

INVITED REVIEW

Self-regulation in close relationships

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Abstract

In the past 20 years, greater attention has been devoted to the study of self-regulation in an interpersonal context. This review summarizes this work and presents findings on how self-regulation processes influence close relationship outcomes. The review is organized around the four ingredients of self-regulation (i.e., standards, monitoring, self-regulatory capacity, and motivation). For each ingredient, we discuss their influence on relationship processes and dynamics. In the standards section, we discuss the literature on approach/avoidance, promotion/prevention, goal conflicts between partners, and interpersonal goal support. In the monitoring section, we describe how partners' monitoring of each other's goal progress affects relationships. We also highlight that research on this topic is scant. In the self-regulatory capacity section, we discuss findings on how self-regulatory capacity is associated with relationship maintenance behaviors. In the motivation section, we review the literature on commitment and its impact on relationship dynamics. Finally, for each ingredient, we address an important avenue for future research.

Statement of relevance: While for decades, the topic of self-regulation was examined as an intrapersonal phenomenon, in the past 20 years, research has started to examine the interpersonal aspects of self-regulation. This review summarizes the literature on how self-regulation affects close relationships and discusses implications and ideas for future research on this important topic.

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KEYWORDS

close relationships, goals, interpersonal processes, self-control, self-regulation

Self-regulation has been a major topic in psychology since Walter Mischel's studies investigating the delay of gratification processes among preschoolers in the 1960s and 1970s (Mischel, 1974). However, a snapshot at the dawn of the 21st century would have revealed that the self-regulation literature had focused overwhelmingly on self-regulation's intrapersonal consequences, like academic performance and eating behavior, and much less on its interpersonal consequences, like constructive problem-solving behaviors and sexual fidelity. Fortunately, over the past two decades or so, scholars have adopted diverse theoretical perspectives (e.g., Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Orehek & Forest, 2016) and methodological approaches (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999) to readdress this neglect, and a cavalcade of rigorous studies has revealed that self-regulatory processes exert profound effects on social relationships. This review takes a snapshot of this rapidly expanding research domain.

Self-regulation refers to the alteration of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to bring them into closer alignment with a specific standard, or goal (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). It is a fundamental human adaptation to the requirements and opportunities of the environment. To understand how self-regulation operates, we contextualize the current review within the cybernetic, test-operate-test-exit (TOTE) perspective of Miller et al. (1960) and Carver and Scheier (1981, 1998), which incorporates the four essential ingredients of self-regulation: standards and monitoring in the test phases and self-regulatory capacity and motivation in the operating phase (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). According to the TOTE model, self-regulation starts with a test phase, which involves comparing the current state of the self to the goal or standard that one wishes to attain. Thus, the first ingredient of self-regulation—*standards* represent desired end states that initiate and sustain self-regulatory activities. If the test reveals a discrepancy between one's current state and the desired standard, then the operating phase is activated to bring the self toward the desired standard and reduce this discrepancy. In this phase, self-regulatory capacity and motivation are crucial, which are the second and third ingredients of self-regulation. *Self-regulatory capacity* refers to the ability to change oneself in order to bring them into alignment with the desired standards. This ingredient is captured in widely used constructs such as executive functioning, inhibition, and self-control. *Motivation* is the strength with which an individual desires a standard and is willing to put effort to achieve it. According to the TOTE model, after the operating phase, there is a subsequent test phase in which the individual assesses their progress toward meeting the standards. This is part of *monitoring*, the fourth ingredient, which refers to keeping track of the discrepancy between the current state and the desired standard after goal pursuit has been initiated. Monitoring signals whether progress has been made toward (or away from) the standard and whether goal progress has occurred. Finally, when the outcome of the monitoring signals that a standard has been met, the individual reaches the exit phase and they cease goal pursuit activities.

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In this work, we review research that has investigated how each ingredient of self-regulation—standards, self-regulatory capacity, motivation, and monitoring—affects interpersonal processes

in close relationships. This review does not include the topic of emotion regulations (for a review on that topic see English et al., 2013; Lindsey, 2020; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2018). To conduct this review, we started by searching for relevant articles using PsycINFO and Google Scholar. We first used the keyword *self-regulation* in conjunction with any of the following: *close relationships*, *romantic relationships*, or *dating relationships*. Subsequently, we also used keywords related to our more specific constructs, such as *standards*, *self-regulatory strength*, *monitoring*, *motivation*, *goals*, *approach/avoidance*, *promotion/prevention*, *divergence of interests*, *interpersonal goal conflict*, *interpersonal goal support*, *self-control*, *executive functioning*, and *commitment*.

Specifically, we focus on how the individual's self-regulation, the perception of the partner's self-regulation, and the combination of both partners' self-regulation affect relationship outcomes. We need to acknowledge that the majority of the research conducted in this field focuses on how the individual's self-regulation affects relationship outcomes as reported by the individual (i.e., actor effects). Much less is known about how the perception of the partner's self-regulation, the actual partner's self-regulation, or the combination of both partners' self-regulation affects relationships. However, when possible, we report on these findings too. Similarly, some ingredients (i.e., self-regulatory capacity, general standards) have received more empirical attention than others (i.e., monitoring). As we will argue in the discussion section, we think that future research should address this gap.

Finally, we should acknowledge our positionality. All authors of the present article come from European Western cultures. Also, all are highly educated (all but one have a PhD), are involved in a romantic relationship, and have worked for years on the topic of self-regulation and/or close relationships. Three of the authors have a social psychology background; one of them has a background in social and clinical psychology, pedagogics, youth studies, and interdisciplinary social science. We acknowledge that our background and personal characteristics may influence the content of the article by the emphasis we may give to certain topics/arguments.

1.1 | Standards in close relationships

As noted previously, standards are defined according to the work of Baumeister and Vohs (2007) and represent the target of individuals' goal pursuits—the specific end-states individuals seek to reach by altering their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In this section, we discuss how the content of individuals' personal standards (or goals) affects close relationship dynamics and outcomes.

1.1.1 | Approach-avoidance

At a very general level, standards can be sorted into two fundamental types: positive standards that the individual wants to approach and negative standards that the individual wants to avoid (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Covington, 2001; Gray, 1990). Applied to the domain of close relationships, individuals who strive to approach positive standards might direct their efforts toward goals like fostering intimacy and trust, whereas individuals who strive to avoid negative standards might direct their efforts toward goals like avoiding conflict and rejection (Gable, 2006).

