) and is thus often contrasted with individuals' public self (i.e., who people are around other people, even if this is not who they really are). Consequently, goal authenticity is different from more general goal characteristics, such as importance: Goal importance

can reflect the value of a goal for various aspects of the self, including the public self, whereas goal authenticity reflects the importance of a goal for a specific aspect of the self—the true self. Similarly, authenticity in goal selection does not simply mean pursuing goals people enjoy, but pursuing goals that allow them to be themselves. In other words, authenticity is more likely to be found in activities that provide one with meaning and self-fulfillment, rather than in merely pleasurable activities (Smallenbroek, Zelenski, & Whelan, 2017).

The importance of individual differences in goal selection per se has been largely overlooked as a factor potentially explaining the beneficial consequences of trait self-control. We propose that high self-control individuals are more likely to pursue goals that reflect their true self (vs. their public self and vs. socially desirable goals). High self-control has been associated with approach tendencies, whereas experiences of low self-control trigger vigilance and self-protection (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & De Ridder, 2014)—tendencies further associated with increasing willingness to yield to social pressure (Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006) and, potentially, make one endorse socially desirable goals, rather than follow one's authentic inclinations. On the opposite, high (vs. low) trait self-control individuals are more likely to engage in activities (e.g., physical exercise) or endorse certain beliefs systems (e.g., religiosity) for intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) reasons (Briki, 2016; Briki et al., 2015). Finally, self-control involves an increased sense of agency and control over how one's life unfolds, which represents a primary source of individual differences in true self-knowledge accessibility (Seto & Hicks, 2016).

Therefore, we propose that high self-control people are more likely to pursue goals that reflect their true self (vs. their public self and vs. socially desirable goals), which in turn contributes to more successful goal pursuit. Three studies tested this mediation hypothesis.

This research was approved by the Ethical Review Board of Tilburg University (protocol number EC-2018.EX28). We report all measures and exclusions in the methods section. The study materials and data can be accessed at the project's open science framework page: https://osf.io/nmb4d/?view_only=f0bda1a6c1c4493684df85b713ffee4f.

Study 1

Study 1 examined whether high self-control people are more or less likely to select goals reflecting their true versus public self.

Method

Participants. As no previous studies examined the association between trait self-control and goal authenticity, we decided to recruit 300 participants—a sample size that would allow us to detect even a small correlation ($r \geq .16$) between trait self-control and goal authenticity

with 80% power (two-tailed test, $\alpha = .05$; and $r \geq .14$ if a one-tailed test is used). The power analysis was conducted with G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). Three hundred and two American adults competed the study on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Eight failed an attention check question (that required them to select a particular response option) and were removed, resulting in a final sample of 294 individuals ($M_{age} = 38.02$, $SD_{age} = 12.30$, 44.2% male).

Procedure. To measure trait self-control, we used a brief *trait self-control* scale (Tangney et al., 2004) ($\alpha = .90$; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Example items include "I am good at resisting temptation" and "I wish I had more self-discipline" (reverse-scored). Half of the participants completed the scale at the beginning, the other half at the end of the survey. As the order was not associated with any measured variables (all $ps > .17$), we did not consider it further. Participants were asked to name five personal goals that they have been pursuing in the recent past (we assumed that participants will be better able to recall and evaluate recently pursued goals). Examples of the goals participants named are "lose 20 pounds", "pay off debt" or "clean out closets". Participants were then asked to rate each goal with respect to whether it reflected their true versus their public self. Specifically, participants read: "Many people feel that they have two sides to themselves. One side is the person that they show to other people (public self). The other side is their true self—that is, the person who they truly are deep down" (adapted from Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2015). They were asked to indicate whether each goal reflects their public self (=0), their true self (=100) or reflects both sides equally well (=50). A slider measure was used with the slider starting anchor point placed at 50. Higher values on this slider measure indicate a stronger *goal authenticity*. By selecting the mid-scale, participants could indicate that their goal reflects public and true self equally well. Finally, participants indicated how much *progress* they made toward each goal in the recent past (1 = no progress at all, 7 = a lot of progress) and filled in a basic socio-demographic questionnaire.

