

Running head: MOTIVATION AND SELF-REGULATION IN RELATIONSHIPS

The Role of Motivation In Self-Regulation: Culture and Relational Self Construal as  
Predictors of Accommodation in Romantic Relationships

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**Simmi Mann**

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## Abstract

Relationships frequently encounter ups and downs, and successful ones often survive the fluctuations by accommodating them strategically (Rusbult, 1987). When faced with a predicament, the partner may make a conscious choice to forgive and support the other (i.e., accommodation), or she or he may choose to chastise the other's actions (i.e., non-accommodation). Self-control is identified as a variable that influences accommodation functioning in romantic relationships (Finkel and Campbell, 2001). Particularly, both dispositional self-control and ego depletion levels impact a given person's likelihood of accommodating in response to a partner's transgression. What makes various individuals more effective at utilizing accommodation than others? The present research examined the association between relationship specific motivation and self-control within the close relationships context. Cultural orientation and relational self-construal were examined as factors that afford greater self-control and accommodation. One hundred and fifty-four undergraduate students in ongoing relationships, of which 48% were Asian in ethnicity and 68% were female were recruited for the study. Ethnicity was found to be highly related to constructive accommodative tendencies. More specifically, Asians were associated with greater voice than Caucasians in response to a partner transgression. Additionally, Asians reported experiencing greater depletion after describing instances of non-accommodation. Multiple regression analyses revealed ethnicity to be a significant moderator of the association between accommodation and self-regulatory strength. Relational self-construal (RISC) was also examined and results indicated that individuals with high RISC reported greater accommodative tendencies and

also reported higher depletion scores after instances of non-accommodation than individuals with low RISC. Additionally, RISC was found to significantly moderate the relationship between self-regulatory strength and accommodation. Contrary to initial predictions, measures of collectivism and dispositional self-control were not significantly related to accommodation. Implications, future directions, and limitations are discussed.

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## The Role of Motivation in Self-Regulation: Culture and Relational Self-Construal as Predictors of Accommodation in Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are a central domain of life heavily influenced by the ability to exert personal will over the inhibitions of the body or the self (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik & Lipkus, 1991). Why is it that some relationships can burgeon and become everlasting, whereas others fail in comparison? One likely explanation involves partners' reactions to the inevitable conflict that they face in their romantic relationships. For instance, will an individual be willing, when his or her partner has engaged in a disruptive behavior, to inhibit tendencies to react destructively in response and instead engage in constructive reactions, such as accommodation? Or will he or she instead retaliate and exacerbate the issue? Recent research has suggested that the ability to accommodate in close relationships is linked to self-control (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). The present study will review past literature on a) accommodation theory b) self-control and c) cultural and individual difference variables in dating relationships. Additionally, I propose two new extensions to examine if motivational factors strengthen the relationship between self-control and accommodation.

### Accommodation in Interpersonal Relationships

The theory of accommodation processes materialized from research in Rusbult's exit-voice-loyalty-neglect of responses to relationship dissatisfaction (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). This model suggests that an individual's reaction will follow four possible response routes: exit is actively harming the relationship (separating, threatening divorce, yelling); voice is actively and constructively expressing ones dissatisfaction with the intent of improving the situation (discussing problems, seeking help from others);

loyalty is passively but optimistically waiting for the situation to improve (praying for better times, supporting partner in harsh times); and neglect is passively allowing the relationship to deteriorate (ignoring or spending less time with partner, avoiding discussion of problems). Thus, it is apparent that voice and loyalty are constructive responses to confrontation which promote relationship well being. Whereas exit and neglect, are destructive responses to a partners' transgressions and could potentially create a hostile environment

Accommodation can be operationalized as the tendency for one to act constructively (making use of voice or loyalty) and abstain from destructive responses (exit and neglect) in light of a partner's transgressions. For example, consider Michael and Lucy whom have become increasingly anxious and stressed because of occupational demands, such that as of late, Michael has been lashing out on his wife Lucy. Making use of a constructive relationship tendency, Lucy asks if she can be of any comfort to Michael during this hard time. This illustration, demonstrates that although Lucy is strained herself, she also considers the long-term well-being of her relationship and chooses to act in an accommodative manner rather than act on impulses and react negatively. That is, individuals react in performing behaviors that are best for the relationship and/or partner rather than what is best for the self.