The degree to which individuals adopt approach and avoidance standards substantially affects relationship well-being. Most studies have found that approach standards are linked to positive outcomes in the relationship, whereas avoidance standards are linked to negative outcomes. For example, individuals with approach standards reported reacting more positively to positive social events (Don et al., 2020) and reported better stress communication, dyadic coping, and fewer relationship problems than individuals with avoidance standards (Kuster et al., 2017). Consistently, approach standards were associated with positive nonverbal communication (e.g., smiles, nods) whereas avoidance standards were associated with negative behaviors in interactions, such as withdrawal (e.g., folded arms, shaking head) (Bernecker et al., 2019).

Furthermore, individuals who make sacrifices in their relationship to approach positive standards (e.g., to develop a closer relationship with their partner) experience healthy relationship adjustment and are unlikely to break up with their partner over the ensuing month, whereas individuals who make sacrifices to avoid negative standards (e.g., to prevent their partner from viewing them negatively) experience poor relationship adjustment and are especially likely to break up (Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2014). Similarly, engaging in sexual contact to approach positive standards predicts better relationship adjustment and buffers individuals against declines in sexual desire over time, whereas engaging in sexual contact to avoid negative standards predicts worse relationship and sexual adjustment (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2017).

Orientations toward relationship goals can also affect the extent to which individuals draw on positive versus negative relationship experiences when evaluating their relationship quality. In one experience-sampling study, participants were randomly signaled several times a day to report their positive and negative feelings about their relationship at that moment. Individuals with strong approach standards appeared to base their daily relationship satisfaction on the positive feelings they experienced that day (e.g., passion), whereas individuals with strong avoidance standards appeared to base their daily relationship satisfaction ratings on the negative feelings they experienced that day (e.g., anxiety) (Gable & Poore, 2008).

1.1.2 | Promotion-prevention

Another influential theory that addresses the general and fundamental types of standards that people hold is the Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997; Molden et al., 2008). According to this theory, individuals approach or avoid standards in either a *promotion-* or *prevention-*focused manner. People in a promotion focus are motivated to approach gains (i.e., positive standards) and avoid non-gains (i.e., negative standards). They are predominantly tuned to ideal-self goals (or standards), which emphasize advancement in dreams, hopes, and aspirations. In contrast, people with a prevention focus want to approach standards that are experienced as non-losses (i.e., positive standards) and avoid standards that are experienced as losses (i.e., negative standards). They are predominantly tuned to ought-to-self goals (or standards), which emphasize fulfillment of duties, obligations, and responsibilities. In the context of relationships, individuals who adopt a promotion focus might approach an opportunity to develop intimacy and avoid missing an opportunity to do so, whereas individuals who adopt a prevention focus might avoid a situation that is likely to cause conflict and approach a situation that is unlikely to do so (Molden & Winterheld, 2013).

Individuals' adoption of a promotion or a prevention focus affects why and how much they enact certain relationship behaviors, as well as the circumstances under which positive relationship behaviors yield the greatest benefits for that relationship. Unlike approach-avoidance standards, empirical evidence suggests that neither focus is unequivocally linked to better relationship outcomes than the other. Instead, both promotion and prevention foci differentially benefit distinct relationship processes and dynamics. For example, several studies have found that promotion focus is associated with greater support provision and receptivity, especially when providing and receiving support in pursuing goals that are congruent with this focus (i.e., ideal-self goals) (Righetti et al., 2010; Winterheld & Simpson, 2016). Interestingly, prevention focus is not associated with receptiveness to support even when people are pursuing prevention-congruent goals (i.e., ought-self goals), presumably because prevention focus leads individuals to become exclusively focused on their individual activities to achieve these goals and they fail to recognize the potential benefits of assistance from others (Righetti & Kumashiro, 2012). Consistently, research has found that when people perceive their goal to be difficult to achieve, such as when prevention-oriented individuals focus on possible losses, they are less open to support (Righetti et al., 2014). Promotion focus is also associated with constructive behavior during conflicts. Specifically, research has shown that during conflicts, promotion-focused individuals perceived their partners as more supportive and less distant, and they displayed more creative conflict resolution behavior than prevention-focused individuals (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011).

However, there are circumstances in which promotion focus undermines, rather than promotes, relationship maintenance behavior. For example, one line of research has shown that promotion-focused individuals display more interest in potential alternative partners (Finkel et al., 2009). Other times, the extent to which promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals engage in relationship maintenance behavior depends on different features of the relationship. For example, when deciding whether to forgive a partner's transgressions, promotion-focused individuals are likely to consider the benefits they may receive by repairing the relationship. Prevention-focused individuals, on the other hand, are likely to consider the potential costs of further relationship deterioration. Feelings of trust may reflect promotion-focused individuals' beliefs that repairing the relationship will produce gains, whereas feelings of commitment may reflect prevention-focused partners' beliefs that holding a grudge or ending the relationship will produce losses. In fact, research has shown that trust motivates forgiveness, especially in promotion-focused individuals, whereas commitment motivates forgiveness, especially in prevention-focused individuals (Molden & Finkel, 2010). Similarly, promotion individuals were the happiest in the relationship when growth qualities were present, whereas prevention individuals were the happiest when their relationship fulfilled security concerns (Cortes et al., 2018).

Scholars have further built upon this work by investigating the inherent interdependence between two partners' regulatory foci (Bohns et al., 2013; Righetti et al., 2011; for a theoretical integration, see Molden & Winterheld, 2013). In particular, scholars have examined how similarity and complementarity in relationship partners' regulatory foci affect motivation in goal-pursuit activities and relationship well-being. Research has found that when promotion-focused individuals are pursuing individual goals, they feel energized and motivated by advice and suggestions that come from promotion-oriented partners (Righetti et al., 2011). However, when partners are working together on a goal, complementarity in regulatory foci may benefit them because it allows couples to coordinate their goal pursuit more efficiently (Bohns et al., 2013). Each partner takes primary responsibility for aspects of the shared goals that fit his or her preferred strategy, such that the more promotion-focused partner can pursue tasks requiring eager strategies while the more prevention-focused partner can pursue tasks requiring vigilant strategies.

