

# Why Self-Discipline Is Overrated: The (Troubling) Theory and Practice of Control from Within

BY ALFIE KOHN

If there is one character trait whose benefits are endorsed by traditional and progressive educators alike, it may well be self-discipline. Just about everyone wants students to override their unconstructive impulses, resist temptation, and do what needs to be done. True, this disposition is commended to us with particular fervor by the sort of folks who sneer at any mention of self-esteem and deplore what they insist are today's lax standards. But even people who don't describe themselves as conservative agree that imposing discipline on children (either to improve their behavior or so they'll apply themselves to their studies) isn't nearly as desirable as having children discipline themselves. For teachers — indeed, for anyone in a position of relative power — it's appealing if the people over whom they have authority will do what

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they're supposed to do on their own. The only question is how best to accomplish this.

*Self-discipline* might be defined as marshalling one's willpower to accomplish things that are generally regarded as desirable, and *self-control* as using that same sort of willpower to prevent oneself from doing what is seen to be *undesirable* or to delay gratification. In practice, these often function as two aspects of the same machinery of self-regulation, so I'll use the two terms more or less interchangeably. Do a search for them in indices of published books, scholarly articles, or Internet sites, and you'll quickly discover how rare it is to find a discouraging word, or even a penetrating question, about their value.

While I readily admit that persevering at worthwhile tasks is good — and that some students seem to lack this capacity — I want to suggest that the concept is actually problematic in three fundamental ways. To inquire into what underlies the idea of self-discipline is to uncover serious misconceptions about motivation and personality, controversial assumptions about human nature, and disturbing implications regarding how classrooms and society are arranged. Let's call these challenges *psychological*, *philosophical*, and *political*, respectively. All of them apply to self-discipline in general, but they're particularly relevant to what happens in our schools.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES: CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS

If our main goal for students is just to get them to complete whatever tasks, and obey whatever rules, they're given, then self-discipline is undeniably a useful trait. But if we're interested in the whole child — if, for example, we'd like our students to be psychologically healthy — then self-discipline might not deserve a privileged status compared to other attributes. In some contexts, it may not be desirable at all.

Several decades ago, the eminent research psychologist Jack Block described people in terms of their level of "ego control" — that is, the extent to which impulses and feelings are expressed or suppressed. Those who are undercontrolled are impulsive and distractible; those who are overcontrolled are compulsive and joyless. The fact that educators are more irritated by the former, and thus more likely to define it as a problem, doesn't mean the latter is any less troubling. Nor should we favor "the replacement of unbridled impulsivity with categorical, pervasive, rigid impulse control," Block warned. It's not just that self-control isn't always good; it's that a *lack* of self-control isn't

always bad because it may "provide the basis for spontaneity, flexibility, expressions of interpersonal warmth, openness to experience, and creative recognitions." So what does it say about our society that "the idea of self-control is generally praised" even though it may sometimes be "maladaptive and spoil the experience and savorings of life"?<sup>1</sup>

Self-discipline is undeniably a useful trait if we just want students to complete tasks and obey rules. But self-discipline may not be desirable if we're interested in the whole child.

The idea that either extreme can be unwise shouldn't be particularly controversial, yet the possibility of unhealthy overcontrol is explicitly rejected by some researchers who double as cheerleaders for self-discipline.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a reluctance to acknowledge this important caution is apparent in the array of published materials on the subject. Such discussions typically contain unqualified assertions such as "The promotion of self-discipline is an important goal for all schools" or "Teaching self-discipline to students should be something all teachers strive for."<sup>3</sup>

It's hard to square those statements with research that finds "disciplined and directed behavior, which can be advantageous in some situations . . . is likely to be detrimental" in others.<sup>4</sup> Not only has it been shown that "the consequences of impulsivity are not always negative,"<sup>5</sup> but a high degree of self-control tends to go hand-in-hand with less spontaneity and a blander emotional life<sup>6</sup> — and, in some cases, with more serious psychological problems.<sup>7</sup>

"Overcontrollers tend to be complete abstainers from drug use, but they are less well-adjusted than individuals who have lower ego control and may have experimented briefly with drugs, [while] a tendency toward overcontrol puts young women (but not young men) at risk for the development of depression."<sup>8</sup> A preoccupation with self-control is also a key feature of anorexia.<sup>9</sup>

Consider a student who always starts her homework the moment it's assigned. What might look like an admirable display of self-discipline, given that there are other things she'd rather be doing, may actually be due to an acute discomfort with having anything unfinished. She wants — or, more accurately,

needs — to get the assignment out of the way in order to stave off anxiety. (The fact that something resembling self-discipline is required to complete a task doesn't bode well for the likelihood of deriving any intellectual benefit from it. Learning, after all, depends not on what students do so much as on how they regard and construe what they do.<sup>10</sup> To assume otherwise is to revert to a crude behaviorism long since repudiated by serious scholars.)