The likelihood of choosing accommodative behavior is influenced by transformation of motivation (Rusbult, et al., 1991). This psychological process involves a sequence of behavior to resist self-interested behavior in order to safeguard the well being of the relationship. When faced with a partner's transgression, the individual will take into account the broader considerations such as the partner's best interests and the

long-term relationship. For instance, Lucy refused to react negatively towards Michael's frustrations and instead offered her unconditional support, which exemplifies transformation of motivation. In sum, accommodation requires a sacrifice of the self in the best interest of the partner and the relationship.

What influences an individual's tendency towards accommodation? Recent research has illustrated self-control to be a central variable in the extent to which one can successfully accommodate in close relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Finkel and Campbell found that dispositional self-control was positively associated with accommodative tendencies in light of a partner's transgression. Conversely, possessing low dispositional self-control decreased the likelihood that participants would engage in accommodative responses. This effect was confirmed even when commitment to the relationship was account for and controlled. Dispositional self-control is positively correlated with voice responses and negatively correlated to destructive responses, such as exit and neglect.

In addition to dispositional self-control, Finkel and Campbell (2001) examined the effects of self-regulatory strength depletion. More specifically, when asked to recall two incidents from a current relationship - one in which they engaged in accommodative behavior and one in which they engaged in non-accommodative behavior, participants reported feeling less depleted prior to an instance of accommodation in comparison to an occasion marked by non-accommodation. This suggests that an individual's ability to engage in accommodative responses is also influenced by current and recent depletions in self-control.

As departures from self-interest are laborious, regulation of such impulses must require a certain level of self-control. More specifically, the re-evaluation of self-interested preferences and recognizing the importance of doing so is necessary in preserving the well-being of a given relationship and enacting in a pro-relationship manner. Successful adjustment of self-interested desires often requires the self to regulate its' behaviors. The capacity to override unwanted urges and alter responses is known as self-control.

### Self Control

Self-regulation or self-control refers to the ability to supersede and modify responses. It is the process by which people attempt to constrain unwanted urges in order to gain control of the incipient response (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Regulation means to adjust, particularly an adjustment to bring behavior (or other states) into line with some standard such as an ideal or goal. The process also includes controlling impulses, thoughts, emotions, and behavior in order to abide by personal and societal boundaries. Adequate self-control is vital for the optimal functioning of humans in both a personal and collective manner. It involves labors by the self to alter one's own states or responses in a goal-directed manner (Heatheron & Vohs, 1998). For example, persisting at a difficult task or forcing oneself to be sociable after an exhausting day are all examples of self-regulation that require inhibiting one set of behaviors and their replacement with willfully chosen behaviors.

Evidence supports the claim that effective self-regulation is essential to living life well and to the existence of a well-functioning civilization (Baumeister, Heatheron, & Tice, 1994). Research has also linked good self-control to a broad range of valuable

outcomes, including, greater popularity, better mental health, and healthier interpersonal relationships (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). Alternatively, those who are poor in self-regulation will most likely find themselves rejected (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). Unsuccessful self-regulators are subject to abandonment by peers, divorce, and in an extreme case, even imprisonment. People who are poor at self-regulation are also less successful in accommodating to their relationship partners (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), and children with poor self-control are less accepted and less popular with peers (Maszk, Eisenberg, & Guthrie, 1999). In a review by Baumeister et al. (1994), the authors go so far as to suggest that failures at self-regulation were a spreading epidemic and essentially the defining problem for modern U.S. society.