1.1.3 | Specific goals

Besides general valence-based standards, research on interpersonal goal pursuit has also investigated how the pursuit of specific goals (e.g., losing weight, promoting one's career) affects relationship dynamics and outcomes. In general, and consistent with Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory (Fitzsimons et al., 2015), people experience greater personal and relationship well-being when their partner is instrumental and helps them to achieve their goals (Drigotas et al., 1999; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Orehek & Forest, 2016; Rusbult et al., 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2016). Partner support of goals influences how much effort people dedicate to goals and how successful they are in achieving them, which, in turn, also fosters relationship satisfaction (e.g., Berli et al., 2018; Briskin et al., 2019; Drigotas et al., 1999; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Shah, 2003). However, people experience lower relationship quality and greater avoidance toward their partner when they believe that their relationship undermines their own specific goal progress (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Gere & Schimmack, 2013).

One source of interpersonal goal obstruction may come from the fact that sometimes partners' goals are not aligned, but rather, they interfere with each other. These situations are called divergence of interests and can be very disruptive to people's relationships. In this regard, an experience sampling study of 130 couples examined people's daily lives for an eight-day period. Every 2 h, partners were asked to report their mood, their relationship satisfaction, and whether they encountered a divergence of interests. Results showed that when partners encountered a situation of divergence of interests, they experienced a greater negative mood, more stress, and lower relationship satisfaction than when such a situation did not occur (Righetti et al., 2016). Consistently, previous research has also shown that people mostly enjoy activities that fulfill both partners' goals rather than activities that fulfill only one partner's goal (Gere et al., 2011). In one laboratory study of dating couples, partners recalled four separate activities they had engaged in: one that met both partners' goals, one that met only the self's goals, one that met only the partner's goals, and one that met neither partner's goals. They then rated how much they typically enjoyed each activity with versus without their partner, how often they typically engaged in each activity without their partner, and how much they typically engaged in each activity for the sake of being with or enjoying time with their partner. Results revealed that participants enjoyed activities most when in the company of their partner and when the activity was congruent with both partners' goals. Luckily, there are some psychological mechanisms in place that facilitate the coordination of partners' goals. For example, partners can influence each other on which goals to achieve. Individuals are more likely to start pursuing goals that their partners are already trying to achieve, a phenomenon called "goal contagion" (e.g., Aarts et al., 2004; Laurin et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals may get discouraged from pursuing certain goals or standards if they are in conflict with their partner's goals (Gere & Impett, 2018).

1.2 | Self-regulatory capacity

As noted previously, self-regulatory capacity refers to the overall amount of self-regulatory capacity available to an individual pursuing a given standard. Self-regulatory capacity is often also defined as self-control or executive functioning, and it can vary across individuals (trait) and across situations (state) (see Kotabe & Hofmann, 2015). As a trait, across time and

situations, some individuals have more capacity than others to change themselves and themselves bring it into line with the desired standards. One study synthesized 31 twin studies and meta-analyzed monozygotic and dizygotic twin correlations to calculate the heritability of self-control. The results showed an overall heritability estimate of 60%, with the remaining 40% of the variance explained by the unique environment and measurement error (Willems et al., 2019). This suggests that there are individual differences in people's self-regulatory capacity (De Ridder et al., 2012) and that environmental factors influence self-control capacity (Willems et al., 2020).

Some models propose that people's use of self-regulatory capacity can be depleted by prior exertions, a phenomenon called ego-depletion (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; Dang et al., 2021; Friese et al., 2019; Hagger et al., 2010). In experimental paradigms typically used to manipulate ego-depletion, half of the participants are asked to engage in an initial task that requires self-regulatory exertion while the other half perform an otherwise-similar task that does not require such exertion. Afterward, all participants perform a second, unrelated task that requires self-regulatory exertion. Compared to participants who have performed the neutral task, participants who have performed the self-regulatory task perform worse on the second task and seem to have diminished self-regulatory capacity (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998; Dang et al., 2021; Hagger et al., 2010; Muraven et al., 1998). The validity of this phenomenon has been challenged in recent years, suggesting that the effect has been widely overestimated given small-study biases and file drawer problems (see Friese et al., 2019 for a review). In fact, two large multilab replication studies did not find a significant effect of ego depletion (Hagger et al., 2016; Vohs et al., 2021, preregistered analyses), while another multilab preregistered replication study using a different manipulation found a small and significant ego-depletion effect (Dang et al., 2021).

Regardless of a temporary reduction in self-regulatory capacity due to prior exertion of self-control, research has also found that some other environmental factors may influence self-regulatory capacity. For example, in stressful and unpredictable environments, self-control capacity may decrease (Finkenauer et al., 2015; Finkenauer et al., 2018). Research using a genetically sensitive design revealed a unidirectional effect of family conflict on self-control. Specifically, family conflict predicted lower self-control in adolescence while controlling for genetic confounds (Willems et al., 2019). This finding indicates that family members are at risk because they share the same genes, with the same genes influencing the presence of family conflict and the risk of having low self-control. Crucially, the findings also suggest a directional, negative effect of the environmental factor family conflict on self-control. Exposure to stress and unpredictability may teach individuals that exerting self-control (e.g., delaying gratification) is not adaptive because long-term gains rarely materialize. Also, losing self-control can help individuals achieve goals in risky social environments (e.g., aggression may ensure that people get their way or the attention they crave; Simons & Burt, 2011). The net result would be little practice using and/or lack of motivation to use self-control capacity. Conversely, harmonious close relationships can be an environment that offers affordances to practice and be motivated to use self-control skills. In a longitudinal study among 199 couples (Pronk et al., 2019), participants completed questionnaires on their self-control and forgiveness within 3 months of their wedding and each year for four further years. The results showed a small but significant increase in self-control and a moderate increase in forgiveness. These increases may occur because partners generally stimulate each other to improve behaviors that bring them closer to achieving their goals (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2009).

Aside from a few key exceptions, scholars generally conclude that low levels of self-regulatory capacity represent a major vulnerability in relationships, whereas high levels

represent a major asset. In this section, we review findings on the positive consequences of self-regulatory capacity for relationship processes and outcomes. We conclude by discussing circumstances in which low, rather than high, self-regulatory capacity promotes pro-relationship behaviors.

