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# How Do People Evaluate Themselves in Terms of Assertiveness and Ability After Having Failed or Succeeded: The (Economic) Consequences Matter!

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## ABSTRACT

Relying on the Big Two framework (Abele et al., 2016, 2021) and the distinction of agency into the facets of assertiveness and ability, three experimental studies address the hypothesis that assertiveness and ability are influenced differentially by the consequences of success or failure. In Studies 1 and 2, participants had to imagine presenting a product developed by a hospital to an audience while either knowing or not knowing that selling the product could have strong positive consequences for the hospital's budget. They further had to imagine that they had succeeded in positively presenting the product or that they had failed. Study 2 replicated the design with the participants enacting the task for real. Supporting our hypotheses, we consistently found that self-evaluation of assertiveness was higher with both success and knowledge about the economic consequences, whereas self-evaluation of ability was higher with success but without knowledge of economic consequences. These findings support the facet approach of the agency dimension and give hints on how the assertiveness versus ability facets of self-evaluation differ.

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## KEYWORDS:

agency; assertiveness; ability; consequences of success or failure

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Imagine that your supervisor asks you to deliver a presentation on a product developed by your company for which, you are told, a successful presentation would be strongly profitable. Imagine also that you have received positive/negative feedback on the presentation; how would you evaluate yourself? Now imagine that you must also deliver the presentation but have not been informed about the economic consequences of a successful (or unsuccessful) performance. Again, you have received positive/negative feedback; how would you evaluate yourself now? Would these experiences, differing only with respect to either knowing or not knowing in advance that your presentation would have serious consequences for your company, lead to you giving similar evaluations of yourself, or would there be differences? This is the topic of the present paper, in which we argue that advance knowledge about the consequences of one's successful (or unsuccessful) performance will have a strong influence on self-evaluation. In addition, we argue that distinguishing between the facets of agency, assertiveness and ability is useful for analyzing these different self-evaluations.

## THE FUNDAMENTAL CONTENT DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL EVALUATION AND THEIR DIFFERENTIATION INTO TWO FACETS EACH

It is now well established that self-, other- and group-perceptions are structured around two basic and fundamental dimensions (e.g., Abele et al., 2008; Abele & Wojciszke, 2013; Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn, Yzerbyt & Judd, 2010). Labelled *communion and agency* (Abele & Wojciszke 2007) or *warmth and competence* (Fiske et al. 2002; Kervyn, Yzerbyt & Judd, 2010), these two basic dimensions of social judgment and their specificities have recently been integrated into a new collaborative model that defines them as the *horizontal and vertical dimensions* (Abele et al., 2021). The horizontal dimension describes people in a 'relational way' and captures their morality and friendliness (Abele et al., 2021). In contrast, the vertical dimension describes them in a 'productive way' according to their skills, success, status and value in interdependence or exchange relationships (Abele & Brack, 2013; Abele et al., 2021). In this paper, we focus on this vertical dimension and label it *agency*, for convenience. Furthermore, agency has recently been decomposed into two facets (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Carrier et al., 2014). The first illustrates an individual's ability (e.g., intelligent, skillful, able). The second communicates their assertiveness (e.g., assertive, ambitious, self-confident). We focus here on the dynamics of self-description through these two facets of agency in respect of the consequences of success (or failure) in performing a task.

## SUCCESS AS A FUNDAMENTAL DETERMINANT OF AGENCY EVALUATION

Studies have shown that a single success or failure is enough for people to infer characteristics about themselves (e.g., Abele, Rupperecht & Wojciszke, 2008). Abele, Rupperecht and Wojciszke's work (2008) demonstrated that success or failure, even when they are mock, can be sufficient to modify agency self-judgments (see also Abele 2003). A particularly interesting finding of Abele, Rupperecht and Wojciszke's (2008) study was that these changes in self-description are independent of several factors that can objectively account for success and failure (e.g., Dutton & Brown, 1997), including actual performance, type of cognitive task, methodology used to induce success or failure, self-esteem, initial level of agency and the participant's gender (Abele, 2003). Indeed, the positive or negative modifications of self-descriptions were triggered by bogus success or failure feedback and by the feeling that performing the task was either easy or difficult. This research did not distinguish the facets mentioned earlier, namely assertiveness and ability.

