

# Cognition, Obedience, and Contribution: Enhancing Self-Control Through A Multistage Developmental Scheme

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## Abstract

The ability to regulate behavior, cognitive processes, emotions, and social interactions, i. e. self-control, is one of the most critical aspects of human lives. When talking about self-regulation and self-control, the essential factor is the self and the restrictions and frameworks it imposes upon itself. This viewpoint guides our thoughts to an agency aspect of self-control abilities. Endorsing this sense of agency and freedom of choice is the crucial factor in enhancing and facilitating self-control abilities. In this article, we propose a multistage developmental scheme for acquiring self-control by focusing on its entwined relations with freedom of choice. The proposed developmental scheme composes of three seven-year stages, namely, Cognition, Obedience, and Contribution. The key idea is to allow the child to acquire self-control through a natural path by exercising his/her own free will.

**Keywords:** Self-control, Agency, Free will, Developmental scheme.

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## 1. Introduction and preliminaries

Human beings live within a complex network of nearly always conflicting internal desires and goals and external norms and expectations. To live blissful lives, to experience and achieve what it is to be a

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human is the outcome of an ever-present multidimensional struggle. One of the most critical aspects of this effortful path is the ability to regulate one's behavior, cognitive processes, emotions, and social interactions. Such an important personality trait that can be referred to by the broad term of self-control needs to be built up from the early years of life to bear fruit in the future. When talking about self-regulation and self-control, the essential factor is the self and the restrictions and frameworks it imposes upon itself. This viewpoint guides our thoughts to an agency aspect of self-control abilities, that is, the ability to choose our path among available, often contradictory options. Endorsing this sense of agency and freedom of choice is the crucial factor in enhancing and facilitating self-control abilities. In this letter, we propose a multi-stage developmental scheme for acquiring self-control by focusing on its entwined relations with freedom of choice.

Due to its wide range of applications, self-control, and other related terms, have appeared in numerous researches so far and are still a hot topic of debate. Experiments like delay of gratification tasks [1], [2] have explored various aspects of self-control abilities in young children. Moreover, longitudinal studies have been conducted to discover possible links between these set of skills and later life successes or failures [3], [4]. Furthermore, many factors and strategies have been suggested to help enhance self-regulatory capacities, from internal cognitive approaches to external situational ones [5]. An essential factor that influences children's self-control is how much they come to believe in and endorse their freedom of choice. However, the relation between how much a child endorses his/her free will and how much self-control he/she can exercise seems to be a culturally variant aspect. While in United States, positive correlations have been found between stronger beliefs in freedom of choice and self-control abilities, the opposite relation appears to exist in eastern cultures of Singapore and China (Kushnir, 2018). Whereas, other studies have shown that depending on the inhibitory control task at hand a negative correlation between success in completing the task and endorsing free will can also be observed in US children [6]. On the other hand, some studies have shown that, in general, children from interdependent cultures, such as China, tend to outperform US children on inhibitory control tasks [7], [8]. These seemingly contradictory research examples indicate that the link between endorsing free will and the ability to control oneself and the cultural variances of that still needs careful explorations. Therefore, to achieve more consistent results, certain factors need to be carefully controlled, such as the key features of the inhibitory task at hand [6] and the inner-cultural differences and developmental history of chosen participants.

## **2. A Multistage Developmental Scheme**

The base and inspiration of our proposed hypothesis are what we have learned of Islam's teachings and anthropological viewpoints. Based on Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims, human beings are born with inner conceptions of right and wrong. Moreover, several works, including [9], [10], have presented evidence of early prosocial and moral tendencies in infants. What prevents a person from acting upon those inner judgments and understandings is yielding to immediate benefits without considering the future, i. e. lack of self-control. On the other hand, as Muslims, we have learned that the Lord has granted humans the freedom to choose their own path, marking it as the main difference between them and other beings. That is, a person has reached the highest levels of humanity only when he/she becomes able to

free him/herself from either the internal temptations of wealth, power and rage or the external limitations imposed by other people. In other words, an act is only as worthy as the inner intention of its doer and whether it has been freely chosen or not. Thus, in Islam's view, parents are not supposed to sculpt a human face out of their children, to inflict norms, restrictions and frameworks and to build what they wish of them. Parents should provide the means for children to choose for themselves and decide who they want to be, much like what societal structures must present. The social structures are not a cage to keep the person in track, but a path laid out for individuals to ease their journey to perfection and to help them maintain their freedom.

