

ED Psych Report Walter Mischel

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### Abstract

Walter Mischel, B.J. Casey, and Yuichi Shoda are psychologists with an interest in discovering the strategies used to delay immediate gratification in pre-school aged children. Following their progress over a 50 year study, conclusions were drawn that children who developed strategies to resist eating their treats immediately during the “Marshmallow Test” were, overall, more successful in life than their peers who were unable to resist the temptations of immediate gratification. These results were developed into curriculum for a school-wide initiative called the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP).

Walter Mischel born February 22, 1930 conducted a 50 year, on-going study of the effects on having a high tendency to delay gratification beginning in children of preschool ages, and monitoring these subjects throughout various stages of their lives. Dr. Mischel is an American psychologist, who has recently published a book of his findings thus far entitled, "The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control". As a result of a half century of research, The New Yorker states that,

"The key, it turns out, is learning to mentally "cool" what Mischel calls the "hot" aspects of your environment: the things that pull you away from your goal. Cooling can be accomplished by putting the object at an imaginary distance (a photograph isn't a treat), or by re-framing it (picturing marshmallows as clouds not candy). Focusing on a completely unrelated experience can also work, as can any technique that successfully switches your attention." (Konnikova, 2014)

Mischel states that his motivation for the study derived from a personal addiction to cigarettes which began at quite a young age. He attempted to quit after the Surgeon General published reports of the harmful effects of smoking in 1964, however, his attempts were to no avail, until one day whilst walking through a hospital when he passed by a man who was very ill and marked for radiation therapy treatments. This grim sight changed Mischel's mindset about smoking cigarettes, and from that day forward he never smoked another day of his life. Mischel could "cool" his "hot" addiction by replacing the cravings for cigarettes with images of the sickly man.

The same could be said for children within the classroom environment. Children who delayed gratification within the investigation by resisting the one treat in front of them, for two treats upon the researchers return, typically scored better on formative assessments such as the SAT.

During the investigations of children, from the approximate ages of three to six years old, the researchers observed students using various strategies to avoid the one treat placed in front of them such as;

- Turning their bodies away from the object
- Looking away from the object
- Playing with the object or other objects in the mean time

By being able to “cool” their “hot” temptations, children would theoretically be able to “reframe” their distractions and impulses; they have better self-control and inevitably will become more active learners. “Mischel has consistently found that the crucial factor in delaying gratification is the ability to change your perception of the object or action you want to resist.” (Konnikova, 2014) Not only did the results show that children who are “high-delayers” academically performed better by actively engaging with the curriculum than those of the “low-delayers” tested, these children were also less likely to become involved or addicted to various substances, and maintained a healthy body mass index. (Sparks, 2011) It is also believed that children who are more likely to resist immediate gratification will grow up with better mental health and well-being.

In order to understand why some children are better at delaying gratification than others, psychologists referenced the cognitive-affective processing system theory which “provides a framework for analyzing individual’s differences and basic processes such as self-regulation, self-control, and proactive, agentic (self-directed and future oriented) behavior over time” (Mischel, Shoda, 1995), as seen in figure 1. Some critiques may argue that this is a trait that is passed down from generation to generation. Mischel’s research, however, consistently reiterates the idea that these impulses, or lack thereof, are not inherently passed down genetically; more-so

he saw a trend of generations becoming more and more resistant to the temptations of the treats during the investigation and throughout their lives, even within families whose first generation of the study may have been classified as “low-delayers”. Some may doubt and question the evidence. It is believed that there are elements of how the child is raised which may have factors attributing to the level of delay witnessed. It was found that children tested who were not raised in “stable” homes were less likely to wait for the treat because they were less trusting in the