#### *Self-Control Strength*

Unfortunately, implementing intentionally chosen behaviors, such as accommodative behaviors when faced with a partner's transgression, is not an easy task. Muraven and Baumeister (2000) conducted a line of research aimed at addressing the conditions where self-regulation fails. Ego depletion is a term used to explain a state of mental fatigue that leads to the breakdown of self-regulation. The self-control strength model states that individuals have a limited pool of resource or energy for self-control (self-control strength). Moreover, self-control performance should be directly related to the amount of strength an individual holds. All attempts at self-control require and consume (deplete) this strength. After exerting self-control, individuals are more prone to subsequent failure at later attempts at self-control. Laboratory studies have found that individuals who have to exert self-control over their thoughts subsequently perform poorly on a second task not utilizing self-control (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). For

example, participants reported that in comparison to solving math problems, a thought control exercise was no more unpleasant, frustrating, arousing, or effortful. The only difference between the two conditions was the amount of self-control required. A second study, found that after coping with everyday stresses outside the laboratory, people are less successful at self-control (e.g. Smoking; Cohen & Lichenstein, 1990).

Although self-regulatory resources can be easily depleted, research has also shown that those who are highly motivated can counter this effect (Muraven, 1998). For example, participants who were well paid for performing a certain task, failed to show signs of self-regulatory depletion in comparison to those who were not compensated. More specifically, when rejected participants were offered a self-serving incentive to self-regulate they self-regulated effectively, postulating that providing a cash incentive (a new motivational goal) counteracted the negative effects of rejection.

In a recent review on self-regulation, Baumeister and Vohs (2007) state that motivation is an essential ingredient for effective self-regulation that has been underappreciated in psychological literature. In a situation where goals are clear, monitoring is sufficient, and the person's resources are plentiful, he or she may still fail to self-regulate due to lack of motivation. Even if willpower (i.e., self-regulatory strength) has been depleted by prior acts, the person may be able to self-regulate effectively if motivation is high (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007).

A primary source of motivation behind self-control is socially induced (Heatherton & Vohs, 1998). More specifically, self-control is shaped through societal forces and driven by the need to be socially accepted (Seeley & Gardner, 2003). Essentially, self-regulation is seen to be fundamental to human survival as social beings

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From an evolutionary basis, individuals who were better able to control their impulses to promote group benefits avoided being ejected from social groups and hence acquired profit. As a consequence, the propensity for self-control would have lead to greater help from others resulting in increased reproduction and in turn further perpetuating the need to belong.

In the present research I examined the role of motivation that affords individuals to avoid acting out of self-interest and accommodate in their relationships. In accordance with current research highlighting the importance of motivation for successful self-regulation, I propose that some people may possess a greater intensity of motivation to preserve the well-being of their relationships, in light of higher costs to the self. The current study explores the driving forces of cultural orientation and an individual's current accessible self-construal in influencing self-regulation and accommodation outcomes in interpersonal relationships.

#### *The Motivational Role of Cultural and Individual Differences in Self-Regulation*

Researchers have found that individuals who are socially oriented are increasingly motivated by their standards and are less apt to fall prey to self-regulatory depletions (Seeley & Gardner, 2003). Participants who were low in other-directed social orientation showed a general pattern of impaired performance on a handgrip task after participation in a thought suppression manipulation. Given the importance of motivation and practice, Seeley and Gardner (2003) posited that socially oriented individuals would be increasingly competent at self-regulation. They demonstrated that cultural differences as well as individual differences moderated an individual's tendency to experience ego depletion after completing the self-control task.



