A sweeter win: When others help us outperform them☆

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ABSTRACT

To succeed in today's workplaces, people often need to outperform the persons who helped them succeed. In three studies we assessed how doing so affects well-being, prosocial behavior and social perceptions. In the first two studies participants took part in a competitive version of a virtual ball-toss game, with different financial incentives in each study. Depending on condition participants either obtained the majority of the ball tosses or almost no ball tosses. Importantly, participants either "earned" this outcome as a result of their own performance or were "granted" this outcome as a result of the performance of the other players. Study 3 featured the same conditions and a combination of the incentives. However, participants now observed one of the games and rated the anticipated reaction of a focal player. The results revealed that (1) winning was better than losing, (2) especially when people's win was granted to them and less so when they earned it for themselves, (3) which resulted in higher well-being and prosocial behavior, and also maintained meta-perceptions and other-perceptions of competence and enhanced meta-perceptions and other-perceptions of warmth. These results advance theories on interpersonal competition, social comparison, and in/exclusion.

1. Introduction

Prior research suggests outperforming others is a "bittersweet" experience (Koch & Metcalfe, 2011; Thompson, Valley, & Kramer, 1995). On the one hand, people clearly enjoy prevailing over others (Dohmen, Falk, Fliessbach, Sunde, & Weber, 2011; Klein & Miller, 1998; Matsumoto & Willingham, 2006). Outperforming others makes people feel proud (Exline & Lobel, 2001; Tesser & Collins, 1988) and successful (Thompson et al., 1995), and people are motivated by the possibility of doing so (Blanes, Vidal, & Nossol, 2011; Kuhlen & Tymula, 2012). On the other hand, outperforming others may also impair well-being (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Exline & Lobel, 1999). The reactions of outperformed others can be a source of worry (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001) and make outperformers feel less honorable (Thompson et al., 1995), and for some people the prospect of outperforming others can be so threatening that they self-sabotage to avoid successes (Pappo, 1983; Zuckerman, Larrance, Porac, & Blanck, 1980).

Although these findings provide valuable insights, they do not fully detail people's reactions to outperforming others. Prior research has typically focused on situations in which competing individuals' achievements were unaffected by their competitors' behavior. For

example, many studies have studied individual achievements such as getting a high grade for an exam (Exline & Lobel, 2001, Study 2; Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004), realizing a high sales performance (Henagan, 2010; Henagan & Bedeian, 2009), or attaining a good score on a lab test performed independently (Zell & Exline, 2010; Zuckerman, Kernis, Guarnera, Murphy, & Rappoport, 1983). Other studies have asked participants to recall incidents in which they outperformed others (Exline & Lobel, 2001, Study 1; Koch & Metcalfe, 2011; Tesser & Collins, 1988) or thought others envied them (Rodriguez Mosquera, Parrott, & Hurtado de Mendoza, 2010). Although these participants may have recalled both situations in which they realized outcomes independent of their competitors and situations in which they did so by relying on their competitors' help, a breakdown of such incidents reported by Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2010)—including academic achievement, having a good (love) life and having a special talent or trait—suggest that they primarily recalled the former. Thus, prior research has primarily studied the experience of outperforming others *without* relying on them.

However, people often outperform others in situations that require them to rely on those others' helpful behavior. For example, individuals in organizations often need to cooperate with their competitors and vice versa (Milkman, Huang, & Schweitzer, 2012). Although workplaces

are competitive environments (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010) in which individuals need to vie for rewards, recognition, or status (Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008; Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010), being successful at work often hinges on effectively cooperating with colleagues (Treadway et al., 2013), even in manifestly competitive areas like sales (Bolander, Satornino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015; Gonzales, Claro, & Palmatier, 2014). Moreover, the wide-spread use of teams in organizations (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999) not only implies that individuals rely on co-workers in order to realize joint goals, but also that they do so to realize their individual goals. For example, co-workers' feelings towards individuals affect their willingness to work with those individual (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008, 2015) which in turn may affect the individuals' opportunities to be successful. Thus, individuals often need to rely on co-workers to "throw them the ball", and, to be successful, may subsequently need to outperform those same co-workers. Consequently, people often need to outperform others whom they relied on to succeed.

We extended prior research on outperforming others by assessing people's reactions to outperforming others who helped them succeed. We drew on research on both social comparison and self-perception to theorize on how outperforming others may affect outperformers' well-being, their subsequent behavior towards the people they outperformed, and, to illuminate the social-cognitive impact of outperforming others, their social perceptions. We tested the resulting hypotheses in three experimental studies.

