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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jespContextual and personal determinants of preferring success attributed to natural talent or striving[☆]Christina M. Brown^{*}, Nicole S. Troy¹, Katie R. Jobson, Jennifer K. Link

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ABSTRACT

Evidence to date has established a preference for successful individuals whose achievements are attributed to natural talent (“naturals”) rather than focused effort (“strivers”). Across six studies, we discovered a reversal of the bias depending on contextual and personal factors. Strivers, rather than naturals, are favored when evaluating ordinary people. This preference is particularly strong among perceivers who have experience in the performance domain, and it replicates across different domains and participant populations. Strivers are also preferred as cooperative partners and are expected to perform better on novel, unrelated tasks. The direction of the preference for naturals versus strivers can be traced to a combination of the perceiver's experience and the target's professional status. Specifically, a naturalness bias was only present among experienced perceivers evaluating professional targets. On the other hand, a more implicit form of the naturalness bias was observed in attributions made about the target's achievement, such that strivers were assumed to have natural talent more than naturals were assumed to have worked diligently.

1. Introduction

Exemplary achievement in academics or the arts is consistently linked to a combination of natural talent (i.e., intelligence) and concentrated effort (Detterman & Ruthsatz, 1999; Ruthsatz & Urbach, 2012), but the relative importance of talent versus effort is a persistent question. While the truth surely lies somewhere in the middle—with effort perhaps determining the level a person attains within a pre-determined range of ability potential (e.g., Meinz et al., 2012)—people's beliefs about and preferences for ability derived through talent or effort have personal and societal consequences.

From the individual's perspective, if talent is essential and no amount of effort will produce improvement, then it is both irrational and futile to continue exerting effort. Believing ability is fixed and cannot be changed is called an entity implicit theory, whereas an incremental implicit theory involves believing effort can improve ability (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). Both dispositional and experimentally manipulated implicit theories consistently predict motivation and performance, with an incremental mindset increasing persistence relative to an entity mindset (e.g., Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). At a societal level, believing natural talent matters more than effort shapes how teachers treat low-performing

students and, as a consequence, those students' motivation and self-expectations (Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2012). Believing in natural talent also influences support for policies designed to reduce social inequality (Rattan, Savani, Naidu, & Dweck, 2012).

Despite cultural maxims like “If at first you don't succeed, try, try again,” evidence to date reveals a bias for natural talent in the United States. For example, professional musicians explicitly report effortful training as more important than innate talent for musical achievement, yet they rate a musician who is described as naturally gifted as more talented, more likely to succeed in the future, and as having performed better than a comparable musician described as having practiced diligently (Tsay & Banaji, 2011). “Naturals” (people who achieve success through their natural aptitude in a particular domain) are also privileged over “strivers” (people who achieve success primarily through persistence, perseverance, and hard work) in entrepreneurial contexts. People making hypothetical hiring decisions sacrifice other qualifications (e.g., years of experience, IQ points, accrued capital) to gain an entrepreneur portrayed as a natural instead of a striver (Tsay, 2016).

Beginning at a young age, humans believe that many traits, ranging from personality to group membership, have essentialist properties (e.g., Gelman, Heyman, & Legare, 2007). These traits are considered inherent to the person, inevitable, and impervious to change. In

[☆] Data. All data can be accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/948rskffhd.1>.

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addition, both children and adults prefer people who have always possessed a likable trait over people who possess the trait to the same degree but had to acquire it over time (Lockhart, Keil, & Aw, 2013). Acquired traits are seen as fragile and easy to lose, whereas natural traits are expected to persist (Lockhart et al., 2013).

In fact, American eighth graders find academic success more attractive when it comes from a combination of high ability and low effort (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995), and even high-performing Honors college students credit their own natural ability, rather than their effort, for their achievement in areas like mathematics and writing (Siegle, Rubenstein, Pollard, & Romey, 2010). Indeed, in the United States, effort is thought to be inversely related to ability, and therefore it has a negative nuance: The assumption is that people only expend effort because they lack ability (Holloway, 1988). As a consequence, many of these effects may be culturally moderated. For example, American students value effort less and are more likely to believe in inborn traits than Japanese students (Holloway, 1988; Lockhart, Nakashima, Inagaki, & Keil, 2009). However, in both the U.S. and Japan people endorse an increasingly essentialist view of traits as they age (Lockhart et al., 2009).

