

Pathways to Self-Destruction: How & Why People Screw Themselves Up

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The limits of rationality

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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The Death Wish *and Other Self-Destructive Tendencies*

- Freudian instinct
 - (in everyone)
- Ordinary pathology
 - (among the troubled)
- Desire for punishment
 - (among the guilty)

Three Pathways

- Intentional Self-Destruction
 - *As primary goal*
- Tradeoffs
- Self-Misregulation (or Under?)
- *Also perhaps combinations*

Tradeoffs

- Alcohol, drugs, cigarettes
- Health care noncompliance/negligence
- Self-handicapping
- Face-work (egotism)
 - Costly violence, revenge
- Shyness
- Procrastination (?)

Backfire & Misregulation

- Misguided Perseveration
 - *Throwing good money after bad*
- Choking Under Pressure
 - *Incentives backfire*
- Learned Helplessness
- Backfiring interpersonal strategies
- Wrongheaded goal setting
- Procrastination?

Foolish Risk Taking

- Possible link to emotional distress
- Analogy to suicide

Autobiographical Stories

- Stories about bad consequences
 - Risky decision 92%
 - Prior bad mood 55%
- Stories about good consequences
 - Risky decision 51%
 - Prior bad mood 53%

Foolish Risk Taking in the Lab

- The lottery choice method

2% chance to win \$25

— **OR** —

70% chance to win \$2

Additional cost for losing...

...98% vs. 30% chance

Foolish Risk Taking in the Lab

- Lottery choice: Expected Gain Values

2% x \$25 = 50 cents

— **OR** —

70% x \$2 = \$1.40 ***

Additional cost for losing...

...98% vs. 30% chance

Embarrassment & Risk

Percent choosing foolish risk

“My Way” 85 %

Nature Video 67

SNL Video 40

Leith & Baumeister, JPSP 1996

Anger & Risk

Percent Choosing Long Shot /Foolish Risk

Anger-Frustration 62 %

Nature Video 8

SNL Video 31

Leith & Baumeister, JPSP 1996

Why?

Why?

% Choosing Long Shot / Foolish Risk

Anger /Simple	67
Neutral (Nature)	15
Anger/Quick Decision	45
Anger/Thoughtful Decision	18 <=

Leith & Baumeister, JPSP 1996

Why?

- No sign of changed appraisal of risks
 - *More to gain, less to lose if already unhappy*
- Upset people do not stop to consider the downside of the risk
 - *Self-regulation failure*

What Kind of Emotions Cause Foolish Risk-Taking?

- Sadness (*The Champ* death scene) did not
- Neutral or pleasant high arousal (humor, nature/serene) did not
- The running in place study
 - Feelings differ markedly
- *Only high-arousal bad emotions cause self-destructive risk-taking*

Risk-Taking Conclusions

- High energy distress causes shift
- Seeks high-risk, high-payoff outcomes
- Not intentional self-defeat
- Original theory: more to gain, less to lose (tradeoff)
- Revised theory: failed-self-regulation

When Immediate Gratification is Especially Welcome

- Self-regulation is partly for delaying gratification
- Intense distress
 - Linked to self
 - Or just keeping at bay
- Desire for pleasure to replace distress
- Desire for oblivion

Escape as Motive

- The escape process
 - Self as burden
 - Shutting out meaningful thought
 - Serenity amid disaster
- Applies to:
 - Alcohol & some drugs
 - Suicide
 - Binge Eating
 - Masochism (*not actually self-destructive, turns out*)

*Baumeister (1991) Escaping the Self.
NY: Basic Books.*

Dysfunctional Coping

- Destructive measures to escape distress
- Lesser: abandon self-control to seek pleasure, counteract distress
- Could explain how emotional distress impairs self-control?

