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INTRODUCTION

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Life is filled with temptations, but many carry the risk of negative consequences. Sometimes the consequences are trivial and emerge far in the future, if at all. In other instances, the risks are more severe and immediate. A struggling college student, for example, may lack the willpower to study for final exams that are critical to staying in school. Or a paroled offender may want to smoke pot with his friends—an allure that must be balanced against the possibility of a failed drug test and a return to prison. Whether big or small, each temptation calls on us to assess our options and make a decision—do we seize immediate benefits, even at the risk of incurring costs we may later regret? Or do we resist, taking comfort in knowing that we protected our long-term well-being?

This book looks at decisions people make every day through the lens of the behavioral sciences. These decisions fundamentally deal with the concept of *self-control*, a quality that captures one's willingness and ability to assess temptations in terms of the benefits they offer *and* the costs they impose, and then behave in ways that advance one's interests. Philosophers and writers have studied self-control for some time (Elias, 1939; Smiles, 1866), but attention to it has intensified in recent decades across many academic disciplines. It goes by many names across this research—"self-control" pervades in criminology,

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but other perspectives describe the same behavioral process using terms like "willpower," "self-restraint," and "self-regulation," or "impulsivity" and "risk-seeking" (qualities marked by the *absence* of self-control). Regardless of the label used, however, two striking empirical facts about self-control have emerged. These facts inform all the following paragraphs, sections, and chapters.

First, there is a growing recognition that the challenge of self-control is inherent to the human experience—there is no escaping the temptations that challenge our self-control. Whenever desire meets a situation in which acting upon it is possible, temptation ensues. A battle in our mind is then under way—one that pits immediate benefits and pleasures against long-term costs and risks. In modern life, this battle plays out constantly over the course of a day. In an ingenious study of about 200 adults, Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, and Vohs (2012) documented this pattern impressively. Subjects were asked to carry beepers throughout the day, and each time an alarm sounded, they reported the presence or absence of their desires at that time or shortly before. It turns out that subjects confronted desire roughly *half the time they were awake.* The most common temptations involved eating, drinking, sleeping, sex, and activities that distracted them from work or school. This result is what might be expected from this largely middle-class sample. For a different sample—one drawn from substance abusers or professional burglars—the specific temptations might be different, but the larger conclusion would be the same: "Desire pervades everyday life" (Hofmann et al., 2012, p. 1329). Thus, although none of us set aside time on our schedules and calendars to "put my self-control to the test" or "contemplate temptation," we will—inevitably—devote time to exactly this challenge.

And then there is a second striking conclusion from this research: Individuals vary *greatly* in how well they handle the challenge of self-control, and the consequences of poor self-control are extraordinary. As we discuss, when faced with temptations, those with high self-control (a quality that can be reliably measured at an early age) often envision—sometimes quite consciously—the well-being of their "future self" (Silver & Ulmer, 2012). They then make decisions that maximize its interests—they give in when it makes sense to and resist when it does not. They seize upon reasonable benefits in their

environments and avoid immediate and long-term consequences; ultimately, individuals with high self-control competently advance their health, happiness, and security.

Compared to their high-self-control counterparts, those with low self-control do not fare well. They either do not consider this future self or deemphasize its interests (instead focusing on the needs and desires of the "present self"). They are easily seduced by immediate enticements, even those that should—upon minimal reflection—highlight annoying or devastating consequences to follow. As a result, people with low self-control often find themselves in predicaments across the major arenas of life. And, of course, this group garners extraordinary attention from behavioral scientists, policymakers, and the media.

What sort of "predicaments" are we speaking of? As the title of our book suggests, we are especially interested in crime, and research tells us there is good reason for this. Criminology has arguably devoted more attention to self-control than any other field of study, and this follows from the natural connection between self-control and the temptations of crime. Many crimes represent temptations in which there are immediate, obvious benefits but also consequences that are perhaps less certain or obvious. Benefits of crime include, for example, money gained through theft or the "justice" that comes from assaulting a cheating or disrespecting person. As enticing as these benefits are, they coexist with major costs, including arrest, loss of reputation, and injury (given that people who are assaulted sometimes retaliate). Criminological research in recent decades indicates that, relatively speaking, those with low self-control prioritize immediate, obvious benefits over uncertain but sometimes severe long-term costs. As a result, they are more likely to commit violent and property crimes, use illegal drugs, and enter the criminal justice system.

