

The effect of social presence on self-control: Ego-depletion among neurotics and ego-replenishment among individuals high in social desirability

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Introduction

Initial exertion of self-control often consumes one's limited resources resulting in impairment in subsequent acts of self-control (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998). However, conditions that deplete self-control resources among some individuals do not necessarily carry the same effects on other individuals. *The present studies suggest that public social context (e.g., being observed) is a source of "selective depletion"*.

Previous meta-analytic research has shown that the effects of public social context on performance depend on the actors' personality traits (Uziel, 2007). Detrimental effects were found among individuals high in neuroticism. *The present studies will explore whether these effects on performance reflect depletion of self-control resources.*

An additional focus of the present studies is social desirability. The literature is indecisive about the reaction of individuals high in social desirability to public social contexts. One approach argues that social desirability is associated with impaired self-control (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), whereas other researchers (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1983) suggest the opposite. *The present studies will explore the effect of public social context on the level of self-control among individuals high and low in social desirability.*

ABSTRACT

Conditions that deplete self-control resources among some individuals do not necessarily carry similar effects on other individuals. The present studies demonstrate that public social context is one such source of "selective depletion". In *Studies 1 & 2*, participants were first asked to perform simple (i.e., non-depleting) task while being videotaped. Next, participants' level of self-control was measured while working alone on a second task. In both studies, early public social context was associated with ego-depletion among individuals high in neuroticism. In contrast, early public social context was associated with subsequent enhancement in self-control among individuals high in social desirability. In *Study 3*, participants first worked on a depleting task while alone. Next, their level of self-control was measured while working on a second task while being videotaped. The results showed that public social context helped individuals high in social desirability to replenish their depleted self-control resources. These studies show that individual differences in self-control stem not only from differences in general availability of resources, but also from differential sensitivity to stimuli that consume self-control. The results also demonstrate that social desirability contributes to enhanced self-control in public contexts.

Study 3

Method

Participants: Sixty-five students, 74% female, mean age = 18.6.

