A Content Analysis of Views of Self-Control: Relation to Positive and Negative Valence, and Implications for a Working Definition

Deane H. Shapiro, Jr.
California College of Medicine, University of California, Irvine Medical Center

It has been argued that one important variable that hampers research on self-control strategies is the absence of a working definition of self-control. Part of the difficulty involves the ambiguous and self-reflexive nature of the term itself, and part of the difficulty involves tautological imprecision equating the construct and definition of self-control with the effects of a self-control strategy. In order to begin to bring order to what has heretofore been a linguistic morass, an effort was made to assess individuals' views of self-control and then to perform a content analysis of the different aspects and dimensions actually embedded within these views. This study offered partial confirmation for six previously identified dimensions: choice, responsibility, awareness, discipline, skill, and goal. These dimensions provide us with a beginning phenomenological framework for assessing how individuals view self-control, and thereby help refine the position endorsed by Mahoney and Arnkoff (1979) that "self-control is a social label which is differentially applied to some behavior patterns." Further, individuals were requested to list positive and negative aspects of self-control, in order to assess whether, as Mahoney and Arnkoff suggest, self-control is necessarily applied to behavior perceived as (a) being socially appropriate or desirable and (b) originating from noble ideals. The study found that there were both positively and negatively valenced aspects thought to be associated with self-control, and that the mention of a certain dimension of self-control (discipline) was found to be significantly

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73
correlated with a specific negatively valenced view (rigidity). The study concludes with implications for developing a working definition of self-control, and with guidelines and suggestions for future research.

It has been argued that efforts to show the clinical efficacy of self-control strategies are reaching a plateau. There have been problems in adherence and compliance, in maintaining treatment gains through long-term follow-up, as well as difficulties in differentiating among the efficacies of competing self-control strategies for a particular clinical problem (cf. Shapiro, 1982; Raskin, 1980; Zuroff & Schwartz, 1980; Blanchard, Andrasik, & Silver, 1980). To keep this plateau from becoming permanent, it has been suggested elsewhere that a major reassessment of seven important variables, from a micro to a macro nature, needs to be undertaken (Shapiro, 1983c). One of these variables is a more precise refinement of the nature and definition of the construct “self-control.”

Views of self-control may mean many things, depending upon the cultural context (e.g., Hadas, 1965; Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976) as well as on the tradition within which it is being discussed, whether that be religious or psychological (Shapiro, 1983a; Heath, 1983).

Unfortunately, even a brief and cursory review of the literature on self-control strategies reflects that self-control implicitly or explicitly means different things to different investigators, all working from their own respective paradigms. Not only is there little cohesion among different investigators, but often there is a tautological assumption that self-control is that which is gained by the effective utilization of a self-control strategy, thereby defining a construct by the effects of a technique, a problem similar to that encountered with relaxation therapies (Davidson & Schwartz, 1976; Shapiro, 1980). What may be needed, therefore, is a development and refinement of a construct of self-control that could then subsequently guide (and in turn be refined and validated by) empirical findings.

One interesting approach to this problem of definition has been a cognitive (phenomenological) one offered by Mahoney and Arnkoff (1979) that “self-control is a social label which is differentially applied to some behavior patterns.” In other words, an adequate definition must take into account the criteria of the labeler.” They further suggest several criteria by which individuals might decide whether the term self-control should be applied, including (a) the absence of immediate external influence, (b) sustained effort in achieving a goal, (c) demonstration of obvious sacrifice in terms of immediate consequences, (d) performances that are considered socially appropriate or desirable, and (e) being motivated by noble ideals. The first three of the above dimensions have considerable overlap with
certain philosophical assumptions and key concepts of self-control previously identified and described at length by this author (Shapiro, 1983b): choice, responsibility, discipline, skill, awareness, goal, determination. The last two views of Mahoney and Arnkoff, however, which view self-control as being socially desirable and originating from noble ideals, has not been unequivocally borne out by our previous research (Shapiro, submitted).

Therefore, this study sought to assess, support, and refine the above views by addressing several questions: (a) How do individuals view self-control—is there a unified view, or are there multiple viewpoints? (2) What components and dimensions are involved in these views of “self-control”? (3) Are there negative as well as positive aspects that individuals associate to their view of the term self-control? By addressing these issues, this study should help to distinguish self-control strategy from the term self-control, to provide more precision about the labeler’s linguistic representation of self-control, to assess the potential multiplicity of valences associated with the term, and should begin to offer guidelines and suggestions for the development of a working definition.