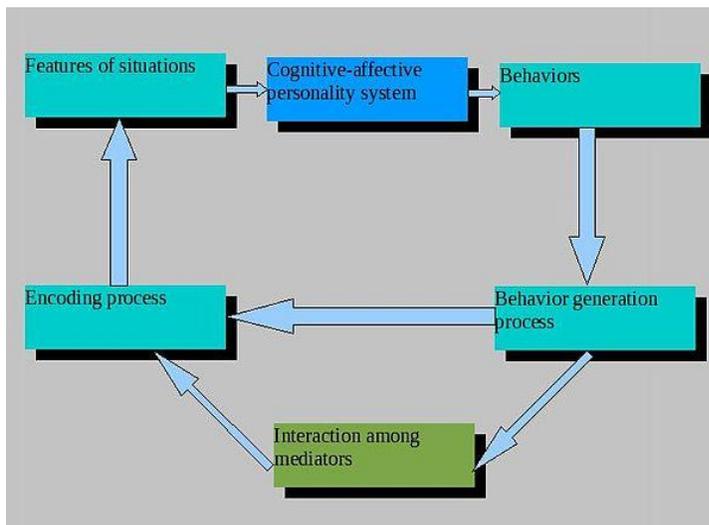


Figure 1. “The cognitive-affective processing system theory provides a comprehensive view that accounts for both the variability of behavior and the stability in the personality system that generates it. Rather than dichotomizing personality research into the study of dispositions or processes, the theory allows the pursuit of both - structure and dynamics - as aspects of the same unitary system.” (Mischel, Shoda, 1995)

the promise of receiving their reward if they were to wait. To provide evidence to any naysayers, “B.J. Casey, PhD, of Weill Cornell Medical College, along with Mischel, Yuichi Shoda, PhD, of the University of Washington, and other colleagues tracked down 59 subjects, now in their 40s, who had participated in the marshmallow experiments as children.” (APA) To the delight of Casey, Mischel, and Shoda the subjects who originally scored as “high-delayers” continued in their perseverance, however the subjects who were originally classified as “low-delayers” scored worse with delaying gratification.

An article in Education Week, September 2014 edition, discusses “Dispelling the Myth of Deferred Gratification”. Within this commentary, author Alfie Kohn remarks on three criticisms which he believes to be untrue about the experiment and results of the “Marshmallow Test”. The

first was focused on the purpose of the investigation which was *if* and *how* a child could resist immediate gratification by utilizing strategies to distract themselves. “This, of course, is precisely the opposite of the usual message that (a) self-control is a matter of individual character, which (b) we ought to help children develop.” (Kohn, 2014) However, Mischel’s research was implemented within KIPP schools who taught strategies, therefore Kohn’s assumption was incorrect because based on his research a character development program was built and is being executed. The second criticism focused on the abilities of students to mentally formulate distractions for themselves to avoid the object during the investigation. “It’s not that willpower makes certain kids successful; it’s that the same loose cluster of mental proficiencies that helped them with distraction when they were young also helped them score well on a test of reasoning when they were older.”(Kohn, 2014) While this statement may have some truth about the purpose of the investigation, willpower is defined as “the ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals” (APA) which has been found to directly link with the measurements of success within various academic and life skills. The third critique discusses if there is always a need for a delay in gratification. Mischel himself stated, ““In a given situation, postponing gratification may or may not be a wise or adaptive choice,” therefore the assumption of being successful in school or life and one having to always delay gratification is untrue. Researchers continue to study the cognitive and psychological variables of delayed gratification including brain scans during the “Marshmallow Test” which shows the differing portions of the brain functioning under varying stressors. As previously stated, Mischel believes this is a learned ability, therefore whether classified as a “high” or “low-delayer” children can be taught strategies which can result in better impulse control. To focus on this research, the environments in which educators currently instruct, and how educators

“measure success” of academics and social indicators, will need to vary slightly from the current methods. Schools participating in the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) in New York City and Philadelphia have added character trait grades which will be assigned twice per academic year measuring “zest, grit, self-control, hope/optimism, curiosity, gratitude, and social intelligence”. Lessons about the character traits are taught and practiced regularly, beginning at a very young age. Although this program is still being piloted and will continue to change as needed, according to Paul Solomon’s interview, “Most KIPP students are chosen by lottery, regardless of prior academic record. Almost all meet federal poverty guidelines. And yet 82 percent go on to college, and nearly half complete a four-year degree, five times the rate of the average low-income student.” (PBS) Obviously, this is staggering data to contend with and leads educators to begin to recognize how this program utilizes some ideals from the “Learner Centered” ideology, “the whole child is to be educated”(Schiro, 2013). Once students have psychologically developed soft skills, such as self-control, they will inevitably be more successful in their studies and throughout their life journeys.

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