1.2.1 | The benefits of self-regulatory capacity for relationships

Self-regulatory capacity may not only be subject to contextual influences but also vary from person to person. Self-regulatory capacity, approached from an individual difference perspective, has emerged in longitudinal research as a strong predictor of relationship processes and outcomes, even as measured at an extremely young age. One study found that children who were able to delay gratification longer were, during their high-school years, better at maintaining friendships and getting along with peers, more considerate and cooperative, and less likely to tease other children (Ayduk et al., 2000). Another program of research studied a cohort of over 1000 consecutive births in Dunedin, New Zealand, nine times between the ages of 3 and 21 (Caspi, 2000). At the age 3 assessment, children completed a 90-min session during which trained observers rated them on a range of behavioral characteristics, including self-regulation tendencies. Relative to their better-controlled counterparts, undercontrolled children—who were impulsive, restless, distractible, and emotionally reactive—experienced inferior interpersonal functioning from ages 5 to 21. They were rated by their parents and teachers as exhibiting more externalizing problems, such as fighting, bullying, lying, and disobeying, across this age span. At age 18, they reported enjoying aggression more and feeling more mistreated, deceived, and betrayed by others. At age 21, they reported elevated levels of conflict and less intimacy and trust in their close relationships. In short, 3-year-olds who exhibited a lack of self-regulatory capacity on behavioral tasks grew up to experience more conflicted and less satisfying relationships throughout childhood and into adulthood. In an extension of this study, Caspi et al. (2016) found that these effects continue throughout adulthood: children with low self-control were more likely to belong to high-cost economic burden groups as adults at age 32 (e.g., using social welfare, fatherless children, smoking, crime, hospital stays, excessive weight). In fact, although the high-cost group of children only concerned 22% of the cohort, it accounted for a disproportionate share of economic-burden outcomes across all eight health and social sectors that were examined (e.g., 81% of the burden of crime; 71% of burden of the fatherless children). Given these findings, self-control has also been coined as a hallmark for children and adolescents to become well-adjusted adults with lasting, harmonious relationships in all sorts of social contexts, including romantic relationships, friendships, work, and school (Casey & Caudle, 2013; Caspi et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2014; Moffitt et al., 2011).

In general, research on adults provides corroborating evidence that individuals with high (vs. low) self-regulatory capacity fare better in social relationships overall. Whereas, low self-regulatory capacity individuals exhibit poor self-presentation behaviors—they talk too much, disclose inappropriately, and take credit for success but deny responsibility for failure (Vohs et al., 2005), high self-regulatory capacity individuals tend to be especially polite and interpersonally appropriate (von Hippel & Gonsalkorale, 2005), and they are more likely to keep promises they make to their partners (Peetz & Kammrath, 2011). Furthermore, relative to their low-capacity counterparts, people with high self-regulatory capacity exhibit not only elevated attachment security toward relationship partners, but also more family cohesion and less family conflict (Tangney et al., 2004) and even less family violence (Willems et al., 2018). This may occur

partly because individuals with high (vs. low) self-regulatory capacity tend to respond better to negative partner behaviors, exhibiting stronger tendencies toward forgiveness and constructive problem-solving behaviors than aggression (Barlett et al., 2016; Burnette et al., 2014; Bornstein et al., 2017; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel et al., 2009; Pronk et al., 2010; Slotter et al., 2020; Testa et al., 2020). Consistently, individuals high in self-control are also less likely to experience loneliness (Stavrova et al., 2021).

Romantically committed individuals with strong (vs. weak) executive control are also more effective at protecting their relationship in other ways. For example, objective coders rate them as less flirtatious toward attractive opposite-sex confederates, who pose a threat by representing alternatives to one's current relationship partner (Pronk et al., 2011). One way that self-regulation protects in this context is by affecting romantically involved individuals' attention to attractive alternative partners. In one study, scholars tested the prediction that self-regulatory capacity enables individuals to shield themselves from the temptation of alternative partners by derogating those alternatives' attractiveness (Ritter et al., 2010). Consistently, noticing attractive alternatives was associated with infidelity among individuals low in self-control but not high in self-control (Brady et al., 2020).

Recent work has also revealed not only that the individual's own self-regulatory capacity has important implications for relationship processes, but also that the perception of a partner's self-regulatory capacity affects relationship dynamics. For example, Righetti and Finkenauer (2011) have shown that partners who are perceived to have high self-control are trusted more than partners who are perceived to have low self-control. Given that individuals with high self-regulatory capacity tend to be able to perform many pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., accommodation, forgiveness, derogation of alternatives, maintaining promises), their partners also trust them to a greater extent. Consistently, Gomillion et al. (2014) found that when high self-control partners engage in relationship destructive behaviors, people are more optimistic that they will behave better in the future, and they retaliate less against them compared to when low self-control partners engage in similar behaviors. Not surprisingly, high self-control partners are also preferred as ideal mates (Brown et al., 2020).

However, sometimes being perceived to have high self-control can backfire. Because high self-control partners are persistent, do not give in to temptations, and are able to exert effort in tasks, people expect and ask more from them than from low self-control partners (Koval et al., 2015). High self-control individuals are also more likely to compensate for the expected lack of effort and work extra hard when they are working with a low self-control partner on a joint task (Van Sintemaartensdijk & Righetti, 2019), although, when they can choose, they prefer to work with other high self-control partners (Meisel & Lynch, 2017). When high self-control individuals feel burdened by others' requests, they can experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction (Koval et al., 2015).

Finally, because in close relationships, each person's self-regulation capacity affects the relationship, scholars have sought to identify the optimal combination of partners' trait self-regulation capacity levels (Vohs et al., 2011). Results revealed that relative to complementarity (large difference in trait self-regulation scores between partners) and similarity (small difference in self-regulation scores between partners), totality (large sum of both partners' self-regulation scores) predicted the best relationship outcomes. Specifically, both among friends as well as married couples, high self-regulatory capacity totality predicted elevated levels of relationship satisfaction, forgiveness, attachment security, accommodation, love, and interaction smoothness, and it predicted diminished levels of conflict and feelings of rejection (however, see Cheung et al., 2021 for evidence that similarity rather than totality may be more functional). In

sum, self-regulatory capacity has important implications for relationship processes and outcomes. However, although most of the relevant research suggests that high levels of chronic and situational self-regulatory capacity generally predict positive relationship outcomes, scholars have identified certain circumstances in which self-regulatory capacity may weaken pro-relationship responses (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Righetti et al., 2013; Stanton & Finkel, 2012).

