

The liberating effects of losing control

February 18 2009

Self-control is one of our most cherished values. We applaud those with the discipline to regulate their appetites and actions, and we try hard to instill this virtue in our children. We celebrate the power of the mind to make hard choices and keep us on course. But is it possible that willpower can sometimes be an obstacle rather than a means to happiness and harmony?

Tufts University psychologists Evan Apfelbaum and Samuel Sommers were intrigued by the notion that too much self-control may indeed have a downside - and that relinquishing some power might be paradoxically tonic, both for individuals and for society.

They explored the virtue of powerlessness in the arena of race relations. They figured that well-intentioned people are careful - sometimes hyper-careful - not to say the wrong thing about race in a mixed-race group. Furthermore, they thought that such effortful self-control might actually cause both unease and guarded behavior, which could in turn be misconstrued as racial prejudice.

To test this, they ran a group of white volunteers through a series of computer-based mental exercises that are so challenging that they temporarily deplete the cognitive reserves needed for discipline. Once they had the volunteers in this compromised state of mind, they put them (and others not so depleted) into a social situation with the potential for racial tension - they met with either a white or black interviewer and discussed racial diversity. Afterward, the volunteers rated the interaction for comfort, awkwardness, and enjoyment. In addition, independent

judges - both black and white - analyzed the five-minute interactions, commenting on how cautious the volunteers were, how direct in their answers - and how racially prejudiced.

As reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, those who were mentally depleted - that is, those lacking discipline and self-control - found talking about race with a black interviewer much more enjoyable than did those with their self-control intact. That's presumably because they weren't working so hard at monitoring and curbing what they said. What's more, independent black observers found that the powerless volunteers were much more direct and authentic in conversation. And perhaps most striking, blacks saw the less inhibited whites as less prejudiced against blacks. In other words, relinquishing power over oneself appears to thwart over-thinking and "liberate" people for more authentic relationships.

More information: Wray Herbert discusses this study in his blog, "We're Only Human..." (www.psychologicalscience.org/onlyhuman/)

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: The liberating effects of losing control (2009, February 18) retrieved 4 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-liberating-effects.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
