



Self-control conflict in the eating domain: A cognitive, affective, and behavioral perspective

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Sometimes we are tempted to do one thing (e.g., order the burger) but know we should do another (e.g., choose a healthier alternative). Such self-control conflicts, moments in which an impulse and a higher order goal are in conflict, are pervasive in everyday life. They are at the heart of the self-control process, given that without such a conflict self-control would be unnecessary. In my thesis I investigated how people experience and deal with conflict, and whether this knowledge helps to improve control over eating behavior.

In one line of research I investigated the interplay between cognitive control and motivational processes, and found that cognitive control is weakened when in direct competition with processing motivationally salient information. This can help explain why people struggle to resist temptation, even though they have a strong intention to do so.

In the second line of research I studied how people feel about making conflicted self-control choices (i.e., giving in vs. resisting temptation). Interestingly, the more conflict people experienced during decision making the more negative and regretful they felt about their choices – even if they had made the ‘healthy’ choice. Only if people were reminded that their healthy choice was a successful act of self-control did conflict strength predict increased feelings of pride.

Finally, I tested whether reducing impulse strength by means of the approach avoidance training could increase control over eating behavior. Three lab studies produced null results, suggesting that more research is needed before the approach avoidance training can be used in the applied setting.

Together, those findings help understand why self-control often fails, and generate several interesting ideas for how to improve self-control.