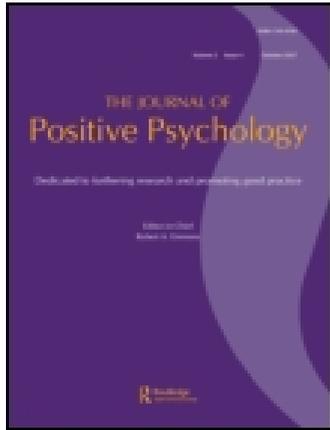


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The winner effect: how power affects your brain

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BOOK REVIEW

Approaching power with humility and wisdom

The winner effect: how power affects your brain, by Ian Robertson, London, Bloomsbury, 2012, 320 pp., £9.59 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4088-2473 3

Most of us know of the genius of Pablo Picasso, the Spanish painter, sculptor, printmaker, and ceramicist, who revolutionized art in the opening decades of the twentieth century. But few of us know the story of his son, Paulo Picasso. Paulo led a feckless life of drifting and heavy drinking – he could never hold down a job or forge a life independent of his domineering, neglectful father. Paulo lost his family, became live-in secretary and chauffeur to his father, and had his own son, Pablito, who tragically committed suicide by drinking bleach two days after Pablo Picasso's funeral in 1973. The tragic story of Paulo and his family highlights the sad and obvious truth that being born to successful parents does not guarantee success in life – becoming a 'winner' is not a genetic endowment that is passed from generation to generation. The children of rich and successful parents are not immune to anxiety and depression, and drug abuse (Way, Stauber, Nakkula, & London, 1994). While Pablo Picasso complained that his son Paulo had no motivation and drive to achieve in life, Pablo may have failed to understand how to empower his son and approach the use of his power with humility and wisdom. Ultimately, Pablo Picasso became a winner who failed to help his son become a winner. But how do we become a winner, a good winner, a sporting winner, magnanimous in victory, and wise in the use of power? How do we approach power with humility and wisdom?

Ian Robertson, in this brilliant new book, *The Winner Effect: How Power Affects Your Brain*, explores these and other questions and reveals the complex and challenging nature of winning, power, and success. To begin with, Robertson notes that developing high achievement motivation can be tricky. For example, parents cannot simply reward their child with money every time they do well, expect their child to model themselves on their parent's brilliance, or simply tell their child that they are a genius and then hope for the best. The brain networks that respond to extrinsic rewards (e.g. being rewarded with *money* if you do well on an IQ test) are different from the brain networks that respond to

intrinsic rewards (e.g. being rewarded by a *sense of achievement* after doing well on an IQ test; Mizuno et al., 2008), and thus cultivating an intrinsically motivated drive to achieve involves identifying values and pursuing goals that somehow sustain a sense of achievement. Notably, David McClelland classically observed that sustained achievement and success derive from setting regular, moderately challenging targets, rather than distant and unattainably high targets (McClelland, 1961). One problem for the children of successful parents, Robertson notes, is that they may see their parent high on the tree of success and wonder how they got there. If their parents fail to inform them of the many challenging, rewarding, incremental steps that led to their success, children may assume – and parents may reinforce the delusion – that success is achieved in one easy step and is a function of an inherited, natural, fixed ability.

In addition to handicapping oneself by setting unattainable goals, one of the greatest impediments to achieving success and maintaining intrinsic motivation in the face of challenges is the view that abilities such as intelligence are 'fixed'. Research shows that children who possess a view of intelligence as 'fixed' show less improvements in academic ability over time when compared with children who have an *incremental* view of intelligence as a product of ongoing learning (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Students who consider intelligence to be 'fixed' tend to view their performance as central to their ego and self-esteem – they are more sensitive to error feedback when compared with students who have an incremental view of intelligence (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006). Also, if they experience a performance failure on a task, rather than say 'I'm not concentrating enough, I must try harder', children with a view of intelligence as fixed may say things like 'I'm no good at this, I give up'. In this worldview, failure reflects poorly on the self or the ego, rather than being seen as an opportunity to learn from experience and persevere (Covington, 2000). Rather than praise our children for being 'bright' or even 'geniuses', and thus instill in them a view of their intelligence as fixed, Robertson suggests that we praise them for their effort, perseverance, ingenuity, and the consistency

of their interest in the pursuit of major challenges (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). As Robertson notes,

Genetic fatalists, in short, believe that they have a fixed ‘dose’ of attributes – intelligence, ability, personality, self-control, happiness and this belief or ‘attribution’ automatically undermines any attempts they might make to change or improve themselves; hence it sabotages their ability to win. (p. 50)

As Ericsson and colleagues have discovered, the level of performance we characteristically call ‘genius’ only ever emerges after about 10,000 h of practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) – genius is the product of practice and perseverance.