1.2.2 | When low self-regulatory capacity promotes pro-relationship behaviors

Recent work has demonstrated that strong executive control can, under certain circumstances, undermine prosocial behavior rather than bolster it. In particular, this work suggests that the link between executive control and positive interpersonal behavior depends upon how adaptive the ability to inhibit responses is in that particular context. For example, inhibitory efforts can backfire in difficult social contexts, during which spontaneous, minimally self-regulated communication may be constructive. One line of research has demonstrated that if individuals are inclined to adopt an effortful interpersonal strategy that proves ineffective, their social outcomes are better to the degree that they possess weaker, not stronger, executive control (Apfelbaum et al., 2010). In this study, three sets of participants engaged in the socially delicate task of advising a struggling obese teenager about how to improve her life: older adults with relatively strong executive control, older adults with relatively weak executive control, and young adults. Compared to both the older adults with relatively strong executive control and the young adults, older adults with relatively weak executive control were more empathic, open, and forthcoming with the teenagers, and obesity specialists rated them as having greater potential for prompting health-promoting lifestyle change.

Another line of research suggests that there are circumstances under which low self-regulatory capacity can bolster beneficial relationship behavior rather than undermining it (Stanton & Finkel, 2012; Zhou et al., 2021). These studies examined the link between self-control depletion and forgiveness of minor versus severe offenses. They found that depleted individuals were more forgiving of mild transgressions than high self-control participants. However, a different pattern emerged for severe transgressions. For severe transgressions, and consistent with previous research, depleted individuals were less forgiving. Similarly, other work has shown that low self-regulatory capacity can promote the willingness to sacrifice in close relationships, at least for relatively minor sacrifices (Righetti et al., 2013) and for couples who have been together for several years (Kammrath et al., 2015). However, self-control seems necessary to enact sacrifices in the initial phase of the relationships (Kammrath et al., 2015) and for sacrifices that are major or require self-regulatory capacity to be enacted (Findley et al., 2014; Pronk & Karremans, 2014).

Finally, recent research suggests that self-control does not “blindly” promote pro-relationship or pro-self-behavior; rather, it may be used to maintain an optimal balance between dedication to personal and relational concerns. Self-control prevents people both from overinvesting in the relationship at the expense of personal concerns, and from overinvesting in personal concerns at the expense of the relationship. Thus, self-control promotes an optimal balance between dedication to personal and relational concerns, which, in turn, enhances both personal and relationship well-being (Visserman et al., 2017). In sum, conceptualizing self-regulatory capacity as always promoting pro-relationships behavior neglects the crucial caveat that self-regulatory capacity may only promote pro-relationships behavior when one's deliberate

interpersonal strategy is sensible (Pronk & Righetti, 2015), which is not always the case. Sometimes self-regulatory capacity is used in favor of self-interest or to avoid exploitation and over involvement in one's relationship.

1.3 | Motivation

As noted previously, individuals do not only need self-regulatory capacity to meet their standards or goals, but they also need the motivation to do so. In an interpersonal context, one of the most studied motivational components is whether partners want to be and stay in a relationship (i.e., commitment; Finkel & Campbell, 2001). In the next section, we will review how commitment, the motivation of having a long-lasting relationship with one's partner, affects various relationship processes.

1.3.1 | Commitment

For a relationship to survive and, ideally, flourish, partners must be *motivated* to reach the standard or goal of establishing a firm, lasting bond. This motivation to persist in a long-term relationship, defined as *relationship commitment*, affects a wide range of outcomes for both the partners and the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Partners tend to be committed to their relationship to the extent that (a) they are satisfied with it; (b) there are no good alternatives that could fulfill their most important needs outside of the relationship; and (c) they have invested a considerable amount of tangible and non-tangible resources in it, such as children, mutual friends, shared marital possessions, time, and emotional energy (Rusbult, 1980). Ample research has shown that the more individuals are committed to their relationship, the less likely they are to break up (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Le & Agnew, 2003; Joel et al., 2018; Rusbult, 1983).

In addition to promoting persistence in a relationship, commitment encourages several adaptive pro-relationship values (e.g., Lemay Jr. et al., 2021) and behaviors defined as *relationship maintenance mechanisms* (e.g., Wieselquist et al., 1999). Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that relationship commitment is a key factor in increasing the likelihood that people will override retaliatory impulses in favor of pro-relationship behavior, and research has linked commitment to reduced tendencies toward retaliation in response to provocation (Rusbult et al., 1991). For example, one line of work, including a laboratory priming experiment, a cross-sectional survey study, and an interaction record study, investigated the causal effects of commitment on forgiveness. Across all three studies, participants experiencing strong (vs. moderate) commitment to their current dating partner were significantly more forgiving of their partner's transgressions (Finkel et al., 2002).

Scholars have also extended these ideas into the domain of physical aggression, demonstrating that highly committed people tend to perpetrate less intimate partner violence than less committed people (Gaertner & Foshee, 1999; Haneley & O'Neill, 1997; Manning et al., 2018). Consistent with the view that commitment helps individuals override their retaliatory impulses rather than prevent the experience of those impulses in the first place (see Finkel & Eckhardt, 2013), recent research has investigated commitment's potential inhibitory effect on aggressive tendencies toward romantic partners following provocation (Slotter et al., 2012). In a series of studies, participants in dating relationships (a) responded to hypothetical provocation

scenarios, (b) experienced partner provocation via manipulated false feedback in the lab, and (c) completed nightly diary entries over the internet for a 5-week period in which they reported their relationship commitment each day, as well as the degree to which their partner provoked them that day. In all studies, although commitment was unrelated to aggression when partner provocation was mild, it predicted lower levels of aggression when partner provocation was severe. Furthermore, the negative association of implicit commitment with aggression toward a highly provoking partner was especially strong among individuals high in tendencies toward retaliation. Presumably, this effect emerged because the restraining effects of commitment were especially relevant among individuals who experienced a strong urge to aggress. In short, commitment predicts the tendency to behave in a pro-relationship manner under circumstances in which the urge to retaliate against the partner's provocation is especially strong.

