Self-control motive: On the manifestation and implication of wanting to have more self-control

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Self-control often brings about favorable outcomes that facilitate adaptation. Notwithstanding, high levels of self-control sometimes come with personal costs (e.g., resisting one’s desires). It is therefore reasonable to expect that, in general, people would want to have more self-control, but also that there will be variability in the expression of this motive. In the present research we introduce a new scale to measure (state and trait) motive to have more self-control, the Self-Control Motive Scale (SCMS). In two studies (a longitudinal field study and a laboratory experiment) we demonstrate that the SCMS has very good internal consistency, that it is sensitive to changes in external demand for self-control, and that it interacts with trait self-control in predicting levels of stress and success in task performance.

Introduction

A large volume of research documents the adaptive outcomes of high self-control. Self-control facilitates goal-attainment, interpersonal and social success, as well as academic achievement (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). Self-control also has a few downsides: Exerting self-control involves making immediate sacrifices and high trait self-control is associated with safer yet less exciting life. Most people would probably like to have more self-control, but it is reasonable to expect that some people may seek at times less self-control.

While self-control represents capacity, self-control motive - the extent to which one wants to have more self-control - represents a subjective sense of success in attaining a desired level of self-control. To the extent that one’s goals and aspirations affect motivation, affect, and performance, self-control motive should be an important moderator of the various effects of self-control. Notwithstanding, to date, no instrument was developed to measure self-control motive.

The present research introduces a new scale to measure self-control motive along with results from two studies that explored the effect of this motive on stress and performance under demand conditions. It was hypothesized that a high self-control motive would bring people to seek at times less self-control.

ABSTRACT

The SCMS measures the extent to which individuals seek to have more self-control. The scale is comprised of 8 items that ask about one’s motive to have more control over one’s thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behavior.

The scale has very good internal consistency:

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The SCMS has: A moderate negative correlation with extraversion (-.54, US) and a weak negative correlation with neuroticism (-.20, US), a weak negative correlation with SAT verbal (rs = -1.23; p < .01), and a stronger motive for self-control (3.63 < 3.78; p < .01).

Tools & Procedure: In T1 (first two weeks of the Fall semester) and T2 (final two weeks of the Fall semester) participants filled in: the SCMS, trait self-control scale (Tangney et al., 2004), and a scale measuring their level of academic stress.

Results:

- Among individuals low in trait self-control, T1 self-control motive was associated with finding fewer differences in the ‘spot the difference’ task (rs = -.29, p < .05).
- Among individuals high in trait self-control, T1 self-control motive was associated with greater T2 academic stress (rs = .52, p < .01).
- That is, as academic pressure increased participants felt more stress and a stronger motive for self-control.

Conclusions:

- A reliable scale was introduced to measure a motive to have more self-control.
- On average, most people want to have more self-control.
- Being low on trait self-control and external demands for self-control increase self-control motive.
- A high motive for self-control among low trait self-control individuals predicts increased stress and reduced ability to exert self-control, especially when demands are taxing one’s ability.
- In the self-control domain, when one lacks capacity, one is better off having low expectations.

Future studies should explore long-term effects of self-control motive.

Study 1: Longitudinal field study

Overview: This study explored longitudinally the effect of increasing academic pressure on students’ self-control motive. It also explored the role of self-control motive in mediating ensuing stress reaction.

Participants: Seventy-six students (83% females; mean age = 22) volunteered to participate in the two measurement occasions.

Tools & Procedure: In T1 (first two weeks of the Fall semester) and T2 (final two weeks of the Fall semester) participants filled in: the SCMS, trait self-control scale (Tangney et al., 2004), and a scale measuring their level of academic stress.

Results:

- Compared with T1, T2 participants felt more stress (4.61 < 5.30; p < .01), less self-control (3.32 > 3.18; p < .01), and a stronger motive for self-control (3.63 < 3.78; p < .05).
- That is, as academic pressure increased participants felt more stress and a stronger motive for self-control.

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