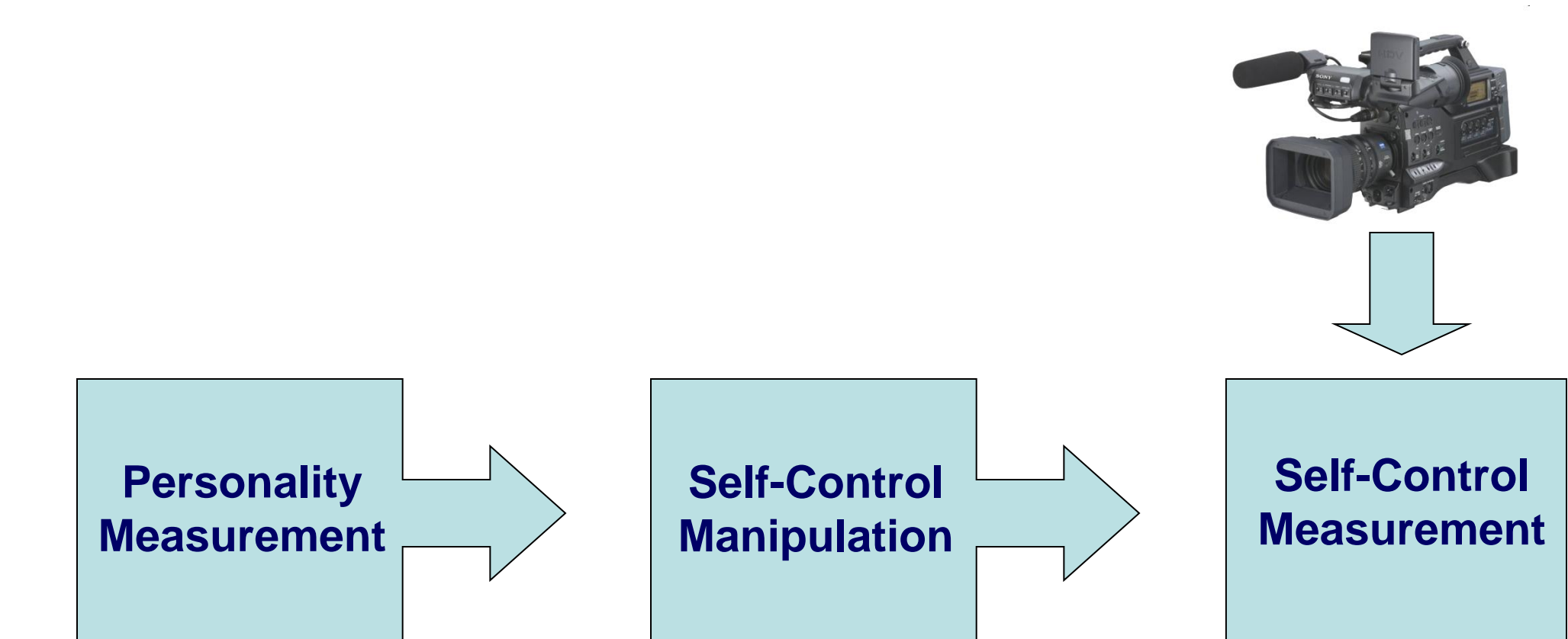
Materials

- **Personality.** Neuroticism (alpha = .86) and social desirability (alpha = .73) were measured with the EPQ-R-S (Eysenck et al., 1985).

- **Self-control manipulation.** (1) Line tracing task. P's were asked to trace a thick line with their dominant hand (non-depleting version) or a thin line with their non-dominant hand (depleting) for 6 minutes; followed by (2) A & N task. P's were asked to write for 6 minutes about "my life in 20 years" while not using the letters X and Z (non-depleting) or A and N (depleting).

- **Self-control measurement.** Letter scramble task (*alone* vs. in *public*). P's were required to come up with as many words as possible by using the letters of the word "accelerating". Number of words and time spent working on the task were measured.

