



## Short Communication

# The dark side of self-control: High self-control leads to better outcomes when engaging in bad behaviors



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## 1. Introduction

Self-control is the ability to change behavior in order to satisfy important values or meet long-term goals (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007), and it is usually thought of as highly desirable. Baumeister (2012), for example, referred to it as the “moral muscle” and argues that it is “most important for helping people lead happy, successful, and useful lives” (p. 112). But is high self-control an unambiguously beneficial trait, or could there be a negative aspect to it? Perhaps the ability to delay gratification could allow people to engage effectively in selfish behaviors. The purpose of this study was to explore whether high self-control individuals who engage in antisocial behavior are more likely to accomplish their goals or avoid punishment (i.e., achieve better outcomes) than low self-control individuals.

Most researchers who study self-control argue that it is uniformly beneficial. For example, it correlates positively with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, and negatively with aggression (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Low self-control, on the other hand, is associated with antisocial behaviors, with an influential theory of criminal behavior even positing that impulsivity is an important predictor (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Although high self-control often leads to prosocial behavior, it probably does not preclude people from engaging in antisocial activities if they are beneficial to the self.

Uziel and Hefetz (2014) make precisely this argument, suggesting that self-control is morally neutral. People high in self-control are able to examine the short and long-term consequences of their behavior and choose the outcome goals that best serve their interests which allows them to then do what it takes to achieve those goals. Mischel's (1974) classic work illustrates this point. Preschoolers were given the option of eating a treat immediately or waiting in order to receive more treats later. Mischel found that there were individual differences in the ability to exercise self-control, with some better able to achieve the goal of extra treats by waiting. Not only did the high self-control preschoolers earn the desired treat, but as high school students they scored higher on a college aptitude test (the SAT) than the children who were unable to wait (Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990).

Uziel and Hefetz (2014) suggest that the many positive correlations between self-control and prosocial behaviors (e.g., family cohesion and empathic concern; Tangney et al., 2004) are due to the fact that self-interest is usually best served by adhering to societal norms, which results in prosocial behavior. They found that weakening prosocial norms in a laboratory setting led to greater adherence to self-interest among high self-control individuals. Uziel and Hefetz suggest that human beings are basically selfish and that it is the internalization and/or salience of social norms that deter selfish/antisocial behavior. Thus, when social norms are of low importance to the individual, selfish/antisocial behavior is the most rewarding course of action. Because high self-control people can better determine the contingencies and act accordingly, their resulting behavior is selfish/antisocial when norm salience is low.

A logical extension of this reasoning is that high self-control individuals will engage in antisocial behaviors only when the probability of success is high (or the probability of being caught is low). This may be because high self-control people only choose to engage in the selfish/antisocial behavior under “safe” conditions, that is, situations when the agents in charge of enforcing the rules are absent or because they engage in extensive planning so as to insure success. Supporting this rationale, Jia, Khan, and Litt (2015) found that high self-control individuals had more accurate risk perceptions, while those low in self-control underestimated the likelihood of negative consequences. Similarly, participants playing a resource allocation game in which the goal was to maximize profit by either accepting or rejecting monetary offers from a partner were more likely to accept disadvantageous offers when self-control was experimentally diminished (Achtziger, Alós-Ferrer, & Wagner, 2016).

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The purpose of the present research was to determine if the theory proposed by Uziel and Hefetz (2014) is supported in real world situations. To test this thinking, we hypothesized that, although high self-control individuals may be less likely to engage in illegal/antisocial activities overall, when they do engage in antisocial activities they will report better outcomes. That is, they will report evaluating their activities as more successful or state that they were less likely to get caught/punished compared to low self-control individuals. Stated differently, we predicted (1) a negative relationship between self-control and engaging in antisocial activities and (2), after controlling for participation in antisocial activities, self-control would be positively correlated with success (evaluated subjectively or by reports of not getting caught/punished).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred female and 91 male undergraduates from a public university in the United States participated in an online survey for course credit. Their average age was 19.3 (range, 17 to 43). White (non-Hispanic) participants comprised 54% of the sample, while African Americans were 26.8%, Hispanic/Latino/Latina were 13.4%, Asian/Pacific Islander were 2.1%, and 3.8% indicated “other” or did not respond. Treatment of participants was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Self-control

Numerous self-control measures exist, and they may vary in the extent to which they are related to prosocial behavior. Schroder, Ollis, and Davies (2013), for example, suggest that their Habitual Self-Control Scale measures pure self-control while other self-control measures include goals like control of thoughts, emotions, impulses, and performance, which appear to be related to prosocial or antisocial behavior (e.g., control of temper). To account for possible differences in prosociality of measures, three scales were used: Habitual Self-Control Scale (Schroder et al., 2013), Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004), and Individual Self-Control Scale (Grasmick et al., 1993).