Results

On average, individuals believed that their goals reflected their true self more than their public self ($M = 67.99$, $t(293) = 17.78$, test-value = 50, $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$). This tendency was more pronounced in high (vs. low) self-control individuals, as reflected in a significant correlation between self-control and goal authenticity ($r = .26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.15; 0.36]).[1] Trait self-control was positively associated with goal progress ($r = .30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.19; 0.40]). Goal authenticity and goal progress were positively associated with

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[1]Here and throughout the paper, the correlations were computed with the measures averaged across the goals.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables, Studies 1/2/3

		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Self-control	3.41/2.91/2.91	0.80/0.57/0.65	–	–	–	–	–
2	Goal authenticity	67.98/5.15/4.92	17.34/0.86/0.77	.26***/.22***/.21**	–	–	–	–
3	Goal social desirability	-/4.59/4.09	-/0.94/1.02	-/−.08/−.01	-/.07/.25***	–	–	–
4	Goal-conflicting desires	-/4.51/-	-/1.03/-	-/−.22***/-	-/−.24***/-	-/−.03/-	–	–
5	Habit strength	-/3.85/-	-/0.83/-	-/.16**/-	-/.18**/-	-/.19***/-	-/−.14**/-	–
6	Goal progress	3.82/4.36/4.63	1.25/0.92/0.86	.30***/.24***/.38***	.18**/.16**/.14*	-/.10/−.03	-/−.32***/-	-/.38***/-

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Correlations with goal characteristics are average correlations across goals.

each other ($r = .18$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.07; 0.29]). A full correlation matrix is presented in Table 1.

As goals were nested within participants, we used multilevel mediation analyses for the main hypothesis testing, with the independent variable measured at the level of participants and both mediators and the dependent variable measured at the level of goals. To compute path a (trait self-control → goal authenticity), we regressed goal authenticity on trait self-control. To compute path b (goal authenticity → goal progress), we regressed goal progress on both goal authenticity and trait self-control. All models included a random intercept.[2] The indirect effect was computed as a product of the paths a and b and its significance was determined with the Monte Carlo simulation method (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004; Selig & Preacher, 2008).

The results of the mediation analyses are shown in Figure 1. High self-control individuals were more likely to select goals that reflect their true (rather than public) self ($b = 5.62$, $p < .001$) and individuals who pursued true-self goals were more likely to report stronger goal progress ($b = 0.006$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect was 0.03, 95% CI [0.01; 0.06], and the total effect was 0.46 ($p < .001$), suggesting that 5.8% of the total effect of self-control on goal attainment was mediated by individuals' propensity to select authentic goals.

Discussion

This study provided first evidence that differences in the type of goals people pursue might account for the positive relationship between trait self-control and goal attainment. High self-control individuals were more likely to pursue goals that reflected their true (vs. public) self and were consequently more successful at goal attainment.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the results of Study 1. It also sought to establish goal authenticity as a distinct mediator of the link between self-control and goal attainment, independent from the other two previously established mechanisms: individual differences in the tendency to experience conflicting desires (Gillebaart et al., 2016) and turn goal-directed behaviors into habits (De Ridder & Gillebaart, 2017). In addition, given the tendency to see the true self as fundamentally good and therefore socially desirable (De Freitas et al., 2018) as well as the strong associations between trait self-control and social desirability (Stavrova & Kokkoris, 2017; Uziel, 2010), we additionally explored individual differences in the tendency to pursue socially desirable goals as another competing mediator of the effect of self-control on goal attainment.

Method

Participants. Participants were first-year psychology students who participated in the study for course credits. We used the same procedure as in Study 1 to determine the sample size. Following the lab's practice, to collect at least 300 responses, we gave the students the possibility to fill in the survey within two weeks. Three hundred and forty-three individuals completed the survey ($M_{age} = 19.88$, $SD_{age} = 2.16$, 20.7% male).

Procedure. After completing a brief *trait self-control* scale (Tangney et al., 2004) ($\alpha = .80$; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much), participants were asked to name three personal goals they had been pursuing in the recent past.[3] With respect to each goal, participants indicated to what extent pursuing each goal (i) makes them feel like they are really being themselves, (ii) makes them feel alienated from themselves (reverse-coded), (iii) makes other people like them and (iv) makes other people respect them (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants' responses to the former two items were collapsed to measure *goal authenticity* (r between .35 and .39 across the goals, $p < .001$) and participants' responses to the latter two items were collapsed to measure *goal social desirability* (r between .50 and .63 across the goals, $p < .001$). Participants also reported how

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[2]Adding a random slope of goal authenticity in the estimation of path b did not change the results (indirect effect 0.04, 95% CI [0.01; 0.07]; total effect 0.47, $p < .001$).