METHOD

Subjects and Setting

Seventy-four individuals attending a conference on the psychology of health care, in either Sacramento or Las Vegas, took an afternoon workshop on self-control. The demographic profile of the conference attendees is as follows: Median age was 37.8; 65% were female, 35% were male; 39% were single, and 40% were married; and 29% were divorced or separated. Employment categories were: health care professionals (individuals in health and healing professions, physicians, psychologists, social workers, and nurses), 48%; students, 8%; “other” fields (e.g., business, teaching, law), 44%. In terms of educational level, 71% had a college degree and 40% had some graduate work.

Instrument

Individuals were given a sheet with three columns on it. In the first column they were to respond to the prompt “What is self-control?” In the
Table 1. Coding Categories for Dimensions of Self-Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Examples of sentences (from study itself)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Choice (Furlong, 1981; Thoreson &amp; Mahoney, 1974; Shapiro, 1983b; Nolan, 1972; Lefcourt, 1973): Choice is the dimension that suggests volitional efforts in which external demands (shoulds, oughts) are minimized. Choice implies alternative degrees of freedom, and the ability to evaluate as well as posit goals.</td>
<td>Ability to choose Volitional Deciding what is in one's best interest Weighing responses Exploring options Action either one way or the other</td>
<td>Choosing to respond in a particular manner. Having the ability to choose your reaction/responses Choice of an attitude Extent to which I am volitional in my behavior The possibility for me to choose my own behavior Ability to determine what my action/reaction will be in any given situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Goal (vision): This is what choices are made toward—i.e., self-control for/or what?—accelerative or deaccelerative self-control (Thoreson &amp; Mahoney, 1974). The goal is defined as the desired objective toward which effort (discipline) is directed.</td>
<td>Process goals What is in my best interest What I want Setting appropriate goals Goals specific in their content Self-acceptance and serenity Balance of emotions and intellect Acting more freely Developing inner peace regardless of circumstances</td>
<td>Doing what a person wants to do Doing what is best for me Dealing with impulses and urges in a manner conducive to self-fulfillment Balancing emotional and intellectual aspects Not doing something you want to do and doing something you don't want to do The ability to accept and adapt to things and people the way they are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Awareness: Awareness is the ability to discriminate cues in the internal and external environment and an ability to note how those variables affect oneself. (There are many different types of awareness, methods of focusing, depth of concentration and absorption, all of which in turn affect how one perceives the world) (Shapiro, 1978, 1980). Awareness could be either of a particular cause/effect change, style of perceiving, a recognition of the goal (category 2 above) and/or an awareness of options and choices (category 1 above).</td>
<td>Being in touch with, knowing, realizing how, noticing, awareness, recognizing</td>
<td>Conscious regulation of one's behavior and feelings; being in touch with your body processes, feelings, thoughts; awareness of all processes that are in operation at a given time; ability to realize how and when emotions play a significant role in decision making; recognizing one's resources and limitations; to be aware of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, behaving that influence me; being able to recognize what is best for me</td>
</tr>
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</table>
4. Discipline: Discipline is utilized here to include effort, delay of gratification, self-sacrifice, determination. Webster's (1981) defines discipline as "training that molds, corrects, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character," and control gained by enforcing obedience or order (p. 322).

Hold to, restrain, control responses, stay with goal, follow through, put aside immediate pleasure, repression, limit, restriction

Holding to the behavior or attitude one intends in the face of intrusion
Not doing something you want to do and doing something you don't want to do
Conscious regulation of one's behavior
Regulation of responses to stimuli encountered physically and mentally
The ability to decide what is right for me at a particular time and follow through with that decision
Ability to restrain oneself physically, emotionally to achieve a higher goal

5. Skill (Thoreson & Cotes, 1976; Bandura, 1977): Webster's (1981) defines skill as "the ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in execution of performance" or "a development of aptitude or ability" (p. 1079). It refers to the abilities to do something, such as in the case of self-control, developing self-discipline, learning how to concentrate, recognizing cues in the environment that will help the person become more aware, etc.

