



Childhood self-control, adolescent behavior, and career success



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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that dispositional self-control is an important predictor of a wide range of behaviors and outcomes but little research has examined this characteristic in the context of career success. This work adds to the limited findings in this area and extends previous research by developing and examining a model of self-control and career success. Specifically, drawing from the concepts of cumulative and interactional continuity (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989) and the recently proposed distinction between start/initiatory and stop/inhibitory self-control (e.g., de Ridder, de Boer, Lugtig, Bakker, & van Hooft, 2011), we developed and tested a model of the pathways leading from childhood self-control to career outcomes focusing on adolescent behavior that is positive (e.g., studying) versus negative (e.g., stealing), education, and job complexity. Results indicated that childhood self-control predicted positive and negative adolescent behavior; this behavior predicted educational attainment; education predicted the complexity and income associated with one's job; job complexity predicted income and job satisfaction; and income predicted job satisfaction. These findings add to research on self-control and career success, further demonstrating the relevance of self-control in this context and highlighting key links connecting these variables involving factors related to start and stop control.

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1. Introduction

Self-control—involving effective regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—has been extensively examined across a range of contexts. Researchers investigating clinical, developmental, social, personality, criminology, and health issues (among others), have developed substantial knowledge bases regarding the nature and implications of self-control in these areas (e.g., see Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This broad and sustained research attention stems in part from the notion that ineffective self-control is a major factor responsible for a range of personal and social problems (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994) and conversely effective self-control is a key to success in life (e.g., Baumeister, Leith, Muraven, & Bratslavsky, 1998). Consistent with this idea, dispositional self-control has been linked to a number of important outcomes including academic performance, impulse control, psychological adjustment, and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995).

However, dispositional self-control has not received substantial attention in work contexts, particularly in terms of career success. Given the pervasive influence of this characteristic on significant

behaviors and outcomes, this may represent a notable gap in research on the factors influencing career-related outcomes. The purpose of the present study was to extend the limited research on this issue. More specifically, this research draws from two theoretical perspectives—involving the concepts of cumulative and interactional continuity (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989) and the recent notion of a distinction between two aspects of self-control (stop/inhibitory and start/initiatory; de Boer, van Hooft, & Bakker, 2011; de Ridder, de Boer, Lugtig, Bakker, & van Hooft, 2011)—to develop and test a model of the pathways leading from self-control to career outcomes.

1.1. Defining self-control and career success

Self-control has been defined as “the exertion of control over the self by the self” (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000, p. 247). This concept thus entails internally focused active control tendencies involving regulation of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Dispositional self-control has connections to other prominent personality traits, including the Big Five, but evidence indicates this characteristic is reasonably distinct. There is, for example, a clear link between self-control and conscientiousness but these characteristics appear to overlap only partially (e.g., Tangney et al., 2004, reported a correlation of .54 between self-control and conscientiousness).

Career success has been conceptualized in a variety of ways but is often defined as the positive psychological or work-related

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outcomes accumulated as a result of one's work experiences (e.g., Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Career-related success is typically characterized as involving two primary components: extrinsic or objective and intrinsic or subjective (see Ng et al., 2005). Extrinsic career success involves observable outcomes such as salary, whereas intrinsic career success involves subjective outcomes such as satisfaction. Given previous evidence suggesting that these two types of outcomes are relatively independent (Ng et al., 2005), the current study examined both extrinsic and intrinsic outcomes, focusing on income and job satisfaction.

1.2. Linking self-control and career success

As noted, although a large number of studies have demonstrated connections between self-control and a variety of important behaviors and outcomes, research on this characteristic in the career context has been quite limited. For instance, in a recent meta-analysis, de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, and Baumeister (2012) reviewed evidence regarding the relationship between trait self-control and behaviors across a range of domains. These researchers reported k (number of tests) of only 5 for the domain "school and work performance." Furthermore, although de Ridder et al. did not provide detailed information regarding the specific behaviors examined in the school and work performance domain, it may be that these were largely school- or task-related, rather than work- or career-related, as these authors listed GPA, homework hours, and persistence at solving tasks as examples of behaviors in this domain. There have been a few studies examining relationships between self-control variables and unemployment (e.g., Kokko, Pulkkinen, & Puustinen, 2000) and "career orientation" (involving occupational status, education, present work situation, and career stability; Pulkkinen, Ohranen, & Tolvanen, 1999), but research investigating specific career success outcomes in employed individuals has been limited.