[3]As Study 2 included more questions about each goal, we reduced the number of goals from five (Study 1) to three.
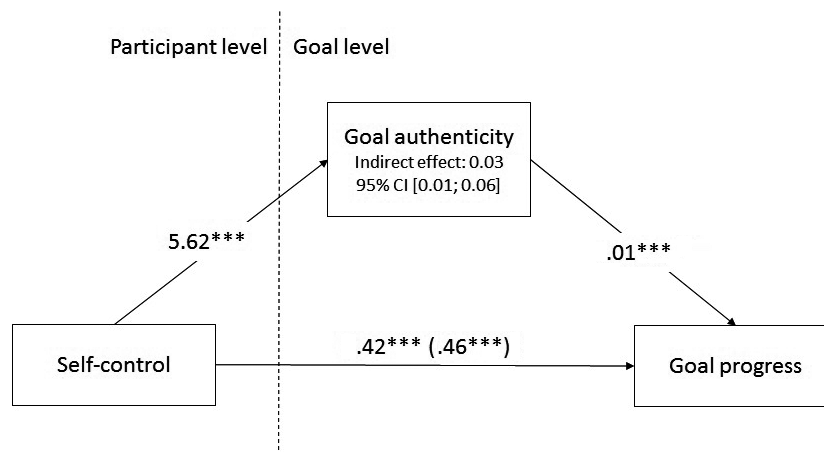
Fig. 1: Multilevel mediation, Study 1.
Note: ****p* < .001. The coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients

often during the past week they experienced desires that conflicted with each goal and rated how strong these desires were. Participants' responses to these two questions were averaged to measure *goal-conflicting desires* (7-point scale, *r* between .72 and .80 across the goals, *p* < .001). We then asked participants to name a typical activity or behavior that they engage in to reach each goal and indicate the degree to which these activities represent a habit (the *habit strength* scale was used, taken from Verplanken & Orbell, 2003); 12 items, sample item is "Is this activity something you start doing before you realize you are doing it?", 7-point scale; α between .87 and .93 across the goals). Finally, participants reported their *progress* toward each goal thus far, using the following three items: "I have made a lot of progress toward this goal", "I feel like I'm on track with my goal plan" and "I feel like I have achieved this goal", adapted from Milyavskaya and Inzlicht (2017). Responses were given on a 7-point scale and α ranged between .87 and .93, across the goals. Participants also indicated whether pursuing each goal made their life meaningful (three items; this measure was included for reasons unrelated to the topic of the present paper) and provided basic socio-demographic information.

Results

Means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations among the variables are shown in Table 1. Trait self-control was positively associated with goal progress (*r* = .24, *p* < .001, 95% CI [0.14; 0.34]), goal authenticity (*r* = .22, *p* < .001, 95% CI [0.12; 0.32]) and habit strength (*r* = .16, *p* = .002, 95% CI [0.06; 0.26]), and negatively with conflicting desires (*r* = −.22, *p* < .001, 95% CI [−0.32; 0.12]). It was not related to goal social desirability (*r* = −.08, *p* = .122, 95% CI [−0.18; 0.03]) (Table 1). Goal authenticity (*r* = .16, *p* = .003, 95% CI [0.06; 0.26]) and habit strength (*r* = .38, *p* = .001, 95% CI [0.29; 0.47]) were positively while conflicting desires (*r* = −.32, *p* < .001, 95% CI [−0.41; −0.22]) were negatively associated with goal progress.