The Habitual Self-Control Scale is a 14-item scale; a sample item is: “I usually succeed in translating good intentions into action.” The 13-item version of the Self-Control Scale uses items such as “I am good at resisting temptation.” The Individual Self-Control Scale measures six self-control facets proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) in their general theory of crime: lack of impulsivity, preference for complex tasks, avoidance of risk taking, preference for mental activity, lack of self-centeredness, and temper control. It consists of 24 items, four per facet; sample items for each of the facets are: “I devote much thought and effort to preparing for the future,” “I like really hard tasks that stretch my abilities to the limit,” “I find no excitement in doing things I might get in trouble for,” “I would almost always rather do something mental than physical,” “I try to look out for others first, even if it means making things difficult for myself,” and “I don’t lose my temper very easily.” Responses on all three scales were made with a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 5 (*definitely agree*).

#### 2.2.2. Prevalence of antisocial behaviors

Five antisocial behaviors were measured with published scales: minor crime, academic dishonesty, reckless driving, verbal aggression, and mate guarding. All responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely false/no*) to 5 (*definitely true/yes*). Pilot testing with eight college students was used to select behaviors from each scale that were judged as common among a student population. Specific scale item numbers are reported below.

The Criminal Intent Scale (Dunkel, Mathes, & Beaver, 2013) measures intent to commit minor criminal behavior. The scale was modified by rewording items from intentions to engage in those behaviors to reporting past engagement in those behaviors. The 13 most common items (based on pilot testing) were used: fighting, shoplifting, use of a false ID, vandalism, possession of drug paraphernalia, obstructing a police officer, receiving stolen property, driving without a license, burglary, illegal drug possession, marijuana sale, disorderly conduct, and trespassing. A sample item is, “Have you engaged in shoplifting?”

The Academic Dishonesty Measure (Lambert, Hogan, & Bartton, 2003) is a 20 item measure of academic cheating. The 12 items that measured the most frequent forms of academic dishonesty were used. A sample item is, “Have you asked another student for the answers to an examination that he/she had previously taken and you were about to take?”

The Manchester Driver Behaviour Questionnaire (Lajunen, Parker, & Summala, 2004) is a measure of reckless driving behavior. We used the 11 most frequently endorsed items. A sample item is, “Have you crossed an intersection knowing that the traffic lights had already turned against you?”

The Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) is a measure of the extent to which an individual has used coercive tactics during a romantic conflict. A sample item is, “Have you insulted or swore at a romantic partner?” Only the five most common verbal aggression tactics were measured: insulted or swore, sulked or refused to talk, stomped out, cried, and done or said something to spite.

The Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008) measures engaging in behaviors designed to prevent rivals from stealing a romantic partner (sometimes called mate guarding). Only the 10 items that were judged in pilot testing as both antisocial and common were used. A sample item is, “To find out if your partner was totally faithful, have you snooped through your partner’s personal belongings?”

#### 2.2.3. Outcomes of antisocial behaviors

To measure participants’ antisocial behavior outcomes, the items from the prevalence of antisocial behavior scales were reworded to inquire about outcomes. For the Criminal Intent Punishment Scale, College Academic Dishonesty Punishment Measure, and Manchester Driver Behaviour Punishment Questionnaire, the items were modified by including the words “have you gotten caught/punished” at the beginning of each item (e.g., “have you gotten caught/punished for engaging in shoplifting?”). For the Conflict Tactics, items were re-worded by including “Have you gotten your romantic partner to do what you wanted” at the beginning of each item (e.g., “Have you gotten your romantic partner to do what you wanted by insulting or swearing at your partner?”). For the Mate Retention scale “Have you successfully kept your romantic partner?” was included. Note that the Conflict Tactics and Mate Retention scales measure self-assessed success while the other scales measure being caught and punished. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely false/no*) to 5 (*definitely true/yes*).

## 3. Results

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliabilities of the various measures are presented in Table 1. All of the scales had internal consistency reliabilities of 0.80 or greater except for the Individual Self-Control Scale which had an adequate, but less than ideal, reliability of 0.62. The size of this reliability was probably due to the heterogeneity of the six facets of self-control measured by the scale. Because past research has shown that self-control generally predicts prosocial activities, the measures of self-control were correlated with the measures of antisocial behavior; negative correlations were expected. As can be seen in Table 1, all of the self-control-antisocial behavior correlations were negative and statistically significant

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