



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Addictive Behaviors Reports

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/abrep

Strong-willed but not successful: The importance of strategies in recovery from addiction

Anke Snoek^{a,b}, Neil Levy^{a,c,*}, Jeanette Kennett^a

^a Macquarie University, Australia

^b Maastricht University, Netherlands

^c University of Oxford, England

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 April 2016

Received in revised form 9 September 2016

Accepted 10 September 2016

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Willpower

Self-control

Recovery

Qualitative research

Trait self-control

Strategies

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Philosophers, cognitive and social psychologists and laypeople often subscribe to the view that willpower is central to recovery from addiction. But there are reasons to suspect that willpower is much less important to explaining recovery than this view suggests.

Methods: Here we report findings from a qualitative longitudinal study on how substance dependent people see their agency and self-control, and how their self-control develops over time. 69 opioid, alcohol and methamphetamine dependent people were interviewed over a 3 year period.

Results: Most of the participants described themselves as strong willed; in fact, as very strong willed. However, there seemed no correlation between having a (self-assessed) strong will and recovery status. Rather, the number of strategies cited by participants distinguished those in stable recovery from those who were not. Participants in recovery were also more enthusiastic about strategies than those who have not succeeded in controlling substance use. Willpower remained important, but was itself used strategically.

Conclusions: People with addiction seem not to be short on willpower; rather, recovery is dependent on developing strategies to preserve willpower by controlling the environment.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Laypeople, cognitive and social psychologists and philosophers very frequently invoke effortful capacities of self-control to explain both addiction and recovery from addiction. Psychologists and neuroscientists probe the extent to which executive function, and especially the capacity of impulse inhibition, are altered by the cascade of neural changes consequent on addiction (Baler & Volkow, 2006; Garavan & Stout, 2005; Nestor, Hester, & Garavan, 2010). The claim that an impairment of executive function partially explains why recovery from addiction is so difficult dovetails with the way in which ordinary people often invoke ‘willpower’, understood as a capacity of effortful resistance of temptation, to explain why some people become addicts or recover from addiction. Since the difficulties that addicted people face with controlling drug use seem difficult to explain by reference to compulsion or to the pains of withdrawal (Carter & Hall, 2012), and in light of the fact that many addicted people succeed in achieving abstinence or controlled use (Heyman, 2009), the invocation of executive function or of willpower seems well motivated.

The hypothesis that something like willpower plays a role in loss of control seems to receive support from recent work in psychology

widely held to have delineated its contours. According to the *ego depletion* hypothesis, self-control relies on a depletable resource (Baumeister, 2002; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Individuals differ in their capacity to exercise self-control, in virtue of possession of different amounts of this resource. This capacity has been identified with willpower, both by psychologists (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007) and philosophers (Holton, 2009). Differences in success at controlling drug use may therefore be explained by differences in the resources that willpower draws upon (Baumeister, 2002, 2003; Levy, 2006, 2011; note, however, that the ego-depletion hypothesis is currently highly controversial following the finding of a multi-lab preregistered trial that found that the effect size was at best very small; Hagger et al., 2016; see also Carter, Kofler, Forster, & McCullough, 2015).

While we are sympathetic to the claim that an impairment of self-control is central to addiction, we will argue that willpower or executive capacities play less of a role in successful self-control than the pursuit of strategies. By ‘self-control’ we understand the mechanisms and processes whereby agents negotiate a recurrent problem we all face: resisting the temptation to consume smaller sooner rewards (rewards that are available immediately or almost immediately) when they conflict with larger later rewards (rewards which we prefer but which are relatively distant in time). Conflicts between these kinds of rewards are frequent, ranging from the relatively trivial (say, the conflict between watching one more episode of *Game of Thrones* and being well-rested

* Corresponding author at: Macquarie University, Australia.
E-mail address: neil.levy@mq.edu.au (N. Levy).

tomorrow) to the personally significant (say, the conflict between buying a new car every two years and having enough money for retirement). We will use the term 'willpower' to refer to what Mele (1987) calls 'brute resistance': the capacity to resist temptation by effort of will. Willpower, in this sense, is roughly synonymous with executive function. We will suggest that while differences in willpower play a role in explaining relative success in recovery, other factors will play a bigger role. Exercising control over one's environment is particularly crucial, we claim (Kennett, 2013). We think that the deployment of what we will call *strategies* plays a central role in enabling control over drug use in many or most addicted people who achieve it.

In this paper, we briefly review theoretical reasons to think that willpower is less important than the use of strategies. We then adduce evidence from a qualitative study of addicted people that supports our claim that the deployment of strategies is often or always more important than willpower in enabling recovery. Earlier work has highlighted the importance of strategies in enabling self-control (Ainslie, 2001; Mele, 1987; Schelling, 1984). We believe that this is the first evidence that the utilization of such strategies, many self-generated, underlies recovery for many people with addiction independent of the state of their willpower. It is important to recognize that the evidence we present here is limited in important ways. Despite these limitations, we believe that it suggests the implementation of strategies may frequently be more effective in aiding recovery than willpower.

