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Life’s winners think success was earned even if it was down to luck

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People attribute success to skill even when it’s down to luck
Henrik Sorensen/getty

By Clare Wilson

Do wealthier people owe their financial success to skill or luck? Your views on this question may be set by your own financial status, at least according to a study of people playing a card game.

In a simplified two-player version of the game known as “President” (or less politely, “Asshole”) winners were more likely than losers to credit their success to skill rather than luck – even though the game clearly involved little skill and when the odds were blatantly rigged in the winner’s favour.

“It was absolutely obvious one of the players was playing with a huge advantage,” says Mauricio Bucca of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.

Talent or luck?

People have long debated whether success in life is mainly due to talent or luck. Surveys show those who are wealthier are more likely to say they earned their success. This may be because they are being big-headed – alternatively they may genuinely have worked harder, and be more aware of how that has contributed to their financial success.

Bucca’s team explored the subject by creating a version of President that involved almost no skill, and in which the influence of the starting conditions could be dialled up or down. They recruited about 1000 people through a website, Amazon Mechanical Turk, giving people \$2.50 for taking part and a \$5.00 bonus if they won.

Whoever was randomly picked to play the first card in round one of the game always had an advantage that meant they were most likely to win that round. In some versions, this starting advantage was further boosted: after the cards had been dealt for round two, the winner of round one was able to swap one or two of their weakest cards with the strongest ones of their opponent. In other versions, the opposite happened: the starting advantage was weakened by the previous loser getting good cards from the winner.

Fair game?

At the end of their game, people were asked if it had been fair. Regardless of the conditions, winners were more likely to say yes than losers. Even when the winners benefited from receiving either one or two strong cards from their opponent, they were twice as likely to judge it a fair game as the losers. What’s more, in most versions of the game winners were more likely than losers to attribute success in the game to talent – even though the game required very little.

People’s views in real life are even more likely to be influenced by their personal circumstances, says Bucca. “It’s probably not half as strong as what happens in real life, where there’s less information.”

But Richard Wilkinson at the University of York, UK, co-author of *The Spirit Level*, says people with low-paid jobs also underestimate the role of luck in societal inequalities. “We tend to judge personal worth by people’s external worth.”

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