Procedure



Results

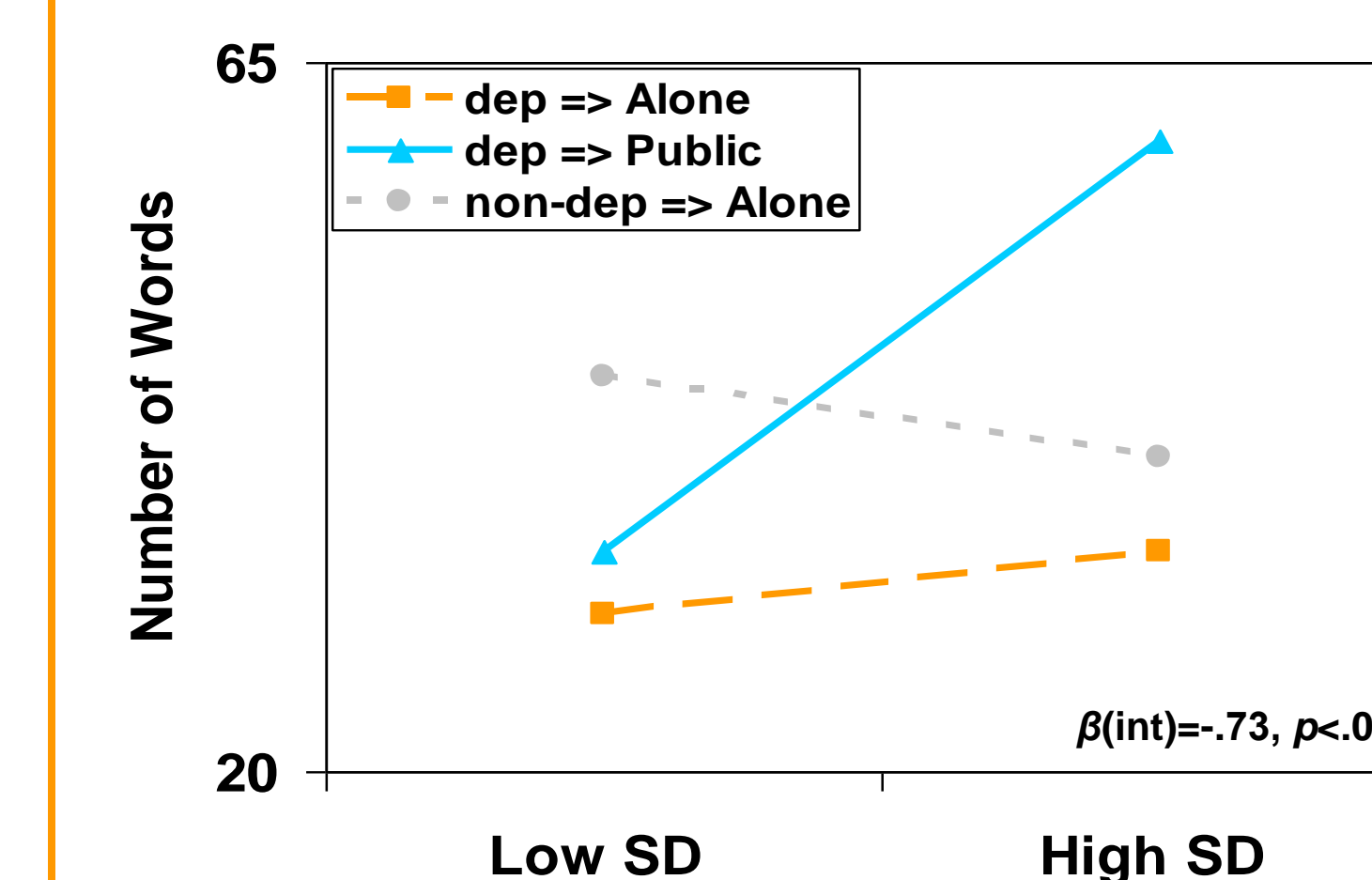


Figure 5: The effect of late public social context on self-control (number of words) among individuals high and low in social desirability