More generally, it can be less a sign of health than of vulnerability. Self-discipline might reflect a fear of being overwhelmed by external forces, or by one's own desires, that must be suppressed through continual effort. In effect, such individuals suffer from a fear of being *out of control*. In his classic work, *Neurotic Styles*, David Shapiro described how someone might function as "his own overseer, issuing commands, directives, reminders, warnings, and admonitions concerning not only what is to be done and what is not to be done, but also what is to be wanted, felt, and even thought."<sup>11</sup> Secure, healthy people can be playful, flexible, open to new experiences and self-discov-

ery, deriving satisfaction from the process rather than always focused on the product. An extremely self-disciplined student, by contrast, may see reading or problem solving purely as a means to the end of a good test score or a high grade. In Shapiro's more general formulation, such people "do not feel comfortable with any activity that lacks an aim or a purpose beyond its own pleasure, and usually they do not recognize the possibility of finding life satisfying without a continuous sense of purpose and effort."<sup>12</sup>

A couple of interesting paradoxes follow from this analysis. One is that while self-discipline implies an exercise of the will, and therefore a free choice, many such people are actually not free at all, psychologically speaking. It's not that they've disciplined themselves so much as that they can't allow themselves to be undisciplined. Likewise for the deferral of gratification, as one researcher observed: Those who put off the payoff "were not just 'better' at self-control, but in a sense they seemed to be unable to avoid it."<sup>13</sup>

A second paradox is that impressive self-discipline may contain the seeds of its own undoing: an explo-

## On Marshmallows and Gender Differences:

### Rereading Self-Discipline Research

**F**our decades ago, in the Stanford University laboratory of Walter Mischel, preschool-age children were left alone in a room after having been told they could get a small treat (say, a marshmallow) by ringing a bell at any time to summon the experimenter — or, if they held out until he returned on his own, they could have a bigger treat (two marshmallows). As the results of this experiment are usually summarized, the children who were able to wait scored better on measures of cognitive and social skills about a decade later and also had higher SAT scores. The lesson is simple, as conservative commentators tell the story: We ought to focus less on "structural reforms" to improve education or reduce poverty and look instead at traits possessed by individuals — specifically, the ability to exert good old-fashioned self-control.<sup>1</sup>

But the real story of these studies is a good deal more complicated. For starters, the causal relationship wasn't at all clear, as Mischel acknowledged. The ability to delay gratification might not have been responsible for the impressive qualities found 10 years later; instead, both may have resulted from the same kind of home environment.<sup>2</sup>

Second, what mostly interested Mischel wasn't *whether* children could wait for a bigger treat — which, by the way, most of them could — and whether waiters fared better in life than non-waiters, but *how* children go about trying to wait and which strategies help.<sup>3</sup> Mischel discovered that kids waited longer when they were distracted by a toy. What worked best wasn't "self-denial and grim determination" but doing something enjoyable while waiting so that self-control wasn't needed at all!<sup>4</sup>

Third, the specifics of the situation — that is, the design of each experiment — were more important than the personality of a given child in predicting the outcome.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely the opposite of the usual lesson drawn from these studies, which is that self-control is a matter of individual character, which we ought to promote.

Fourth, even to the extent Mischel did look at stable individual characteristics, he was primarily concerned with "cognitive competencies" — strategies for how to think about (or stop thinking about) the goody — and how they're related to other skills that are measured down the



sive failure of control, which psychologists call “disinhibition.” From one unhealthy extreme (even if it’s not always recognized as such), people may suddenly find themselves at the other: The compliant student abruptly acts out in appalling fashion; the pious teetotaler goes on a dangerous drinking binge or shifts from absolute abstinence to reckless, unprotected sex.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, making an effort to inhibit potentially undesirable behaviors can have other negative effects. A detailed review of research concerning all sorts of attempts to suppress feelings and behaviors concludes that the results often include “negative affect (discomfort or distress) [and] cognitive disruption (including distractibility and intrusive, obsessive thoughts about the proscribed behavior).”<sup>15</sup>

