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Like Mike: Ability contagion through touched objects increases confidence and improves performance

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ABSTRACT

Magical thinking refers to irrational peculiar beliefs, including those that conform to the laws of contagion. We propose that touching an object that was previously touched by a high performer increases confidence via magical thinking (ability contagion) and improves actual performance among individuals high in experiential processing. A series of studies provides support for this main proposition. Our results cast doubt on an alternative explanation based on priming, and are obtained controlling for participants' level of rational processing, motivation, and affect.

Introduction

One of the authors of this paper was a fairly consistent high scorer on tests during undergraduate days, as well as fairly broke, and so wore the same pair of Nike sneakers every exam day. One day, in the midst of a shoe crisis, the author's college roommate borrowed these Nikes and scored very highly on her own test. Convinced that her academic success was due to a transfer of intelligence through the sneakers, a ritual that lasted for the next 2 years was born. Indeed, the popularity of movies such as *Like Mike*, in which a 14-year-old orphan of diminutive size and even more diminutive athletic ability becomes an NBA superstar when he wears a pair of discarded sneakers presumably previously owned by Michael Jordan, suggests that the belief that performance abilities can be transferred resonates with many people. Such apparently irrational beliefs and behavior (i.e., borrowing sneakers improves performance) fall under the law of contagion in the domain of sympathetic magical thinking. Although such beliefs are often at odds with known and otherwise accepted scientific paradigms, even rational adults may fall prey to its laws (Pronin, Wegner, & McCarthy, 2006; St. James, Handelman, & Taylor, 2011).

Research has begun to explore physical contagion in venues like retail stores and celebrity auctions (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006, 2008; Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007; Mishra, 2009; Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011). Although these papers are important for providing the first evidence of attribute-based contagion effects in marketplace environments, no one has explored whether contagion effects can similarly occur in the workplace. Importantly, despite the common belief that a wide range of properties is potentially contagious (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2002), belief in the transfer of abilities from person to person via intermediary vehicles has never been tested explicitly. Yet, evidence of ability contagion in the workplace has many important and unexplored consequences; namely, if such a belief exists, can the transfer of higher (vs. lower) ability manifest as increased performance requiring that ability, and if so, by which process?

The current research seeks to demonstrate the existence of a magical belief that ability essence can reside in everyday objects and transfer through touch. In doing so, we add to the magical thinking and contagion literatures in three important ways. First, we show that individuals with a tendency to process experientially believe that ability can transfer through touch via intermediary objects. Second, we find that such ability contagion can impact actual performance. Third, we demonstrate that the effect is driven by contagion elevating receivers' confidence that they can do well on a task of the same ability, raising performance expectations.

Theoretical background

Peculiar beliefs and magical thinking

Peculiar beliefs are non-veridical beliefs that do not have a rational, empirical, or scientifically established link to outcomes

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they are intended to influence (Kramer & Block, 2011). Such beliefs have been inconsistently and interchangeably referred to in the literature as paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural (Lindeman & Svedholm, 2012). For example, peculiar beliefs that objects or actions can influence one's luck (e.g., beliefs that a pair of sneakers is inherently lucky and thus improves performance when worn) are commonly referred to as superstitions, while peculiar beliefs that adhere to the laws of similarity and contagion (e.g., beliefs that the ability of a high performer transfers into a pair of sneakers and subsequently to a new owner and thus improves performance when worn) are most often referred to as magical thinking. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, Lindeman and Svedholm (2012) conclude that there are no essential conceptual differences that define these terms independently. Nonetheless, to be consistent with the existing research to date, we will use the term "magical thinking" when referring to the laws of similarity and contagion.

Although magical thinking is most often thought to be relegated to young children and people living in tribal cultures, research has recently begun to document just how common and ordinary it is among otherwise rational adults (Pronin et al., 2006; Subbotsky, 2004). The two magical thinking laws of similarity and contagion were originally proposed as universal truths over a century ago (Frazer, 1959), but are modernly conceptualized as rules of thumb that help people make sense of the world (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2002). The law of similarity holds that things that resemble one another share fundamental properties, or that "appearance equals reality" (Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986). Rozin and colleagues (1986) and Rozin, Nemeroff, Wane, and Sherrod (1989) have demonstrated the law of similarity with food and choice, including participants' hesitancy to consume sugar from a jar labeled "Sodium Cyanide, Poison," despite the fact that participants themselves labeled the jar.

