
Newcastle University

Date: 12 December 2015

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Overview

This study [1] attempts to examine the motives regarding the Illusion of Control (IOC) [2]. Langer first reasoned that we as humans on occasions believe our probability of winning games of complete chance is somehow increased due to a non-existent entity. This entity could be described as luck, which has been defined in the paper as a ‘casual force over which no one has control’. However Langer has shown we do believe we have control over an uncontrollable event. In other words we can control our own luck. There is a greater faith in our own conventional abilities even in games of chance.

An earlier study by Wohl & Enzle [3] extended this by showing that we use ‘personal luck’ in order to maximise their outcomes. Both of these papers examined personal luck, but the present study is claimed by the authors to be the first of its type to investigate control by what the author’s term ‘by proxy’. Through an extensive literature search it appears that their claims are factual with previous work since Langer’s paper being in relation to personal control. What is meant by ‘proxy’ is that we will hand over control or responsibility to another. This challenges the view of the IOC in terms of gambling choice. The authors predict we will hand over responsibility to another in games of pure chance. This is indeed relevant as it is common to look toward a more experienced professional, for example in medicine. There is a rational reason to do so in that case, as medical professionals will differ in their abilities. However in games of chance we look to those who appear to be ‘lucky’.

The inspiration used in the paper is that of organising a lottery syndicate, whereby members contribute and split the prize money. There will be a member of the group that will be chosen to select the numbers each week. This member is usually interchangeable depending on the amount of ‘good picks’ the person has had. Rationally one person is no more likely than the other to pick the correct numbers. This scenario may not seem terribly relevant, but when this is applied to property investment the stakes become much higher and spectacularly relevant [4]. It could be argued a property investor has a certain ability to identify a wealthy prospect, yet there is certainly an element of chance related to this. To further appraise this study the methods will be examined, along with the analysis they use, and the conclusions they draw from this. It is important to note the deductions they have reached are generally accurate. There are improvements that could be made to further justify their claims.

Experimental Procedure

Experiment one allows a participant to pick their own scratch card or allow a fellow participant, who is a confederate, to pick the scratch card. They hypothesis participants were more likely to allow the confederate to choose the scratch card for them. This addresses the issue of the researchers as a source of bias. By including a confederate they will not have as much personal association with the
outcome of the experiment. They are unlikely to be giving any conscious cues related to the outcome of the experiment. However they will know the hypothesis and may give cues to the participant to direct their choice.

We do not know how old the confederate is or whether they are male or female, which would affect their interaction [7]. It has been found that even the colour of waitresses dress has an impact on the amount of tipping. Male are found to be effected more by this when the confederate is a female [16]. This is the case when the female wears a red t-shirt. This may have a framing effect on how much the participants are willing the confederate to take control. The fact the confederate speaks may give the impression they are confident, hence more successful. Females tend to be more vulnerable and generally give lower estimations of self-confidence [17] whereas males often rate their judgements as more confident [18]. Due to these findings it is important we control this gender element of the confederate.

Any winnings from the scratch card are not shared, so is not relevant to their original aim of investigating the reasoning behind a lottery syndicate. Therefore an improvement would be to use two actual participants, who are unaware of the research question and share any profit. This will also remove the issue of social cues from the confederate which the authors highlight.

The sample size used is relatively small and includes twenty four females to six males. When using a larger sample we may see this effect is not as large. There is a high percentage of females, who as we know are more risk averse [5] [15]. The results may be affected by this as females may not want to take the risks themselves, so gave responsibility to the confederate [14]. For this reason risk taking behaviour should have been measured. Although, we still see this transfer of control in the other experiments, where there is a more balanced sample.

There is an unnecessary deceptive element of the first experiment. The participant believes the decision of who is the experimenter is to be randomized, however this is rigged. There seems no logical reason why this could not be assigned before the participant entered the room. It has been shown that deception in experiments arouses suspicion. This can have an effect on decision making if the participant becomes aware of this, or has had experience of this in the past [6]. Participants received a course credit for this so will have more than likely participated in previous psychological studies. They may be more equipped to identify any deception.

The environment the experiment takes place in not natural. The room contains roulette tables and other gambling related games, which are not usually found in the same place as scratch cards. These type of games and gambling may be unfamiliar to participants. This may create ambiguity, which highlights feelings of incompetence and worsens evaluation of a decision [19]. They do enquire about
gambling habits and find no difference in experience in gambling, however this does still not tell us how familiar the participants will be with these games. The experiment should be repeated in a real world environment, for example purchasing in a shop if scratch cards were to be used.

