

Public Abstract

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Title:RESOURCE-DEPLETION: OUTCOME OF FAILED ENERGY MANAGEMENT OR ADAPTIVE EMOTION?

The purpose of this study was to determine whether people have a limited self-control ability. Past research has shown that when people control themselves they are worse at controlling themselves afterwards. So, for instance, if you're dieting and have to inhibit the impulse to eat cake in front of you, you would be less able to regulate yourself afterwards if you encountered another temptation.. The most popular explanation for this finding is that people have a limited amount of self-control resources that become depleted with use. Self-control is like a fuel or muscle that becomes worn out over time. We were interested in testing whether people become worse at self-control after previously using it because they are unwilling to do so and not because they are literally unable to do so due to limited resources. Based on evidence demonstrating that self-control increases the motivation to pursue activities that are interesting and fun, this alternative theory predicts that after controlling themselves people should perform better than people who have not controlled themselves on a second rewarded self-control task.

To test this, half of our participants were given a self-control task while the other half were not. We expected that people given the self-control task would be in a more indulgent mindset, and therefore would be more motivated to win money. This was expected to make these people perform better when rewarded than people who did not do a self-control task.

Contrary to this prediction, results indicated that rewards had a greater influence on people who did not previously control themselves, supporting a depleted limited resource theory. Thus, the experiment provides support for the idea that people have a limited amount of self-control that can be weakened, even though alternative explanations that appeal to the motivation to control oneself rise in popularity.