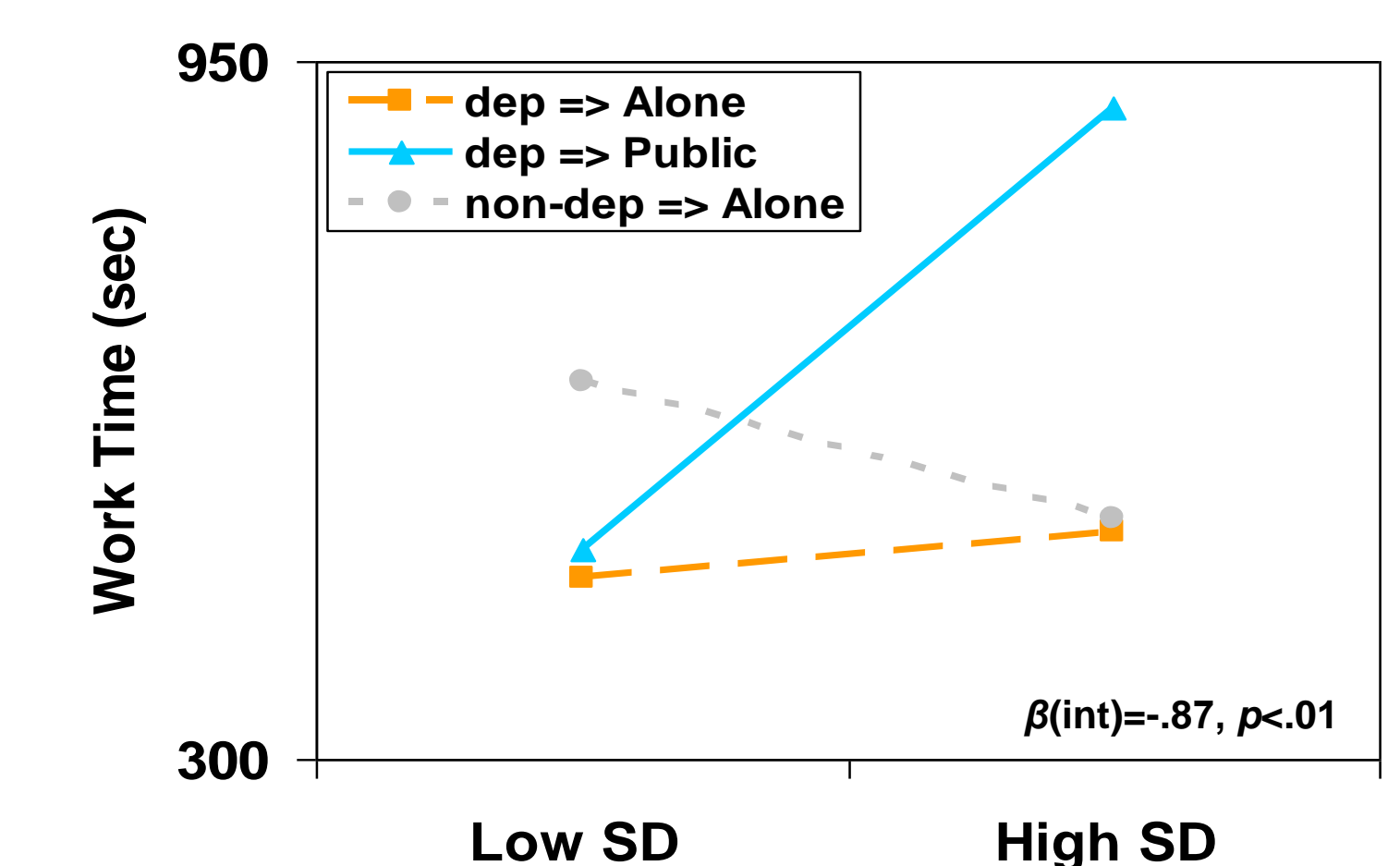


Figure 6: The effect of late public social context on self-control (work time) among individuals high and low in social desirability

Summary: Public social context helped participants high in social desirability to replenish their depleted self-control resources. No effects were found for neuroticism.

Studies 1 & 2: Method

Study 1

Participants: Fifty-eight students, 55% female, mean age = 19.5.

Materials

- **Personality.** Neuroticism (alpha = .84) and social desirability (alpha = .63) were measured with the EPQ-R-S (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985).

- **Self-control manipulation.** Thought suppression task, *simple* version (*alone* vs. in *public*). P's were asked to write down their thoughts for 6 minutes.

- **Self-control measurement.** Anagrams task (*alone*). P's were asked to solve as many anagrams as they could for 15 minutes. They were led to believe that some were unsolvable.

Study 2

Participants: Sixty-five students, 65% female, mean age = 19.5.

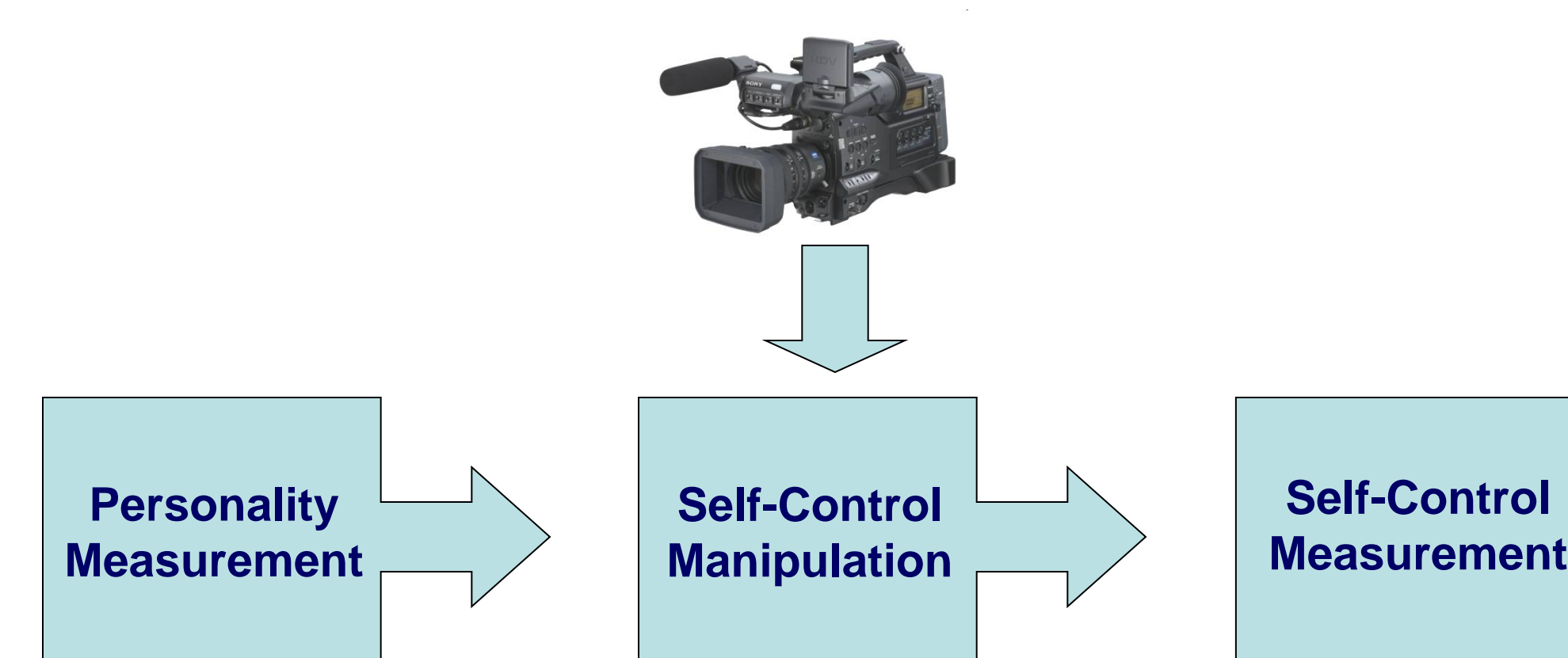
Materials

- **Personality.** Neuroticism (alpha = .76) and social desirability (alpha = .78) were measured with the EPQ-R-S (Eysenck et al., 1985).