As we will discuss, however, low self-control also predicts involvement in harmful and self-defeating behaviors that are *not* criminal in nature. Low self-control is linked to, among other things, dropping out of school, being a victim of crime, developing health problems, accruing debt, and experiencing harmful accidents. And these effects are notably long term in nature. As Moffitt and her colleagues (2011) showed in a recent report published in *Proceedings of the National*

Academy of Sciences, a child's self-control during the first 10 years of life is a robust predictor of critical adult outcomes, including physical health and the accumulation of wealth (in this case reported at least two decades later when subjects were 32 years old). Simply stated, many of the undesirable things people do—to themselves and others—follow in part from deficits in self-control.

If the entire story were just this simple—temptation is everywhere and those with high self-control live better lives—then this would be a much shorter book. However, these empirical realities merely set the stage for delving more deeply into the interesting complexities of self-control—complexities that are considered daily by an army of behavioral scientists from all over the world and from a wide array of academic disciplines. Every year, they contribute new insights to what we think of as one big self-control jigsaw puzzle. In some cases they add new pieces to the puzzle that nobody was aware of, and in other instances they shed light on where to position older, well-established pieces. As active researchers in this area—as scholars who spend a good part of our day thinking about self-control research—we have come to appreciate a basic fact: Much is known about the self-control puzzle, but there still is much to learn, and there is value in reliving the provocative and insightful process that brings us to our present state of knowledge.

That is what inspires this book. Its fundamental goal is to not only describe in rich detail what we know (or strongly suspect) about self-control, but also pave the way to considering exciting possibilities in the years to come. A key challenge in writing such a book is knowing where to begin. There are so many critical pieces to consider, and each one is interrelated with the broader whole; understanding any one issue requires at least a little understanding of many issues. The key, therefore, is to describe the self-control puzzle sensibly, not jumping too quickly into its most difficult parts, but also not unnecessarily dragging through its most basic ones.

With that in mind, we use this introductory chapter to provide a concise foundation for the discussions that follow. In building this foundation, we emphasize the definition of self-control that guides us and the key perspectives and priorities that inform our approach.

A DEFINITION OF SELF-CONTROL

Academic volumes are notorious for devoting 300 or 400 pages to an idea or concept without ever directly specifying what it means. We are eliminating that possibility by defining self-control sooner rather than later. We should emphasize that we are not seeking to break new ground when it comes to our definition of self-control—we approach it much as it has been defined in prior research. Across the literature, self-control is often described with different words and phrases, but we see these differences as largely superficial. When scholars speak of self-control or its various synonyms, they generally speak of the same basic activity.

At its core, self-control is a practice in which individuals deliberately *act upon themselves* to alter their immediate urges, impulses, inclinations, or temptations (and any other word you can think of that conveys the idea of a craving or compulsion). This is done to bring responses into line with higher-order standards that correspond to a person's values, morals, social commitments, and long-term well-being. As Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007) have emphasized, central to this is the idea of *overriding*—an impulse to behave in one way is replaced with a different behavior that adheres to a higher-order standard. Thus, when a given man feels an impulse to assault someone who has disrespected him but overrides that impulse to adhere to higher-order standards, self-control has been exercised. And those higher-order standards can come from a variety of sources, including moral values ("Assaulting people is wrong; I shouldn't do it"), interest in long-term well-being ("Getting arrested for assaulting this guy could cost me my job"), and social commitments ("My wife hates it when I assault people, and I don't want to disappoint her").

Importantly, although self-control research focuses in large part on behavior, self-control overriding is relevant also to thoughts and emotions. Thus, just as individuals can override an impulse to commit an assault, they can override impulses to get carried away by specific emotions (e.g., anger and indignation) or to dwell on specific thoughts (e.g., the nerve of the guy who did the disrespecting). This often involves *reframing* a situation to make it less thought consuming or

salient ("That guy is nothing to me") or *redirecting* attention to other topics that are less tempting or stress inducing.