To examine whether goal authenticity mediates the effect of self-control on goal progress, we used the same procedure as in Study 1, except that goal authenticity, goal social desirability, habit strength and conflicting desires were modelled as parallel mediators. As in Study 1, paths a and b were estimated in separate multilevel models. All models included a random intercept.[4]

The results of the mediation analyses are shown in Figure 2. High self-control individuals were more likely to select goals that reflect their true self (*b* = 0.32, *p* < .001), were less likely to experience desires that conflict with these goals (*b* = −0.39, *p* < .001) and were more likely to turn goal-directed activities into habits (*b* = 0.24, *p* = .002), all of which in turn contributed to a stronger goal progress (goal authenticity: *b* = 0.14, *p* < .001; conflicting desires: *b* = −0.21, *p* < .001; habit strength: *b* = 0.32, *p* < .001). All three indirect effects were significant (goal authenticity: 0.04, 95% CI [0.02; 0.08]; conflicting desires: 0.08, 95% CI [0.04; 0.13]; goal strength: 0.08, 95% CI [0.03; 0.13]). The indirect effect via goal social desirability was not significant (−0.01, 95% CI [−0.03; 0.003]). The total effect was 0.39 (*p* < .001) and the direct effect reached 0.20 (*p* = .013). That is, the mediators accounted for about half of the total effect, with goal authenticity, conflicting desires and habit strength explaining 10%, 20% and 20%, respectively.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1, showing that high scores in trait self-control facilitate the selection of the goals reflecting one's true self (but not socially desirable goals) and therefore contribute to a successful goal attainment. Importantly, this effect was independent of other previously established mediators: experience of goal conflicting desires and the propensity to turn goal-

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[4]Including random slopes of four proposed mediators in the estimation of path b was not possible as the number of random parameters exceeded the number of observations in the datasets (the same applies to Study 3).
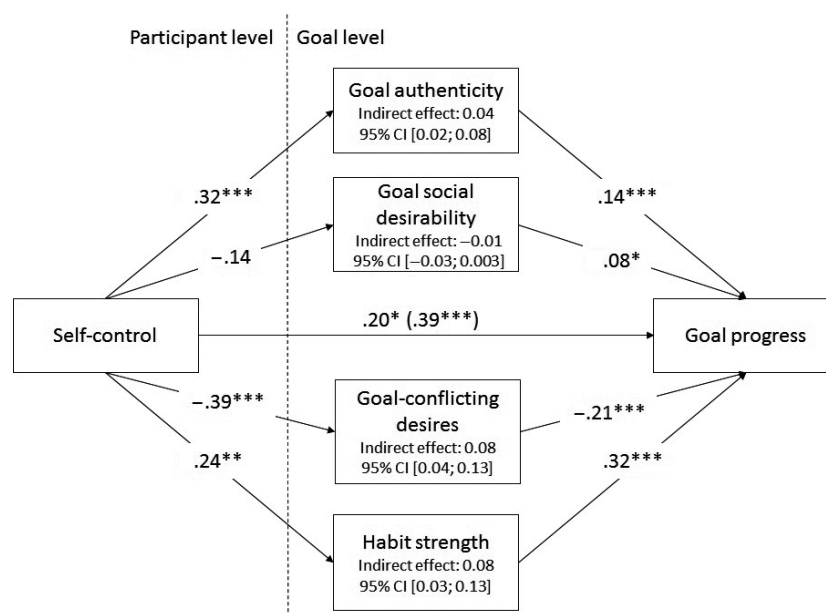
Fig. 2: Multilevel mediation, Study 2.
Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. The coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients

directed behaviors into habits. Thus, goal authenticity is a distinct mechanism explaining why people with high self-control are better at reaching their goals.

Study 3

We assumed that high self-control individuals are more likely to select authentic goals, thereby facilitating successful goal attainment. However, the cross-sectional design used in Studies 1 and 2 did not allow us to rule out an alternative possibility: namely that the more progress people make toward a goal, the more they think that this goal reflects their true self. Therefore, in Study 3 we recurred to a longitudinal design. We asked participants to set their goals for the coming week and rate them on authenticity. We re-contacted the participants one week later and asked them to indicate how much progress they had made toward these goals.

Method

Participants. The study was conducted with first-year psychology students who were rewarded with course credits.[5] The sample size was determined in the same way as in Study 2. Two hundred and sixty-one participants completed the first part of the survey (T1). Ten failed to respond correctly to an attention check item (the same as in Study 1) and were not invited to the one-week follow-up (T2). The follow-up survey

was completed by 217 individuals, who constituted the final sample (M_{age} = 20.10, SD_{age} = 2.31, 21.2% male).