- **Self-control manipulation.** E's crossing task. A proof-reading task performed while following *simple* (non-depleting; *alone* vs. in *public*) or *complex* (depleting, *alone*) set of rules.

- **Self-control measurement.** Unsolvable puzzle (*alone*). P's persistence in working on an unsolvable puzzle was measured.

Procedure (Studies 1 & 2)



Studies 1 & 2: Results

Study 1

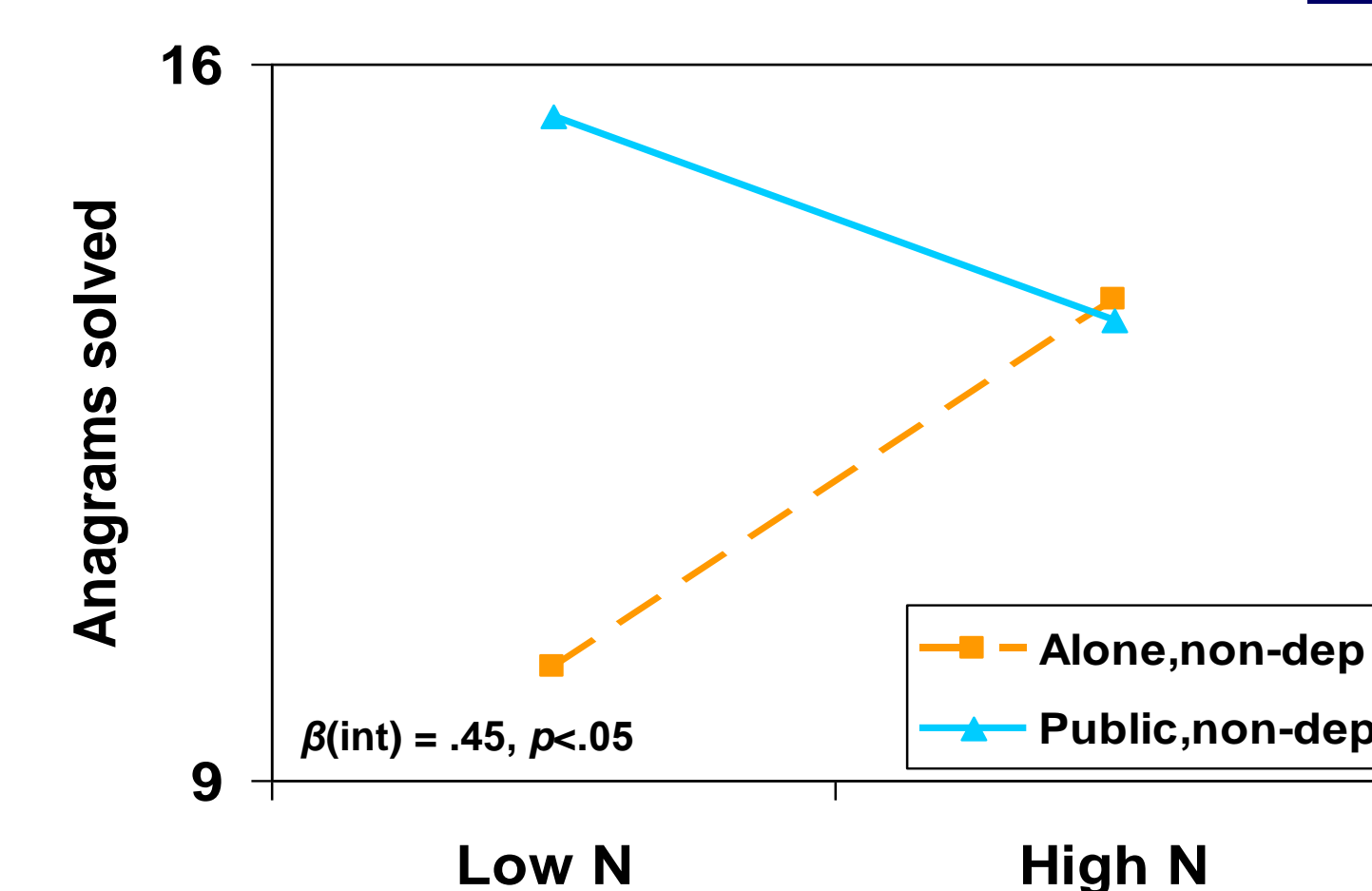


Figure 1: The effect of early public social context on self-control among individuals high and low in neuroticism