Somewhat related to success and failure, agency is closely linked to professional success (Abele, 2003). Indeed, the more people gain status and success in their professional careers, the more they report agency traits (Abele, 2003). This specificity of agency also explains why it is preferred in employee selection or promotion settings (Caruana, Lefevre & Mollaret, 2014; Dubois & Aubert, 2010; Wojciszke, Bazinska & Jaworski, 1998). Moreover, agency is linked to status, which also refers to success on a societal level (Carrier et al., 2014). Based on the recent distinction between the assertiveness and ability elements of agency, experimental studies have indeed consistently shown a link between status and assertiveness, but not ability. Assertive individuals are given higher social status and a higher level of remuneration than capable individuals (Koch et al., 2016; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). Reciprocally, people with a high remuneration level describe themselves and are described by others as more assertive than those with a lower remuneration level (Cohen, Darnon & Mollaret, 2017; see also Rule & Ambady, 2008, 2011) or status (Carrier et al., 2014). Finally, as Abele (2003); Abele, Rupperecht and Wojciszke (2008); and Hauke and Abele (2020) have shown, people's representation of their performance or contribution to a system is also mirrored in their self-description in terms agency traits. Thus, studying the influence of performance and contribution feedback in organizational settings while considering the distinct facets of agency should be relevant.

## HOW ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF ONE'S SUCCESS OR FAILURE INFLUENCES SELF-EVALUATION

In exchange processes, individuals who obtain the highest social rank are those who are perceived to make the most significant contributions to their group (Berger, Cohen & Zelditch, 1972; Blau 1964; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Van Vugt, Hogan & Kaiser, 2008). Concerning self-evaluation, people carry a representation of their status in social groups (Anderson et al., 2006; Goudeau, Autin & Croizet, 2017). These representations are not independent of an individual's success or failure in contributing to the group. For instance, Anderson et al. (2012) showed that people base their self-perceived value to the group as a function of their apparent contribution to it, which in turn influences their desire for status. Correlations have indeed been established between status, self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002) and self-evaluations of assertiveness (Abele et al., 2016; Barkow, 1980; Gebauer et al., 2015; Hauke & Abele, 2020). Knowledge of the consequences of one's behavior for an organization should thus be of particular importance for self-evaluations on the facets of agency and especially assertiveness.

In many professional contexts, individuals are evaluated based on their contribution to the (annual) benefits of their company. We thus choose to manipulate the economic contribution as far as it is critical for organizations' functioning, particularly if they are profit-orientated. As critical contributions to the group are known to be rewarded by objective or symbolic status (hierarchical advancement, gratification, power, respect), we thus hypothesize that the knowledge of strong economic consequences should favor the relationship between success and assertiveness (vs. ability) self-evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

## EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Our studies aimed to show that advance knowledge of the consequences of one's success or failure differentially influences a self-evaluation of assertiveness versus ability. We hypothesized that assertiveness self-evaluations are more responsive to success or failure than ability self-evaluations when participants know the strong economic consequences of their success, whether this performance is imagined (Studies 1 and 2) or experienced (Study 3).

### STUDY 1

#### PARTICIPANTS

The sample size was calculated with G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007). The minimal total sample size was 100 (25 per condition) for an effect size equal to .22 and a correlation between measures equal to .48 with .95 power and a .05 alpha criterion (based on Carrier et al., 2014) in a

repeated-measures ANOVA with four groups. Because of replication and generalization considerations, we opted for a minimal sample of 40 participants per condition in the three experimental studies. We recruited 160 students (123 women, 37 men; aged 17–45 years,  $M = 21.22$ ,  $SD = 4.07$ ) of law and humanities from of a French university. They received an email inviting them to take part in an online questionnaire for a social psychology study.