*Cultural Differences.* Cultural psychology has identified the extent to which the self is defined in relation to others as a key variable distinguishing between members of Western and Eastern cultures. In Western (independent, individualistic) cultures, people perceive themselves as unique and independent from others. The self is defined mainly in terms of internal attributes such as abilities and attitudes and the uniqueness of the self is valued highly (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Eastern (interdependent, collectivistic) cultures, people perceive themselves as connected to others; in this way the self is defined in terms of group memberships, relationships to family and friends and social roles. Consequently, similarities with others and common goals are intrinsically, more valued than in individualistic cultures. The differences between individuals with an independent self-construal and individuals with an interdependent self-construal have been extensively studied by comparing people from different cultures (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998).

In relation to self-control, those in collectivist cultures have been thought to have an advantage because they are being socially oriented. As self-regulation is driven by the need to belong, it could be considered to be one of the most basic dispositional factors central to East Asian cultures (Seeley & Gardner, 2003). Past research has shown that individuals who endorse collectivist attitudes adjust their needs or behavior to fit in with others (Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Research by Ybarra and Trafimow (1998) indicate that individuals primed with an individualistic self view projected to behave in accordance with their personal attitudes more than societal norms, whereas those primed with a collectivist self view placed increasing influence on subjective norms than on their own attitudes in deciding how to behave. Additional research has demonstrated that

collectivist cultures tend to show a higher degree of conformity to others' behaviors in relation to members of individualistic cultures (Kim, 2002).

In collectivistic cultures, people are inclined to ask, 'How will other people important to me think about me?' and 'how will this affect my relationship with my family, as well as my relationship with this person?' in making decisions in relationships and daily interactions (Hsu, 1981). Members of collectivist cultures (in comparison to individualist cultures) are more inclined to resolve troubles by engaging in behavior that will show loyalty and likely please, important others at their own cost (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). Likewise, maintaining harmony in a relationship is more important in collectivistic (as opposed to individualistic) cultures (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarello, 1986)

Alternatively, those from individualistic cultures feel fewer obligations to others and given there is a wider range of acceptable behaviors lead researchers to believe that they would be less able to self-regulate than collectivists (Seeley & Gardner, 2003). More specifically Seeley and Gardner (2003) concluded that one's cultural and social orientation provides motivation to behave in accordance with the expectations of another. In the short term, this motivation may cause individuals to self regulate and over the long run it leads to increased practice. All in all, the combination of high motivation (specific to interpersonal relationships) and practice makes accommodation in a conflict situation seem more becoming of collectivistic cultures than of individualistic cultures. If the need to belong has been shown to bolster self-regulation (Heatherton & Vohs, 1998), then the cultural values that place greater prominence on collective needs of individual desires should provide for chronic motivation and frequent practice at self-regulation, most

especially when exercised in the interpersonal domain. As a result, when faced with conflict in their relationships, collectivists should be more motivated to consider the other person's needs and deal with concerns first and approach the situation in a more other-centered and relationship-enhancing manner (e.g., respond to the other's hostile behavior with positivity and assurances to preservation; voice). Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are posited:

**H1:** Members of collectivistic cultures will respond to interpersonal conflicts with greater levels of accommodation enacting (i) voice and loyalty more, and (ii) exit and neglect less than will members of individualistic cultures. Therefore, there will be a direct effect of culture on accommodation.

**H2:** Collectivists will demonstrate greater levels of dispositional self-control than independents. Consequently, there will be a direct effect of culture on dispositional self-control.

Baumeister and Vohs (2007) conclude that motivation can substitute for deficient ability; nevertheless, even for the highly motivated, self-regulation failure will occur. In an interpersonal context, ineffective regulation may lead to non-accommodation in response to conflict with a partner. Consequently, I predict that it should be increasingly difficult to deplete individuals who are highly relationship motivated, as they should have a greater self-regulatory reserve within the interpersonal domain. Consequently such individuals should respond to instances of non-accommodation by reporting greater depletion. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

**H3:** Compared to independents, collectivists will report experiencing greater self-regulatory depletion following a description of non-accommodation, rather than an

accommodative situation. Consequently, there will be a moderating effect of culture on the relationship between self-control and accommodation.

