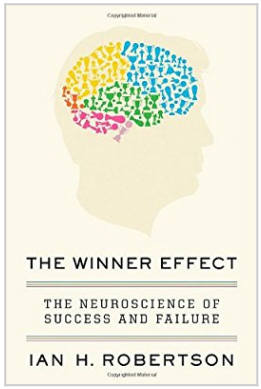

The Winner Effect: The Neuroscience of Success and Failure

By Ian H. Robertson

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What makes a winner? Why do some people succeed both in life and in business, and others fail? Why do a few individuals end up supremely powerful, while many remain powerless?

The "winner effect" is a term used in biology to describe how an animal that has won a few fights against weak opponents is much more likely to win later bouts against stronger contenders. As Ian Robertson reveals, it applies to humans, too. Success changes the chemistry of the brain, making you more focused, smarter, more confident, and more aggressive. The effect is as strong as any drug. And the more you win, the more you will go on to win. But the downside is that winning can become physically addictive.

By understanding what the mental and physical changes are that take place in the brain of a "winner," how they happen, and why they affect some people more than others, Robertson answers the question of why some people attain and then handle success better than others. He explains what makes a winner?or a loser?and how we can use the answers to these questions to understand better the behavior of our business colleagues, family, friends, and ourselves.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A book that will help you understand what makes winners, and what paths to avoid when you get power.” ?*MindYourDecisions.com*

“Fascinating.” ?*The Sunday Times (UK)*

“Compelling stories combine with cutting-edge science to show why coming first is not the same as being a real winner -- engrossing.” ?*Oliver James, author of They F*** You Up*

“Like a masterful detective, Dr. Robertson provides a captivating and insightful journey into understanding the mystery of the effects of power on human behavior and thinking.” ?*Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others*

“He tells a compelling, vivid and instructive story of how we are empowered and how we are disempowered and how we succeed and how we fail. I really enjoyed it -- it is a must read.” ?*Raymond Tallis, author of Aping Mankind*

“A fascinating topic dealt with in a fascinating way. … I love the book.” ?*Matt Cooper, author of How Ireland Really Went Bust*

“What does it take to be a winner; to be successful and achieve at an optimal level? Professor Robertson has masterfully synthesized cutting edge social, cognitive, and developmental psychology, as well as neuroscience with fascinating stories of notable people in the public eye to answer this question. Thoroughly researched and engagingly written by an international scholar, once you begin reading this book it will be difficult to put down. Whatever your profession, this remarkable book will most assuredly resonate with you.” ?*John B. Arden, PhD, author of Rewire Your Brain*

“Utterly fascinating.” ?*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

"Ian Robertson is a rare combination: a cutting edge neuroscientist whose important research is done in great depth and with careful detail, who also has the ability to step back, take risks, and explore the big picture, with a vivid, clear, engaging style, and enviable energy." ?**Norman Doidge, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Brain that Changes Itself***

A neuroscientist and trained clinical psychologist, Ian Robertson is an international expert on neuropsychology. Currently Professor of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin, and formerly Fellow of Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge, he holds visiting professorships at University College London and Bangor University in the United Kingdom, and is a visiting scientist at the Rotman Research Institute in Toronto, Canada. He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy and has published over 250 scientific articles in leading journals. He is also author and editor of ten scientific books, including the leading international textbook on cognitive rehabilitation, and three books for the general reader including *Mind Sculpture: Your*

Brain's Untapped Potential. He is a regular keynote speaker at conferences on brain function throughout the world. He lives in Dublin, Ireland.

The Winner Effect

1

The Mystery of Picasso's Son

Are we born to win?

Holding hands with their father, a six-year-old girl and her eight-year-old brother arrive at the mansion's gates. They ring the bell and wait, smelling the eucalyptus scent released by the rain that is falling steadily. It takes a long time before the concierge appears, peering out and demanding if they have an appointment. Their father stammers that they have.

'I'll see if the Master will receive you,' the old man says. They wait and wait.

'You'd better wait in the car,' the father mutters, but they stay. The concierge appears again, looking slightly shamefaced.

'The Master can't see you today. He's working.'

They trudge back to the car in silent humiliation. Again and again over the years they repeat this journey. Sometimes the Master sees them and sometimes he doesn't.

But on the next weekend he is available. Their father shoos the girl and boy into their grandfather's living room, urging them forward to embrace shyly the bright-eyed old man. A slight awkwardness soon passes and the children forget themselves, cautiously pleased as their grandpa folds animals and birds out of paper for them. Their father relaxes into the familymoment too, absent-mindedly taking out a file to smooth a cracked fingernail. Suddenly the older man jumps up, snapping, 'It's ridiculous to use a nail file. Do what I do: file them against a corner of a wall.'

And from that moment on and for the rest of his life, the thirty-something Paulo Picasso did exactly that, just as he had adopted many of his father Pablo Picasso's other habits - eating fish with his hands was another such idiosyncrasy. As she was to recall in her 2001 memoir, *Picasso: My Grandfather*, watching these and countless similar interactions between the two made Paulo's little daughter Marina 'sick with shame'.1

Paulo - the frightened-looking, dressed-up three-year-old in his father's famous 1924 painting *Paul as Harlequin* - led a feckless life of drifting and heavy drinking. He could never hold down a job or even forge a life independent of his domineering, neglectful father. Paulo could not provide for his family, and his two children grew up supervised by social workers; his son Pablito would kill himself when he was twenty-four by drinking bleach two days after Pablo Picasso's funeral in 1973.