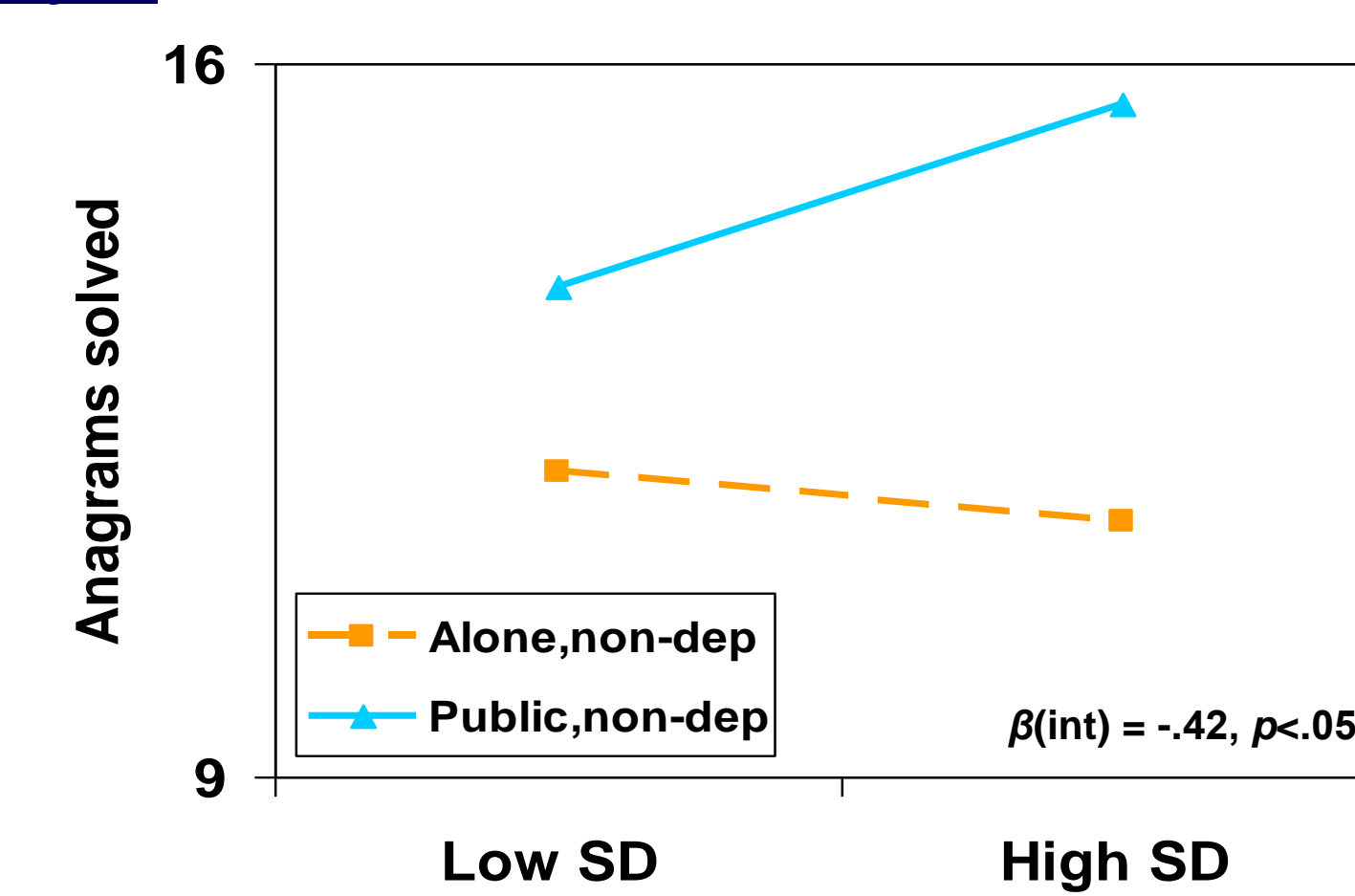


Figure 2: The effect of early public social context on self-control among individuals high and low in social desirability