Though many theorists continue to maintain that willpower is central to self-control, recent work has cast doubt on this claim: differences in willpower do not correlate positively with differences in trait self-control (TSC), a measure of the difference between individuals in their capacity to exercise self-control, and TSC is predictive of success in a range of domains requiring self-regulation (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Muraven, Pogarsky, & Shmueli, 2006; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Individuals high in TSC are significantly more vulnerable to the effects of ego depletion than those who are lower in TSC, and, conversely, individuals more than one standard deviation below the mean in TSC show virtually no effect of depletion (Imhoff, Schmidt, & Gerstenberg, 2014).

The dissociation between TSC and willpower is explained, we think, by the fact that there is more than one way to exercise self-control. One way consists in the effortful resistance of temptation. This way of exercising self-control draws upon, and depletes, willpower. Because it depletes willpower, this approach is doomed to fail when it is called upon too often or continuously for too long, but under the right conditions it may be a powerful means of achieving agents' ends. However, self-control may very often better be achieved not by effortful resistance of temptation, but by deploying strategies to ensure either that temptations are not encountered, or that when they are encountered they are relatively easy to resist and little willpower is required. The selection and deployment of such strategies requires foresight and planning. This form of self-control is thus often termed diachronic self-control.

Individuals may avoid temptations, and therefore calls upon their willpower, by utilizing very simple strategies. If they find it difficult to resist sweet foods, they may choose not to have them in their homes, and avoid walking past the local bakery with its tempting smells. Alternatively, individuals may make it easier to resist temptations by making giving in relatively more costly. For example, they may choose to deposit money in term deposit accounts which impose penalties for early withdrawal: the penalty makes it less likely that they will give in to the urge to buy on impulse. The deployment of such strategies is a means of exercising self-control: by these means, we can deliberately bring it about that our pursuit of larger later rewards is not disrupted by conflicting smaller sooner rewards.

There is evidence that individuals high in TSC utilize such strategies to avoid giving in to temptations. Imhoff, Schmidt and Gerstenberg (2014) found that individuals high in TSC reported a lower frequency of engaging in effortful self-control. Data from Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, and Vohs (2012) suggests we ought to interpret this evidence

as indicating deployment of strategies. Using an experience sampling methodology, Hofmann et al. found that high TSC correlated neither with whether subjects resisted desires when they experienced a conflict with regard to them nor with whether they went on to act on them. Rather, high TSC individuals reported fewer instances of experiencing temptations, and especially temptations from the set that an independent study reported as problematic. This suggests that rather than being better at resisting temptations, they are avoiding them.

More direct evidence comes from recent work by Ent, Baumeister, and Tice (2015). Participants in their experiments were given the option of performing a task in a boring but distraction free or a more distracting environment. Individuals high in TSC were significantly more likely to choose the distraction free environment. High TSC participants in this study self-reported that they avoid temptations. Taken together with the evidence that high TSC subjects are not better at resisting desires than other people, the available data strongly suggests that high TSC individuals deploy strategies to pursue their goals. This hypothesis explains their vulnerability to ego depletion. There is evidence that the capacity to effortfully resist temptations may be built up with practice (Hui et al., 2009; Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999; Oaten & Cheng, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). If high TSC individuals pursue their goals by avoiding temptations, they will fail to build up this capacity, and in the unfamiliar environment of the laboratory, where they cannot deploy their strategies, they will be especially vulnerable to self-control failures. What high TSC individuals do seem to be better at is anticipation and planning.

We now report evidence that the recovery of people with addictions is partially explained by their capacity to generate and use strategies that enable them to shape and manage their future environment. This data was gathered from surveys of addicted people in recovery that were designed with different aims in mind. Due to this fact, we did not probe the strategies that participants deployed as closely as we would now have liked. Moreover, the numbers involved were small. These facts entail significant limitations on our data. However, we believe that it is strongly suggestive that for at least some addicted people, recovery is explained not by willpower – which does not predict success – but by the deployment of strategies. Successful recovery requires diachronic self-control.

2. Method

The paper draws on findings from a sub-study of an Australian Research Council funded study entitled 'Addiction, identity and moral agency, integrating theoretical and empirical approaches'. The aim of the study was to evaluate how people with addiction perceived their self-control and agency. The larger study employed a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) longitudinal design. The results presented here are based on the Sydney component of the study, which was mainly qualitative. Study participants ($n = 69$) completed a life-line interview at baseline, and were followed up over a three-year period (baseline in 2011, and successive 12 month follow-up episodes in 2012, 2013, and 2014). At baseline all participants were asked about their goals for the next year and any plans they had made to achieve their goals. The questions we focus on in this paper: 'Do you see yourself as weak- or strong willed or just as everybody else?' and 'What strategies do you use to stay in control of your substance use?' were not the main focus of the research. The question about strength of will was not asked in the baseline interview, but added during the first follow-up. While we recognize the limitations of measuring will-power through self-report, this approach was mandated by the primary goal of this research: exploration of people's self-concept.

Recruitment and interviewing took place in a public detoxification treatment and an opioid substitute treatment facility. The follow-up interviews mostly took place at the hospital connected to these facilities, but also in public places or at participants' homes.

Respondents were between 23 and 64 years of age; most respondents were between 30 and 50. Around 70% were male (49) and 30% were female (20). The main focus was on alcohol and opioid dependency, since these substances have the highest prevalence for the in-treatment

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7261411>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7261411>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)