The law of contagion holds that physical contact between a source and a target results in a perceived transfer of some essence or quality between the two entities. While actual physical contact is critical in magical contagion (as opposed to merely proximal), this contact may be direct or may be mediated through a third object that either simultaneously or subsequently touches both objects (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2002). Importantly, transfer can occur irrespective of valence (i.e., contagion can be both positive and negative), and the exchanged qualities can be physical attributes of the source, moral qualities and dispositions, or abilities.

Beliefs in the transfer of physical attributes

Mishra (2009), Morales and Fitzsimons (2007), and Argo et al. (2006) present studies that collectively demonstrate the physical attribute model of contagion in the marketplace. For example, Morales and Fitzsimons (2007) found that when a product that elicits disgust (e.g., feminine napkins) has had supposed contact with other products (e.g., cookies), their evaluations are lowered. Further, Argo and colleagues showed that physical attributes of consumers are believed to contaminate products through perceived contact. For example, when a clothing item is believed to have been tried on by a previous customer, such perceived contact can arouse disgust, which in turn results in less favorable evaluations (Argo et al., 2006). In follow-up studies, the same researchers explored if positive contagion can occur; in other words, contagion not mediated by feelings of disgust (Argo et al., 2008). In these studies, customers increased evaluations of a clothing item if the previous customer was attractive.

Beliefs in the transfer of moral qualities and dispositions

Rozin and colleagues demonstrate the transmission of moral qualities and general dispositions through contact. For example, Rozin et al. (1989) found evidence of contagion effects in the transfer of clothing and personal belongings from unsavory or personally disliked people. Nemeroff and Rozin (1994) identified the belief in contagion transfer for both positive and negative qualities and dispositions. For instance, sexiness can be perceived to transfer from personal objects worn by a favorite sex symbol, general goodness from a person considered to personify goodness, and evil from a villain or someone who personifies evil (e.g., Hitler). Finally, Kramer and Block (2011) explicitly examined the transfer of moral qualities in backward contagion, which is characterized by an unwillingness to allow one's personal effects to come into the possession of disliked people. Findings indicated that consumers may be less willing to accept their own auction reservation price for a teddy bear they were selling when the bidder was of low (i.e., a sex offender) than of high (i.e., a mother of a young child) moral quality.

Beliefs in the transfer of abilities

Surprisingly, to date research has never explicitly tested beliefs in the transfer of source abilities, which is a gap in the contagion literature the current research seeks to fill. Specifically, the literature is silent on two important research questions: first, can a person's specific abilities, like creativity, transfer from a source to a target through physical contact with an object, and second, can such essence transfer manifest as increased performance on tasks requiring that ability, rather than in merely increased valuation of the intermediary item? In this research, we propose that abilities can be perceived to transfer via intermediary vehicles and impact subsequent performance on related tasks. Further, we expect that differential performance on a task will be driven by a change in confidence caused by the ability contamination of the intermediary vehicle.

Specifically, there is robust evidence in the literature that performance tends to be influenced by self-efficacy or confidence (Bandura, 1997). The more confidence individuals have in their abilities, the better they tend to perform (Feltz, Short, & Sullivan, 2008; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Importantly, we propose that one antecedent of confidence is ability contagion. This argument is consistent with findings concerning the effect of other irrational beliefs, such as luck-related superstitions, on confidence. For example, Langer (1975) found that confidence increased when individuals were given the illusion of control over outcomes that were actually determined by chance. Darke and Freedman (1997a, 1997b) showed that individuals who believe that they have control over their luck (i.e., those scoring high on the belief in good luck scale) feel more confident about a subsequent task performance after experiencing a lucky event. More recently, across a series of studies, Damisch, Stoberock, and Mussweiler (2010) demonstrated that activating good luck, whether via lucky charms or lucky sayings (e.g., "I'll keep my fingers crossed"), prior to performing a task leads to increased performance on the task, and that this increased performance is mediated by higher self-efficacy judgments. For example, participants who brought their own lucky charms to the experimental session (Damisch et al., 2010) reported higher levels of self-efficacy and actually did better on a memory task (Experiment 3) or an anagram task (Experiment 4) than those who arrived without a lucky charm. Thus, actual performance may improve even when the confidence boost is based on irrational beliefs, such as wearing a lucky charm or a general belief in good luck (Damisch et al., 2010; Darke & Freedman, 1997a). Similarly, we propose that ability contagion impacts confidence, which, in turn, will drive subsequent performance.

Note that the transfer of ability from a source to a recipient via an intermediary object is a mechanism unique to magical thinking (particularly the law of contagion) that does not exist in other peculiar beliefs, like lucky superstitions. Lucky superstitious beliefs and behavior are instances of peoples' tendency to subjectively