Study 2

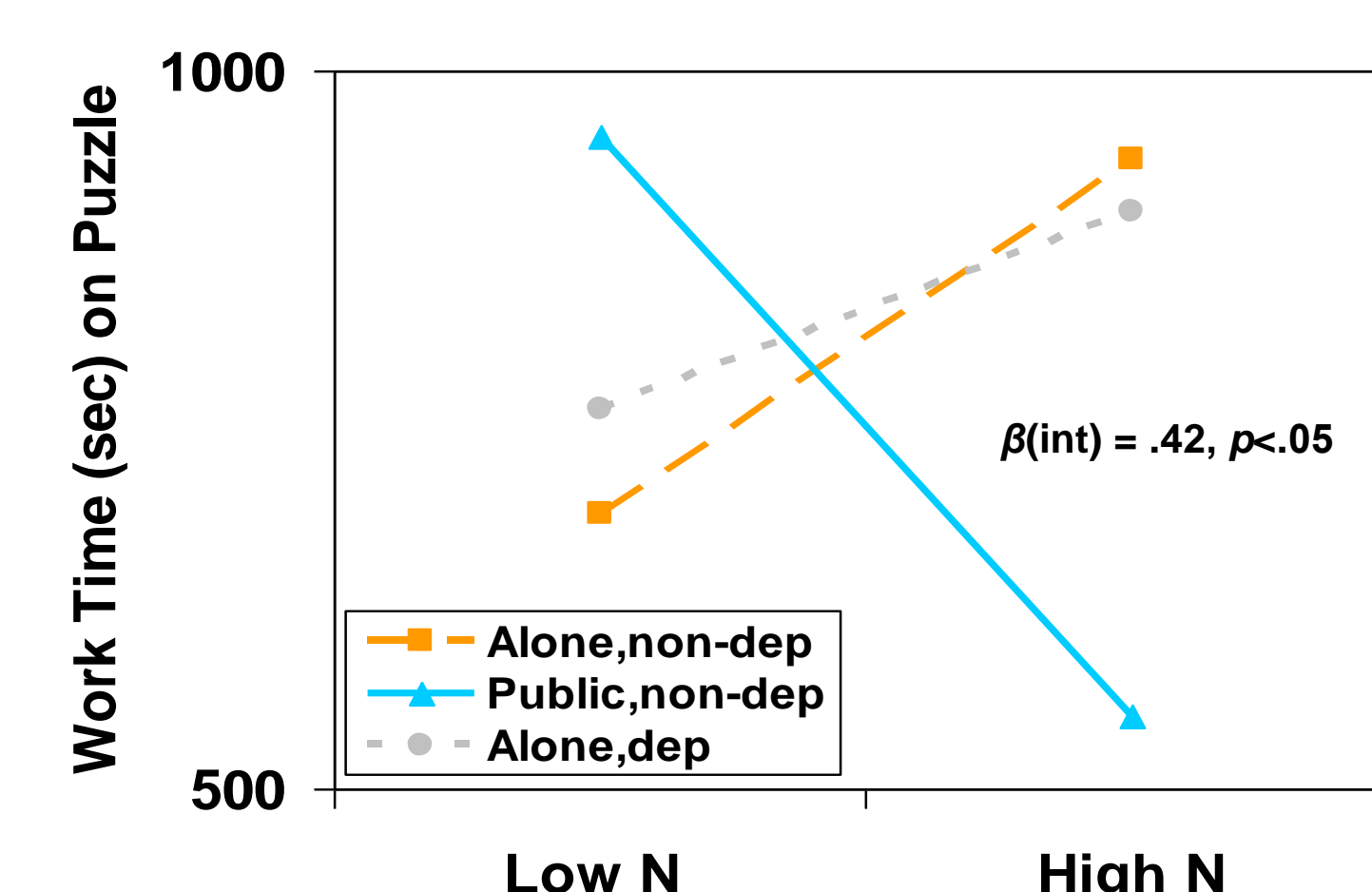


Figure 3: The effect of early public social context on self-control among individuals high and low in neuroticism

