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On the Pros and Cons of Delay of Gratification

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Polivy's analysis of the possible costs of self-control is cogent, persuasive, and almost comprehensive. But despite the wide range of research cited in her article, one important, large literature is neglected. When its findings are included, at least some of the phenomena described in the article appear in a somewhat different light.

The neglected literature concerns delay of gratification. Both Walter Mischel (e.g., 1974; Mischel, Shoda & Peake, 1988) and Jack Block (e.g., Block & Block, 1980; Funder & Block, 1989), and their colleagues have conducted experiments on this behavior for decades. In the basic paradigm the participant (usually but not always a child) is offered a choice between a small reward available immediately and a larger reward for which he or she must wait. This paradigm has obvious relevance to the issues discussed in Polivy's article. The situational and personal variables related to this kind of delay behavior have received extensive research attention.

Two rather different conceptualizations of the nature of delay of gratification have developed out of this research. The first, promoted by Mischel and his collaborators (e.g., Mischel et al., 1988), interprets delay of gratification as an "ability" (p. 694) derived from "cognitive and social competencies and meta-cognitive insight" (p. 688). As might be expected given this interpretation, delay behavior is seen as having "some possible overlap [with] ... performance on intelligence tests" (p. 693). Of importance to the issues raised in Polivy's article, Block and I observed some years ago that:

Because it is a competency ... [control of impulse] is assumed [in Mischel's conception] to influence behavior only in contexts where delay is indeed adaptive. As a result, according to this ... theoretical view—and by definition—delay of gratification is something one cannot have too much of. (Funder & Block, 1989, p. 1042)

The second view, promoted by Block and his collaborators, is that the tendency to delay or not delay gratification is one behavioral manifestation, among many others, of a construct called *ego control*, which ranges from ego undercontrol at one pole to ego overcontrol at the other. To paraphrase Polivy's description of behavioral inhibition, the overcontrolled individual is one who tends to ignore motivational guides to behavior. As Funder and Block (1989) observed,

These tendencies [toward undercontrol or overcontrol] are viewed as affecting delay behavior independently of whether the behavior happens to adaptive in a given situation ... By this conceptual scheme, delay of gratification is not always useful or appropriate, and in such situations the result of overcontrol will not be beneficial and may even be personally costly. (p. 1041)

A large body of research supports the distinction between these two conceptions. For example, Funder and Block (1989) reviewed evidence that when the incentives for delaying or not delaying are relatively small, delay behavior is closely associated with IQ and is quite consistent with Mischel's description. But as incentives become larger, ego control becomes more important. In their own study, which used larger incentives (and older participants) than is typical, Funder and Block found that delay behavior was highly correlated with both ego control and ego resiliency (a concept akin to adjustment) even after IQ was partialled, but it was unrelated to IQ when ego control and ego resiliency were partialled.

A more important finding, for the present context, was that the personality correlates of delay of gratification were not all positive in nature. Participants who exhibited the most delay were not just "better" at self-control, but in a sense they seemed to be unable to avoid it. The correlates of delay of gratification are definitely a mixed bag. Delayers are in general smart and in some respects well-adjusted, but they also tend to be somewhat overcontrolled and unnecessarily inhibited. Other studies have found that overcontrollers tend to be complete abstainers from drug use, but they are less well-adjusted than individuals who have lower ego control and may have experimented briefly with drugs (Shedler & Block, 1990), and that a tendency toward overcontrol puts young women (but not young men) at risk for the development of depression (Block, Gjerde, & Block, 1991).

Polivy's description of the pros and cons of self-control seems more compatible with the ego control than with the ability conception of delay. However, the ego control conception reverses the imputed direction of causality. Polivy interprets the negative concomitants of excessive self-control as a result of the self-control behavior itself. The ego control view turns this around and raises the possibility that, at least sometimes, those who are prone to excessive self-control already have less than ideal psychological

adjustment and suffer from tendencies toward negative affect, cognitive disruption, and health problems.

Polivy says impulse control can cause problems. The experimental evidence she cites backs her up. But some of the evidence cited in Polivy's article is correlational, which makes a complementary observation relevant: Some of those who tend toward the overcontrol of motivational impulse may already have problems.

Note

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Why Is It So Difficult to Inhibit Behavior?

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Polivy's model of behavioral inhibition, with its emphasis on the consequences of suppression, is a compelling integration of diverse areas of research. By asserting that the long-term costs of inhibiting internally motivated behaviors are far greater than the benefits gained by their suppression, she brings to the forefront an issue largely neglected by researchers and theorists. The similarity in outcomes for behavioral, affective, and cognitive suppression provides abundant support for her claims, but as with most excellent articles, her analysis raises as many questions as it answers. In our commentary we focus on possible mechanisms responsible for the difficulty of behavioral inhibition.

Polivy outlines a number of possible explanations for why behaviors are generally difficult to inhibit, ranging from frustration, to ironic processing, to activation of dopaminergic transmitter systems in the brain. Our contention is not that Polivy is wrong, but that her list is incomplete given the limited research on inhibition. Our goal in this article is to describe additional mechanisms that help to provide a more comprehensive understanding of why inhibition is so difficult.

The Mind of the Inhibitor

Why do people inhibit behavior? We share Polivy's general view that inhibitions are socially in-

duced. Whereas Polivy tries to distinguish personal preferences from social sanctions, we believe that all inhibitions (even those that apparently reflect personal choice) are shaped through societal forces. Starting with toilet training, children are taught that it is necessary to completely inhibit certain impulses and to delay gratifying others. Inhibitions are important for harmonious social interactions, and evolution has undoubtedly favored those who could control undesirable impulses. For instance, those who could not refrain from committing violence on others or from consuming more than their fair share of communal resources might have faced exclusion from the group, a situation that Baumeister and Tice (1990) proposed is the functional basis of anxiety. In their model, anxiety serves as an alarm function that group exclusion is likely and therefore motivates people to behave according to group norms. Given that survival was enhanced for those who lived in groups (who could assist one another with the tasks of survival and jointly care for offspring), those who were expelled from social groups might have been less likely to survive and pass along their genes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The dieter sitting in front of a tempting chocolate sundae probably does not give much thought to evolutionary forces, but he or she probably does feel anxious. The sundae is mightily tempting, but to eat it might contribute to being overweight or to preventing