#### MATERIAL AND PROCEDURE

In the first part of the questionnaire, we collected information about the participants' age, sex, academic major and professional activity. The participants had to imagine presenting a product developed by a hospital to an audience. In the instructions, they were asked to imagine that their presentation could be chosen by sales representatives to promote the product to prospective buyers. They then read out their product presentation, which described how the hospital had developed a process for growing spirulina, a biomass of algae, along with its fantastic nutritional and health benefits. This scenario allowed us to manipulate advance knowledge about the economic consequences of the product for the hospital and the imagined success versus failure of the presentations (see later).

#### DESIGN, MANIPULATION AND MEASURES

The study was a two (advance knowledge of the economic consequences) by two (feedback about success or failure) design with 40 participants per cell. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions.

#### Advance Knowledge of the Economic Consequences of Success or Failure

Just before reading the text of the presentation, half of the participants were informed about the strong economic consequences for the hospital from selling the product. They were provided with graphs to show a booming market in spirulina, and the hospital, therefore, stood to make up to five million euros in sales of this product. Participants in the control condition were not given any information about the economic consequences.

#### Success versus Failure Feedback

Participants were then asked to put themselves in the shoes of a person who had performed the task and to imagine having been successful or not. Participants in the success condition were instructed to imagine that they had done well and that their presentation had been selected by sales representatives to promote the product. Those in the failure condition had to imagine that their presentation had been rejected.

#### Measures of Assertiveness and Ability

We then collected participants' self-evaluations, each with six negative and positive ability traits (positive: *competent, efficient, conscientious*; negative: *incapable,*

unskilled, mediocre) and assertiveness traits (positive: *enterprising, self-confident, decided*; negative: *hesitant, indecisive, lacking confidence*) on scales ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Completely*). The traits were presented in random order. Negative items were recoded to compile a composite score for ability and assertiveness.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Analysis of the Scales**

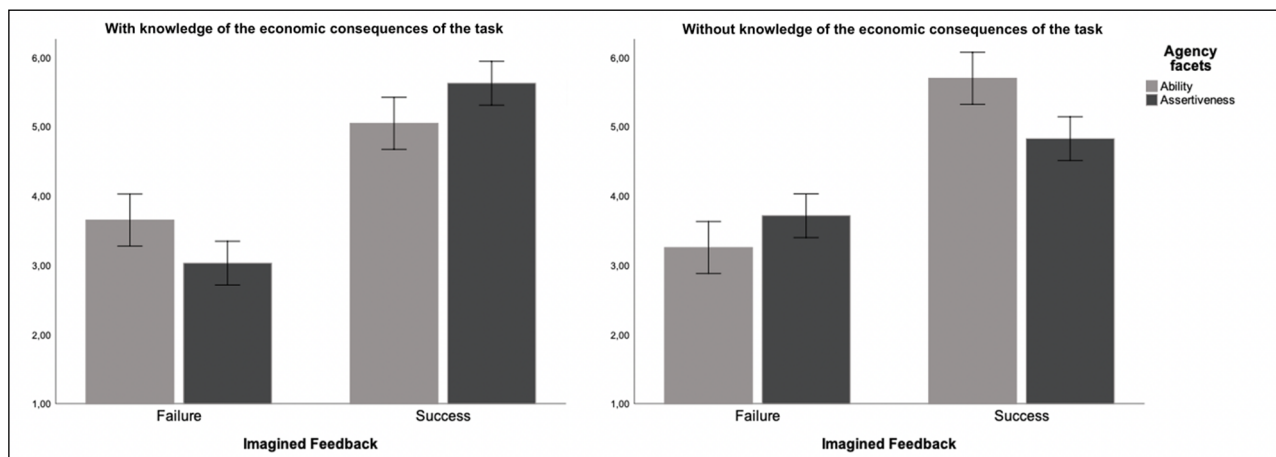
We checked the trait structure by running a factor analysis (oblique rotation). This analysis confirmed the two-factor structure, which enabled us to account for approximately 60% of the variance (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin [KMO] measure of sampling adequacy = .88; 46% for ability, 14% for assertiveness). The reliability of both scales was good (ability,  $\alpha = .90$ ; assertiveness,  $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Main Results**

