LSE public lecture

Willpower: self-control, decision fatigue, and energy depletion

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LSE events

Suggested hashtag for Twitter users:
#lsewillpower

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Willpower and Self-Control in Everyday Life

Roy F. Baumeister

ROY F. BAUMEISTER
& JOHN TIERNEY

WILLPOWER

REDISCOVERING OUR GREATEST STRENGTH

The New York Times Bestseller

'Phenomenally perceptive. Ignore it at your peril'
Stephen J. Dubner, co-author of *Freakonomics*

Value of Self-Control

- Success in work, school
- Good relationships
- Happy, low stress
- Adjustment, mental health
- Physical health
- Good behavior (vs. crime, abuse, prejudice)
- Longevity
- *It is difficult to identify any major personal problems that do not have some element of self-control failure*

What is Self-Control?

- Overriding responses, changing oneself
  - *Thoughts, emotions, impulses, performance*
- Regulate: Change based on idea (standard)
- Vital for human social life (culture)
- Psychological basis of morality
- Basis for free will

Power of Willpower

- Was the desired behavior actually performed?
  - If no resistance: 70%
  - If resistance: 17%

- *Thus, self-control helped reduce the enactment of desire, from 70% to 17%*

Frequency of Self-Control of Desire: *Extrapolating to 16 Waking Hours*

- Desiring something: 8 hours per day
- Resisting problematic desires: 3 to 4 hours per day
- Succumbing to previous resisted temptations: half hour per day

Willpower is limited

- Idea of willpower implies limits
- “Ego depletion” effects

Perseverance Despite Frustrating Failure

Radish

Chocolate

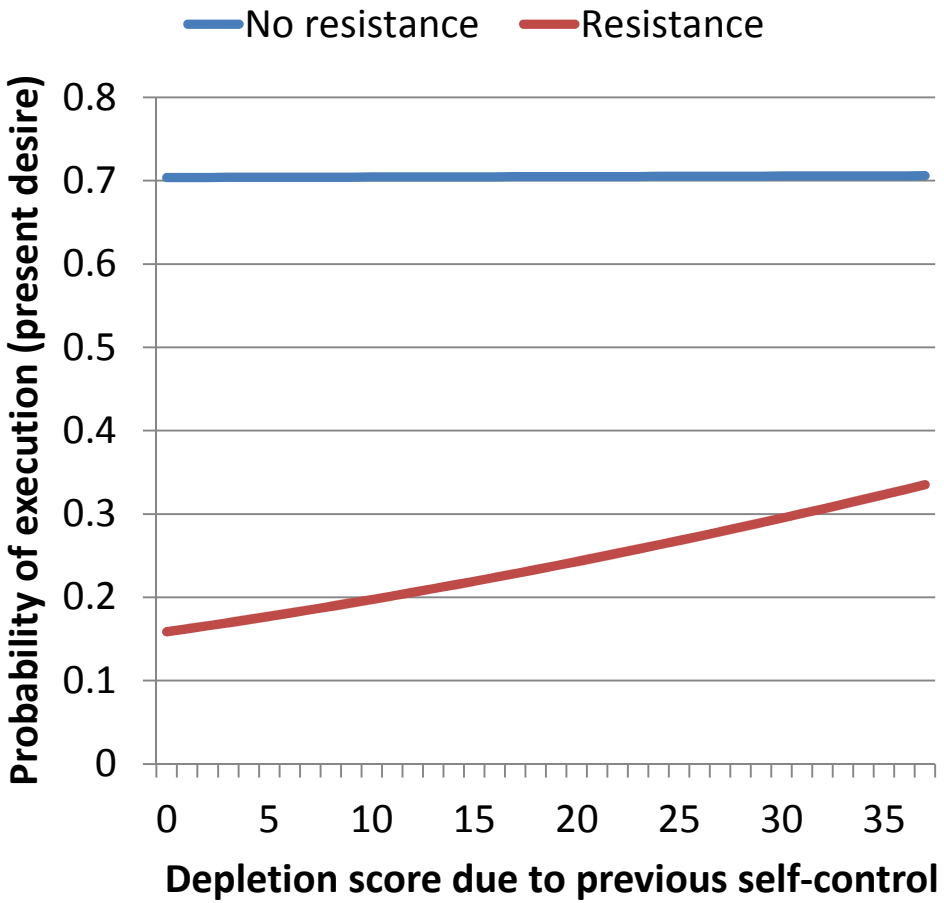
No-Food Control

Perseverance Despite Frustrating Failure

Radish	8.35	*minutes*
Chocolate	18.90	
No-Food Control	20.86	

Ego Depletion in Daily Life

- Depletion score: sum of previous resistance attempts on same day, weighted by temporal distance



Like a Muscle

- Gets tired after exertion
- Conserving energy
- Exercise increases strength !

One Willpower, not Many

- Control thoughts
- Control feelings
- Impulse control
- Task performance

Uses of Willpower

- Self-control
- Decision making…
  - *E.g., after making decisions, self-control is impaired*
- Initiative

Decision Fatigue:
Choosing While Depleted

- Postpone/avoid decision
- Less compromise
- Default option
- Impulse, self-indulge
- Irrational bias

Effective Self-Controllers

- Less frequent resistance!
- Less guilt
  - *From other work: lower life stress*
- Implications: Playing offense, avoiding problems

Hofmann, Baumeister, et al., in press, J Pers Soc Psyc

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:John_William_Waterhouse_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens_%281891%29.jpg

Willpower, Brain, and Body

- Prefrontal cortex
- Glucose

Understanding Glucose

- Self-control
- Physical exertion
- Immune system
- Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

What Depletion Feels Like

- Strong behavioral effects, but weak subjective
- No “signature feeling”
- Some reluctance to tackle difficult things
- Sometimes different on “tired”
  - (But usually not)
- Intensification of all emotions, desire
  - Turns up the volume on life!

Conclusion

- Limited but powerful
- Self-control, but also choice, initiative
- “Greatest human strength”?, individually & collectively

Acknowledgements

- Overview book: Baumeister & Tierney (2011), *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*
- Major collaborators: Kathleen Vohs, Brandon Schmeichel, Mark Muraven, Nathan DeWall, Dianne Tice, Wilhelm Hofmann, Matthew Gailliot.

The End

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