In short, we shouldn’t always be reassured to learn that a student is remarkably self-disciplined, or apt to delay gratification (since delayers “tend to be somewhat overcontrolled and unnecessarily inhibited”<sup>16</sup>), or always inclined to persist at a task even when he or she is unsuccessful. The last of these tendencies, commonly romanticized as tenacity or “grit,” may actual-

ly reflect a “refusal to disengage” that stems from an unhealthy and often counterproductive need to continue with something even when it clearly doesn’t make sense to do so.<sup>17</sup>

road. In fact, those subsequent outcomes weren’t associated with the ability to defer gratification, per se, but only with the ability to distract oneself when those distractions weren’t provided by the experimenters.<sup>6</sup> And that ability was significantly correlated with plain old intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, most people who cite these experiments simply assume that it’s better to take a bigger payoff later than a smaller payoff now. But is that always true? Mischel, for one, didn’t think so. “The decision to delay or not to delay hinges, in part, on the individual’s values and expectations with regard to the specific contingencies,” he and his colleagues wrote. “In a given situation, therefore, postponing gratification may or may not be a wise or adaptive choice.”<sup>8</sup>

### NO BENEFIT BUT HIGHER GRADES

If the conservative spin on Mischel’s work is mostly attributable to how others have (mis)interpreted it, the same can’t be said of a more recent study, where the researchers themselves are keen to blame underachievement on the “failure to exercise self-discipline.” Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman attracted considerable attention (in *Education Week*, the *New York Times*, and elsewhere) for their experiment, published in 2005 and 2006, purporting to show that self-discipline was a strong predictor of academic success, and that this trait explained why girls in their sample were more successful in school than boys.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, the conclusion is a lot more dubious once you look more closely. For one thing, all of the children in

this study were 8th graders at an elite magnet school with competitive admissions, so it’s not at all clear that the findings can be generalized to other populations or ages. For another thing, self-discipline was mostly assessed by how the students described themselves, or how their teachers and parents described them, rather than being based on something they actually did. The sole behavioral measure — making them choose either \$1 today or \$2 in a week — correlated weakly with the other measures and showed the smallest gender difference.

### GOOD SELF-DISCIPLINE

Most tellingly, though, the only beneficial effect of self-discipline was higher grades. Teachers gave more A’s to the students who said, for example, that they put off doing what they enjoyed until they finished their homework. Suppose it had been discovered that students who nodded and smiled at everything their teacher said received higher grades. Would that argue for teaching kids to nod and smile more, or might it call into question the significance of grades as a variable? Or suppose it was discovered that self-discipline on the part of adults was associated with more positive evaluations from workplace supervisors. We’d have to conclude that employees who did what their bosses wanted, regardless of whether it was satisfying or sensible, elicited a favorable verdict from those same bosses. But so what?

We already know not only that grades suffer from low levels of validity and reliability, but that students who are led to focus on grades tend to be less interested in what they’re learning, more likely to think in a superficial fashion

seems, isn't just a matter of how much but what kind. One of the most fruitful ways of thinking about this issue emerges from the work of motivational psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. To begin with, they invite us to reconsider the casual way that we talk about the concept of motivation, as if it were a single thing that one possessed in a certain quantity. We want students to have more, so we try to "motivate" them — perhaps with the strategic use of rewards or punishments.

In fact, though, there are different types of motivation, and the type matters more than the amount. *Intrinsic* motivation consists of wanting to do something for its own sake — to read, for example, just because it's exciting to lose oneself in a story. *Extrinsic* motivation exists when the task isn't really the point; one might read in order to get a prize or someone's approval. Not only are these two kinds of motivation different — they tend to be inversely related. Scores of studies have shown that the more you reward people for doing something, the more they're apt to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Researchers keep finding that offering children "positive reinforcement" for being helpful and generous

(and to retain information for a shorter time), and apt to choose the easiest possible task.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there's some evidence that students with high grades are, on average, overly conformist and not particularly creative.<sup>11</sup> That students who are more self-disciplined get better grades, then, constitutes an endorsement of self-discipline only for people who don't understand that grades are a terrible marker for the educational qualities we care about. And if girls in our culture are socialized to control their impulses and do what they're told, is it really a good thing that they've absorbed that lesson well enough to be rewarded with high marks?

— A.K.