Early childhood is often characterized by impulsive actions. Behavioral patterns usually consist of desiring something and acting to possess it. How can a child grow from this basic impulsivity to higher cognitive and social degrees of self-control? How can a person effectively learn to endorse his/her freedom of choice while not yielding to temptations that might lead him/her astray? Here, we present a multi-stage developmental scheme to bridge the gap between early childhood impulsivity and cognitive and behavioral control of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. The proposed developmental scheme, which is inspired by a famous saying from Islam prophet Mohammad [11], composes of three seven-year stages, namely, Cognition, Obedience, and Contribution. The key idea is to allow the child to acquire self-control through a natural path by exercising his/her own freedom of choice.

**Cognition stage.** The first seven years of a person's life is his/her chance to experience the world, become familiar with its concepts and rules, and acquire the requisite cognitive skills to adapt to its ever-varying conditions. In this stage, children should be allowed to explore wherever they wish for, possess and examine whatever they desire, break, build, play, and do anything that might help them better comprehend their surroundings. The child becomes the boss, the authority, who could have his/her wishes fulfilled without restrictions and boundaries. In this stage, parents should not enforce any norm compliance, rule following, or self-control over their young children. Surely, there would be times when fulfilling a child's wishes is not possible. In situations like this, children must be distracted from their original desires. That is, parents should make them forget what they wanted in the first place by introducing something else and therefore, never denying them their wishes. In the early years of life, children discover what it is to be part of this world and to be bound by its cause/effect structures. Parents must allow their children to explore these structures and comprehend the natural consequences of their choices rather than enforcing strict behavioral frameworks upon them. Only then would the child fully appreciate the necessity of following rules and accept the possible limits they may impose on his/her seemingly unbounded freedom.

**Obedience stage.** The second seven years of life is the time when one must learn to abide by the rules, be responsible for what he/she does and take into action what he/she has learned in the first seven years. The child is now ready to take orders and follow norms. Parents must start giving small responsibilities to their children, expect them to follow stated rules and norms, and provide rewards or punishments to remind the child of the consequences of his/her actions. The second seven years of life is when the child learns to accept boundaries and limitations. He/she would slowly come to understand that one cannot achieve his/her wishes without paying any prices. In other words, the concept of self-control finds its way into a child's cognitive assessments of his/her situation in the world.

**Contribution stage.** The third and final stage of a child's development is when his/her personality flourishes. In this stage, the child is slowly changing into an adult, ready to contribute to and be

actively involved in familial and social commitments. He/she has gathered much knowledge and experience in the first and second seven years of life and is now ready to incorporate those in more challenging, realistic situations. That's why parents should now include the child in family decision-making affairs, value and act upon his/her suggestions, and entrust their teenagers with significant responsibilities. The child is past obedience in this stage and is turning into a full agent. Therefore, maintaining his/her freedom of choice is of the highest importance. Parents should allow their teenagers to make decisions for themselves and to act upon those decisions, even if they come to complete contrast of what parents themselves think to be true. The supervisory role of the parents must be subtle, never harming his/her sense of agency and only to intervene to prevent irrecoverable harms.

### 3. Discussion

Carefully conducted longitudinal studies are needed to appreciate the full extent of our multi-stage developmental scheme. However, there are also other, more short-term methods to verify it. As an example, we suggest designing behavioral tasks testing the characteristics of each stage while assessing the conditions of its previous ones via gathering information from children and their parents. For instance, the first and second stages imply that granting children nearly unrestrained freedom from birth to seven results in better and compliance by social norms and family rules from seven to fourteen. Furthermore, abilities such as cognitive control, decision making in demanding and pressurized situations and costly moral judgments and actions can be tested in teenagers of the third stage (between fourteen to twenty-one years of age) while assessing and ranking their previous conditions and lifestyles. Based on our hypothesis, we predict that the higher a teenager ranks in correspondence with characteristics of the first and second stages, the better he/she would perform in mentioned tasks. We believe that the proposed hypothesis is a novel approach worth exploring that can shed light on one of the most vital aspects of human lives, that is, self-control and its interlinked relation with free will.

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