We ran a two (advance knowledge of economic consequences: yes vs. no) by two (success vs. failure feedback) repeated measures ANOVA with assertiveness and ability self-ratings as within-participants factors. The analysis revealed a strong main effect of feedback,  $F(1, 156)$

$= 176.77, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.53$ , with self-perceptions being more positive after success ( $M = 5.37, SD = 1.25$ ) than failure ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.20$ ). We did not observe the main effects of advance knowledge about economic consequences,  $F(1, 156) = 0.06, p = .81$ , or of the two facet ratings,  $F(1, 156) = 1.21, p = .27$ , nor first-order interactions between these variables (all  $F$ s  $< 0.82$ , ns). However, as predicted, the second-order interaction of feedback, advance knowledge of economic consequences and the facets was significant,  $F(1, 312) = 88.95, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .22$  (cf. Figure 1).

We broke this interaction down with interaction contrasts, which were designed to test the sensitivity of the assertiveness and ability self-ratings for the imagined feedback in each condition of economic consequences. The first contrast tested our hypothesis that the difference between failure and success is larger for assertiveness than ability in the presence of advance knowledge about the economic consequences. The second contrast tested the difference between success and failure being stronger for ability (than assertiveness) when information about economic consequences is not mentioned. The contrasts were coded as indicated in Table 1 (cf. Wiens & Nilsson 2017).



**Figure 1** Assertiveness and Ability Scores According to the Knowledge of the Economic Consequences of the Task and Feedback (Success or Failure) (Study 1).

Note. Error bars indicate 95% CI.

KNOWLEDGE OF ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES	FEEDBACK	AGENCY FACET	CONTRAST 1	CONTRAST 2
Yes	Failure	Assertiveness	-0.5	
No				0.5
Yes	Success		0.5	
No				-0.5
Yes	Failure	Ability	0.5	
No				-0.5
Yes	Success		-0.5	
No				0.5

**Table 1** Codes for Tested Contrasts.



Both contrasts were significant. Thus, assertiveness self-evaluations were more sensitive to the success or failure manipulation than ability when economic consequences were mentioned: contrast 1, *estimate* = 0.60, CI95[0.31, 0.89],  $t(156) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely, ability self-evaluations were more sensitive to success or failure when the economic consequences of the task were not mentioned: contrast 2, *estimate* = 0.67, CI95[0.38, 0.95],  $t(156) = 4.55$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, a third contrast showed that assertiveness was more sensitive to the imagined feedback in the presence of advance knowledge about the economic consequences of the presentation than in the absence of advance knowledge: *estimate* = 0.74, CI95[0.40, 1.09],  $t(285) = 4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ .

These contrast analyses were supported by significant simple effects in line with our hypotheses. Participants who were told to imagine success reported more assertiveness (than ability) when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned,  $F(1,156) = 4.29$ ,  $p < .05$ , and conversely more ability (than assertiveness) when they were not,  $F(1,156) = 57.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . The opposite pattern was observed when participants were told to imagine failure. Precisely, participants reported less assertiveness than ability when they had knowledge about the economic consequences,  $F(1,156) = 11.63$ ,  $p < .005$ , and less ability than assertiveness in the absence of knowledge about the economic consequences,  $F(1,312) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ .

