Prisoners of Their Own Resources: Depletion in Parole Decision By Expert Judges

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An examination of parole rulings of highly experienced judges indicates that the preference for the status quo, denying parole, increases throughout each session. The findings suggest that experts are not immune to the mental depletion that results from making successive choices. However, a relatively simple intervention can restore mental resources.

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Special Session
New Perspectives on Depletion: Expanding the Boundaries and Nature of Depletion
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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Exercising Self-Control Increases Approach Motivation”
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Success at self-control is essential for several important aspects of life, from personal concerns such as losing weight and saving money to societal concerns such as reducing drug abuse and preventing violence. Self-control can be construed as a struggle between two competing forces: the force that motivates the expression of an impulse (i.e., impulse strength) versus the countervailing force that overrides the impulse (i.e., self-control strength).

The strength model of self-control posits that the inner mechanism for self-control operates on the basis of a limited resource or strength. The sufficiency of this strength for overriding behavior is determined in part by previous behavior. If the person has recently exercised self-control, then strength may be depleted and further efforts at self-control may be prone to failure.

However, the strength model is mute regarding the other element of the self-control struggle—the strength of the impulse that opposes the control mechanism. Given that both the motivation to act on an impulse and the capacity to control impulses jointly determine self-control outcomes, and given that self-control outcomes are determined in part by recent efforts at self-control, we hypothesized that recent efforts at self-control influence not only self-control strength, but also the motivation to act on impulse.

The present research tested the hypothesis that exercising self-control temporarily increases the strength of approach-motivated impulses. Results in support of this hypothesis would suggest that prior efforts at self-control affect subsequent behavior by increasing impulse strength. The research to be presented in this talk provides the first evidence that initial acts of self-control that have been shown to reduce self-control strength also increase approach-motivated impulse strength.

There are several specific behaviors (e.g., eating, aggression) that are driven both by the impulse that compels the behavior and by the inner mechanism that attempts to control the behavior. For these behaviors, it may be difficult to distinguish the contributions of impulse strength from the contributions of self-control strength. However, other approach-motivated behaviors may be unrelated to self-control because the person has no interest or inclination to control them. To distinguish between approach-motivated impulse strength and self-control strength in the current work, we chose to study approach-motivated behaviors that are uninfluenced by self-control. We reasoned that, if exercising self-control causes an increase in approach-motivated behaviors that do not entail self-control, then we can be confident that exercising self-control temporarily increases approach motivation.

Study 1 found that prior efforts at self-control caused an increase in self-reported approach motivation. Study 2a identified a behavior—betting on low-stakes gambles—that is associated with approach motivation but not self-control, and Study 2b found that prior efforts at self-control cause an increase in low-stakes betting behavior. Last, Study 3 found that exercising self-control subsequently facilitates attention toward a reward-relevant symbol but not a reward-irrelevant symbol (Study 3), consistent with the view that self-control increases approach motivation.

Altogether, the current findings suggest that the strength model of self-control be amended to incorporate the other side of the self-control struggle—impulse strength. Prior acts of self-control may increase approach motivation in addition to reducing self-control strength. This amendment to the strength model expands our understanding of self-control failure and may help to explain why prior acts of self-control increase aggression, eating, drinking, profligate spending, and more.

“Prisoners of Their Own Resources: Depletion in Parole Decision by Expert Judges”
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Highly experienced decision makers, such as judges, doctors, and government officials, often make sequential decisions in a single session. For example, parole board hearings, psychiatric release boards, university acceptance committees, and deportation hearings all involve sequential decisions of individual cases with results that carry significant implications both for the individuals under review as well as the public.

Previous work indicates that making successive decisions is mentally taxing (Vohts et al., 2008), and that decision fatigue leads to simplified decision making, such as accepting default options (Levav et al., 2010). We test whether highly experienced judges who make repeated decisions are susceptible to similar depletion effects.

A substantial body of evidence supports the assumption that experts’ judgments are well-calibrated and that they are less susceptible than non-experts to the influence of contextual variables (e.g., Carlson and Bond 2006). Here we examine experts’ “decision endurance.” Since experts may decide more efficiently and may be mindful of extraneous influences on the quality of their decisions, are they more equipped to make better calibrated decisions over time?

We study parole rulings of expert judges as a function of the temporal order of the rulings. Specifically, we examined whether the probability of granting parole—a deviation from the less effortful option of rejecting parole and maintaining the status quo—decreases for decisions later in the case sequence. Also, following work by Gailliot and colleagues (2007), we examine whether food breaks that separate decision sessions can counteract the negative effects of choice and replenish depleted mental resources. In particular, we test whether cases considered immediately following a break are associated with a greater probability of release than cases considered immediately prior to the break.