1.1. Research objectives

The purpose of the current work was to identify the boundaries, if any, of the preference for people with natural talent. Our work was inspired by past research showing more favorable ratings of a musician's talent, performance, future potential, and employability when the musician's achievement was described as originating from natural talent rather than effort (Tsay & Banaji, 2011). Initially, we predicted that the only contexts in which strivers are preferred over naturals would be those in which effort is explicitly valued. In testing our predictions, however, we unexpectedly identified other boundaries as well as a new but related bias: attributing a portion of success to natural talent despite no evidence of giftedness.

Our original predictions were as follows:

- (1) Given the powerful dislike and avoidance of free riders (e.g., Price, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2002) and partners who avoid expending effort (Park & Brown, 2014), people will prefer strivers over naturals as partners in cooperative tasks. Strivers' past history of effort indicates they are unlikely to free-ride, and this should make them desirable cooperative partners.
- (2) Strivers will be rated as more likely to be successful in a new domain than naturals. Perceivers may assume a natural's talent is limited to that domain while a striver's persistence is a stable, context-independent personality trait (in fact, persistence may even be seen as an inherent trait; Lockhart et al., 2013).
- (3) The preference for naturals will be exacerbated when evaluating potential mates. The presumed genetic origin of a partner's natural talent could be passed on to offspring, therefore making them more desirable mates (i.e., “good genes” theories of attraction and mating; e.g., Roberts & Little, 2008). Because this hypothesis is based on genetic inheritance in heterosexual reproduction and homosexual mate preferences do not consistently parallel the preferences of heterosexual individuals of the same physical sex (e.g., gay men vs. straight men) or with the same target of attraction (e.g., gay men vs. straight women; e.g., Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995), only the data from participants reporting opposite-sex attraction were used to test this particular prediction.

As we will describe, while some of our predictions were supported, the most interesting outcome of the current work was that we consistently observed a preference for *strivers* on dependent measures that were intended to ensure the manipulation of striving versus natural talent did not affect perceptions of the target's actual achievement. We pursued this finding, obtaining it again across samples and domains,

until we were able to identify moderators of the preference for naturals versus strivers.

Specifically, when evaluating ordinary people (non-professionals), there is a preference for individuals whose success is described as the result of *striving* rather than natural talent, and this preference is particularly pronounced when the performance domain is self-relevant. In contrast, when people evaluate a professional in a self-relevant domain, they exhibit a preference for natural talent. Critically, however, people believe that success achieved through striving still originates from some amount of natural talent, which lends evidence to a more implicit, but still present, naturalness bias.

2. Study 1

2.1. Overview

Participants, all of whom played a musical instrument (cf. Tsay & Banaji, 2011), read a fake self-description of another participant who played the same instrument as themselves. The target was portrayed as being a natural or striver at the instrument. All participants reported their general impressions of the target before being randomly assigned to evaluate the target as a potential cooperative partner on a new task unrelated to music (Hypotheses 1 and 2) or as a romantic partner (Hypothesis 3). We expected the natural to be preferred as a romantic partner, whereas the striver would receive higher ratings as a cooperative partner as well as higher performance expectations for the new task.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Participants

Participants were 221 adults recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) with the survey administered through TurkPrime (Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock, 2017). Seven were excluded for not following instructions on the essay task (specifically, writing at least one complete sentence about themselves). The description of the target was designed to include the same instrument the participant reported playing, so we excluded two participants who did not type the name of one instrument (i.e., one wrote “voice” and another listed multiple instruments). This left a final sample of 212 participants (48% male, 52% female; age $M = 33.18$, $SD = 10.24$). When analyzing participants' romantic interest in the target, we excluded the responses of 15 participants who reported being most attracted to the same sex and one participant who did not report their sexual preference. These participants were retained in all other analyses.

Sample size for this and all subsequent studies was decided in advance. In all six studies we did not inspect the data until after the predetermined number of participants was attained, and we report all exclusion criteria and variables.

2.2.2. Procedure

The study was advertised as “For musicians only.” After reading the consent statement, participants reported their sex, the sex they were most attracted to, and the instrument they played. Common instruments were displayed in a list of multiple-choice options, and participants could type the name of their instrument if it was not listed. Their instrument was then inserted into a fake profile of another person (the target) that participants later read. Participants were asked how long they had played that instrument (in years and months) and how important playing the instrument well was to them (on a scale of 1 *Not at all important* to 7 *Very important*). Participants were then told,

We are collecting brief paragraphs about how musicians describe themselves. We'll ask other musicians to read each other's descriptions, and then to form impressions based on these descriptions.

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