



Brief Report

Autonomous self-control is less depleting [☆]

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Available online 16 August 2007

Abstract

Autonomously motivated self-control may be less depleting than extrinsically motivated self-control. Participants were asked to not eat cookies and their motivation orientation for resisting that temptation was assessed. Their self-control performance was assessed immediately before and after fighting the temptation. As compared to their baseline performance, participants who avoided eating the cookies for more autonomous reasons performed better at the second measure relative to participants who did not eat for more extrinsic reasons. Mood, arousal, and demographic factors were not related to self-control performance and feelings of autonomy. Overall, it appears that feeling compelled to exert self-control may deplete more strength than having more freedom when exerting self-control. The results may increase our understanding of how self-control strength and feelings of autonomy interact.

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Keywords: Self-control; Depletion; Self-determination theory

1. Introduction

Does why someone diets matter? Regardless of whether one is dieting to look good to other people, improve one's health, or to prove that one can lose weight, the person must fight against the temptation of eating a cookie. Yet research has found that people who diet for more personal reasons tend to be more successful at losing weight than people who diet for more external reasons (Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996). Research has found similar effects of autonomous motivation on alcohol abstinence

[☆] This research was supported by Grant DA015131 provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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(Ryan, Plant, & O'Malley, 1995) and smoking cessation (Curry, Wagner, & Grothaus, 1990; Williams, Gagné, Ryan, & Deci, 2002).

Research on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has found that individuals fall upon a continuum of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At one end, intrinsically motivated individuals engage in an act out of personal interest or volition. They may, for example, study for a class for autonomous reasons, as they find the class interesting and studying personally enjoyable. At the other end of the continuum, extrinsically motivated individuals act for controlled or non-autonomous reasons, as they may study for the class because they might get a new car if they get an A in the class.

The point of the present research is to examine the effects of autonomous motivation on self-control. Although it is rare that self-control is totally intrinsically motivated, it is likely that individuals may have very different reasons for regulating themselves. For example, in the Williams et al. (1996) research, some dieters reported that their pursuit of a weight loss goal was driven by more external pressure than others. In this research, the greater the perceived external pressure, the less likely the person was to adhere to his or her weight loss goal.

The self-control strength model might help explain why feeling forced to exert self-control may lead to poorer outcomes. In particular, this model suggests that any and all exertions of self-control (and only self-control) deplete a limited resource, known as self-control strength (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Because this strength is required for the success of self-control, individuals whose strength is depleted should be at greater risk for a loss of control, as compared to individuals whose strength is less depleted. For example, individuals who were asked not to eat chocolate chip cookies were subsequently less able to regulate their emotions and failed to persist as long on a frustrating task as compared to individuals who were asked not to eat radishes (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Subsequent research has found that this difference in persistence was not due to differences in mood, arousal, frustration or many alternatives; to date the only predictor of persistence in these experiments is the amount of self-control exerted on in the initial task (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998).

I suggest, however, that the same self-control task may be more or less depleting, based on the individuals' feelings of autonomy. When a person resists eating sweets because dieting is valuable to him or her, it may require less self-control strength than when a person avoids eating a cookie because he or she was ordered to do so. Autonomous self-control may involve less feelings of internal conflict and may be more energizing (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999) than compelled self-control. This reduced conflict and increased feelings of energy may increase individuals' level of self-control strength and hence lead to better self-control performance subsequently.

The present study was designed with that idea in mind. This study examined participants' feelings of autonomy while exerting self-control using a correlational approach. This design closely represents what happens when an individual decides to exert self-control, such as when beginning a diet and captures the full range of motivation toward that particular task. Thus, this study was designed to provide insight into the relationship between self-control strength and feelings of autonomy.

More precisely, participants were asked to resist eating cookies. Resisting a temptation like cookies requires a great deal of self-control, as the person has to override the natural desire to eat a tempting substance. Thus, resisting a temptation should deplete self-control strength. Previous research has indeed found that resisting cookies requires self-control

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