We may want to become winners and we may hope for the same for our children. However, we need to be careful what we wish for. One problem we need to be aware of is that winners may fail to help others become winners as a consequence of the effect that winning has on their brain and behavior. Being placed in an environment that allows one to win tends to increase testosterone levels, dominance behaviors, and the probability that one will continue winning. The emergence of dominance hierarchies in the animal kingdom is a function of how winning a challenge with one animal increases the probability of winning another challenge with other animals (Landau, 1951). Winning increases testosterone levels, even among apparently coolheaded chess players (Mazur, Booth, & Dabbs, 1992). Winning and empowerment also increase dopamine levels in the brain, which is associated with increased motivation and positivity in the context of goal pursuit – people become less cautious, more goal-oriented, their sense of control increases, and they become overoptimistic in relation to the time it takes to achieve a goal (Weick & Guinote, 2010). Increasing people’s sense of power experimentally will boost their motivation and executive control (Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008), and may help them to think in more abstract and creative ways (Smith & Trope, 2006). However, boosting people’s sense of power does not necessarily lead them to become altruistic enablers of others. In fact, experiments that increase people’s sense of power can make them more self-centered, less empathic, and less likely to factor in the perspective of others (Galinsky, Magee, Ena Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), while also making them less socially disinhibited. High-power people are also more likely to think that although others should follow the rules, the rules do not apply to them – they are more ‘forgiving’ of their own transgression and more harsh in their judgment of other’s transgressions (Lammers & Stapel, 2009; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010).

Wisdom entails that we gain perspective on the factors that empower people and the effects that power can have on behavior. Subtle, contextual factors may operate outside of our awareness. For example, soccer players show higher levels of testosterone before a *home* game compared with an *away* game (Neave & Wolfson, 2003) and this home advantage increases their chances of winning (Pollard, 2006). Similarly, people who negotiate a sale price in their *home* office as opposed to an *away* office strike better deals (Brown & Baer, 2011). Even striking a ‘high power’ pose (e.g. an expansive, casual pose like leaning back on one’s chair with legs outstretched) can increase testosterone levels and a sense of being ‘in charge’ and ‘powerful’, while also decreasing levels of the stress hormone, cortisol (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010).

The effects of experience, context, and posture on winning, power, and power-related behaviors may go unnoticed by people much of the time, and yet our sense of power is being constantly shaped, much like when implicit cultural biases lead both men and women to implicitly regard men as more powerful than women (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 2001). In a social context, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that empower one group at the expense of disempowering another group can have terrible negative consequences for those who have been disempowered. Robertson describes the classic study by Katz, Roberts, and Robinson (1965) who found that when black people living the southern states of America were given a test, they performed worse when told it was a test of ‘intelligence’ as opposed to a test of ‘eye-hand coordination’, particularly when the person testing them was a white. The prejudicial view that white Americans held in relation to black Americans at the time – specifically, that black people are less intelligent than white people – created a malignant self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby black people performed less well in the context of a white person testing their ‘intelligence’. Similar negative testing conditions can be created, which sanction the prejudicial view that older adults are less intellectually competent than younger adults – the consequence of which is worse performance among the older adults being tested under these conditions (Hess, Hinson, & Statham, 2004). Manipulations that make people feel like subordinates trigger cortisol stress responses (Sapolsky, 2005) and hyperactivate the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain involved in self-monitoring and self-consciousness (Zink et al., 2008). The social evaluative threat that comes with feeling like a subordinate, being judged, and rejected, can have a negative long-term impact on health (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004).

