



“Thou Shalt Kill”: Practicing self-control supports adherence to personal values when asked to aggress



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ABSTRACT

Poor self-control is a root cause of aggression and criminality. But people can improve their self-control through repetitive practice. Because self-control involves acting in accordance with personal values, practicing self-control can promote attainment of value-consistent goals. The present research tested the hypothesis that practicing self-control could both decrease and increase obedient aggression. In Experiment 1, relative to the active control group, participants who practiced self-control were more hesitant to engage in mock violence (e.g., “cutting” the experimenter’s throat with a rubber knife), especially for participants high in dispositional empathy. In Experiment 2, practicing self-control increased obedience to kill insects, but only among participants who felt little moral responsibility for their actions. There was a trend for decreased killing among participants who felt morally responsible for their actions. Our findings suggest that when asked to behave aggressively, self-control promotes adherence to personal values, which may or may not fuel aggression.

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1. Introduction

Social psychologists have traditionally understood self-control as the ability to restrain or override a prepotent response in the service of long-term goals and values (e.g., Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Consistent with this definition, higher self-control is linked to lower levels of aggression and criminality (Denson, DeWall, & Finkel, 2012; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt et al., 2011). Baumeister and colleagues’ strength model specifies that one way to boost self-control capacity is to practice self-control over an extended period of time. This practice is often referred to as self-control training (SCT) or self-regulation training (Berkman, *in press*). In laboratory experiments, relative to a control group, two weeks of SCT reduced reactive aggression toward strangers in individuals high in trait physical aggression (Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, & Schofield, 2011) and aggressive tendencies toward romantic partners (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). In the present research, we investigated how personal values shape how practicing self-control influences participants’ willingness to obey a request to behave aggressively.

SCT entails monitoring ongoing behavior and replacing a habitual behavioral response with a preferred behavior. In addition to reduced aggression, practicing self-control in one domain for a minimum of two weeks (e.g., practicing better posture, using one’s non-dominant hand for common tasks) can improve self-controlled behavior in a variety of additional, unrelated domains (e.g., smoking abstinence) (Berkman, *in press*; Denson et al., 2011; Finkel et al., 2009; Gailliot, Plant, Butz, & Baumeister, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010; Hui et al., 2009; Muraven, 2010a, 2010b; Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999; Sultan, Joireman, & Sprott, 2012). A meta-analysis of 30 experiments found a significant small-to-moderate effect of SCT on improving a wide range of self-controlled behaviors (Hedge’s $g = +0.36$) (Beames, Schofield, & Denson, *in press*).

In contrast to the strength model, two recent models of self-control emphasize the importance of goals. Fujita (2011) suggested that self-control is required in the presence of a conflict between abstract, distal motives and concrete, proximal motives. He suggests that self-control is not uniformly good in every situation. Rather, self-control is a tool for obtaining goals, which can be socially desirable or undesirable. When distal goals are socially undesirable (e.g., hurting another person), practicing self-control should promote the attainment of this socially undesirable goal.

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Similarly, the elaborated process model of self-control provides a theoretical basis for predicting that self-control may sometimes increase harmful behaviors (Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014). According to this model, self-control allows people to pursue goals derived from personal values (called “have to” goals) rather than focusing on goals that they intrinsically enjoy (called “want to” goals). To the extent that a person feels they “have to” engage in harmful behaviors (e.g., as part of one’s profession or obeying a request to harm others), practicing self-control may increase aggression (e.g., Rawn & Vohs, 2011). Similarly, Finkel (2007) suggested that goal-directed, instrumental aggression could be enhanced by high self-control, for example, by overriding the aversion to harm others.

Although both models emphasize goal attainment as the outcome of self-controlled behavior, goals and values are intricately linked. Most theories suggest that values determine which goals are pursued (e.g., Feather, 1992). Fujita’s (2011) model implies that they are largely interchangeable. Specifically, self-control facilitates acting in accordance with one’s higher-order goals and values. Similarly, Inzlicht, Legault, and Teper (2014) emphasized that self-controlled behavior is more easily achieved when goals are aligned with personal values than when they are unaligned. Consistent with this notion, affirming core values counteracts the depletion effect (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). In the present research, we expected personal values to moderate the influence of SCT on obedient aggression. Specifically we examined the moderating influence of the personal values of empathy (Experiment 1) and moral responsibility (Experiment 2) on the effect of SCT on obedient aggression.