These three hypotheses are based on the underpinning that culture influences behavior directly and within a specific culture, certain characteristics are victorious. However to fully understand an individual's predilection of a particular response to an interpersonal conflict, one cannot disregard the aspects of an individual's self that lead him/her to opt for one behavior over the others to achieve relational goals.

*Individual Differences: Relational Interdependent Self-Construal.* Specifically within western culture, Cross, Bacon, and Morris (2000) have defined a component of the relational self, referred to as *relational-interdependent self-construal*. Relational-interdependent self-construal designates a cognitive-personality pattern in which positive feelings regarding the self are derived from developing and maintaining close personal relationships with others (Cross et al., 2000). Individuals high in interdependent self-construal classify themselves, in large part, through their interpersonal relationships. Persons displaying high levels of interdependent self-construal amalgamate their interpersonal relationships into the self concept, along with other aspects of identity (i.e., physical appearance, abilities, preferences, values, traits, etc.; Cross et al., 2000). People differ markedly in the degree to which their important interpersonal relationships are self-defining and thereby, they differ distinctly in levels of relational-interdependent self-construal.

Individuals high in relational interdependent self-construal are significantly more likely to (a) develop and preserve a greater number of important social relationships, (b) self-disclose in those relationships, and (c) permit close others to impact the manner in

which they think or behave (Cross et al., 2000). Relational-interdependent self-construal has been explored widely within social psychology (see Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002). In relation to social cognition, such individuals were more likely than others to remember relational information about others and to organize information about others in terms of relationships. The propensity to pay special attention to and remember the disclosures of a relationship partner is contingent on both the nature of the self-construal and the closeness of the relationship (Cross et al., 2002). Those who possessed a high relational self-construal described a friend and themselves more similarly than did low relationals (Cross et al., 2002). Essentially high relationals will think, as well as behave, in a manner to foster and augment important or close relationships. In being committed to an ongoing relationship, one must make it evident to be more than a reassuring reaction to a partner's disclosures. If an individual wants to maintain accord in a relationship, it is imperative not only to respond with sensitivity to one's partner but also to remember what has been disclosed and to take this information into account in future interactions (Cross et al., 2002). Such knowledge allows the individual to weigh the partner's behavior and to prevent conflict in the relationship. A person may then learn to maneuver away from sensitive topics to avoid disagreements or change his or her behavior to maintain harmony in the relationship.

Additionally, relational self-construal is marked typically by the use of a high-context communication style, whereas low relationals are associated with a low-context communication style (Gudykunst et al., 1996). That is, low relationals are inclined typically to employ direct, assertive, and confrontational communication strategies to satisfy their own needs, whereas high relationals typically care more about others' feelings and face

first and prefer to use indirect, face-saving strategies and avoid confrontation (e.g., Kim, 1994).

Given the specific cognitive and personality patterns indicative of relational self-construal, it is possible that it provides individuals with the motivation to respond in an accommodative manner when faced with a partner's transgression. Accordingly, within western culture, individuals who are largely self-defined by their close relationships should exercise greater self-regulatory capability in the context of close relationships, thus the following hypotheses are posited:

**H4:** Individuals with a high relational self-construal will report greater accommodative tendencies (i) greater voice and loyalty, and (ii) lower exit and neglect than will those with low RISC. Accordingly, there will be a direct effect of self-construal on accommodation.

**H5:** High RISC individuals will additionally demonstrate higher scores in dispositional self-control than low RISC individuals. As a result, there will be a direct effect of self-construal on dispositional self-control.