Two recent exceptions are studies by Moffitt et al. (2011) and Converse, Pathak, DePaul-Haddock, Gotlib, and Merbedone (2012). Moffitt et al. (2011) demonstrated that childhood self-control (beginning at age 3) predicted negative adolescent behaviors (from age 13 to 21; e.g., smoking and dropping out of school), which, in turn, predicted income later in life (at age 32). Similarly, Converse et al. (2012) found that childhood self-control related to later income and occupational prestige through educational attainment and later career satisfaction through occupational opportunity for achievement. These studies provide valuable initial evidence of the relevance of self-control in predicting career-related outcomes. However, information regarding the specific pathways linking self-control to these outcomes is somewhat limited and, in particular, the above studies did not draw from the recent perspective suggesting that there are two aspects of self-control (start and stop). Thus, this work draws from Caspi and colleagues' (1989) ideas regarding cumulative and interactional continuity and the notions of start and stop self-control to develop and test a model involving self-control measured in childhood, positive and negative behaviors (related to start and stop control) in adolescence, and career-related outcomes in adulthood (see Fig. 1). Note that these perspectives provided the stimulus and conceptual background for the current research but we are not directly testing these theories.

1.2.1. Cumulative and interactional continuity

The model developed in the present research is developmental in that it involves pathways leading from self-control relatively early in life to career outcomes experienced in adulthood. To develop this model, we drew from Caspi and colleagues' (e.g., Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Caspi et al., 1989) ideas regarding continuities

and consequences of interactional styles over time. Caspi et al. (1989) proposed two general processes involving person-environment interactions across time. First, cumulative continuity involves the individual selecting, creating, and shaping his/her environments based partially on dispositional qualities, and these environments then sustaining those dispositions. An extraverted individual, for example, may often select environments involving social interaction; these environments may then help to maintain this individual's extraverted tendencies. Over long periods of time, this type of process may lead to not only stable dispositions, but also distinct life paths. Second, interactional continuity involves transactions between the individual and the environment: the individual acts, the environment reacts, and the individual responds. Caspi et al. (1989) proposed that this process can also have implications for life paths and dispositional continuity in several ways including through reciprocal reinforcement, self-confirming expectations, and selective attention to information that confirms one's self-concept.

In developing these ideas, Caspi and colleagues emphasized continuity with respect to certain interactional styles, but these processes also appear to be quite relevant to the current context involving pathways leading to career outcomes. More specifically, the concepts of cumulative and interactional continuity suggest that individual differences in an influential characteristic such as self-control present relatively early in development can produce different life paths, resulting in different career outcomes. For instance, self-control may influence the types of environments individuals select, create, and shape (e.g., those higher in self-control may choose situations based on longer term implications rather than shorter term rewards). Similarly, this trait may also affect individuals' reciprocal interactions with the environment (e.g., those higher in self-control may engage in more long-term desirable behaviors that are then reinforced by the environment including parents and teachers). As these processes unfold over time, different life paths may be created, leading to differing career outcomes. Fig. 1 presents the current model based on this perspective and the following sections discuss the specific links.

1.2.2. Start and stop control

Effectively exercising self-control involves both inhibiting undesirable behaviors and initiating desirable behaviors (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; de Ridder et al., 2011). Based on this notion, recent research by de Boer et al. (2011) and de Ridder et al. (2011) suggests two key dimensions of self-control: start (or initiatory) and stop (or inhibitory). The start dimension of self-control is expected to facilitate engaging in positive behaviors, such as goal-directed activities, that may not be desirable in the short-term but are likely to benefit individuals in the long-term. Alternatively, the stop dimension of self-control is expected to inhibit engaging in negative behaviors, such as illicit or harmful activities, that may be desirable in the short-term but can have negative consequences in the long-term. Based on this research, it is likely that dispositional self-control predicts both positive and negative behaviors. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that self-control is positively related to positive behaviors, such as time spent studying, and negatively related to negative behaviors, such as alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking (de Boer et al., 2011; de Ridder et al., 2011). This has also been supported by a recent meta-analysis that found self-control predicts both desirable and undesirable behaviors (de Ridder et al., 2012). Based on the concepts of cumulative and interactional continuity, these relationships are expected to hold over time, from childhood to adolescence. For example, children higher in self-control may be more likely to choose situations and behaviors that are seen as more long-term desirable (e.g., following rules). This may then be rewarded by parents and teachers, reinforcing those tendencies

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