1.1. The current research

We ran two experimental lab-studies in which participants took part in a competitive task, followed by a larger-scale online experiment in which participants observed such a task while taking the perspective of a focal participant. In each experiment, we compared (focal) participant's experiences of outperforming others—victory—with (focal) participant's experience of the opposite end of this dimension: being outperformed by others—loss. Moreover, in each experiment we compared victory or loss that resulted from (focal) participant's own behavior—earning—with victory and loss that resulted from their competitors' helpful behavior—granting. To do so, we created competitive versions of two virtual ballgames: *cyberball* (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) and *claimball* (De Waal-Andrews & Van Beest, 2012).

In keeping with earlier versions of cyberball and claimball, our versions featured a ball being tossed between players who were pictured as schematic figures on the screen. Moreover, participants were led to believe they were (or the focal participant was) playing with two other people, but in reality a computer determined the ball-tosses. However, as cyberball and claimball were originally designed to manipulate inclusion and exclusion, we made a number of key changes to both games in order to use them to manipulate victory and loss. First, the current versions of the games were programmed so that (focal) participants either won by obtaining *more* ball-tosses or lost by obtaining *less* ball-tosses than either of the other players. Second, as being given a prize for winning may increase competitiveness (Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013), we used monetary incentives to motivate (focal) participants to compete. Finally, to remind participants of the competitive nature of the games the scores accumulated by each of the players were displayed throughout the game.

Cyberball is played by clicking another player's figure on the screen to throw this player the ball. Therefore, in our version other players could allegedly "grant" (focal) participants victory or loss by throwing or not throwing sufficient balls. In contrast, in claimball the ball can allegedly be claimed by being the first to click the player holding it. Therefore, in our version (focal) participants could "earn" victory or loss by claiming or not claiming sufficient balls. Thus, using competitive versions of cyberball and claimball allowed us to independently control the game *outcome*—that is whether (focal) participants emerged as winners or losers—and the game *process*—that is whether (focal)

participants earned or were granted the outcome.

We varied the incentives used in respectively Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3 to reflect the diverse nature of competitions in organizations in which valued outcomes may be the result of a single, direct competition (e.g., being selected for a desirable job or promotion), the cumulative result of a series of smaller, indirect competitions (e.g., successfully realizing a series of tasks, sales or projects may result in a larger paycheck than colleagues), or a combination of the two. More specifically, in Study 1, participants were told that the player who obtained the most balls would be entered into a prize draw, the ball-tosses accumulated by each player were displayed throughout the game, and a statement was flashed three times at the end of the game indicating who had won. In Study 2, participants were told they would receive a financial reward for each ball that passed through their hands. Moreover, the money accumulated by each player was displayed on the screen, allowing participants to ascertain that they outperformed others or were outperformed. Finally, in Study 3, like in Study 2, players received a financial reward for each ball that passed through their hands and accumulated rewards were displayed during the game. However, like in Study 1, a statement flashed three times at the end of the game to indicate the winner. Moreover, the winners' reward was subsequently doubled.[1]

1.2. Well-being

We expected that winning would lead to higher well-being than losing, but that this effect of outcome would depend on the process leading to the outcome.

Specifically, we reasoned that process would not moderate the effect on well-being of loss. Performing weakly in domains that others value makes people feel less accepted by those others (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001, Study 1 and 2). Moreover, if others can choose whom to work with, they may refrain from working with an underperforming individual, leaving this individual not only psychologically but also physically isolated. Similar to other experiences of reduced social value (Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & De Waal-Andrews, 2016; McDonald, Saltzman, & Leary, 2003), social exclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) or ostracism (Hartgerink, Van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015; Williams, 2009), we reasoned, this isolation should negatively impact people's well-being, irrespective of the process leading to their isolated position.

Crucially, we expected that process would moderate the effect on well-being of victory. Outperforming others makes people feel competent, confident, proud and successful (McAuley, Russel, & Gross, 1983; Tesser & Collins, 1988; Thompson et al., 1995; Weiner, Russel, & Lerman, 1979). Therefore, it may help satisfy a fundamental human need: the need for competence (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001), irrespective of the process leading to that outcome. Moreover, outperforming others can also be interpersonally abrasive (Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006; Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001; Hyland & Dann, 1988) and thus threaten another fundamental need: the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sheldon et al., 2001). However, this threat occurs only to the extent that outperformers worry about outperformed persons' feeling threatened by being outperformed (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001), which they are less likely to do if the outperformed persons helped them succeed. Consequently, as events are more satisfying if they fulfill a broad range of fundamental needs (Sheldon et al., 2001; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006), we expected that well-being would be higher following earned victory than following granted victory.

Hypothesis 1. There will be a two-way interaction between outcome and process, such that well-being will not differ across process

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