Research by Cross and colleagues (2002) has highlighted the tendency for high RISC individuals to organize information, and behave, in a manner to foster important or close relationships. Along these lines, I predict that high RISC individuals will demonstrate a greater self-regulatory reserve within the interpersonal domain and as a result, it will be more difficult to deplete their reserve. Although, those who possess high RISC will be increasingly motivated to act in a pro-relationship manner, at a certain threshold they will engage in situations marked by non-accommodation. In such

situations, individuals should respond to instances of non-accommodation by reporting greater depletion, than low RISC. Therefore, the following hypothesis is postulated:

**H6:** There will be a moderating effect of self-construal type on self-control and accommodation such that, those with high RISC, compared to those with low RISC, will report greater self-regulatory depletion after describing an instance of non-accommodation than accommodation when compared with low RISC.

#### Overview of the Current research

Much research has been conducted on the benefits of executing proper self-control in various domains of life. To ensure a satisfying relationship in the face of adversity and boredom, one must learn to accommodate when faced with a partner's bad behavior. Furthermore, in dealing with the life stressors, individuals may find it increasingly difficult to respond in a pro-relationship manner to relationship conflict.

The goal of the present research is to examine the role of motivation afforded by culture and construal type. That is, whether such constructs provide a direct effect on one's propensity to self-regulate and make use of accommodating responses, in the face of conflict. Specifically, I will examine the effect of cultural orientation (collectivist or independent) and individual difference variables (relational self-construal) in influencing the likelihood of using accommodative responses. Moreover, apart from one's inclination to use pro-relationship tendencies, past research has shown self-control factors to be important in accommodative behavior. The present research will examine how cultural and/or relational self-construal influences one's dispositional self-control as well as self-regulatory strength in response to conflict.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and seventy-nine introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba were recruited to participate in exchange for a partial course credit. Requirements of the study were that all participants be involved in romantic heterosexual relationships of at least 3 months in length and that their first language was English. Twenty-five participants had to be excluded for not understanding or fully completing the materials. The remaining sample of 154 consisted of 105 women and 50 men. Mean age was 21.00 years ( $SD = 5.75$ ) and mean relationship length was 24 months ( $SD = 10.15$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was 48% Asian and 52% Caucasian.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited for data collection sessions of less than one hour in length. During the session participants were given a packet of questionnaires containing the study materials and received feedback at the end of the session (Appendix A). Prior to completing the questionnaire, I indicated my specific research goals as well as obtaining signed informed consent from participants (Appendix B).

### *Materials*

The questionnaire consisted of various measures addressing cultural orientation, accommodation, relationship quality and trait and state levels of self-control. The order of the measures was counterbalanced to control for any possible priming effects. The self-control materials used for the current research are based in part by those devised by Finkel and Campbell (2001) in their investigation on the association between self-control and accommodation.



*Accommodation Manipulation* (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Participants were told to describe two instances in their current romantic relationship: one in which they engaged in an accommodative response following a destructive partner behavior and b) one in which they engaged in a non-accommodative response following destructive partner behavior. Specific to the first description, participants were given examples and instructed to think of instances where they inhibited their urge to behave badly and instead behaved in a constructive manner. In the second description, they described an example in which they were not as accommodating. Participants were also asked how difficult it was for them to describe the instance of accommodation or non-accommodation on a scale of 1 to 10 (Appendix C).

*The Self-Control Scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). The Self-Control Scale is a 36-item measure of self-control. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from, “Not at all” to “Very much”. An example of an item is: “I am good at resisting temptation”. Twenty-four of the 36 items were reversed scored. The Total Self-Control Scale had internal consistency,  $\alpha = .72$  (Appendix D).

*Concurrent Depletion Questionnaire* (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). This 16-item scale assessed self-regulatory depletion at the time of the specific incident (e.g., “I felt overwhelmed with work/school,” “I felt preoccupied with other things,” “I felt tired”) Reliability analyses on the items revealed an alpha of,  $\alpha = .78$ . The responses to each item were scored on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (*I didn't feel at all this way*) to 7 (*I felt very much this way*) (Appendix E).

*Recent Depletion Questionnaire* (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). The 26-item recent depletion questionnaire assessed self-regulatory depletion during the week leading up to