The results supported our predictions. Assertiveness increased with success and decreased with failure, albeit only when the participants had advance knowledge of the economic consequences of the presentation. In contrast, ability was higher when the economic consequences of the task were not mentioned beforehand. These results confirm the relationship between agency and success (Abele 2003; Abele, Rupperecht & Wojciszke, 2008), as well as the relevance of the distinction between the assertiveness and ability facets in terms of self-description.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings of Study 1. Our secondary objective was to rule out an alternative explanation about the effect of knowledge of economic consequences on self-evaluating assertiveness. In Study 1, participants were explicitly told that the presentation aimed to promote the spirulina product to prospective buyers. We reasoned that successfully selling the product might stereotypically be associated with assertive qualities such as the capacity to persuade people or making decisions. Numerous studies about personality indeed show that extraversion, which is associated with assertiveness traits (Abele et al., 2016), is linked to success in sales activities (e.g., Barrick, Mount & Judge 2001; Bergner, 2020). Consequently, the effect

of advance knowledge of the economic consequences of success (vs. failure) on self-evaluating assertiveness should have been emphasized by the advertising and commercial purpose of the presentation. Study 2 was designed to overcome this potential limitation. As in Study 1, half of the participants were informed of the strong economic consequences of selling the product for the hospital. However, those in Study 2 were told that the aim of the presentation was to inform the public about spirulina and its medical benefits, instead of promoting the product to prospective buyers.

## PARTICIPANTS

A total of 160 students of law and humanities from of a French university took part on this study (112 women, 48 men; aged 18–25 years,  $M = 21.01$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). As in Study 1, they were invited by email to take part in an online questionnaire for a social psychology study. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. A second analysis of power based on the Study 1 findings led to the conclusion that 40 participants per condition was sufficient to reach .95 power with .05 error probability.

## DESIGN, MANIPULATION AND MEASURES

The design, manipulation and measures were identical to those of Study 1, except that the advertising purpose (promoting the product to prospective buyers) was replaced by an informative one (informing about the nutritional and health benefits of spirulina). As in Study 1, participants were informed that they would have to imagine presenting a product created by a hospital. Before reading the text of the product presentation, they were explicitly told that the presentation was aimed at informing the public about the benefits of spirulina. Half of the participants then received information about the strong economic consequences of spirulina for the hospital before reading the presentation text. The other half read the text straight after being given the instructions. The participants also had to imagine that they had successfully presented the product (their presentation had been selected by the hospital) or that they had failed (their presentation had been rejected). Assertiveness and ability self-evaluations were then collected with the same traits as in Study 1.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of the Scales

A factor analysis (oblique rotation) confirmed the two-factor structure, which enabled us to account for approximately 51% of the variance ( $KMO = .85$ ; 34% for ability, 17% for assertiveness). The factor solution was close to that of Study 1, even if the repartition of traits among assertiveness and ability was less clear for the 'self-doubting' and 'conscientious' traits.<sup>2</sup> The reliability of both scales was good (ability,  $\alpha = .84$ ; assertiveness,  $\alpha = .80$ ).

