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Too Much of a Good Trait: Perceived Self-Control and Robotic-Dehumanization

Abstract

Past research has heavily focused on the benefits of having high self-control, while little has examined its potential negative outcomes. In the current research, we investigate how those perceived as having high self-control may face negative social consequences due to dehumanization from their peers. Desire is part of human nature — being vulnerable to desire makes us human in the perception of others. We argue that because one inherent function of self-control is to suppress temptation, a person who engages in self-controlling behaviors consistently and successfully could be perceived as less human, and more specifically, more robot-like. Such dehumanization can lead to negative social consequences. We tested this hypothesis by asking participants to nominate one acquaintance with high self-control and one with average self-control. We then measured the participant’s perceptions of warmth, competence, trust, and dehumanization towards each acquaintance. We also asked how interested the participants would be in engaging with each acquaintance socially. Our findings support our dehumanization hypothesis of self-control; those perceived as having high self-control were seen as more robot-like and less warm compared to the average self-control acquaintance. Participants also had lower motivation for social connection with the high self-control acquaintance, compared to the average self-control acquaintance. These findings offer evidence that high self-control can result in negative consequences and shed light on the dynamic relationship between self-control and perception.