1. For example, see David Brooks, "Marshmallows and Public Policy," *New York Times*, 7 May 2006, p. 13.

2. Walter Mischel, "From Good Intentions to Willpower," in Peter M. Gollwitzer and John A. Bargh, eds., *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behavior* (New York: Guilford, 1996), p. 212.

3. A "remarkably consistent finding" in delay-of-gratification studies, at least those designed so that waiting yields a bigger reward, is that "most children and adolescents do manage to delay." In one such experiment, "83 out of the 104 subjects delayed the maximum number of times" (David C. Funder and Jack Block, "The Role of Ego-Control, Ego-Resiliency, and IQ in Delay of Gratification in Adolescence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 57, 1989, p. 1048). This suggests either that complaints about the hedonism and self-indulgence of contemporary youth may be exaggerated or that these studies of self-control are so contrived that *all* of their findings are of dubious relevance to the real world.

4. Mischel, p. 209.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 212. See also Walter Mischel, Yuichi Shoda, and Philip K.

ends up undermining those very qualities, and encouraging students to improve their grades results in their becoming less interested in learning.<sup>19</sup>

Yet children do some things that aren't intrinsically appealing even in the absence of extrinsic inducements. They have, we might say, *internalized* a commitment to doing them. And here we return to the idea of self-discipline (with the emphasis on "self"). Indeed, this is exactly where many educators have placed their bets: We want kids to get busy without needing an adult to stand next to them, carrots and sticks at the ready; we want them to act responsibly even when no one is watching.

But Deci and Ryan are not finished complicating our lives. Having shown that there are different kinds of motivation (which are not equally desirable), they go on to suggest that there are also different kinds of internalization (ditto). This is a possibility that few of us have considered; even an educator who can distinguish intrinsic from extrinsic will insist that children should be helped to internalize good values or behaviors, period. But what exactly is the nature of that internalization? On the one hand, a rule or standard can be swallowed whole, or "introjected," so that it con-

Peake, "The Nature of Adolescent Competencies Predicted by Preschool Delay of Gratification," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 54, 1988, p. 694.

6. Mischel, p. 211.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 214. This finding is interesting in light of the fact that other writers have treated self-discipline and intelligence as very different characteristics. See, for example, the title of the first article in note 9, below.

8. Yuichi Shoda, Walter Mischel, and Philip K. Peake, "Predicting Adolescent Cognitive and Self-Regulatory Competencies from Preschool Delay of Gratification," *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 26, 1990, p. 985. They add that the *ability* to put up with delay so one can make that choice is valuable, but of course this is different from arguing that the exercise of self-control in itself is beneficial.

9. Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents," *Psychological Science*, vol. 16, 2005, pp. 939-44; and Angela Lee Duckworth and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Self-Discipline Gives Girls the Edge," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 98, 2006, pp. 198-208.

10. I've reviewed the evidence on grades in *Punished by Rewards* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) and *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

11. Consider one of the studies that Duckworth and Seligman cite to prove that self-discipline predicts academic performance — that is, high grades. It found that such performance "seemed as much a function of attention to details and the rules of the academic game as it was of intellectual talent." High-achieving students "were not particularly interested in ideas or in cultural or aesthetic pursuits. Moreover, they were not particularly tolerant or empathic; however, they did seem stable, pragmatic, and task-oriented, and lived in harmony with the rules and conventions of society. Finally, relative to students in general, these superior achievers seemed somewhat stodgy and unoriginal" (Robert Hogan and Daniel S. Weiss, "Personality Correlates of Superior Academic Achievement," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 21, 1974, p. 148).



trols children from the inside: “Behaviors are performed because one ‘should’ do them, or because not doing so might engender anxiety, guilt, or loss of esteem.” On the other hand, internalization can take place more authentically, so the behavior is experienced as “volitional or self-determined.” It’s been fully integrated into one’s value structure and feels chosen.