Priority Shift Theory

- What self-control restrains
- The allure of immediate gratification
- Being good vs. feeling good
 - *Emotion control vs. impulse control*

The Mood Freezing Pill

- Placebo
- Made plausible with analogies
- (Ostensibly) no point trying mood repair
- Variations: instructions, aromatherapy
- Background uses
 - Sadness & helping
 - Anger & aggression

Inducing distress

- Vivid imagine cause traffic accident including death of child
- Vs good mood condition (saved child's life)
- Write essay summarizing feelings

Overeating fatty snacks

Z scores combined eating of pretzels,
cheese crackers, cookies

	Mood freeze	No Freeze
Happy	+.49	-.35
Distress	-.89 !	+.79

Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, JPSP 2001

Implications Study 1

- Sadness/distress led to more eating of junk food
- *But not if mood was frozen*
- Thus, distress causes overeating designed to make self cheer up
- Self-regulate eating versus cheering self up

Delay of Gratification Study

- Classic self-control task
- With adults: overfishing procedure
- Trait Negative Mood Regulation
- 25 trials, endpoint surprise
- Measures
 - Total money earned
 - Fish remaining after trial 25
 - Fish remaining after trial 6

Total Earnings

Earnings (¢) after 25 trials. Low scores indicate self-defeat from poor self-regn

	Frozen Mood		Normal Mood
High NMR	216.31	>	164.31
Low NMR	183.50	=	213.38

Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, JPSP 2001

Fish Left at End

High scores indicate good management of resources, thus good self-regulation

	Frozen Mood		Normal Mood
High NMR	110.88	>	46.81
Low NMR	78.40	=	74.75

Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, JPSP 2001

Implications: Fishing Study

- Distress leads to immediate gratification instead of delay
- *But not if mood is frozen*
- Mainly among high NMR
 - *Thus, it reflects mood regulation strategy*
- Differences emerged quite early in game and remained strong at end

Procrastination: Background

- Procrastination seen as self-regulatory failure
- Procrastination is self-destructive
 - Tradeoff: short-term gain, long-term cost
 - Longitudinal study of students found lower grades
 - ALSO found health better early, but **much worse later** (*Tice & Baumeister, Psy Sci, 1997*)

Procrastination Study

- Lab analogy to procrastination: playing instead of studying
- Upcoming multiplication test (said most students forget)
- Mood freeze with aromatherapy
- Distractors: fun vs boring
 - Popular puzzle, video game, popular magazines
 - Preschool puzzle & game, obsolete technical journals

Time Procrastinating (*Minutes*)

With Fun Distractors

MOOD	Frozen	Normal
Good	7.59	8.09
Bad	5.68	13.68

Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, JPSP 2001

Time Procrastinating (*Minutes*)

With Boring Distractors

MOOD	Frozen	Normal
Good	7.86	9.86
Bad	8.05	8.18

(no significant differences)

Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, JPSP 2001

Implications, Procrastination Study

- Distress leads to more procrastination
- *But not if mood is frozen*
 - Thus, procrastination is for feeling good
- Only if distractors are fun
 - Again, it is for feeling good

Self-Regulation Failure: Why People Let Go

Three Ingredients of Self-Regulation

- Motivated commitment to standards
- Monitoring
- Willpower and its Helpers

...And how their failures lead to Self-Destruction

- Motivated commitment to standards
 - The priorities paper
- Monitoring
 - Alcohol
- Willpower and its Helpers
 - Ego depletion

Depleted Willpower, Poor Self-Control, and Actual Stupidity

- Ego depletion
- IQ testing
- Automatic versus controlled thinking

Fluid Versus Crystallized Intelligence

	CET (Fluid)	GMAT
Emotion Control (Depletion)	10.1	21.6
No effort control	12.1	22.9
	<i>(p<.05)</i>	<i>(ns)</i>

Measure: Number Correct

Source: Schmeichel et al., JPSP, 2003

GRE Analytical Performance

	# Correct	#Attempts
Attention Control (Depletion)	3.5	5.3
No effort control	7.2	8.9

Source: Schmeichel et al., JPSP, 2003

Rote Versus Reasoning

	GRE Reading Comprhnsn	Word Recall
Attention Control (Depletion)	4.5	40 %
No effort control	5.7	45 %
	($p < .05$)	(<i>ns</i>)

Measure: GRE correct; pct correct recall

Source: Schmeichel et al., JPSP, 2003

Conclusions

- Foolish Risk Taking
 - High arousal negative emotions
 - Cuts short thinking
 - Grab for long shot, disregard downside

Conclusions 2

- Shift in priorities
 - Escape from self-awareness
 - Escape emotional distress
 - Basic conflict between restraint & pleasure

Conclusions 3

- Failed self-regulation
 - Depleted willpower
 - Impairs intelligent thought

THE END