Self-Control
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Presentation to Upper Darby

Outline
• What does self-control “feel” like?
• What is self-control, precisely?
• What do self-control questionnaires measure?
• Why does self-control vary across situations?
• Why does schoolwork require self-control?
• Why does self-control vary over short periods of time?
• What strategies improve self-control in children?

“A sharper definition
• Acting “in a manner consistent with one’s global goals and values” in the face of “smaller, more concrete, and proximal rewards” (Fujita, 2011)
• Choosing to act in accordance with second-order desires (what I want to want) rather than first-order desires (what I want) (Frankfurt, 1988)

Why do we differ in self-control?
• Capacity (what I can do)
  – Executive function, metacognitive strategies, scripts
• Information (what I know or believe)
  – Schema, implicit beliefs, cognitive biases
• Motivation (what I want and want to want)
  – Subjective benefits and perceived costs of pursuing temptation vs. global goal

“Willpower is trying hard not to do something that you really want to do”

Some people tend to act more self-controlled than others
Example capacity: executive function

- Single executive function tasks correlate with parent or teacher ratings of self-control, $r = .14^*$

*Error variance is reduced by aggregating several EF tasks (Beck, Carlson, & Rothbart, in press)*

Example capacity: ability to delay gratification

- Delay of gratification task performance correlates with informant ratings of self-control, $r = .21$

Example of information: Your “lay” theory of how self-control works

CBQ Effortful Control

- When drawing or coloring in a book, shows strong concentration
- Prepares for trips and outings by planning things s/he will need
- When building or putting something together, becomes very involved in what s/he is doing, and works for long periods
- Is good at following instructions
- Approaches places s/he has been told are dangerous slowly and cautiously

Eysenck Junior Impulsiveness Questionnaire

- Do you save regularly? (r)
- Do you think that planning takes the fun out of things?
- Do you get very annoyed if someone keeps you waiting?
- Do you often do things on the spur of the moment?
- Do you sometimes get so restless that you cannot sit in a chair long?

Brief Self-Control Scale

- I have a hard time breaking bad habits (r)
- I am lazy (r)
- I say inappropriate things (r)
- I am good at resisting temptation
- Pleasure and fun sometimes keep me from getting work done (r)
- I have trouble concentrating (r)
- I often act without thinking through all the alternatives (r)
Big Five Inventory Conscientiousness

- Is a reliable worker
- Tends to be disorganized (r)
- Tends to be lazy (r)
- Perseveres until the task is finished
- Does a thorough job
- Does things efficiently
- Makes plans and follows through with them
- Is easily distracted (r)
- Can be somewhat careless (r)

The enigma of adolescence

“I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting…”

- Shakespeare, Winter’s Tale

Sensation seeking peaks in adolescence

I can resist everything except temptation

- Oscar Wilde
Unpacking domain-specificity in self-control

Temptation is in the eye of the beholder

Domain-Specific Impulsive Behaviors

- I forgot something I needed for class
- I couldn’t find something because my desk, locker, or bedroom was messy
- I did not remember what my teacher told me to do
- My mind wandered when I should have been listening
- I lost my temper at home or at school
- I interrupted other students while they were talking.
- I said something rude
- I talked back to my teacher or parent when I was upset

Global goal: Academic success
Proximal goal: Angry Birds

Sloane Study of Youth and Social Development ($N = 1228$)

How important was it in relation to your future goals?
Describe your mood as you were beeped: happy

Why girls get better grades

\[ \beta = 0.20^{**} \]

\[ \beta = 0.26^{***} \]

(c.f. gender)

\[ \beta' = 0.12^* \]

It’s not because they care more...

Average Yearly Earnings
“Uncharacteristic” self-control failure

- We become more likely to pursue a proximal goal (temptation) rather than a global goal when...
  - Salience and expected value of proximal goal increases
  - Salience and expected value of global goal decreases

Strategies against self-control failure

- **Decrease** salience and value of proximal goal
  - Out of sight, out of mind (hide the marshmallow!)
  - Cognitive transformation (rethink the marshmallow!)
  - Precommitment (increase the cost of eating the marshmallow!)
  - MCII (avoid the marshmallow!)

- **Increase** salience and value of global goal
  - Psychological distancing
  - MCII

The perception of uncertain, threatening circumstances increases perceived benefit of proximal goals relative to global, distal goals

2 strategies that work
Psychologically distancing oneself from an angry memory...

- Replay the event as it unfolds in your imagination through your own eyes.
- Replay the event as it unfolds in your imagination as you observe your distant self.

...reduces negative affect


Mental Contrasting promotes effective goal setting

- What is my goal?
- What good thing will happen if I achieve this goal?
- What obstacles stand in the way of my reaching this goal?

Implementation Intention plans specify where, when, and how you will get around the obstacles

- “If it is a weekday at 6pm, then I will go to my bedroom and do my work.”
- And, “If my brother bothers me, then I will...”

Sophomores studying for PSAT ($d = .40$)

Fifth graders’ report card grades and attendance ($d_s = .50$)
Summary

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• Why does academic achievement require self-control?
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• What strategies improve self-control in children?