Paulo Picasso never seemed able to escape the shadow of his father, graduating from weekly supplicant - beggar almost - to part-time driver, and eventually, once his own family finally disintegrated, to live-in secretary and chauffeur to a father who never bothered to conceal his contempt for his son's lack of direction. Marina Picasso remembers one visit when Pablo Picasso took his son into a neighbouring room; she and her brother listened as their grandfather shouted, 'You're incapable of looking after your children! You are incapable of making a living! You're mediocre and will always be mediocre. You are wasting my time. I am El Rey, the King. And you - you are my thing!'2

Paulo did indeed become his 'thing' - but not for long. He died at the age of fifty-four, on 5 June 1975, just two years afterhis father died, after protracted family legal battles which left him an inheritance of five-sixteenths of Pablo Picasso's enormous fortune. Paulo's sad life could not have been in greater contrast with that of his famous father.

Does this story represent a more general point about the children of successful parents?

Here, then, is the question for this chapter: why was the success of Pablo Picasso, one of the most renowned artists in the world, so completely absent in the life of his son?

Take a moment to consider your own success, or lack of it, in your life so far. What do you believe is the

reason for that? If you are in a position of power or powerlessness, to what do you attribute your current status? These are questions which Paulo Picasso very likely asked himself, as do most of us from time to time. But as you will see in this chapter, how we answer these questions in our own minds has fundamental effects on whether or not we become winners.

A very commonly held response to the above questions is that we are in some way born to win or to lose. This is the common-sense notion that becoming a winner - whether political, artistic, business or in any other domain - is a matter of breeding. For thousands of years the odds of success have indeed been stacked in favour of the privileged few by genes and well-arranged marriages, a production line for high-performing humans modelled on the racehorse stud and European royalty. In fact, whether they like it or not, a few billion of the earth's population still live by this notion and regard those of us who don't as loopy. This book will challenge their assumptions.

While such an idea might seem dated in first world countries with their egalitarian ethos, we still put a huge premium - consciously or unconsciously - on the 'bred' factors of height, gender and race. As a 2005 survey of Fortune 500companies has shown, we still make our powerful CEOs overwhelmingly tall, male and white.3 And as another piece of research indicates, IQ is a particularly important consideration for the selection of executives, with the strong underlying assumption being made by many that intelligence, ability and genius are bred, not earned. Yet here is the puzzle: if winning has so much to do with breeding, why do so many people who were born with so many advantageous genes - Paulo Picasso included - fall by the wayside in the race to lead a successful, or even happy, life?

Or was Paulo's failure an anomaly? Research by Morten Bennedsen and his colleagues at the University of Copenhagen in 2007 indicates that it was not. Bennedsen looked at businesses founded by entrepreneurs successful enough to have achieved limited company status. What happened when the founder of the business handed over control to a son or daughter, compared with when the chief executive was appointed from outside the family, he asked?4

If people are born to win, then the children of winners should also be more successful than others. Not necessarily so. Bennedsen scrutinised the handovers to new CEOs in over 5,000 companies and what he found was dramatic: where the succession was to a family member rather than an outsider, the profitability of the company dropped by at least 4 per cent around the time of the succession - and plunged even more for bigger firms in high-growth industries.

Being born to successful parents does not guarantee success. But business and art are quite different worlds and Pablo Picasso was clearly not a typical parent, so is there really anything in common between Paulo Picasso and the heirs of family businesses? There is, and the link lies in the psychology of success.

In 1996 Suniya Luthar of the Teachers College of Columbia University and Karen D'Avanzo of Yale University studied two groups of fifteen- to sixteen-year-olds in two very different high schools in the north-east of the United States.5 One school was in a poor inner-city area, with a very low average income, 13 per cent of pupils were white and one in five families received food stamps. The other was a wealthy suburban school with one of the highest average incomes in the country, where 82 per cent of the pupils were white and virtually none received food stamps. Yet the researchers discovered that the richer adolescents were much more anxious and depressed, and used more cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and other illegal drugs than their more economically impoverished peers (a discovery that has been replicated in other studies inside and outside the USA6). How can this be? Can we find a clue to Paulo Picasso's lack of success in this study?

On the face of it, Pablo Picasso's wealth, fame and extraordinary talent were so far removed from the bankers and lawyers in a US suburb that it may seem absurd even to consider comparing their families. And whatever happened to Paulo Picasso was not down to his having too much money. He survived as an adult on whimsically administered dole-outs from his father, who was his casual employer for most of his life, and these left him and his family poor until near the end of his life. But Paulo lived in the shadow of his father's extreme wealth, fame and genius - and as I will show later in the chapter, such shadows can become grimly

tangible influences on the lives on whom they fall.
Suniya Luthar probed her data in subsequent studies7 to find out why children of rich, successful parents might be unhappier than poorer pupils. She came up with a conclusion which resonated with an observation made about the economics of success by the economist Staffan Linder.8 Linder observed thatsuccessful people's time is valuable and the higher their earnings the more each hour is worth. The economic logic for financially successful parents, then, is to maximise the family income by working long hours and contract out mundane household and childcare activities to lower-paid employees and services. This aligned with Luthar's observation: the rich, born-to-win children spent more time either on their own or with adults other than their parents than the poorer children and they therefore also felt less emotionally close to their parents. Paulo Picasso found it hard enough to get an appointment to see his father, let alone spend 'quality time' with him.
Michael Kimmelman interviewed Picasso's former wife Françoise Gilot and his three surviving children for the *New York Times* in 1996 at the time of the opening of a major Picasso exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He wrote on the basis of these conversations: 'Picasso, tellingly, didn't depict his children when they were adolescents or young adults. Adoring toddlers were one thing, teenagers another, and in his art, as in his l...

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