Regardless of whether the impulses in question involve behaviors, emotions, or thoughts, when individuals consciously override these impulses to adhere to higher-order standards, they are exercising self-control. Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004, p. 272), for example, see self-control as "the self's capacity to inhibit its antisocial impulses and conform to the demands of group life." Similarly, Baumeister and his colleagues (2007, p. 351) speak of a capacity for "deliberate, conscious, effortful" actions that "restrain or override one response, thereby making a different response possible." And last, prominent criminological theorists Gottfredson and Hirschi refer to the tendency "to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed short-term benefits" (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2001, p. 83) and "to consider the full range of potential costs of a particular act" (Hirschi, 2004, p. 543). A key idea tying all these perspectives together is that self-control generally involves overriding *easy* responses to a situation (those that are immediately gratifying) and replacing them with *difficult* responses (those that adhere to higher-order standards involving values, social commitments, and long-term well-being).

Importantly, does this mean that people with high self-control avoid pleasurable things? It absolutely does *not* mean this. That point must be emphasized, because self-control sometimes is misunderstood as a joyless quality in which people simply *stop themselves from doing all the things they really want to do.* If that were in fact the essence of self-control, we suspect fewer people would consistently exercise self-control—who would want to live such a grim, pleasureless existence? Thankfully, this is a misunderstanding—self-control often is practiced with an explicit eye on pleasure. Thus, a person need not choose between having self-control and living a pleasurable life—both can be done, and there's a simple reason for why this is true: Life's pleasures often do not conflict with our higher-order standards. Virtually any temptation we can think of—involving such varied things as good food, sex, alcohol, thrilling experiences with friends, the acquisition of money and material possessions, and the free expression of one's ideas—can be indulged in ways that do not undermine basic ideals, morals, and long-term prospects. Thus, what

seems to distinguish those with high self-control is not a disinterest in pleasure; instead, it is their tendency to pursue pleasure with a plan or with good instincts and habits born from their prior successes.

Taken together, this gives us a straightforward working definition of self-control: It is the practice of overriding immediate impulses to replace them with responses that adhere to higher-order standards that typically follow from values, social commitments, and interests in long-term well-being. This definition describes self-control as a *practice*, but we can easily make the leap to defining it in terms of an individual *quality* or *trait*—a person high in self-control has a strong, consistent tendency to engage in the practice of self-control. Importantly, we see this broad definition of self-control as capturing the basic meanings of the wide variety of self-control synonyms used across different areas of research, including "self-restraint," "self-regulation," "willpower," "delayed gratification," "future orientation," "impulsivity," and "risk-seeking" (the latter two qualities being marked by an *absence* of self-control).[1]

AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

This book is the sum of our efforts to answer big-picture questions regarding the causes, consequences, and development of self-control. For example, over the life course and across different arenas of life, what behaviors are significantly affected by self-control? Also, what key factors early in life affect whether a child develops self-control in the first place? And once a certain level of self-control emerges, does it remain stable throughout adolescence and adulthood? Or, conversely, do self-control levels fluctuate as the individual advances deeper into life, and if so, what are the life course events and experiences that give rise to such changes? And last, when self-control affects behavior, *how* does it do so—what is the causal process that explains how low self-control is translated into actual criminal, deviant, and harmful acts?

In tackling these questions and others, our approach is explicitly integrative in nature—it is designed to bring together streams of thought that often have been treated separately. This is done in two ways. The first involves a multidisciplinary approach that is true to the

nature of modern-day self-control research. Scores of new books, articles, and chapters on self-control appear every month, and this research knows no academic boundaries—it spans a diverse list of disciplines, including criminology and criminal justice, psychology, sociology, social work, economics, behavioral and molecular genetics, cognitive neuroscience, and psychiatry. Each of these disciplines has its own research traditions and perspectives, and as noted earlier, different disciplines often have different terminology for our central concept. In each instance, however, they examine processes in which individuals try to control their emotions, thoughts, and actions to advance health, security, and well-being. We therefore draw from them all.

We should emphasize that this multidisciplinary, integrative approach is unique. Much self-control research has taken a narrower, discipline-specific approach; criminologists, for example, have comfortably stayed within their criminological schools of thought, while psychologists have adhered to a psychological approach. The problem, of course, is that all disciplines and their related perspectives have "blind spots"—things they miss because they are so absorbed by *other* things. This certainly has been true in our discipline of criminology, which traces its origins in large part to the field of sociology, with its emphasis on how cultural and social environmental forces shape social norms and behaviors among individuals and groups. Early criminological approaches to self-control were marked by an almost exclusive focus on the social environment; biological and genetic factors were neglected or entirely dismissed. Other disciplines, however, have impressively emphasized biological and genetic variables, but they suffer their own blind spots, and that, in fact, is our main point—any approach that is discipline specific will be incomplete.