Skill, ability, capability, know-how, learning options (as opposed to innate behaviors)

The ability to see creatively, the ability to balance emotional aspects of ourselves with intellectual aspects

6. Responsibility: Responsibility is defined as a cognition in which one assumes a unidirectional, causal attribution about the effect one's own behavior and thoughts have or could have on the environment. Webster's (1981) defines it as a "moral, legal, or mental accountability" (p. 979). (See also Globus, 1980; Shapiro & Shapiro, 1979; Knowles, 1977.)

Any statement that indicated ownership of behavior or use of a pronoun: my, I, me, myself, self, by the person, you, oneself, ones.

Taking responsibility for self
second column they were to list positive aspects of self-control. In the third column they were to list negative aspects of self-control.

Method of Coding the Data and Data Analysis

The methodological principles of content analysis of written behavior used in this study were similar to those of the content analysis of verbal behavior used by Gottschalk (Gottschalk & Gless, 1969).

Categories for Dimensions of Self-Control. The coding categories that were used for the dimensions of self-control reflected certain key concepts and philosophical assumptions underlying the concept of self-control and were drawn from earlier work by the author (Shapiro, 1982c; 1983b). Six dimensions—choice, goal, awareness, discipline, responsibility, skill (see Table I)—were utilized as categories and coded based on key words developed and refined from previous pilot efforts. Rater reliability for coding individuals' view into these categories was 92%.

Categories for Positive and Negative Aspects of Self-Control. Since this was the first effort at coding positive and negative aspects, a post hoc coding format was utilized. Words with similar meanings were grouped, and then a label was applied to the groupings. Coding sheets for positive and negative aspects are listed in Table II. Positive aspects include emotional management, freedom, happiness/well-being, improved relationships, greater awareness/insight, personal growth, achievement, and self-confidence. Negative aspects include rigidity/repression, cold/unemotional, relationship problems, anxiety, guilt, selfishness. Rater reliability for coding individuals' responses for these categories was 87%.

RESULTS

Dimensions Expressed About Self-Control

As can be seen from Figure 1, nearly all individuals' definitions of self-control included a goal toward which self-control was utilized. Sometimes these goals were content goals, the most often mentioned of which was emotional management, 13 (18%). Other goals were more "process" goals; i.e., "whatever one intends," the most frequent of which was balance and homeostasis, 5 (7%). The other categories in terms of frequency were responsibility, 36 (50%); skill/ability, 28 (39%); discipline, 26 (36%); choice, 19 (26%); and awareness, 11 (15%).
Views of Self-Control

Table II. Coding Categories for Negative and Positive Aspects Associated with Self-Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Aspects</th>
<th>Negative Aspects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional management: Responses in this category reflected some aspect of controlling successfully the emotions. Sometimes this was a balancing between cognitions and emotions; other individuals referred to it as regulation of emotions. Generally there was some sense of homeostasis or balance associated with this.</td>
<td>Rigidity/repression: Responses coded for these categories included such words or phrases as inhibition, rigidity, repression, stifling, spontaneity is affected, limiting, blocking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom: This positive aspect consisted only of the words independence and/or freedom.</td>
<td>Cold/unemotional: This category involved words such as aloof, cold, and unfeeling, repressed emotions, inability to show emotions, inhibitor of emotions; lack of openness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness/well-being: Responses grouped into this category included gratification, feels peaceful, enjoying life, enhanced feeling of well-being.</td>
<td>Relationship problems (separate from cold and unemotional): Responses included in this category indicated deterioration or misunderstanding in relationship, self-indulgence at others' expense, make others feel negative about themselves, selfishness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved relationships: Words coded here included don't anger others, help others enjoy life, good for society. They all included a theme of doing something for others.</td>
<td>Anxiety (stress): Coded as itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater awareness/insight: This category was coded for the above two words.</td>
<td>Guilt: Coded as itself—e.g., guilt at failure to reach goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth: This category was coded for positive movement and change in a positive direction—i.e., a step toward becoming the person you can be, positive growth, movement in the desired direction.</td>
<td>Selfishness: Coded as itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement: Successful completion, a result brought about by resolve or endeavor (Webster's, 1981, p. 9). Code words were achievement, accomplishment, and attain.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-confidence: Category here included self-acceptance, confidence in myself, ego enhancing.</td>
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Positive Aspects of Self-Control