Our data include 410 parole cases of Israeli criminals incarcerated for a variety of crimes of differing severity (e.g., theft, assault, rape). Highly experienced justices (N=13) consider 15-30 daily cases, in succession. Judges either grant or deny parole. Parole hearings, which continue from morning until early afternoon, are held in three sessions. A 30 minute break that includes a breakfast snack and an hour long lunch break separate the three sessions. The average case duration is approximately 11 minutes long, and does not vary by session.

Results of a logistic regression showed that the probability of granting parole was strongly affected by the temporal order of the rulings. Consistent with the view that choice taxes mental resources and that food and rest may replenish them, we find that parole likelihood is highest at the start of each session and that it gradually decreases throughout a session. The only other predictor
variable that influenced the probability of granting parole was the number of times the prisoner had been incarcerated in the past. The findings indicate that repeated judgments lead even experienced justices to prefer inaction and preference for the status quo (in this case imprisonment). Furthermore, it appears that these potentially detrimental effects of decision fatigue can be eliminated by a relatively simple intervention.

"Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Depletion Does Not Require Individual Self-control Use"
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Research on the depleting effects of self-control has typically focused on intrapersonal causes and outcomes (e.g., engaging in thought suppression leads a person to spend more money on luxury goods). However, interpersonal cognition and neuroscience evidence suggests that the self-control actions of other people may elicit depleting effects even in people who did not use self-control themselves. This possibility would shed new light on the mechanisms that underlie self-control depletion and on the basic nature of depletion itself. In turn, these would provide new insight into social consumption experiences and the situations in which consumers are likely to benefit (or not) from the presence of other consumers.

Two possibilities emerge from the interpersonal processing literature. First, perceiving others may automatically prime similar cognitions and behaviors. Just as a laugh track can make a mediocre comedy more appealing, perceiving another’s resistance of temptation may prime restraint in the perceivers (e.g., shopping with stingy friends may inspire less impulsive purchasing). An even more full-bodied outcome is suggested by research on mental simulation. Simulation occurs when actions and their downstream consequences are evoked purely through mental recreation of an event. Just as when we grimace watching someone else stub his/her toe, the simulation of one person’s resistance may produce the consequences of self-control use—self-regulatory depletion.

Four studies demonstrate interpersonal consequences of self-control use for two important topics in consumer decision-making—(1) resistance to persuasive messages (Studies 1 and 2) and (2) time perception and impatience (Studies 3 and 4). In each study, I focus on the question: Is there depletion by proxy?

The availability of self-control resources predicts the ability to resist especially persuasive messages (Burkley 2008). In Study 1, participants first read a story about a waiter who came to work at a high quality restaurant without having eaten recently and thus had to exert self-control in order to resist eating food on the job (or else risk being fired). Subsequently, participants viewed an advertisement for a shaving razor that featured either strong or weak messages. The degree to which participants automatically simulated (took the perspective of) the waiter was measured. Automatic perspective-taking was positively associated with favorability towards the ad, primarily when the ad messages were strong, suggesting that participants were no longer able to effectively resist these persuasion attempts. Study 2 used a similar paradigm but actively manipulated perspective-taking. The second task in this study involved reading an essay that advocated changing the school grading system to one that participants initially disliked. Simulating the perspective of the hungry waiter in the first task completely eliminated the negativity towards the grading change and led to a doubling of support for this previously disliked system.

Depleted individuals have also been found to overestimate the passage of time and make more short-term decisions (Vohs and Schmeichel 2003). In Study 3, participants completed a temporal discounting measure after being exposed to another’s self-control use. Those participants who simulated this self-control exhibited more impatience by discounting the future more strongly (i.e., preferring smaller, sooner rewards to larger, later ones). In Study 4, the actual time spent reading a self-control story was recorded along with participants’ estimates of that time. Additionally, in a separate set of conditions, the waiter story was altered to involve a physically exerting, but self-control free, task. Participants who simulated the waiter’s use of self-control believed that more time had passed than participants who either did not simulate mental self-control or those who mentally simulated physical exertion.

In summary, the results of four studies indicate that self-regulatory depletion can result even when people are not exposed to temptation themselves. These findings raise important theoretical questions for models of depletion that rely on the exhaustion of physical resources. They also suggest interesting consequences for consumers, as when shoppers who exert self-control to avoid buying luxury goods impair the self-control of friends who are shopping with them.

REFERENCES