With that in mind, the chapters that follow cover an incredible variety of studies—psychological studies of babies and toddlers interacting with their parents, macro-level sociological studies of concentrated urban poverty, behavioral genetics studies of twins and siblings raised together or apart, and cognitive neuroscience studies that use brain-imaging techniques to reveal patterns of electrical activity in the brain. By considering these types of studies and many others, we bring together the insights from all the areas of study that care about self-control.

Our approach is integrative in another respect. In addition to drawing broadly from multiple disciplines, we combine the insights of specific theoretical perspectives. As we emphasize in a later chapter, we have been most influenced by four specific perspectives: (a) a family-centered control theory approach prominent in criminology (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969), (b) a trait-based psychological approach (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Tangney et al., 2004), (c) a biosocial approach that emphasizes self-control as an executive function of the brain with biological and genetic origins (Barkley, 1997; Beaver, Wright, & DeLisi, 2007; Steinberg, 2010a), and (d) a situational "strength" approach that sees self-control as a renewable and depletable personal resource (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). These approaches have existed largely in isolation from one another; while at times they incorporate one another's ideas, they more commonly proceed as if the others barely existed. They are, in a sense, like Longfellow's "ships that pass in the night, . . . only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence."

Our view is that this need not be the case. As we discuss, these traditions are quite compatible, and each provides a valuable viewpoint for understanding some aspect of the self-control puzzle. True enough, there are genuine differences between them, but we see these differences as strengths rather than weaknesses—each perspective addresses its own niche, and putting their insights together provides a more compelling and thorough understanding of self-control. We therefore draw from them all liberally. Our goal is not to replace these approaches or subsume them into our own grandiose perspective; indeed, such things as personality psychology and the biosocial approach are themselves grand enough to be beyond any incorporation of that kind. Instead, our goal simply is to borrow their good ideas whenever doing so enables us to acquire better answers to the questions we raise.

A LIFE COURSE APPROACH

Our approach is marked by a heavy emphasis on the life course perspective that emphasizes the dynamic nature of development across various stages of the human life course (Elder, 1985; Laub, 2004; Sampson & Laub,

1993). In earlier decades, human behavior was often studied as a static, unchanging phenomenon—people either were criminals or they were not, or they possessed self-control or they did not. There was little appreciation for whether and how people changed as they advanced through different biological and social stages of life. More recently, however, the dynamic aspect of human behavior has taken center stage, and it has important implications for the way we study self-control.

From a life course perspective, self-control is not a quality that you either have or do not have—it is something that develops over time. Self-control has *trajectories* (or *pathways*) that can be marked by continuity (in which preexisting patterns persist) or change (in which there are turning points). And, most importantly, this dynamic, developmental nature of self-control must be viewed in conjunction with other major domains of life, including the biological, psychological, and social trajectories that are under way. As part of this life course approach, attention must be directed to key life events and transitions—like starting school, entering the labor force, and getting married—that may have implications for development.

In using this life course perspective, our discussion of the causes and consequences of low self-control will in some sense walk the individual through the different stages of the life course. We actually begin before birth by discussing how such things as genetics and prenatal experiences shape biological development in ways that are consequential for self-control. We naturally also emphasize the first decade of life—a period of intense biological development, but also a period in which individuals develop and hone their ability to socially interact with others, especially those in the family environment. We consider research with infants and toddlers that sheds light on the qualities and actions that become precursors for later displays of self-control.

And then we consider how self-control evolves as individuals age into the second decade of life—into the so-called "storm and stress" of adolescence. This period brings special attention to patterns of continuity and change. The events and developments of the first decade of life often set the stage for adolescence, and thus many adolescents will be marked by continuity in self-control; if they have successfully developed self-control as children (in ways that can reasonably be expected), they continue that pattern into adolescence. However, change during this

period occurs as well, in part because of the major shifts that accompany adolescence. Adolescents are not only advancing biologically, but also experiencing major social shifts as their activities, social networks, and interests increasingly move them away from the family context and into contexts associated with peers, the school, and the community.

And of course, not all individuals experience these shifts similarly, therefore raising the possibility that there is a "re-shuffling of the self-control deck," so to speak—some who were doing quite well in self-control as children will struggle as adolescents, and vice versa. In studying these issues, we will incorporate the new science on the evolving adolescent brain (Steinberg, 2010a), because contrary to prior accepted wisdom, the adolescent brain is still very much in flux—brain development continues in significant ways through adolescence, and this has interesting implications for self-control.

