Previous research shows that people with high self-esteem persist in tasks longer than people with low self-esteem (McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984\(^1\)), and optimistic people tend to pursue their goals more than pessimistic people do (Carver, 2003\(^2\)). Therefore, previous research shows that persistence is typically associated with relatively healthy psychological traits. Furthermore, these findings indicate that trait tendencies determine persistent behavior. The purpose of this study was to examine the causes of persistent behavior beyond personality. Specifically, this research examined two possible self-related explanations for persistent behavior.

One self-related explanation for persistent behavior is that people persist to confirm expectations about their self-concept. In an intriguing demonstration of consistency theory, Aronson and Carlsmith (1962\(^3\)) found that participants’ performance on a test, which ostensibly evaluated their perceptual abilities, was consistent with how they were expected to perform. For example, participants who believed they would perform poorly on the test but actually performed well changed their answers more than participants who believed they would perform poorly on the test and did, in fact, perform poorly. This study demonstrates that people are motivated to engage in self-consistent behavior, even if that behavior maintains a negative self-image. Moreover, this work suggests that people behave in ways that meet expectations about their self. Therefore, people who are expected to perform well on a task should work longer at achieving success than people who are expected to perform poorly on a task.

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Another self-related explanation for persistent behavior is that people persist to the extent that they have the capacity to control their behavior. Specifically, Muraven and Baumeister (2000) proposed that the capacity to engage in self-regulation relies on a limited resource, such that engaging in an act of self-regulation (e.g., thought suppression) reduces the capacity to engage in subsequent acts of self-regulation. For example, Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister (1998) had participants either engage in a thought-suppression task or a thought-expression task. Results showed that participants subsequently spent less time deciphering unsolvable anagrams after they had suppressed their thoughts than after they had expressed their thoughts. Therefore, this study suggests that the capacity to control behavior influences the extent to which people persist.

In summary, research shows that people engage in persistent behavior either to maintain a consistent self-image (e.g., to meet expectations of their performance) or because they have the capacity to engage in self-control. The purpose of this research, then, was to test these competing predictions of persistence. To investigate this, participants completed a personality test that was used to provide them with feedback about how they were expected to perform on a later task. Before receiving feedback, though, participants completed a self-regulation manipulation task used in previous literature (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Specifically, participants crossed out the letter “e” in a series of easily readable text; however, in the self-control depletion condition, participants crossed out the letter “e” only if it was not next to or one letter away from another vowel in a series of poorly copied and difficult to read text. In other words, participants either completed a simple, non-regulating task or a difficult task that required them to regulate their responses. After participants completed the self-regulation depletion manipulation, they were led to believe that their personality test predicted they would either perform well or poorly on the upcoming anagram task. Control participants received no feedback about how they were expected to perform. Following the feedback, participants attempted to decipher 10 solvable anagrams.

If consistency theory explains persistent behavior, participants would spend longer deciphering the anagrams when they were expected to perform well than when they were expected to perform poorly. If self-regulation capacity explains persistent behavior, participants would spend longer deciphering the anagram when they completed the simple (non-depleting) task than when they completed the difficult (depleting) task. The results supported the latter explanation, showing that participants spent significantly more time trying to decipher the anagrams when they completed the simple, non-depleting task than when they completed the difficult, depleting task. There was no effect of performance-expectations or interaction between the performance-expectations and the self-control manipulations. Therefore, these data suggest that self-regulation capacity, not self-consistency, predicts persistent behavior.

Persistence is typically understood to be a positive behavior. This research suggests that people who have an elevated capacity to self-regulate should engage in more persistent behavior than people with an inadequate capacity to self-regulate. Interestingly, Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, and Oaten (2006) showed that this capacity to engage in self-control can be increased by practicing self-regulation. Therefore, this research, in conjunction with the present work, indicates persistence can be developed by exercising one’s self-regulatory capacity. These

findings contrast previous research that focused on trait differences in persistent behavior, suggesting that persistence was attainable only to the extent that one possessed certain characteristics.

Clearly, persistent behavior is not always beneficial. Therefore, future research should investigate the extent to which self-control influences nonproductive persistence. In addition, future research should identify the circumstances where the self-consistency motive may predict persistence. For example, in this study, participants were run individually. Based on previous research, self-consistent motivations may be more involved in persistent behavior in public situations than in private situations (Baumeister, Cooper, & Skib, 1979). That is, people may be more motivated to maintain a self-consistent image only when others witness this behavior. Therefore, self-regulation capacity may be a personal source of persistence; whereas, self-consistency may be an interpersonal source of persistence.

WORD COUNT: 898

SHORT-VERSION:

People persist either to satisfy their self-consistency motive or because they have the capacity to self-regulate. To test these competing predictions, participants either engaged in a self-regulatory depleting task or a non-depleting self-regulatory task. Participants were, then, told they would perform well or poorly on an upcoming anagram task. Results showed that non-depleted participants spent longer deciphering the anagrams than depleted participants. These data suggest that people persist because they have the capacity to self-regulate.

WORD COUNT: 75

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