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Flexible Control: Conflict Mindsets Reduce the Association Between Trait Measures of Self-Control Decision-Making and Delay Discounting

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People experience conflicts between goals, thoughts, and actions on a regular basis. Those conflict experiences can trigger a *conflict mindset*, a unique information processing style characterized by the activation and consideration of conflicting alternatives. This processing style has been associated with a reduced reliance on dominant or default response tendencies. It could, therefore, affect self-control decisions, in which in order to receive a larger delayed reward (e.g., good health) people need to forego a smaller immediate reward (e.g., tasty pizza). Importantly, the tendency to choose the delayed over the immediate reward varies between individuals, with people scoring low on trait impulsivity (or high on trait self-control) showing an overall stronger tendency to forgo the immediate reward. In three studies ($N_{\text{total}} = 480$) we tested the effect of a conflict (vs. neutral) mindset on people's repeated choices for smaller immediate over larger delayed rewards in a delay discounting task. A fully powered analysis across all three studies supported the notion that a conflict mindset reduced the influence of dispositional "default" response tendencies on self-control decisions: participants' trait impulsivity and self-control scores predicted delay discounting only in the neutral mindset condition. In the conflict mindset condition, those dispositional tendencies and delay discounting were unrelated. This finding extends previous work on conflict mindsets by showing that they can reduce the association between individual differences and behavior.

Keywords: conflict mindset, delay discounting, impulsivity, self-control, flexibility

Feeling conflicted is part of our daily life (Hofmann et al., 2012). Conflicts may arise when deciding what job or university to apply to (weighing prestige vs. distance to home), when choosing between the healthier salad or the tastier pizza for dinner, or when trying to find the right work-life balance. In those situations at least two conflicting goals and choice alternatives are simultaneously activated and considered. Several lines of research within psychology suggest that the experience of such conflicts influences information processing and behavior (Botvinick et al., 2001; Kleiman & Hassin, 2013). Effects not only occur when the conflict is experienced (e.g., Botvinick et al., 2001; Dreisbach & Fischer, 2012), but can also be observed in subsequent, even unrelated situations (Becker et al., 2019; for an overview see: Kleiman & Enisman, 2018; Sassenberg et al., 2022). One explanation of those carry-over effects is the activation of a *conflict mindset*. The general notion in the

mindset literature is that conflict mindsets reduce the reliance on dominant preferences or response tendencies and thereby increase flexibility of thoughts and behavior (e.g., reduced confirmation bias; for reviews see Kleiman & Enisman, 2018; Sassenberg et al., 2022).

The present studies test the effect of a conflict mindset on self-control decision-making. More specifically, on people's preference for smaller immediate over larger delayed rewards (i.e., delay discounting; Odum et al., 2020; Richards et al., 1999). Taking a person $\times$ situation interaction approach (see Bem & Allen, 1974; Mischel et al., 2002), we predict that people's preferences in self-control decisions are influenced by their dispositional tendencies (e.g., trait impulsivity and self-control) and that this influence is mitigated when a conflict mindset is activated. To be more precise we test the prediction that individual differences in people's trait impulsivity and self-control will predict delayed discounting in a control condition (e.g., de Wit et al., 2007; Kirby et al., 1999), whereas this association will be reduced in a conflict mindset condition. By that, we go beyond existing conflict mindset research not only by showing the effect of conflict mindsets for the first time in the context of self-control decision-making, but also by investigating their moderating impact on the association between supposedly stable interindividual differences and concrete self-control behavior.

Conflict Mindsets Impact Information Processing

A conflict mindset arises when two or more contradicting alternatives are simultaneously activated and considered. Those alternatives

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