And we do not stop with adolescence, because there are interesting self-control patterns in adulthood as well, especially early adulthood. This stage of life has been described as "demographically dense"—it involves more life-changing shifts in roles and identities than any other period in the life course (Caspi et al., 2005, p. 467). Early adulthood, after all, is often the period in which people graduate from college, enter the labor force, get married, and have children. However, these events allow for reversals also—employed and married individuals can lose their jobs or get divorced, and other individuals will get ensnared by complications in the areas of health, mental health, addiction, and even incarceration. For each of these life events (good or bad), one's level of self-control likely affects whether or not they occur, but in turn, these events often influence later self-control; key life transitions have a way of altering one's willingness and ability to exercise self-control. In covering these alternative possibilities, we hope to convey that a person's self-control should be understood as the product of a lifelong developmental process.

CONNECTING SELF-CONTROL TO OTHER CAUSES OF BEHAVIOR

This book is based on the premise that self-control really matters for behavior. Yet, self-control is not the *only* important cause of behavior.

Criminology in particular has a wide array of theories that emphasize the causal effects of such things as social control in the family environment, negative experiences in school, social interactions in delinquent peer networks, and the social conditions of disadvantaged and disorganized communities. Therefore, it is useful here at the outset to ask this question: Where does self-control fit in the broader context of criminological theory?

There is no one way to answer that question, but a useful distinction can be made between *types-of-people* and *types-of-places* explanations for behavior. "People" explanations overwhelmingly emphasize the qualities of individuals as the determinants of behavior. Individuals commit criminal and deviant acts because of *who they are*—they possess biological or psychological attributes that make antisocial behavior likely no matter where they find themselves. In contrast, "place" explanations emphasize that individuals engage in crime and deviance as a result of *where they are*, and therefore what social environments, relationships, and subcultures they encounter. This is more of a blank-slate approach to human behavior—individuals behave and develop in ways that match the social influences around them. If they are in places that encourage crime, they commit crimes, but if not, they avoid crime. Prominent examples of place theories include Shaw and McKay's (1969) social disorganization theory (with its emphasis on neighborhood social control and neighborhood subcultures) and Merton's (1938) strain theory (with its attention to environments that emphasize monetary success goals but offer fewer opportunities for legally achieving those goals). Social learning theories (Akers, 1998) that emphasize reinforcements and punishments in primary social relations with parents and peers are yet another example of place-oriented explanations.

In reality, few theories are a pure version of either a people or place explanation, but they can be placed along a continuum, and theories of self-control definitely fall on the people side of that continuum. Indeed, in criminology, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory—which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter—is often cited as the prototypical types-of-people explanation. It sees self-control as an individual quality that develops early in life and becomes so powerful that it crowds out the effects of the place-oriented influences previously thought to matter (the family environment, peer groups, and the school

and community contexts). Thus, in response to our original question—where self-control fits in the broader context of theories of crime and deviance—one clear response is that self-control has historically been seen as a types-of-people explanation that downplays the significance of types-of-places explanations.

We should, however, give fair warning—in the chapters that follow, we approach self-control in ways that substantially blur the lines between people and place explanations. This follows from a simple recognition: The more one studies self-control, the more it becomes clear that this prototypical types-of-people variable is inextricably intertwined with the types-of-places variables that are its presumed rivals in the world of criminological theory. Most notably, in the early years of life, the development of this individual quality depends on the type of place in which a child is raised—the family environment is especially consequential. Beyond childhood, the family environment continues to matter for self-control, but other places do as well, including the peer context, the school, and the community environment. Moreover, as we will discuss, the effects of low self-control on behavior are not uniform across different types of places—in some social contexts, low self-control produces especially high problems with crime and deviance, whereas in other places, the harmful effects of low self-control are repressed by social and cultural conditions that promote prosocial behavior. In such places, the deficit in self-control may persist, but the qualities of that place minimize its negative consequences.

Ultimately, therefore, we end up emphasizing causal variables from prominent place-oriented criminological theories that often have not figured greatly into prior discussions of self-control. We believe this approach will be increasingly common in the future. Simply stated, when you study self-control, you end up studying the many other important things to which it is connected.