These power dynamics play out in all realms of life, but their impact can be hugely magnified in the context

of national and international politics and business. Success in politics and business comes at the risk of the potentially corrupting influence of power. To the extent that an increase in power can result in a decrease in perspective and empathy, an increase in dominance, goal focus, an illusion of control, abstract thinking, and risk-taking tendencies, we see a potentially dangerous admixture of brain-behavior dynamics that can potentially destroy the lives of millions of people. Robertson skillfully describes how power, poor perspective, illusions of control, and brutal dominance have resulted in countless foolish, risky, and aggressive decisions by business executives and politicians in recent history. For example, he recounts the public outcry in the US in 2008 when executives from GM, Ford, and Chrysler, lacking all perspective in relation to social sentiment at the time, arrived to Washington in luxury private jets and then requested a 25-billion dollar government bailout for their near-bankrupt companies. Robertson also describes how, in comparison with Bill Clinton and other world leaders, an analysis of the speeches of Tony Blair revealed that Blair had a hugely inflated belief that he could control world events (Dyson, 2006), which may explain a number of his foolhardy decisions to go to war and his subsequent falling out with Bill Clinton over foreign policy. While Robertson acknowledges that some good may have come as a result of Tony Blair's ballsy dominance, focus, and sense of control (e.g. his vigorous determination in pushing for peace in Northern Ireland), he also notes how important democratic processes are to help forestall the negative consequences of bad decisions made by power-needy leaders. Unfortunately, people with a high need for power not only have a drive to win, they also become stressed when they lose (Wirth, Welsh, & Schultheiss, 2006). Power-needy people respond more vigorously to angry faces (Schultheiss et al., 2008) and strive to maintain their power and dominance in the face of dissent. As such, power-needy leaders may reinforce groupthink within close inner circles and force failures of judgment upon a democratic society that strives for open deliberation, critical thinking, and collective intelligence.

But power need not always damage our social and moral sensibilities and make us more prone to a ballsy, reckless, risky behavior that ignores the needs and perspectives of others. David McClelland described two types of power needs, p-power (power needs for personal goals) and s-power (power needs focused on goals for an institution, a group or a society). While p-power people tend to see life as a zero-sum game in which there are winners and losers, s-power people are regulated by reflective judgment, self control, and social responsibility and are driven to win for wider social purposes (McClelland, 1975). Studies reveal that men with exclusively p-power tendencies show double the testosterone

levels of men who possess a mixture of both p-power and s-power when imagining winning a contest; furthermore, men with a mixture of p-power and s-power do not show the same dominance–testosterone link to actually winning the contest as do men with exclusively p-power tendencies (Schultheiss, Campbell, & McClelland, 1999). Studies also suggest that while women have on average the same levels of p-power as men, they show higher s-power on average than men (Chusmir & Parker, 1984), suggesting that women are more motivated than men to control others for the wider benefit of communities and organizations, not just for themselves.

Returning to the case of Pablo Picasso and his son Paulo, it is clear that parents need to be particularly careful in the way they wield power in the home. Researchers have found that the use of assertive and forceful control by parents can lead to more resentful, disruptive, and antisocial behavior in their children over time (Kochanska, Barry, Stellern, & O'Bleness, 2009), which may lead these children to abuse a position of power later in life, if the opportunity arises (Rogow & Lasswell, 1963). However, power does not corrupt everyone. Research suggests that power makes bullies of people who feel inadequate in the role of boss (Fast & Chen, 2009). We need people to feel empowered and we need people to assume positions of leadership, but Robertson suggests that people with power need to audit themselves for potential distortions in thinking and behavior that power can cause – they need to keep their p-power in check and maintain the social conscience and perspective that derive from their s-power. Robertson also notes that the temptation in a materialistic society is to become individualistic in our pursuit of power, money, and status, thus compromising our s-power tendencies. The sad reality is that materialism and money can act like a drug that may destroy judgment, degrade morality, and make people miserable and unhappy if money is not used for altruistic and social purposes (Kasser, 2002).

According to Robertson:

Real winners enjoy the benefits of power – the testosterone fueled drive, smartness, creativity and goal-focus – and enjoy influencing other people by dispensing resources that other people need and want. They thrive on being able to have an impact and they do not cripple themselves by believing their success to be due to inherited, unchangeable qualities ... Winners feel in control of life, and that sense of control will help shield them from stress and help them succeed better and live longer and happier. But true winners appreciate that, no matter how much of chimera it is, the ego is a dangerous dog. The men and women who take on the burden of power and use it well always keep the dog at a certain distance and on a tight leash of accountability to principles beyond themselves. Taming 'I' may be the greatest challenge for mankind's success. (pp. 274–275)

Ian Robertson has written a truly wonderful book full of the wisdom and perspective that derives from deep immersion in psychological science, and genuine, honest efforts to apply psychological science to the complex dynamics of everyday life.

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