On Integrating the Components of Self-Control

As the science of self-control matures, the organization and integration of its key concepts becomes increasingly important. In response, we identified seven major components or “nodes” in current theories and research bearing on self-control: desire, higher-order goal, desire-goal conflict, control motivation, control capacity, control effort, and enactment constraints. To unify these diverse and interdisciplinary areas of research, we formulated the interplay of these components in an integrative theory of self-control. In this model, desire and an at least partly incompatible higher-order goal generate desire-goal conflict, which activates control motivation. Control motivation and control capacity interactively determine potential control effort. The actual control effort invested depends on several theoretically derived moderators of effort investment. Actual control effort and desire compete to determine a prevailing force, which ultimately determines behavior, provided that enactment constraints do not impede it. Using this theoretical framework, I will present and integrate a selected number of research findings, including research on the emergence of desire and applied research aimed at helping people overcome obstacles to successful self-control. I will conclude by discussing how the proposed theoretical framework may be useful for highlighting several new directions for research on self-control, for classifying self-control failures, and for devising optimal self-control interventions.