Examining the interactive effects of SCT and personal values on obedient aggression provides an opportunity to examine whether practicing self-control can enhance socially desirable and undesirable behavior in some people. To date, self-control has largely been thought to exclusively promote socially-desirable behaviors. For instance, studies showing that self-control reduces reactive aggression strongly support this notion (Denson et al., 2011; Finkel et al., 2009; Moffitt et al., 2011). However, consistent with newer models of self-control (Fujita, 2011; Inzlicht, Schmeichel et al., 2014), it is equally plausible that under some circumstances, SCT could increase obedient aggression.

1.1. Obedient aggression

Many violent atrocities throughout history were committed by people who were directed to do so. Warfare and genocide claimed tens of millions of lives in the 20th century. Milgram’s (1963, 1974) experiments and subsequent replications showed the world the ubiquity of the human propensity to obediently hurt other people. When an authority figure was present in the room and asked the participant to deliver electrical shocks to a physically distant victim, a surprisingly large number of participants were willing to inflict an apparently excruciating level of pain. When the authority figure was not physically present, obedience levels shrank. Similar reductions in obedient aggression were obtained when the victim was moved to the same room as the participant.

To frame these results in Fujita’s (2011) terms, the physical presence of an experimenter created a proximate goal of obeying the authority figure’s directives. More distal concerns about the victim’s welfare were pushed into the background. Obedient aggression therefore represents a context in which the more distal values suggest that aggression is inappropriate. Boosting self-control in this context should therefore decrease aggression for people who are empathic or feel morally responsible for doing harm. However, for people who do not feel responsible for their harmful behavior, SCT should increase aggression. On a similar note, a recent study found that people high in conscientiousness, which is a trait characterized by a high degree of self-control, were willing to administer more intense shocks in a Milgram paradigm (Bègue et al., 2015).

We examined the effect of SCT on obedient aggression using two different paradigms. In Experiment 1 (based on Cushman, Gray, Gaffey, &

Mendes, 2012), we asked participants to engage in mock violence. In this paradigm, participants are asked to perform actions which simulated (but did not actually inflict) extreme physical harm upon another person (e.g., drawing a rubber knife across someone’s throat). This procedure induced self-reported distress and physiological stress responses in participants (Cushman et al., 2012). In Experiment 2, we asked participants to kill bugs by grinding them in a coffee grinder (Martens, Kosloff, Greenberg, Landau, & Schmader, 2007). We report all variables for both experiments and data are available here: <https://osf.io/hpquv/>.

2. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, participants completed an SCT or control procedure before performing an adaptation of Cushman et al.’s (2012) mock aggression task. We predicted that SCT would make participants more hesitant and therefore slower to engage in mock aggressive actions. To provide evidence that this effect was due to participants’ moral values, we also examined an individual difference variable which represents moral objections to aggression. Burger (2009) found that individuals high in empathic concern were less likely to engage in obedient aggression; and there is a well-known and sizable literature suggesting that empathy increases concern for the welfare of others (Batson et al., 1988; Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). As such, we predicted that SCT would only make participants high in empathic concern more hesitant to perform symbolically aggressive actions, but may actually increase obedient aggressiveness among participants low in empathic concern.¹

2.1. Participants and design

A total of 59 undergraduate psychology students (38 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.5$) at the University of Wyoming completed both sessions of the study. One additional participant (assigned to the SCT condition) was excluded for extreme non-compliance with this protocol (see below). As there was no viable effect size estimate to base power analyses on prior to conducting this study, this sample size was chosen because it allots approximately 30 participants to each cell of the design. Thus, this exceeds recommendations to allot at least 20 participants per cell (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). Participants were required to have a phone with texting capabilities to participate, and they received course credit for participation. At the first session, participants were assigned to either the SCT ($n = 30$) or control condition ($n = 29$) on a pseudo-random basis (i.e., odd-numbered participants = SCT; even-numbered participants = control condition) and reported on their level of trait empathic concern. This procedure ensures equal numbers of participants were assigned to each condition, while still eliminating pre-existing differences between conditions. At the second session, their times to comply with instructions to engage in symbolical-aggressive and non-aggressive actions were measured.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants signed up for a study on “handedness and dexterity”. They were instructed that the study would consist of two brief (i.e., half-hour) sessions, as well as a two-week activity between these two sessions. Participants signed up for both sessions at the same time, and they were scheduled exactly two weeks apart.

¹ Participants also completed measures of physical aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992), psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), perspective-taking (Davis, 1983), and self-control (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). The perspective taking \times SCT interaction approached significance ($p = 0.14$) and was in the same direction as the empathy interaction. No other interactions were significant. All data are available on the Open Science Framework.

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