

Licensed to sin

We usually think of over-indulgence in terms of a lack of willpower. I scoff the doughnut because I can't marshal the necessary self-control to resist it. A great deal of psychology research has pursued this particular line, demonstrating, for example, that willpower seems to be a finite resource. Expend it in one situation and you'll have less left over for another.

A new study by Jessie de Witt Huberts and her colleagues at Utrecht University takes a different perspective. They point out that we often over-indulge, not because we can't help it, but because we reason that it's okay to do so. After that half-hour run, we tell ourselves, we deserve the doughnut! de Witt Huberts' team call this self-licensing and they say it's surprisingly underresearched.

Previous studies have shown how self-licensing affects our choices. For example, after working harder, people are more likely to choose a cake over a fruit salad. But before now, no one's looked to see how self-licensing might affect actual indulgent consumption.

Before they got started, de Witt Huberts and her team had to confront a complication with researching this topic – the need to separate out the effects of low energy from self-licensing. If someone's been working hard, not only might this encourage them to think they deserve a

naughty snack, their lack of energy might also deplete their willpower (indeed, studies have suggested that low sugar levels reduce willpower).

To get around this problem, de Witt Huberts and her colleagues needed a way to trick people into thinking they'd worked hard (inviting self-licensing) without actually diminishing their willpower levels. They did this by having participants test out what they were told was a new screening tool for dyslexia. It involved looking at 200 words on a computer screen, one at a time, and pressing the key on the keyboard that corresponded to the first letter of each word. Crucially, one group of participants did this for five minutes, and were then told they had to do it all over again for another five minutes to check the reliability of the screening tool. The other participants simply had a one-minute break between two five-minute sessions.

In a pilot study with 106 women, the group who thought they'd had to test the screening tool twice, felt like they'd worked harder than the other group, who thought they'd done it just once (even though both groups had worked for the same length of time). Next, both groups completed the Stroop test, a classic measure of self-control that requires people to read colour words (e.g. blue), whilst ignoring the ink colour they're written in. This test confirmed that both groups had the same levels of self-control even though one group felt like they'd worked harder than the other.

When it came to the study proper, 39 women were split into two groups – one did the dyslexia screening tool in two

phases, to make them feel like they'd worked harder, and the other group did it in one bash. Next, ostensibly as part of a separate consumer research study, all the women taste-tested some crisps, M&Ms, wine gums and chocolate chip cookies.

The take-home finding? Both groups said their willpower levels felt the same, but the women who thought they'd worked harder tended to eat more of the naughty food. In the 10 minutes available, they consumed an average of 26 grammes more snack food, which equated to 130 more calories. As well as feeling like they'd worked harder, they also said they felt more hungry, but this wasn't correlated with the amount they ate. The researchers speculated that the feelings of hunger could have been a further form of self-licensing – 'I've worked hard and I'm hungry'.

This study is one of the first steps towards uncovering the part that self-licensing plays in giving in to temptation. It's limited in that the sample only included women and the self-licensing was implicit. The women who thought they'd worked harder were more indulgent, but we don't know anything about the way they reasoned with themselves, or if the effect was conscious at all. 'Nevertheless,' the researchers concluded, 'although many questions about self-licensing require further investigation, the current studies demonstrate that sometimes people strategically choose to indulge and that gratification of our desires is not inevitably governed by our impulses.'



In the *European Journal of Social Psychology*



Not in my gang

In *Cognitive Development*, April to June

It's a fact of life that when kids form friendship groups some would-be members get left out. A lot of psychology research has focused on what it's like to be rejected. But now a new study has taken a more unusual approach, asking children and adolescents to recall times they left someone out, and to explain their reasons for doing so.

Three age-matched groups (7, 11 and 17 years) of 28 children each were interviewed, and a clear difference emerged with age. The younger children rarely described themselves as having any choice when they'd excluded others. They mostly gave practical reasons – 'We were playing piggy-back wars... another kid wanted to play... we didn't have any more people for him' – or peer pressure – 'We were playing jump roping and somebody else wanted to play with us, but then my friend said no'. Their pleas of innocence contradict behavioural observations that young children often deliberately leave others out. The 17-year-olds, by contrast, most often gave the reason that they disliked the excluded person – 'We didn't invite this one girl because she's not open-minded...' was a typical comment.