Forty-two of the respondents listed positive qualities for self-control. As can be seen from Figure 2, these positive aspects can be broken down into several categories: personal growth, 8 (19%); happiness/well-being, 7 (17%); achievement, 7 (17%); freedom, 5 (12%); emotional management, 5 (12%); self-confidence, 4 (9%); improved relationships, 3 (7%); awareness/insight, 3 (7%).
Negative Aspects of Self-Control

As can be seen from Figure 3, 50 individuals responded to the prompt negative qualities of self-control. The most frequently mentioned negative aspect was rigidity and repression, 23 (46%), followed by cold and unemotional, 8 (16%); relationship problems, 5 (10%); and 6% each for guilt, anxiety, and selfishness (plus 5 miscellaneous).
Views of Self-Control

Fig. 3. Negative qualities of self-control.

Relationship Between the Dimensions of Discipline

We found a significant relationship between the presence of discipline in the definition and the occurrence of rigidity and repression in the negative qualities of self-control ($\chi^2 = 4.11, df = 1, p = .05$). We also noted that the presence (or absence) of choice in the definition was significantly associated with the presence (or absence) of discipline ($\chi^2 = 7.7, df = 1, p = .01$)—i.e., the presence of choice in the definition was associated with the absence of discipline in the definition; the absence of choice was associated with the presence of discipline in the definition.

DISCUSSION

This study offers partial confirmation of a theoretical model descriptive of self-control, involving six dimensions previously identified as important aspects of self-control. These dimensions—choice, awareness, discipline, skills, goal, and responsibility—provide a means of categorizing individuals' views of self-control (how labelers perceive it) thereby providing a linguistic, phenomenological representation of how individuals viewed self-control. Further, certain of the characteristics (defining properties, dimensions) of self-control studied here are important elements embedded (sometimes with different salience) in others' definition of self-control (e.g., Goldiamond, 1965; Thoreson & Mahoney, 1974; Thoreson & Coates, 1976; Mahoney & Arnkoff, 1979).

A second task of this study was to assess whether individuals perceived negative as well as positive aspects associated with self-control.
Although previous writing has suggested that self-control was a label applied to that which was socially desirable and motivated by noble ideals (Mahoney & Arnkoff, 1979), this study suggests that it is not necessarily viewed as a socially desirable concept (Figure 3). Although it may be argued that the negative aspects of self-control cited are merely an artifact of the coding instrument (in which people had an opportunity to consider negative aspects and therefore listed some), preliminary results from a large scale U.S. study (Shapiro, submitted), corroborate the view that self-control is not seen as unequivocally positive. Further, as this study noted, there was a significant association between people who saw self-control as including a dimension of discipline and those who saw a negative aspect of self-control as rigidity, repression, inhibiting, decreasing or limiting spontaneity or creativity. [Although nothing definitive can be stated about the meaning of nonresponders, it is interesting to note that only 42 people responded to the positive aspects of self-control (second column), yet 50 people put down negative aspects of self-control (third column).] Why might there be this negatively valenced view? One positive answer might come from looking closely at Thoreson and Mahoney's (1974, p. 12) definition of self-control. They define self-control as those times when a person engages in a behavior whose previous probability has been less than that of alternatively available behaviors “involving lesser or delayed reward, greater exertion or aversive properties and so on... and delayed environmental consequences” (italics mine). From this definition, it is not hard to understand why some people might find it aversive to work harder for lesser or delayed reward! As Mahoney and Arnkoff point out, “The masochist is often behaving in a fashion very parallel to that of the self-regulating person” (1979, p. 80).

In terms of evolving a working definition, this author previously defined self-control as “the ability to decide what you want to do, and the ability to do it” (Shapiro, 1978, p. 256). The first part of this definition (the ability to decide what you want to do) includes many of the dimensions cited in this study—awareness, choosing, responsibility, and goal. The second part (the ability to do it) involves the others—skill/ability, responsibility, and discipline (including perserverance and commitment). A subsequent definition (Shapiro, 1980, p. 133) was “a cognitive or behavioral activity generated by an organism and maintained over time in order to facilitate the attainment of certain goals which the organism defines as desirable.” (This definition clouds the distinction between self-control and self-control strategy, unless the latter is defined as that which influences the probability of that cognitive or behavioral activity—i.e., the self-controlling response (Skinner, 1953; Thoreson & Coates, 1976.)