ATTENTION TO PUBLIC POLICY

As the above sections indicate, our efforts involve a heavy emphasis on theory—we wish to advance a better theoretical understanding of

the causes, consequences, and development of self-control over the life course. We are sensitive, however, to a critique often lodged against theoretical efforts of this kind: They approach a given phenomenon (such as low self-control) with a focus on its theoretical nuances and complexities rather than on how to fix the urgent real-world problems associated with that phenomenon. In short, intense concern over questions of theory leads to a disappointing neglect of questions of policy.

However, this need not be the case—a concern for theoretical advances is not the least bit incompatible with a concern for solutions to the real-world problems that follow from low self-control. Indeed, these two concerns should go hand in hand. Our thoughts on this are captured well by Greenstein's (2006, p. 5) view of the proper link between social scientific theory and public policy:

> If one is truly concerned with changing society, good theory is a necessity. Armed with good theory, we can design and implement interventions designed to change the world around us. If we really understand why an outcome occurs, we have the knowledge **. . .** to change that outcome.

With this in mind, we vow to "walk and chew gum at the same time," as the saying goes—we will focus on the critical theoretical issues while also emphasizing the implications they have for public policy efforts to reduce problems linked to low self-control. We will consider the key opportunities for social service, juvenile justice, and criminal justice intervention across key stages of the life course. For example, we will describe programs that invest in children and families in the prenatal and postnatal periods, as well as those that promote self-control among early childhood "troublemakers" and adult offenders alike. As we will discuss, extensive evidence-based policy efforts are well under way in these areas. We also will consider more global efforts to build cultural awareness of self-control and related cognitive abilities—a goal that many economists see as important for our nation's future productivity (Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Kocher, Rutzler, Sutter, & Trautmann, 2012).

CONNECTING THE SCIENCE OF SELF-CONTROL TO THE STORIES WE READ ABOUT EVERY DAY

Our approach is heavily rooted in science and research, but we confess that an enjoyable part of writing this book has been our deep dives into popular culture and history to find compelling depictions of self-control in action. Simply stated, the news and entertainment media are replete with rich and informative illustrations of what goes well—or sometimes horribly awry—when it comes to self-control. We take many opportunities in the coming chapters to make the connection between the scientific principles we emphasize and these interesting examples.

We cover instances of extraordinary self-control, such as Aron Ralston (featured in the film *127 Hours*), who mustered the willpower to amputate his own hand to extricate himself from a dislodged boulder. There is also Ram Bahadur Bomjon, a devout young Buddhist in Nepal whose story has been featured in such varied Western media outlets as the BBC, *National Geographic*, and the magazine *GQ*—he has baffled the scientific community with his prolonged meditations in which he voluntarily goes without food or water for days, maintaining his meditative pose during the entire stretch. On the other side of the continuum, we consider extraordinary lapses in self-control, sometimes among powerful people whose lives are otherwise marked by extraordinary self-control.

We also get the chance to discuss television shows that have made self-control prominent in our society's cultural dialogue. These include, for example, one of the earliest reality TV programs: the Fox Network's 2001 show *Temptation Island* (see In Focus 1.1). More recently, MTV's reality show *16 and Pregnant* chronicled the lives of female teenagers experiencing one of the more life-altering results of self-control lapses: an unplanned pregnancy. The show has been described as "grim" and "brutally honest" about the challenges faced by these girls (Bellafante, 2009; National Public Radio, 2014). Interestingly, *16 and Pregnant* has attracted attention from scientists who see an interesting effect on its teenage viewers: It has increased their displays of self-control in avoiding unplanned pregnancies (Kearney & Levine, 2014). In seeing these various cultural and historical illustrations, we think readers will reach the same conclusion we have: Self-control stories are nearly everywhere you look.

