

Psychologists argue conscientiousness outshines willpower in predicting success

September 10 2024, by Diana Yates



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According to two psychologists, the field of psychological science has a problem with the concept of self-control. It has named self-control both a "trait"—a key facet of personality involving attributes like

conscientiousness, grit and the ability to tolerate delayed gratification—and a "state," a fleeting condition that can best be described as willpower. These two concepts are at odds with one another and are often confused, the authors report.

"Self-control is a cherished quality. People who have lots of it are celebrated and seen as morally righteous," wrote University of Toronto psychology professor Michael Inzlicht and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign psychology professor Brent Roberts in a [review](#) in the journal *Current Opinion in Psychology*.

Many studies find that people who score highly on various measures of conscientiousness do better than their peers academically and financially and tend to live healthier lives.

This led psychologists to conflate momentary [willpower](#) with the other characteristics that make conscientious people successful, the researchers said.

"We assumed that highly conscientious people simply engage their willpower more often than their less-conscientious peers," Roberts said. "But this is not the case. Conscientious people do not control themselves more than others. In fact, studies have shown that they spend less time restraining wayward desires. This was a surprise when it was discovered more than a decade ago."

The misguided emphasis on willpower led to interventions designed to increase it, with the goal of also strengthening conscientiousness. This approach occasionally yielded some positive short-term results, the researchers said. But in the long term, such changes tend to erode.

"People usually revert to their baseline levels of willpower and conscientiousness," Inzlicht said. "Willpower is generally fragile,

unreliable and weak."

The science strongly suggests that other aspects of "trait self-control" are more likely to contribute to the lifelong benefits associated with this trait, Inzlicht said.

"Perhaps it's their industriousness or organizational skills," he said. "Or maybe it's their ability to persist in pursuit of a goal."

"We wonder if we should abandon the term 'self-control' when referring to traits and instead refer to conscientiousness," the researchers wrote. "Consider the alternative universe if we had settled on the name 'planfulness' or 'consideration of future consequences.'"

"Success in life might be the result of engaging less in day-to-day willpower and more in cold calculation before a temptation is ever met," they said. "Maybe [conscientiousness](#) is explained not by exerting willpower, but by avoiding the need to exert it in the first place."

Ultimately, Inzlicht and Roberts wrote, they aim to "highlight the need for a broader conceptualization of [self-control](#) in psychological research and interventions."

Roberts is also an affiliate of the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology at the U. of I.

More information: Michael Inzlicht et al, The fable of state self-control, *Current Opinion in Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101848](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101848)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Psychologists argue conscientiousness outshines willpower in predicting success (2024, September 10) retrieved 10 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-09-psychologists-conscientiousness-outshines-willpower-success.html>

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