Commitment also helps people to avert the allure of attractive alternatives. Indeed, commitment reduces the attention given to potential attractive alternatives (Miller, 1997; Zhang et al., 2017), increases the derogation of attractive alternatives, and increases the effort to enhance one's own relationship (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Lydon, 2010). Consistently, commitment is a motivational force that reduces unrestricted sociosexuality (i.e., the preference for a multitude of diverse casual sex partners; Rodrigues & Lopes, 2017) and decreases the chances that people engage in online infidelity (Liu & Zheng, 2019).

Not surprisingly, commitment also promotes willingness to sacrifice in a relationship (Johnson et al., 2019; Van Lange et al., 1997) because committed individuals are more likely to give things up in order to hold on to the relationship and because they are more attached and communally oriented toward their partner (Wieselquist et al., 1999). However, in situations in which a partner's interests are incompatible with the relationship's interests, commitment may reduce pro-partner behavior rather than promote it, a phenomenon called "the *Manhattan effect*." For example, if Aaron has an opportunity to work abroad for a period of time, but accepts it would threaten the stability of the relationship with Andrea, Andrea's commitment to their relationship may reduce her support for Aaron pursuing this career opportunity. A series of studies have in fact shown that, in the absence of relationship threat, commitment predicts greater support of the partner's interests. However, when the partner's interests posed a considerable threat to the maintenance of the relationship, commitment undermined support for the pursuit of the partner's personal interests. (Hui et al., 2014).

Importantly, not only the individual's own commitment is important in determining relationship outcomes, but also the perception that the partner is committed, or motivated to have a long-lasting relationship. The perception that the partner is committed to the relationship has, in fact, emerged as one of the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction (at least when assessed concurrently; Joel et al., 2020) and also an important determinant of stay/leave decisions (Joel et al., 2018). Furthermore, a dyadic approach to commitment has shown a weak-link effect, in that the fate of a relationship depends more strongly on the level of commitment of the partner who is less committed (Attridge et al., 1995; Orina et al., 2011). In fact, in Schoebi et al. (2012), the critical predictor of marital dissolution was the extent to which one of the partners had less inclination to maintain the relationship.

1.4 | Monitoring

Pivoting from the literature linking goal standards with interpersonal outcomes to the literature linking goal monitoring with interpersonal outcomes reveals a stark truth: In contrast to the

robust literature relevant to goal standards, there is, to our knowledge, much less research relevant to how goal monitoring of one's own goals affects relationships, a point that we will also address in the discussion. The limited research on this topic has rather investigated how people's monitoring of their partners' goals and the communication of the progress affects their partners' success at attaining the goal and the consequences for the relationship. The empirical work on this topic is rather new and it is mostly related to health-related goals and behaviors (Riccio et al., 2019). In fact, while research has repeatedly found a robust link between having close relationships and positive health outcomes (e.g., Miller et al., 2013; Robles et al., 2014), the mechanism for why close relationships exert such dramatic effects on health-relevant behaviors is not well established yet (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015; Uchino et al., 2012). One possibility, which is corroborated by empirical findings, is that partners may help each other in monitoring the progress of goal pursuit activities, a process also called *dyadic action control* (e.g., Berli et al., 2016; Riccio et al., 2019), and goal monitoring has indeed been shown to be functional for goal achievement (e.g., Harkin et al., 2016; Michie et al., 2009). In fact, interventions that involved partners' monitoring of individuals' goal progress seem to be particularly effective in helping individuals achieve their goal. However, rather than simply monitoring per se, it seems that it is the communication of the goal progress from the partner that is helpful for the individual to achieve his goals. For example, among overweight and obese couples, receiving a daily text message from one's partner as a reminder to monitor goal progress increased the likelihood that individuals achieved the recommended daily activity levels (Berli et al., 2016). Relatedly, goal monitoring increased when partners made plans together on how often, where, and when to exercise, and this joint planning and monitoring had positive consequences for goal achievement (Burkert et al., 2011).

However, it is also important to note that the way partners monitor each other's goals and how they communicate the required changes strongly influences whether interpersonal goal monitoring is going to be successful or not. For example, the literature has distinguished between positive and negative social control messages (Craddock et al., 2015). The positive ones often include praise, encouragement, reminders, and suggestions (e.g., Butterfield & Lewis, 2002; Fekete et al., 2009) with the intent of influencing a partner's healthy behavior. A meta-analysis of 35 studies has shown that this positive communication is often effective in eliciting the partner's behavior change and is also positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Craddock et al., 2015). Alternatively, negative social control messages often communicate guilt, anger, and withdrawal (Fekete et al., 2009) and have negative consequences for the individual's goal achievement (Craddock et al., 2015) and for the relationship (e.g., Craddock et al., 2015; Dillard & Fitzpatrick, 1985; Young et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite the intention to benefit a partner's health and wellbeing, even positive control strategies may not work or may only work under certain conditions. For example, among couples in which one partner suffers from a chronic disease, Stephens et al. (2013) found that on days when partners used more diet-related control strategies, dietary adherence of patients with type 2 diabetes actually decreased. Khan et al. (2013) found that only on days when partners also provided high levels of social support was partner control related to an increase in physical activity of the partner suffering from diabetes.

2 | DISCUSSION

In close relationships, which are contexts characterized by high interdependence between partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), the way partners self-regulate is likely to impact each other and

the relationship. In this work, we reviewed research describing the effects of the four ingredients of self-regulation—self-regulatory standards, capacity, motivation, and monitoring—on close relationship processes and outcomes. First, we reviewed findings demonstrating that the standards that individuals try to meet (approach/avoidance, promotion/prevention, and specific goals) affect the relationship in a variety of ways. Second, we discussed the role of self-regulatory capacity in various interpersonal dynamics. We also noted that although self-regulatory capacity represents a major asset for interpersonal functioning in the majority of cases, there are important exceptions to this rule. Third, we reviewed findings on how the motivation to persist in a relationship (i.e., commitment) affects relationship maintenance mechanisms. Finally, we highlighted the fact that while there is (few) research on how and whether partners can monitor each other's goal progress and how this affects relationships, the influence of monitoring of one's own goal and its consequences for interpersonal processes seems to have largely been neglected in the current literature.

