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Breaking the Rules: Low Trait or State Self-Control Increases Social Norm Violations

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ABSTRACT

Two pilot and six studies indicated that poor self-control causes people to violate social norms and rules that are effortful to follow. Lower trait self-control was associated with a greater willingness to take ethical risks and use curse words. Participants who completed an initial self-control task that reduced the capacity for self-control used more curse words and were more willing to take ethical risks than participants who completed a neutral task. Poor self-control was also associated with violating explicit rules given by the experimenter. Depleting self-control resources in a self-control exercise caused participants subsequently to talk when they had been instructed to remain silent. Low trait self-control and poor performance on a behavioral measure of self-control (the Stroop task) predicted poor compliance following experimental instructions over a 2-week span. Poor self-control thus undermines adherence to some social rules and regulations, therefore possibly contributing to a broad variety of social ills.

KEYWORDS

Ego Depletion; Social Norms; Self-Control; Self-Regulation; Ethical Behavior; Risk Taking; Reciprocity

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