Thus, a student may study either because she knows she’s supposed to (and will feel lousy about herself if she doesn’t) or because she understands the benefits of doing so and wants to follow through even if it’s not always pleasurable.<sup>20</sup> This basic distinction has proved relevant to academics, sports, romantic love, generosity, political involvement, and religion — with research in each case demonstrating that the latter kind of internalization leads to better outcomes than the former. With education in particular, it’s possible for teachers to promote the more positive version by minimizing “externally imposed evaluations, goals, rewards, and pressures” as well as proactively supporting students’ sense of autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

The moral of this story is that just because motivation is internal doesn’t mean it’s ideal. If kids feel controlled, even from within, they’re likely to be conflicted, unhappy, and perhaps less likely to succeed (at least by meaningful criteria) at whatever they’re doing. Dutiful students may be suffering from what the psychoanalyst Karen Horney famously called the “tyranny of the should” — to the point that they no longer know what they really want or who they really are. So it is

for teenagers who have mortgaged their present lives to the future: noses to the grindstone, perseverant to a fault, stressed to the max. High school is just preparation for college, and college consists of collecting credentials for whatever comes next. Nothing has any value or provides any gratification in itself. These students may be skilled test takers and grade grubbers and gratification delayers, but they remind us just how mixed the blessing of self-discipline can be.

## PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: UNDERLYING BELIEFS

In light of all these reasons for caution, why do we find ourselves so infatuated with self-discipline and self-control? The answer may involve basic values that pervade our culture. Let’s ask a different question: What must be true about children — or people in general — if self-discipline is required to make oneself do valuable things?

Consider this recent reflection by David Brooks, a conservative newspaper columnist:

In Lincoln’s day, to achieve maturity was to succeed in the conquest of the self. Human beings were born with sin, inflected with dark passions and satanic temptations. The transition to adulthood consisted of achieving mastery over them. You can read commencement addresses from the 19th and early 20th centuries in which the speakers would talk about the beast within and the need for iron character to subdue it. Schoolhouse readers emphasized self-discipline. The whole character-building model was sin-centric.<sup>22</sup>

Brooks has it right with one important caveat: The emphasis on self-discipline isn’t just a historical relic. These days we’re spared the florid and exhortatory rhetoric, but a few minutes online reminds us that the concept itself is alive and well in contemporary America — to the tune of 3 million hits on Google. It’s also a key element in the character education movement.<sup>23</sup> Brooks offers a useful if disconcerting reminder about the sin-centric assumptions on which the gospel of self-discipline still rests. It’s because our preferences are regarded as unworthy, our desires as shameful, that we must strive to overcome them. Taken to its logical conclusion, human life is a constant struggle to stifle and transcend ourselves. Morality consists of the triumph of mind over body, reason over desire, will over want.<sup>24</sup>

What’s interesting about all of this is how many secular institutions and liberal individuals, who would strenuously object to the notion that children are self-centered little beasts that need to be tamed, nevertheless embrace a concept that springs from just

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such a premise. Some even make a point of rejecting old-fashioned coercion and punishment in favor of gentler methods.<sup>25</sup> But if they're nevertheless engaged in ensuring that children internalize our values — in effect, by installing a policeman inside each child — then they ought to admit that this isn't the same as helping them develop their own values, and it's diametrically opposed to the goal of helping them become independent thinkers. Control from within isn't inherently more humane than control from without, particularly if the psychological effects aren't all that different, as it appears they aren't.

## Control from within isn't inherently more humane than control from without.

Even beyond the vision of human nature, a commitment to self-discipline may reflect a tacit allegiance to philosophical conservatism with its predictable complaint that our society — or its youth — has forgotten the value of hard work, the importance of duty, the need to accept personal responsibility, and so on. (Never mind that older people have been denouncing youthful slackers and “modern times” for centuries.) And this condemnation is typically accompanied by a prescriptive vision that endorses self-denial and sarcastically dismisses talk about self-exploration or self-esteem.

In his fascinating book, *Moral Politics*, the linguist and social critic George Lakoff argued that self-discipline plays a critical role in a conservative worldview.<sup>26</sup> Obedience to authority is what produces self-discipline, and self-discipline, in turn, is required for achievement.<sup>27</sup> Its absence is seen as a sign of self-indulgence and therefore of moral weakness. Thus, any time a child receives something desirable, including our approval, without having *earned* it, any time competition is removed (so that success is possible without having to defeat others), any time he or she receives too much assistance or nurturance, then we are being “permissive,” “overindulgent,” failing to prepare the child for the Real World. Interestingly, this kind of conservatism isn't limited to talk radio or speeches at the Republican convention. It's threaded through the work of key researchers who not only study self-discipline but vigorously insist on its importance.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, fundamental questions about morality and human nature can't be resolved in an article; it's clear that the point of departure for some of us is rad-

ically different than it is for others. But for educators who casually invoke the need to teach children self-discipline, it may make sense to explore the philosophical foundation of that concept and to reconsider it if that foundation gives us pause.