Importantly, this review focuses on findings in close relationships because close relationships are an ideal setting to study these phenomena given the strong interdependence between partners. However, it is likely that many of the processes discussed in this work do not only apply to close relationships but also to other types of relationships (e.g., teacher-pupil, co-workers, neighbors, etc.), even though the effects may differ in less interdependent contexts. It is important to note, however, that like the majority of findings in psychology (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016; Richard et al., 2003), the effects sizes observed on this topic are hardly ever large but tend to range from small to medium. Nevertheless, small effect sizes are indispensable when examining complex phenomena, such as self-regulation, in complex environments such as relationships (Götz et al., 2022). It is also important to note that the work that has studied self-regulation in close relationships has mostly gathered data from samples of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) and heterosexual populations. To our knowledge, very little research has been conducted on these topics using different or diverse samples (e.g., only homosexuals). Thus, the findings discussed in this work may especially apply to a fragment of the population, while more research is needed to draw stronger conclusions about other, understudied, populations.

Furthermore, there are methodological issues to be aware of when interpreting the findings in this area. First, much research on self-regulation in relationships heavily relies on self-report measures, which may not always be accurate because they rely on people's awareness and accuracy in describing their own self-regulatory processes (Righetti et al., 2022). For example, people may not always be aware to which extent the result of their action depends on their self-regulatory capacity versus motivation. Furthermore, self-report measures may be susceptible to social desirability and motivated reasoning and may not always accurately reflect the processes under examination.

Second, there may be variability to the extent the research discussed in this article can provide strong evidence for causality and external validity. In fact, while some experimental studies may provide evidence of causal relationships between variables, they may be conducted in artificial settings (e.g., university laboratories) that may not necessarily represent what occurs in everyday life. Instead, other studies that are more ecologically valid (such as diary studies where the events are examined close to their occurrence in real life) may not provide sufficient evidence of causality given their correlational nature. Finally, although this literature review revealed how the past 20 years have seen a big development in the field of self-regulation in close relationships, many research questions are still left unanswered and some topics have been entirely neglected. For each ingredient, we will now discuss possible directions for future research.

2.1 | Unanswered questions and directions for future research

Research linking self-regulation to interpersonal processes and outcomes has grown rapidly over the past decade, and the rate of growth is accelerating. This acceleration is welcome, especially given that the field still possesses some gaping holes. First, an important aspect of the study of fundamental standards (e.g., approach/avoidance and promotion/prevention) in relationship dynamics is that those standards should be kept separate. At the current state, many findings that used a regulatory focus framework could also be explained by approach-avoidance, in part because some studies use measures that may confound the two constructs (see Molden & Winterheld, 2013). Indeed, the two types of standards are conceptually different. In fact, promotion and prevention orientations each concern both approach and avoidance: promotion-focused people *approach* gains and *avoid* non-gains, whereas prevention-focused people *approach* non-losses and *avoid* losses (Higgins, 1997). Thus, given the greater complexity of regulatory focus theory, promotion and prevention focus is especially useful for addressing research questions that a simple approach versus avoidance perspective cannot answer, but it would be important to measure (or manipulate) regulatory foci in a way that is independent from approach/avoidance.

Second, many unanswered questions remain about the relational consequences of self-regulatory standards. Some recent work (Bohns et al., 2013) indicates that complementary regulatory focus orientations (e.g., with one partner high in promotion focus and the other partner high in prevention focus) predict positive outcomes for interdependent couples who have more goals in common. The logic behind this effect is that having multiple regulatory preferences available allows couples to “divide and conquer” goal pursuits as a unit, so that both partners can adopt their preferred regulatory focus when pursuing a common goal. The promotion-focused partner is likely to take roles that require a promotion focus, whereas the prevention partner is likely to take roles that require a prevention focus. Future research could fruitfully examine whether couples might reap more, fewer, or just as many benefits from a different form of “divide and conquer.” Specifically, rather than pursuing the same shared goal with different regulatory foci, couples might instead divide and pursue different goals that are necessary for their relationship.

Research could also identify circumstances in which sharing goals harms, rather than helps, relationships. For example, too much goal congruence may threaten individuals' need to be distinctive within their relationship. Although individuals desire to be interdependent with romantic partners, they also want to feel that they are autonomous, independent beings (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Individuals strive to feel that they are the origin of their own actions and pursuits and that their interest in chosen actions and pursuits is authentic and intrinsic (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001), and when individuals' motivation to feel like an independent individual is thwarted, their well-being suffers (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991; Myers & Diener, 2005). In essence, individuals want to be involved in close, caring relationships, but they do not generally wish to be so consumed in these relationships that they lose their identity. Without unique goals over which individuals can claim ownership, their need for independence and autonomy may be threatened. This may lead them to distance themselves from their partner in order to regain it, and this could negatively impact intimacy and closeness in the relationship.

A robust body of research has investigated self-regulatory capacity, and as noted previously, most of the time, exerting self-regulatory capacity brings positive relationship outcomes. However, there might be circumstances under which self-regulation in the service of improving social relationships has unexpected negative consequences for individuals' overall well-being.

For example, although inhibiting retaliatory impulses in favor of forgiveness generally promotes relationship well-being, it can undermine important components of personal well-being if the partner makes insufficient amends or generally behaves in a way that does not warrant the forgiveness (Luchies et al., 2010; McNulty, 2008). For example, longitudinal evidence showed that the self-respect of highly forgiving people increases over the first 5 years of marriage if one's spouse was high in agreeableness, but it decreases if one's spouse was low in agreeableness (Luchies et al., 2010).

Scholars have also investigated the consequences of self-regulation for individuals' well-being by questioning what outcomes qualify as self-regulatory failure (Rawn & Vohs, 2011). Scholars have gathered plenty of evidence over the years that self-regulatory capacity usually represents outcomes that benefit the self (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 2004), but emerging research suggests that individuals may at times set standards that are harmful to the self. In the past, behaviors like alcohol consumption, overeating, smoking, gambling, and impulsive spending were considered to be the results of self-control failure. Recently, however, Rawn and Vohs (2011) argued that some actions commonly construed as failures may actually be self-regulatory efforts toward a different standard: social inclusion. Indeed, research on the *self-control for personal harm model* suggests that people often self-regulate their natural urge to avoid personally risky behaviors (e.g., the overconsumption of alcohol, the tendency to engage in dangerous driving behaviors) in order to achieve expected social rewards (Rawn & Vohs, 2011).

