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Vicarious Control: Exposure to Mastery and Perceived Self-Efficacy

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Vicarious Control: Exposure to Mastery and Perceived Self-Efficacy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sometimes we are exposed to other people performing difficult activities with high levels of mastery. In such situations, the performer has perfect control over the activity, and every element of the execution flows naturally and apparently effortlessly. We hypothesize and test in a series of experiments that observing masterful performances of others at difficult activities will increase one's perceptions of self-efficacy at those same activities.

In general, people are not accurate at predicting their own ability and are susceptible to systematic errors at this type of task (Billeter et al., 2011). Projection biases (Loewenstein et al., 2003), self-enhancement motives (DeNisi & Shaw, 1977), or excessive focus on one's own vs. others' abilities (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) may keep people from forming accurate predictions. The lack of accuracy at evaluating personal skills and at predicting individual performance suggests that contextual information, such as the performance of a third person, may affect people's predictions. Indeed, observing the performances of others is a source of information used to judge self-efficacy, that is, one's perceived ability to perform an activity (Bandura, 1977; Gist & Mitchell, 1993). Research on contrast effect would predict that exposure to an expert mastering an activity negatively affects one's perceived ability to successfully perform the same activity, because the expert's superior ability becomes a new standard of comparison against which personal ability is compared (Herr et al., 1983; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Therefore, one's ability will be judged as lower than if it were assessed without being exposed to the high mastery of the expert. In addition, research on social comparisons would expect that exposure to high mastery makes other people's ability more salient, thus reducing the focus on one's own ability that is typical for many self-assessments (Kruger, 1999). Such increased salience of others' ability could mitigate the better-than-average effect (i.e., the tendency to judge ourselves as better than others at relatively easy activities) or exacerbate the worse-than-average effect (i.e., the tendency to judge ourselves as worse than others at relatively difficult activities), thus resulting in diminished self-assessments.

However, we posit that exposure to an expert mastering an activity may have a positive effect on one's perceived ability to perform that activity. By definition, mastery involves high control over the activity performed (White, 1959; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kubovy, 1999). The high level of control exhibited by the performer confers an apparent ease to the activity, which may be interpreted as actual ease (Song & Schwarz, 2008). More in general, seeing others perform challenging activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts (Bandura & Barab, 1973). These findings have been attributed to the powerful motivational effects of individuals' need for control (deCharms, 1968; Rotter, 1966). Research has shown that a sense of competence and mastery over one's own environment leads to perception of personal control (Bandura, 1989; White, 1959), and that individuals tend to seek control (Brehm, 1966), even in trivial or illusory forms (Langer, 1975).

We hypothesize that observing a performance conducted with high mastery allows to vicariously satisfy one's need for control. The exertion of control apparent in the high mastery performance may transfer to the observers, and trigger the belief that they would also

be able to exert that same level of control on the activity. As a consequence, such vicarious control would raise observers' expectations on their own ability to perform the activity, resulting in inflated assessments. We also hypothesize that this effect will be stronger for individuals that are more similar to the expert performer being observed, because such similarity would increase the personal relevance of vicariously derived information (Kazdin, 1974; Schunk, 1989). Study 1 shows that exposure to the masterful performance of a fairly complex yoga pose positively affects participants' assessment of their own ability to perform the same pose. Participants exposed to the masterful performance reported higher ability to perform the pose than participants just exposed to the instructions and a picture of the pose. Study 2 manipulates the level of mastery of the performance of the same yoga pose (high vs. low) and measures its effects on participants' predicted ability to perform the same pose. We also measured to what extent participants felt in control while watching the performance, and, as a potentially alternative mediator, the perceived difficulty of the pose. Participants exposed to the high-mastery performance evaluated themselves as more likely to be able to perform the yoga pose than participants exposed to the low-mastery performance. In addition, perceived control mediated the effect of exposure to mastery on predicted ability, but the perceived difficulty of the pose did not. Study 3 tests whether the dissimilarity between the observed expert and the self prevents the occurrence of the effect of exposure to mastery. Participants were first asked whether they watched the London 2012 100m men Olympic final (i.e., a highly masterful sport performance). Then, they indicated in how many seconds they thought they could run 100m, our measure of predicted ability. Finally, as a measure of their similarity to the Olympian athletes, participants reported their level of fitness. A significant interaction between exposure to mastery and level of fitness revealed that the effect of exposure to mastery was significant for high-fitness participants but not for low-fitness participants, signaling that the similarity between the performer and the observer moderates the effect of exposure to mastery on perceived self-efficacy.

Our results demonstrate that exposure to mastery results in enhanced self-efficacy, as individuals exposed to a highly masterful performance overestimate their own ability to perform the same activity. This effect appears to be due to the experience of a form of vicarious control while observing the masterful performance. Supporting the proposed explanation, this effect is moderated by the similarity between the individual and the actor. These results provide initial evidence on the conditions under which exposure to expert performance may enhance intentions to perform activities or purchase products that require skills and practice in order to be appropriately used (Thompson et al., 2005; Murray & Haubl, 2007; Burson, 2007).

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