## POLITICAL ISSUES: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

When we want to understand what's going on in a given environment — say, a classroom — it often makes sense to look at its policies, norms, and other structural features. Unfortunately, many of us tend to ignore the way the system works and attribute too much significance to the personalities of the individuals involved — a phenomenon that social psychologists have dubbed the Fundamental Attribution Error.<sup>29</sup> Thus, we assume that self-control is just a feature that a person might possess, even though it's probably more accurate to think of it as “a situational concept, not an individual trait” given that “an individual will display different degrees of self-control in different situations.” Exactly the same is true of delaying gratification.<sup>30</sup>

It's not just that attending to individuals rather than environments hampers our ability to understand. Doing so also has practical significance. Specifically, the more we fault people for lacking self-discipline and spend our efforts helping them develop the ability to control their impulses, the less likely we are to question the structures (political, economic, or educational) that shape their actions. There is no reason to work for social change if we assume that people just need to buckle down and try harder. Thus, the attention paid to self-discipline is not only philosophically conservative in its premises, but also politically conservative in its consequences.

Our society is teeming with examples. If consumers are over their heads in debt, the effect of framing the problem as a lack of self-control is to deflect attention from the concerted efforts of the credit industry to get us hooked on borrowing money from the time we're children.<sup>31</sup> Or consider the Keep America Beautiful campaign launched in the 1950s that urged us to stop being litterbugs — a campaign financed, it turns out, by the American Can Company and other corporations that had the effect of blaming individuals and discouraging questions about who profits from the production of disposable merchandise and its packaging.<sup>32</sup>

But let's return to the students sitting in our classrooms. If the question is: “How can we get them to raise their hands and wait to be called on rather than

blurting out the answer?” then the question *isn't*: “Why does the teacher ask most of the questions in here — and unilaterally decide who gets to speak, and when?” If the question is: “What’s the best way to teach kids self-discipline so they’ll do their work?” then the question *isn't*: “Are these assignments really worth doing?” In other words, to identify a lack of

## The more we fault people for lacking self-discipline and try to help them control their impulses, the less likely we are to question the political, economic, or educational structures that shape their actions.

self-discipline as the problem is to focus our efforts on making children conform to a status quo that is left unexamined and is unlikely to change. Each child, moreover, has been equipped with “a built-in supervisor,” which may not be in his or her best interest but is enormously convenient for creating “a self-controlled — not just controlled — citizenry and work force.”<sup>33</sup>

Not every objection or piece of evidence reviewed here will apply to every example of self-discipline. But it makes sense for us to take a closer look at the concept and the ways in which it’s applied in our schools. Aside from its philosophical underpinnings and political impact, there are reasons to be skeptical about anything that might produce overcontrol. Some children who look like every adult’s dream of a dedicated student may in reality be anxious, driven, and motivated by a perpetual need to feel better about themselves, rather than by anything resembling curiosity. In a word, they are workaholics in training.

1. Jack Block, *Personality as an Affect-Processing System: Toward an Integrative Theory* (Mahway, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2002), pp. 195, 8-9. Or, as a different psychologist puts it, “One person’s lack of self-control is another person’s impetus for a positive life change” (Laura A. King, “Who Is Regulating What and Why?” *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 7, 1996, p. 58).

2. “Our belief [is] that there is no true disadvantage of having too much self-control,” Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman wrote in their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 515. June Tangney, Roy Baumeister, and Angie Luzzio Boone similarly declared that “self-control is beneficial and adaptive in a linear fashion. We found no evidence that any psychological problems are linked to high self-control” (“High Self-Control Predicts Good Adjustment, Less Pathology, Better Grades, and Interpersonal Success,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 72, 2004, pp. 271-324). This conclusion — based on questionnaire responses by a group of undergraduates — turns out to

be a trifle misleading, if not disingenuous. First, it’s supported by the fact that Tangney and her colleagues found an inverse relationship between self-control and negative emotions. Other research, however, has found that there’s also an inverse relationship between self-control and *positive* emotions. (See, for example, Darya L. Zabelina et al., “The Psychological Tradeoffs of Self-Control,” *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 43, 2007, pp. 463-73.) Even if highly self-controlled people aren’t always unhappy, they’re also not particularly happy; their emotional life in general tends to be muted. Second, the self-control questionnaire used by Tangney and her colleagues “includes items reflective of an appropriate level of control and [of] undercontrol, but not overcontrol. It is therefore not surprising that the correlates of the scale do not indicate maladaptive consequences associated with very high levels of control” (Tera D. Letzring et al., “Ego-Control and Ego-Resiliency,” *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 39, 2005, p. 3). In other words, the clean bill of health they award to self-control was virtually predetermined by the design of their study. At the very end of their article, Tangney et al. concede that some people may be rigidly overcontrolled but then immediately try to define the problem out of existence: “Such overcontrolled individuals may be said to lack the ability to control their self-control” (p. 314).