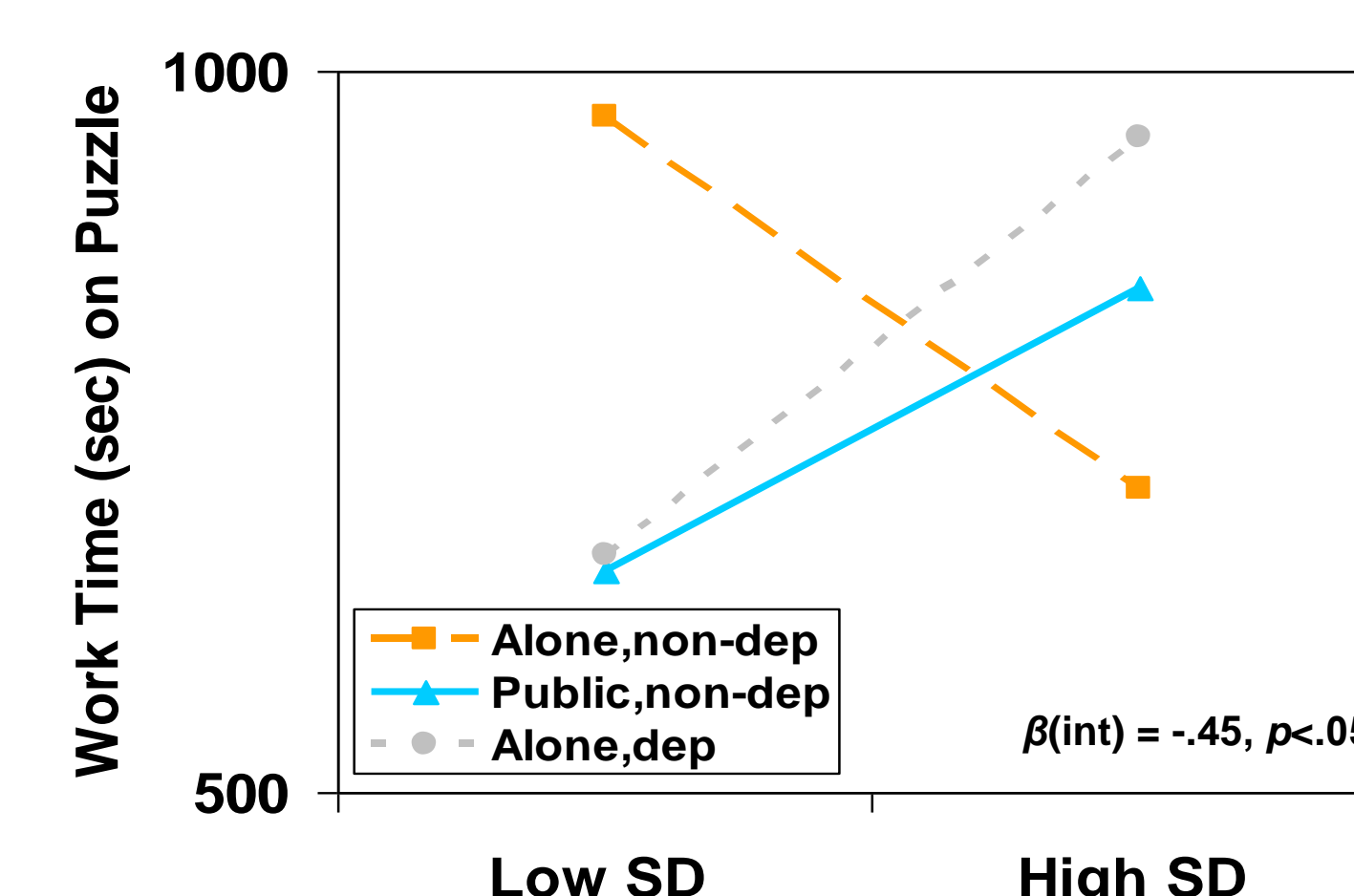


Figure 4: The effect of early public social context on self-control among individuals high and low in social desirability

Summary: Early exposure to public social context depleted self-control resources among individuals high in neuroticism but helped individuals high in social desirability to have more self-control in performing subsequent tasks.

Conclusions

- Self-control is considered a general "mental muscle". The present studies showed that activation of this muscle is required under different circumstances among individuals with different personality traits.
- Among individuals high in neuroticism, exposure to public social context depleted self-control resources that were required for subsequent acts of self-control.
- Among individuals high in social desirability, early exposure to public social context enhanced self-control resources, facilitating subsequent performance.
- Furthermore, public social context replenished self-control resources among individuals high in social desirability.
- Social desirability, thus, predicts having greater self-control in public social contexts.