IN FOCUS 1.1

Self-Control in Popular Culture: *Temptation Island*

One of the more outrageous reality shows on network TV was one of the first: Fox's short-lived *Temptation Island* (2001–2003). It put the relationships of real couples to the test by seeing if they could endure a steady dose of illicit romantic temptation. The selected couples were flown to a remote, tropical location where the male and female partners were separated from each other. However, they were given plenty of time with single, attractive members of the opposite sex, and the show included all sort of contrived opportunities for them to "date" those to whom they were attracted. Also, to invite maximum drama, the contestants were given vivid, detailed updates (sometimes with video footage) of exactly what their partner was doing (and with whom) on the other side of the island. The show garnered weak ratings, but it broke up plenty of relationships in its three seasons, and it also become infamous for the eye-rolling, cringe-worthy drama it induced each week. The staff at *Time* magazine (TIME Staff, 2009) cautioned viewers to approach the show not as reality or drama, but as "high comedy" that could be appreciated if you remembered that these "star-crossed lovers voluntarily jumped at the chance to ruin their long-term relationships for a free trip to Belize and some priceless exposure." The show illustrates how drama revolving around self-control dilemmas is often emphasized in popular culture. And this is the case not just in the United States—while *Temptation Island* lasted only three years in the U.S. television market, successful spin-offs emerged in more than 15 other countries. The French version (*L'Île de la tentation*) ran for eight seasons!

CONCLUSION

Self-control occupies an interesting place in modern society. As behavioral scientists, we approach it as a quality that explains individual differences in bad behavior. When looked at in a historical and cultural context, however, it is so much more. Self-control looms large, for example, in most world religions. In Christianity, it is central to the creation story in the Book of Genesis, as Adam and Eve, upon giving in to temptation, are exiled from the Garden of Eden. And at least five of Christianity's seven deadly sins (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, and

wrath) seem to directly implicate low self-control. Self-control is also the focus of epic works of art—including novels like *Lolita* and *The Scarlet Letter* and movies like *A Clockwork Orange*—that explore the dramatic human struggle between resisting and giving in to temptation. And in modern societies marked by an ethos of "self-help" and "personal transformation," self-control sits at the forefront of sought-after virtues, with popular titles promising insights on how to "develop unstoppable self-discipline" (Wyatt, 2014) and "rediscover your willpower instinct" (Perry, 2013).

And is it possible that shifts in self-control altered the course of human civilization? Acclaimed Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) says it has. Pinker makes the novel argument—one that he painstakingly supports with evidence—that we presently live in the *least violent* period of human history. Modern humans kill, torture, rape, and go to war against one another more than we should, but at a rate lower than that seen previously. Pinker says that a key contributor to this trend is a multiple-centuries-long "civilizing process" in which human societies have become more willing to "anticipate the consequences of acting on our impulses and to inhibit them accordingly," often in ways that encourage more humanitarian solutions to problems and conflicts. Pinker's compelling arguments underline a point that resonates throughout his book—that the concept of self-control reaches deeply into the arenas and chapters of the human story. We look forward to developing this idea in the pages that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What short-term pleasures are you sacrificing by taking the time to read this book chapter? How might your choice to do so relate to your self-control and your "future self?"

2. Recall a recent instance where you had the opportunity to give in to something tempting. Did you *override* the temptation, or give in? Do you think your self-control played a part in the decision you made, or was it something else?

3. Compare and contrast the ability of toddlers, teenagers, and adults to exercise self-control. How might the life course concepts of *stability* and *change* explain differences in ability between toddlers, teens, and adults?

4. Do you think people behave as they do because of *who they are* or because of *where they are*? Which perspective is self-control more compatible with? Could it be compatible with both?

5. Google "self-control in the news" and read one of the stories. How does it relate to the themes discussed in this chapter?

NOTE

1. In considering the definition of self-control, some scholars have considered the possibility that self-control comprises different facets or dimensions—perhaps there are narrower components that are part of an *overall* self-control construct. In criminology, debates about this have followed largely from Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) discussion of six "elements" of self-control. In our opinion, their discussion and the resulting debates have often obfuscated rather than clarified the meaning of self-control, and Hirschi (2004) seems to agree with this view. We purposefully avoid a rehashing of that literature, except to emphasize the potential uniqueness of risk-seeking, which sometimes is referred to as sensation-seeking. It involves a preference for intense, novel, and exciting stimuli that often, by their very nature, carry the possibility of immediate or long-term consequences. Individuals high in risk-seeking are those that would be bored by a life without danger (Eysenck & Zuckerman, 1978). They often are quick to embrace exciting or emotionally thrilling lines of action even if they undermine higher-order standards. Risk-seeking often goes hand in hand with the other self-control-related concepts and synonyms we have discussed. However, that will not always be true. Some individuals who are high in risk-seeking—which is expected of those low in self-control—may nevertheless be high in other traditional indicators of self-control, or vice versa (see Burt, Sweeten, & Simons, 2014).