This emerging area of research raises important questions about which standards individuals should prioritize. Socially successful self-regulation that yields bodily harm or mental anguish carries great risks for the self. On the other hand, if self-regulatory failure in such cases leads to social rejection or isolation, this could also seriously damage the individual. Sometimes, people must choose whether to exert self-control for standards that favor close relationships (or social relationships in general) yet could harm the self, versus for standards that favor the self but could harm relationships. One task for future research may be to identify when individuals will prioritize one sphere over the other. If individuals feel especially invested in standards represented by either sphere, self-regulatory efforts may more likely be directed toward reaching them. For example, people high in social anxiety or the need to belong may be more likely to direct their self-regulatory efforts toward gaining social acceptance rather than toward avoiding personal harm.

It is also important to note that whereas traditional models of self-control tend to strongly emphasize the inhibitory aspect of self-control, more recent approaches tend to integrate and emphasize the importance of proactive forms of self-regulatory capacity (such as situation selection) and the role of self-control strategies (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2016; Fujita, 2011; Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012). Traditionally, much of the research on self-regulatory capacity has focused on the former aspect, but more research into proactive forms of self-control in the relationship context is clearly warranted. Future research should examine how individuals select different strategies to avoid interpersonally destructive impulses and the repercussions of those strategies. For example, it may be more dysfunctional for relationships if aggressive individuals decide to avoid the situations that trigger such impulses altogether (i.e., conflicts) rather than if they decide to adopt a response modulation approach and learn to calm down their bodily reactions while maintaining an open discussion with their partner.

Regarding motivation, our review has also shown that the motivation to persist in a close relationship (i.e., commitment) is a strong predictor of the effort people will exert to engage in *relationship maintenance behaviors* (e.g., forgiveness, accommodation, faithfulness, sacrifice).

Interestingly, research has shown that both motivation (commitment) and self-regulatory capacity predict those behaviors. However, these two factors have mostly been studied separately, and there is little research on the interplay between self-regulatory capacity and commitment in predicting relationship maintenance behaviors (for an exception, see van der Wal et al., 2014).

As noted previously, however, the most glaring gap in self-regulation and relationship literature is the dearth of research on the interpersonal consequences of monitoring, a key ingredient of self-regulation. While there are few studies on the effects of partners' monitoring of the individuals' goal pursuit activities (Riccio et al., 2019), to our knowledge, there is no research that has examined whether people who monitor their own goal pursuits more closely (or in a different manner) experience different relational processes and outcomes than other people do. That said, indirect evidence suggests that monitoring could, through its effects on affect, exert important interpersonal effects. For example, Carver and Scheier (1990) proposed that emotions, or affect, are designed to register the rate of progress toward a goal or standard. If progress toward the goal is on or ahead of schedule, positive emotions will arise, whereas if progress is too slow, negative emotions will arise. These emotional consequences could, in turn, affect relationship processes. For example, research has shown that experiencing more positive and less negative emotion is associated with better interpersonal functioning and that engaging in maladaptive emotion regulation strategies—such as suppression—exacerbates negative relational outcomes (Gross & John, 2003). Some common emotion regulation strategies also consume cognitive resources, so maladaptive responses to negative emotion can also impair self-regulation by draining self-regulatory capacity (Gross & John, 2003). Negative emotions also shift focus inward on the self, the logic being that negative emotions signal a problem that self-focus may help to identify and solve (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Unfortunately, self-focus can hamper an individual's ability to be responsive to one's partner, or the partner may misinterpret unrelated negative emotion as negative feelings about the self; this in turn erodes crucial intimacy and closeness (see Reis et al., 2004). In short, if one or both partners' monitoring processes indicate insufficient progress toward a goal, negative emotion may result, and the relationship as a whole may suffer.

Another interesting direction for future research on monitoring involves the ways in which individuals monitor progress toward relationship-specific goals. People have a standard or ideal of how a relationship should progress, and monitoring this progress might affect relationship outcomes. If two partners' ideals regarding the rate or manner of progress do not match, conflict may arise between them. For example, they may disagree about relevant joint decisions (e.g., sharing a bank account, moving in together). Alternatively, one individual may feel rushed to reach certain milestones or build a certain level of intimacy in the relationship while the other may feel anxious that the relationship has not yet progressed to these points.

Besides the attention given to each of the self-regulatory ingredients, it is also clear that little research has examined how each ingredient of self-regulation interacts with others to predict outcomes. We believe that future research should give more emphasis to this aspect, examining more systematically the interplay between standards, self-regulatory capacity, monitoring, and motivation to identify, for example, whether one ingredient is more important than others to determine good outcomes, whether one ingredient can compensate for another, or whether they are all necessary to obtain the best possible relationship outcomes. Finally, although abundant research has investigated how self-regulatory processes affect relationships, far less is known about the *conjunctive* effects of both partners' self-regulatory processes on relationship outcomes. Close relationships are composed of two selves that are simultaneously self-

regulating. It is highly likely, therefore, that many interpersonal dynamics are influenced by the concurrent way in which the two partners self-regulate. For example, research identifying the optimal combination of partners' trait self-regulation capacity distinguished totality (a large sum of both partners' self-regulation scores) from complementarity (a large difference in trait self-regulation scores between partners) and similarity (a small difference in self-regulation scores between partners) in predicting the most positive relationship outcomes (Vohs et al., 2011). Likewise, future work should investigate the conjunctive effects of both partners' standards, monitoring, and motivation. For example, is greater total motivation to persist in the relationship (e.g., commitment) preferable, or should two partners have equal motivation even if it is lower overall?

These future research directions notwithstanding, it is important to bear in mind the great strides that scholars have taken thus far. In the year 2000, the bodies of literature on self-regulation and on close relationships were largely independent. Since then, scholars have come to understand the relationship-relevant effects of many key aspects of self-regulation, including self-interested versus relationship-interested standards, strong versus weak self-regulatory capacity, and motivation (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). We hope that future research will further develop the study of self-regulation in close relationships, filling the current gaps in the literature and expanding this field of research to paint a comprehensive picture of how these two domains interrelate.

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