Procedure. At T1, participants completed a brief *trait self-control* scale (Tangney et al., 2004) (α = .85; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much) and were asked to name three personal goals that they planned to pursue during the coming week. Participants were asked to be specific: "Don't write down your general life goals but more concrete, specific goals that you want to accomplish this week (e.g., finish a school assignment, sign up for a gym class, clean up your room). Make sure that you select the goals that you haven't started pursuing yet". Half of the participants completed the trait self-control at the beginning, the other half at the end of the survey. As the order was not associated with any measured variables (all *p*s > .17), we did not consider it further. To measure *goal authenticity*, participants responded to five items[6] adapted from Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, and Joseph (2008). Sample items are "This goal reflects very well who I am deep down inside" and "Having this goal makes me feel in touch with 'the real me'" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α ranged between .79 and .83 across the goals). The questionnaire additionally included the same measure of goal social desirability as used in Study 2 (*r* between .61 and .68 across the goals, *p* < .001).

At T2 (one week later), participants were reminded of the goals they set at T1 and were asked to report their *progress* toward each goal (six items, sample items "I have had quite a lot of success in pursuing this goal" and "Many of my efforts in

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[5]Participants in Study 3 were recruited from the same subject pool as participants in Study 2. Of 560 participants (343 in Study 2 and 217 in Study 3), 512 (91%) were unique participants and 48 (9%) took part in both studies.

[6]As participants rated their goals on only two dimensions, we used a longer goal authenticity scale than in Study 2 (without making the study too long).
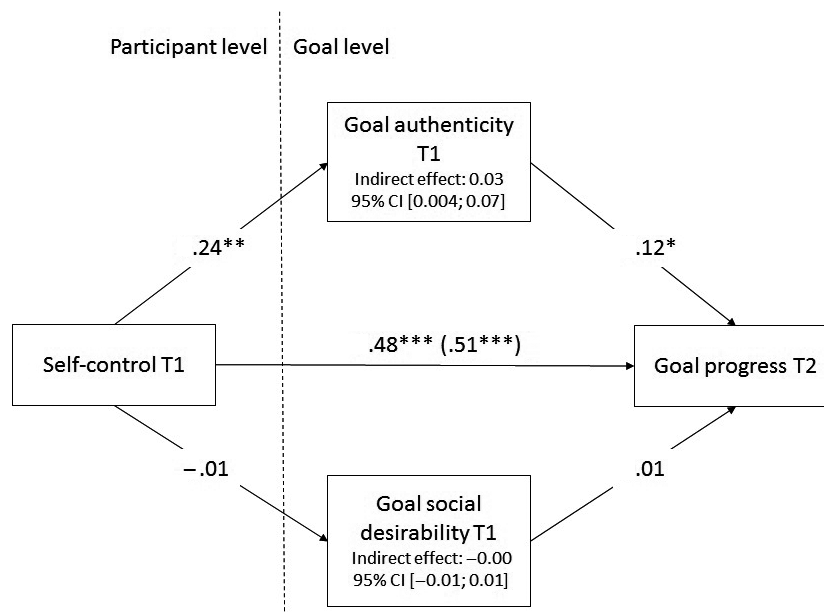
Fig. 3: Multilevel mediation, Study 3.
Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. The coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients

carrying out this goal have failed" (reverse-coded); adapted from Brunstein, 1993). A 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) was used and α ranged between .84 and .90.

Results

Trait self-control was positively associated with goal authenticity ($r = .21$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.08; 0.33]) and goal progress ($r = .38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.26; 0.49]), but not with goal social desirability ($r = −.01$, $p = .95$). Goal progress was positively related to goal authenticity ($r = .14$, $p = .039$, 95% CI [0.01; 0.27]) but not to goal social desirability ($r = −.03$, $p = .67$) (see Table 1).