3. The first sentence is from Joseph F. Rogus, “Promoting Self-Discipline: A Comprehensive Approach,” *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 24, 1985, p. 271. The second is from <http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/Self-Discipline>, a web page of the Curriculum, Technology, and Education Reform program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Rogus’ article appeared in a special issue of the journal *Theory Into Practice* devoted entirely to the topic of self-discipline. Although it featured contributions by a wide range of education theorists, including some with a distinctly humanistic orientation, none questioned the importance of self-discipline.

4. Letzring et al., p. 3.

5. Scott J. Dickman, “Functional and Dysfunctional Impulsivity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 58, 1990, p. 95.

6. Zabelina et al.

7. Daniel A. Weinberger and Gary E. Schwartz, “Distress and Restraint as Superordinate Dimensions of Self-Reported Adjustment,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 58, 1990, pp. 381-417.

8. David C. Funder, “On the Pros and Cons of Delay of Gratification,” *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 9, 1998, p. 211. The studies to which he alludes are, respectively, Jonathan Shedler and Jack Block, “Adolescent Drug Use and Psychological Health,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 45, 1990, pp. 612-30; and Jack H. Block, Per E. Gjerde, and Jeanne H. Block, “Personality Antecedents of Depressive Tendencies in 18-Year-Olds,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 60, 1991, pp. 726-38.

9. For example, see Christine Halse, Anne Honey, and Desiree Boughtwood, “The Paradox of Virtue: (Re)thinking Deviance, Anorexia, and Schooling,” *Gender and Education*, vol. 19, 2007, pp. 219-35.

10. This may explain why the data generally fail to show any academic benefit to assigning homework — which most students detest — particularly in elementary or middle school. (See Alfie Kohn, *The Homework Myth* [Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2006] and an article based on that book in the September 2006 issue of *Kappan*.) Remarkably, most people assume that students will somehow benefit from performing tasks they can’t wait to be done with, as though their attitudes and goals were irrelevant to the outcome.

11. David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York: Basic, 1965), p. 34.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 44

13. Funder, *op.cit.*, p. 211.

14. Regarding the way that “disinhibition [is] occasionally manifested by some overcontrolled personalities,” see Block, p. 187.