Based on the finding with the younger children, Recchia and her team said that social inclusion programmes for youngsters may benefit from encouraging them to take ownership over their actions, 'given their apparent reluctance or incapacity to do so spontaneously'.



On a positive note, when asked to evaluate their reasons for excluding others, even the younger participants showed evidence that they were conscious of the ramifications (e.g. the rejected person might not want to be friends with them in the future). It was also clear that the participants sometimes deliberately avoided thinking too much about what they'd done – a strategy that the researchers said 'was aimed at numbing their awareness of the emotional consequences of leaving others out'. Consistent with this, some participants mentioned feeling guilty when they gave in to peer pressure.

Even among the 17-year-olds, who mostly treated disliking another person as a valid reason for excluding them, there was evidence they were aware of the 'undesirability' of exclusion. Recchia's team said this was 'heartening' and could provide 'an initial entree for interventions aimed at helping widely disliked victims of exclusion become reintegrated'.

This is the first study to investigate the subjective experience of excluding others across a wide age range of young people. The researchers said a 'one-size-fits-all' model fails to capture the complexity of their results. 'We argue that research on social exclusion could benefit from a fuller recognition of this variability and complexity in young people's subjective construals of their own experiences,' they concluded, 'thus setting the stage for programmes that may help young people to more critically and deliberately weigh their multiple and varying goals and concerns.'



The pitfalls of moving away from hierarchy

In Human Relations

What's the best way to organise groups of people? Some organisations have explored the use of 'autonomous workgroups', where teams are led from within rather than by a supervisor. Providing workers with more autonomy is well known to promote motivation. But is the relative rarity of such approaches merely down to inertia within the world of work, or are there some challenges that need consideration?

Jonas Ingvaldsen and Monica Rolfsen of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology present a case study detailing 'Tools', a Norwegian company that decided to move from a hierarchical situation to a flatter structure, partly led by an organisational and national culture sympathetic to labour empowerment. The investigators took a qualitative approach, using interviews and focus groups to gather information from team members over 13 years. The new system began with a different team member each week taking on a spokesperson role. At first the workforce was enthusiastic: 'The flat structure has come to stay. We won't return to the foreman system, where someone points the finger and tells you what to do.'

Eight years later several issues had emerged. The transient nature of the spokesperson role made it possible to skimp on more onerous and seemingly less essential activities like information-sharing. Moreover, because the spokesperson role was crafted around team needs,

when tensions between teams or functions emerged, there were few formal mechanisms to resolve disputes. Spokespeople were unable to enforce decisions that were individually unpopular but better for the larger system: 'self-management ends up with what is optimal for each individual, and that is comfort' – the team's production schedule may be efficient for the team but harmful for inventory management.

Tools then introduced a new system involving distributed leadership, where managerial responsibilities were unbundled and allocated to different team members. In this '5-M' model, one person would look after Man (i.e. staffing), another Machine, and so on. While this appears to have had some powerful benefits – Milieu specialists can get together in their M-meeting, and discuss how to improve air quality across the organisation – real-

life problems don't always fall neatly into boxes. The interviews revealed concerns that non-essential issues often got kicked from one M to another without resolution. Concrete and immediate problems did tend to get resolved rapidly and effectively, but anything big-picture called on coordination that no one was equipped for.

This case study captures some of the benefits and challenges of non-hierarchical methods within large, complex organisations. Are all members dispositionally suited to taking on leadership duties over their existing work? How can they develop mastery of these duties when only practised one week in six? Are the domains that we carve the world into sufficiently legible to those who have to operate with them? Worthwhile questions to help us toward a 21st-century approach to the workplace.

Written by Alex Fradera, for www.occdigest.org.uk



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