To test whether the effect of trait self-control on goal progress is mediated by goal authenticity, we conducted a multilevel mediation analysis, following the procedure described in Studies 1 and 2 (Fig. 3). The results showed that high self-control individuals were more likely to select goals that reflect their true self ($b = 0.25$, $p = .002$) and that this tendency facilitated goal progress ($b = 0.12$, $p = .019$). The indirect effect was 0.03, 95% CI [0.004; 0.07]. Replicating the results of Study 2, the indirect effect via goal social desirability was not significant ($−0.00$, 95% CI [$−0.01$; 0.01]). The total effect was 0.51 ($p < .001$), suggesting that 5.8% of the total effect of self-control on goal attainment was accounted for by individual differences in the propensity to set authentic goals.

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2, this time with a longitudinal design. When asked to set personal goals for the coming week, high self-control participants were more likely to set authentic goals and were consequently more likely to report a stronger progress toward these goals one week later.

General Discussion

Why is trait self-control associated with successful goal progress? In the present research, we proposed that high self-control people differ from their low self-control counterparts not only in *how* they pursue goals but also in *what* goals they pursue. Drawing from the literature on the role of true (or authentic) self in goal-setting (Milyavskaya et al., 2015), we assumed that high self-control individuals are more likely to pursue goals that reflect their true self, which in turn contributes to more successful goal pursuit. Three studies using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs provided consistent support to this idea. Higher scores in trait self-control were associated with a stronger goal progress, and this association was mediated by participants' perception of their goals as reflecting their true, authentic self.

Why does self-control foster the selection of authentic goals? On the one hand, high self-control individuals might have a stronger true self-knowledge accessibility (Seto & Hicks, 2016), which can help them to distinguish authentic goals from the ones imposed by social pressure or norms. Alternatively, high self-control individuals might initially select beneficial goals as everyone else does but, in contrast to their low self-control counterparts, they might be more likely to include these goals in their "true self-concept" over time. Understanding whether high self-control individuals differ from the lower self-control counterparts in objective goal content and examining the goal

internalization processes over time would help in reaching a deeper understanding of this process.

Does the novel explanation of the benefits of self-control proposed here undermine the validity of the existing ones? Our answer is: No. Study 2 has shown that all three processes—the two discussed in the literature so far, including the experience of goal-conflicting desires (Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015) and habit strength (Adriaanse, Kroese, Gillebaart, & De Ridder, 2014), as well as the novel one we proposed here, goal authenticity—explain the facilitating role of trait self-control in goal attainment. In fact, these three processes might even interact and build off each other. For example, selecting authentic goals might make it easy for high self-control people not to be distracted by goal-conflicting desires and turn goal-directed behaviors into habits.

The correlational nature of the data does not allow us to rule out several alternative explanations. While we assumed that trait self-control affects goal selection, selecting authentic goals might foster self-control development as well.[7] Similarly, we proposed that goal authenticity promotes goal attainment. Alternatively, making progress toward a goal might contribute to seeing it as more reflecting of one's true self. In Study 3, we attempted to rule out this alternative explanation by asking participants to select their goals and rate them on authenticity at the beginning of the week and evaluate goal progress at the end of the week. Nevertheless, we encourage future studies to examine temporal trends in both ratings of authenticity and goal progress, which would represent a more thorough test of these alternative explanations. Finally, while the present studies focused on a very specific characteristic of goals—the degree to which they reflect participants' true self—future studies might consider a more general dimension of goal importance as a factor linking trait self-control to goal attainment.

Individual differences in response biases and other unassessed variables might partially explain our findings as well. For example, high self-control people could have taken the study more seriously, worked harder on the selected goals and therefore have been more successful at achieving them. It is also possible that high self-control individuals differed from their low self-control counterparts in reporting (but not necessarily selecting) authentic goals. Similarly, given a positive association between self-control and self-esteem (Tangney et al., 2004), high self-control participants could have just overestimated their goal progress compared to low self-control participants. Future research could shed more light on the proposed mechanism by employing experimental methods (e.g., random assignment to different goals) and objective measures of goal attainment.

Despite these limitations, the present research has provided initial evidence showing that the benefits of trait self-control might lie not only in how people pursue goals but also in what kind of goals they select in the first place, thereby contributing to the ongoing discussion on the mechanisms behind the benefits of self-control and laying the ground for promising future research.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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[7]Indeed, swapping the independent variable and the mediator in the mediation analyses showed a significant indirect effect as well, suggesting that self-control might mediate the effect of goal authenticity on goal progress (see Supporting Information for details).

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