15. Janet Polivy, "The Effects of Behavioral Inhibition," *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 9, 1998, p. 183. She adds: "This is not to say that one should never inhibit one's natural response, as, for example, when anger makes one want to hurt another, or addiction makes one crave a cigarette" (ibid.). Rather, it means one should weigh the benefits and costs of inhibition in each circumstance — a moderate position that contrasts sharply with our society's tendency to endorse self-discipline across the board.
16. Funder, op. cit., p. 211. Walter Mischel, who conducted the so-called "marshmallow" experiments (see sidebar on page 170), put it this way: The inability to delay gratification may be a problem, but "the other extreme — excessive delay of gratification — also has its personal costs and can be disadvantageous. . . . Whether one should or should not delay gratification or 'exercise the will' in any particular choice is often anything but self-evident" ("From Good Intentions to Willpower," in Peter M. Gollwitzer and John A. Bargh, eds., *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behavior* [New York: Guilford, 1996], p. 198).
17. See, for example, King, op. cit.; and Alina Tugend, "Winners Never Quit? Well, Yes, They Do," *New York Times*, 16 August 2008, p. B5, for data that challenge an unqualified endorsement of perseverance such as is offered by psychologist Angela Duckworth and her colleagues: "As educators and parents we should encourage children to work not only with intensity but also with stamina." That advice follows their report that perseverance contributed to higher grades and better performance at a spelling bee (Angela L. Duckworth et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 92, 2007; quotation on p. 1100). But such statistical associations mostly point up the limitations of these outcome measures as well as of grit itself, a concept that ignores motivational factors (that is, *why* people persevere), thus conflating genuine passion for a task with a desperate need to prove one's competence, an inability to change course when appropriate, and so on.
18. Block, op. cit., p. 130.
19. See, for example, my book, *Punished by Rewards*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); and Edward L. Deci et al., "A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 125, 1999, pp. 627-68.
20. Richard M. Ryan, Scott Rigby, and Kristi King, "Two Types of Religious Internalization and Their Relations to Religious Orientations and Mental Health," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 65, 1993, p. 587. This basic distinction has been explicated and refined in many other writings by Ryan, Deci, Robert J. Vallerand, James P. Connell, Richard Koestner, Luc Pelletier, and others. Most recently, it has been invoked in response to Roy Baumeister's claim that the capacity for self-control is "like a muscle," requiring energy and subject to being depleted — such that if you resist one sort of temptation, you'll have, at least temporarily, less capacity to resist another. The problem with this theory is its failure to distinguish "between self-regulation (i.e., autonomous regulation) and self-control (i.e., controlled regulation)." Ego depletion may indeed take place with the latter, but the former actually "maintains or enhances energy or vitality" (Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "From Ego Depletion to Vitality," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 2, 2008, pp. 709, 711).
21. See, for example, Richard M. Ryan, James P. Connell, and Edward L. Deci, "A Motivational Analysis of Self-Determination and Self-Regulation in Education," in Carole Ames and Russell Ames, eds., *Research on Motivation in Education*, vol. 2 (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1985); and Richard M. Ryan and Jerome Stiller, "The Social Contexts of Internalization: Parent and Teacher Influences on Autonomy, Motivation, and Learning," *Advances in Motivation and Achievement*, vol. 7, 1991, pp. 115-49. The quotation is from Ryan and Stiller, p. 143.
22. David Brooks, "The Art of Growing Up," *New York Times*, 6 June 2008, p. A23.
23. See Alfie Kohn, "How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1997, pp. 429-39.
24. One educator based his defense of the need for self-discipline on "our natural egoism [that threatens to] lead us into 'a condition of warre one against another'" — as though Thomas Hobbes's dismal view of our species was universally accepted. This was followed by the astonishing assertion that "social class differences appear to be largely a function of the ability to defer gratification" and the recommendation that we "connect the lower social classes to the middle classes who may provide role models for self-discipline" (Louis Goldman, "Mind, Character, and the Deferral of Gratification," *Educational Forum*, vol. 60, 1996, pp. 136, 137, 139). Notice that this article was published in 1996, not 1896.
25. To whatever extent internalization or self-discipline *is* desired, this gentler approach — specifically, supporting children's autonomy and minimizing adult control — has consistently been shown to be more effective. (I reviewed some of the evidence in *Unconditional Parenting* [New York: Atria, 2005], especially chap. 3.) Ironically, many of the same traditionalists who defend the value of self-control also promote a more authoritarian approach to parenting or teaching. In any case, my central point here is that we need to reconsider the goal, not merely the method.
26. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
27. For a discussion of the relationship between obedience and self-control, see Block, esp. pp. 195-96.
28. I'm thinking specifically of Roy Baumeister and his collaborator June Tangney, as well as Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth, and, in a different academic neighborhood, criminologists Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, who argued that crime is due simply to a lack of self-control on the part of criminals. For a critique of that theory, see the essay by Gilbert Geis and other chapters in Erich Goode, ed., *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).
29. I discussed the Fundamental Attribution Error in an article about academic cheating, which is typically construed as a reflection of moral failure (one often attributed to a lack of self-control), even though researchers have found that it is a predictable response to certain educational environments. See "Who's Cheating Whom?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2007, pp. 89-97.
30. Per-Olof H. Wikström and Kyle Treiber, "The Role of Self-Control in Crime Causation," *European Journal of Criminology*, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 243, 251. Regarding delay of gratification, see Walter Mischel et al., "Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 21, 1972, pp. 204-18.
31. For example, see CBS News, "Meet 'Generation Plastic,'" 17 May 2007, available at [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/17/eveningnews/main2821916.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/17/eveningnews/main2821916.shtml).
32. See Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York: New Press, 2005).
33. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic, 1976), p. 39. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the conservative *National Review* published an essay strongly supporting homework because it teaches "personal responsibility and self-discipline. Homework is practice for life" (John D. Gartner, "Training for Life," 22 January 2001). But what aspect of life? The point evidently is not to train children to make meaningful decisions, or become part of a democratic society, or learn to think critically. Rather, what's being prescribed are lessons in doing whatever one is told. **■**

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