If we look at Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1981), we find self defined as “the entire person of one individual” (p. 1040) and control as the
“power or ability to guide or manage” (p. 245). Self-control is defined as “restraint exercised over one’s own impulses, emotions, or desires” (p. 1041). Self-control, then, according to the dictionary, would mean the power or ability to guide or manage oneself. Part of Webster’s definition involves the concept of discipline/restraint, and certainly many of the definitions in our study reflected that—e.g., emotional management, mediating between emotions and cognitions. Interestingly, however, the goals embedded in self-control in our study reflected more than restraint, and included self-fulfillment, spiritual goals, and process goals such as “whatever one intends,” “doing what a person wants to do.” Some of the goals seem to reflect an active mode, an assertive mode in that the goal of self-control was accomplishment, achievement (as well as restraint, impulse control). However, there appeared to be a second and different grouping of goals, one reflecting more of a yielding and accepting mode. This mode included such terms as balance, self-acceptance, serenity, adapt, and inner peace regardless of the circumstance. Further research should explore this observation more carefully to determine whether there may be (at least) two different factors of positive self-control that might be identified.

Further research should also address two additional questions regarding the dimensions: (a) whether there are more that might be profitably considered, and (b) the nature of the interaction between dimensions.

With regard to question (a) above, there are two additional dimensions and one philosophical issue that many be important to self-control, but that were precluded from this investigation by the nature of the questions asked on the instrument. One dimension involves motivational issues, such as determination and intention, which may be considered to be antecedent to and separate from discipline, but which, in this study, were coded under discipline. Future research should try to determine more precisely the relationship of the dimension of intention to the dimension of discipline. A second important dimension not addressed by this study is beliefs, in terms of a person’s belief in his ability to develop self-control—i.e., self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Subsequent research could assess, as a potential predictor of outcome, whether individuals saw skills for self-control as that which was learned or that which was innate and over which they had little ability to effect change. Finally, the philosophical issue of the self is not directly addressed by this study. As one respondent said, “Self-control cannot be expressed because I do not know what the self is nor who is doing the controlling.” The issue of self, though quite complex and involving multiple and often divergent views, is essential to a working definition of self-control (cf. Shapiro, 1983b; Globus, 1980; Bandura, 1978; May, 1969; Jung, 1960; Mead, 1925; Minuchin, 1978; Skinner, 1953).
Future research should also attempt to become more precise about the relation of the different dimensions. For example, are certain of these dimensions more important than others? Can there be self-control without any one dimension there—i.e., are all dimensions necessary? Sufficient? Can one have a goal without choice and responsibility? Or choice without awareness? Might one type of awareness be useful at a given point in the self-control process and another type later? Are individuals who see more qualities and dimensions of self-control better able to actually utilize self-control strategies? Are there limits to the amount of self-control that is considered positive—i.e., do we then get into overcontrol or rigidity? Is self-control in fact a unitary construct, or might there be different factors of “control” operating, as reflected by our assertive (change) goals and yielding (accepting) goals?

Once we become more precise about the definition, research could then do a content analysis of verbal behavior of individuals before, during, and after therapy to determine a control profile. Here we would want to assess the relation between self-control as a construct and the literature on perceived control, being in control, and internal/external locus of control. With the clinic population, it might also be interesting to list our different dimensions of self-control and have them rate which ones they believe are most salient and important.

In summary, it should be noted that linguistic, conceptual, value-laden, and philosophy of science issues make the task of defining self-control a difficult one. One measure of its difficulty may be reflected in the most complete absence of efforts in the journal literature trying to define the construct of self-control. Certainly, this study, based on a sample of health professionals, is not representative of a general population and surely not representative of a clinical population. Therefore, it has to be seen as a beginning heuristic effort, one benefit of which may be to encourage more careful reflection on the nature and dimensions of the construct that are implied by our utilization of self-control strategies. The study itself offers partial confirmation of six dimensions utilized in a theoretical model descriptive of self-control, and describes both positive and negative aspects associated with self-control.

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