In experiment two we see the authors recognise the issues of social cues in the first experiment with the use of an online roulette game. There are some disadvantages associated with performing gambling online. There may be a lack of an emotional high due to the game not being physically real [8]. It must be said there have been many studies to show the advantages of performing tasks online rather than in person, such as reducing experimenter effects [9][10][11]. We observe a much better gender balance, seventeen men and twenty one women, and the effect is still found. Another improvement they carry out is that any winnings are shared, so this is more relevant to their research question, which was based on a lottery syndicate.

The participants conversed with the confederate online in order to build a rapport. There is no control over what is said in this interaction. This will mean each participants conversation will be different and could have an impact on their decision. It may not be intentional the confederate may be using framing in some of the dialogue [12]. This fails to reduce this source of bias. Social cues will be reduced from experiment one but it may be useful to have no interaction at all with the confederate or have an automated response.

In the description of experiment three there is a mistake when referring to experiment two on page 194. The authors intend to refer to experiment two, however they refer to experiment three. This may mislead the reader into what is being discussed. The word ‘ostensibly’ is used several times throughout, which is an overly complicated word for the context in which it is used.

In experiment three the participant can choose the amount of money they are willing to bet. It is shown that they will bet more when the confederate spins the wheel. The participants do not share the winnings, so is not particularly relevant to the original aims of the syndicate. The $15 stake was given to the participants and is not of particularly high value. From the research we have seen the greater the loss the less likely we are to gamble, due to our natural loss aversion [13]. This could mean the higher the amount or if it is their own money used they may not transfer their control.

A factor, which is not mentioned in the study, is the participant’s revenue from the spins and whether this is related to their perception of how lucky they thought the confederate was. If they believed the confederate was lucky we should see those with the highest revenue perceive the confederate as very lucky in a linear relationship. This would have provided further evidence for their theory when comparing the revenue of those in the lucky-proxy to the control condition.
Further Research

An extension could be a lottery syndicate including three conditions, an unlucky-proxy, a lucky-proxy and a control. A confederate in the unlucky-proxy would demonstrate in a section of practise rounds their unlucky ability. In the lucky condition the confederate would prove their ‘lucky’ ability. In the control condition the confederate would be neutral. The participants would have the option to confidentially vote each round who should pick the next round of numbers, as well as having the option to not put their money forward. After each round they would score each person in the group’s luckiness etc.

To relate this to a student context we must use concepts that are most important to students, which is succeeding in examinations, and money as an incentive. The procedure would use the same principle as the lifelines used on the game show ‘Who wants to be a Millionaire’, although played with smaller amounts of money. The participants would be given questions that are not in their area of expertise. They will have the option to ‘phone a friend’ or 50/50 (removes two of the four options on each question). There would be a 2 x 2 design for this study. In the expert condition, where the ‘friend’ is another student, who is taking classes in the subject area of the question. Within this condition the expert will either answer the question incorrectly or correctly. The other condition will be the novice condition where the ‘friend’ is taking classes which are not in the subject area of the question. This condition will include a correct or incorrect answer from the ‘friend’. This involves no social cues as it will be simply be an automated answer. We may see feedback have an effect, as overconfidence is very little in those such as weathermen who have regular feedback [20]. Positive or negative feedback may change the confidence the participant has in the ‘friend’. We should find in the expert-correct condition the participant asks the ‘friend’ on subsequent questions almost always as they are logically more skilled. In the expert-incorrect condition will the participant still give control to the other person? In the novice-incorrect condition we should see the participant not refer back to the friend and use the 50/50 option more. Will the participant continually refer to the ‘friend’ in the novice-correct, even though it will be based on pure chance? Will they refer to the ‘friend’ in the novice-correct condition as much as in the expert-correct condition?

Conclusion

Overall the paper justifies their conclusions well with the data they present, using many appropriate controls and considering the social effects, however they could be more confident about their conclusions with certain adjustments. Their findings go against the illusion of control, and are incredibly interesting, informative and applicable to the real world, only if we can verify their findings using the extension of their experiment we have suggested.
References


4. Mike Cox Lecture 7 Case Study ‘Bill Clinton’


12. Mike Cox Lecture 4 Slide 13

13. Mike Cox Lecture 3 Slide 3

15. Mike Cox Lecture 1 Slide 108
16. Mike Cox Lecture 4 Slide 56
17. Mike Cox Lecture 9 Slide 87


19. Mike Cox Lecture 8 Slide 12
20. Mike Cox Lecture 9 Slide 30