## Main Results

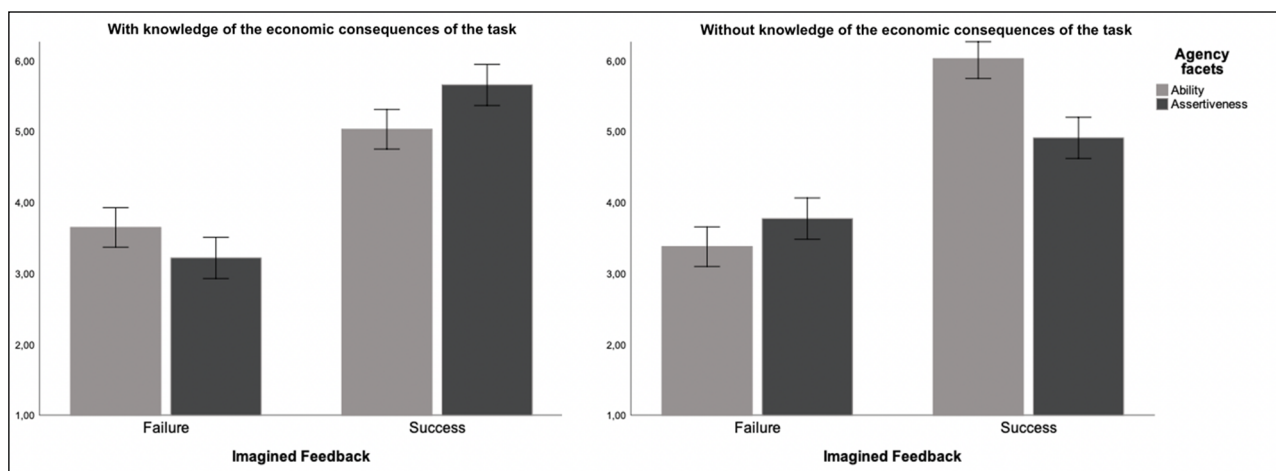
We ran a two (advance knowledge of economic consequences: yes vs. no) by two (success vs. failure feedback) repeated measures ANOVA with assertiveness and ability self-ratings as within-participants factors (facets). The analyses revealed a strong main effect of the imagined feedback, with self-perceptions being more positive after success ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than failure ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ),  $F(1, 156) = 273.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .64$ . We also observed an effect of the knowledge of economic consequences on facet scores,  $F(1, 156) = 6.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . Ability self-perceptions were higher ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) than assertiveness ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) in the absence of knowledge about the economic consequences, regardless of success or failure. We did not observe any significant main effect of advance knowledge about economic consequences,  $F(1, 156) = 1.34$ ,  $p = .25$ , facets,  $F(1, 156) = 2.29$ ,  $p = .13$ , or interaction between traits and feedback,  $F(1, 156) = 2.29$ ,  $p = .13$ . In accordance with our hypotheses, the second-order interaction between imagined feedback, advance knowledge of economic consequences and agency facets was significant,  $F(1, 156) = 54.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .26$ . The results are depicted in Figure 2.

Breaking this interaction down showed that assertiveness was more sensitive (than ability) to success or failure when the participants were informed of the economic consequences for the hospital: contrast 1,  $estimate = 0.53$ ,  $CI95[0.28, 0.77]$ ,  $t(156) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely, ability was more sensitive (than assertiveness) to success and failure when the economic consequences were not mentioned: contrast 2,  $estimate = 0.76$ ,  $CI95[0.51, 1.00]$ ,  $t(156) = 6.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, also as expected, a third contrast showed that assertiveness was more sensitive to imagined feedback when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned than when they were not mentioned:

contrast 3,  $estimate = 0.65$ ,  $CI95[0.37, 0.93]$ ,  $t(290) = 4.15$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As in Study 1, these contrasts were supported by significant simple effects in line with our hypotheses. Participants who were told to imagine success reported more assertiveness (than ability) when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned,  $F(1,156) = 10.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , and conversely more ability (than assertiveness) when they were not,  $F(1,156) = 150.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . The opposite pattern was also observed when participants were told to imagine failure. They reported less assertiveness than ability when the economic consequences were mentioned,  $F(1,156) = 8.65$ ,  $p = .005$ , and marginally less ability than assertiveness when they were not,  $F(1,156) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .10$ .

Taken together, Study 1 showed assertiveness self-evaluations to be more sensitive to success versus failure than ability self-evaluations when participants were aware of the economic consequences of their success or failure, and Study 2 confirmed these findings and ruled out an alternative hypothesis such that this association is imputable to the specific configuration of the task (i.e., promoting a product). Both studies demonstrated that assertiveness and ability captured distinct facets of social evaluation. It did not matter if the task was prescriptive of a 'real' assertive behavior (e.g., being convincing, appearing self-assured when selling a product) or not (e.g., informing an audience properly); assertiveness self-evaluations seemed to be triggered more when the (strong) economic consequences of a behavior were at stake. This was not the case for ability self-evaluations, which followed the opposite pattern. However, it could be argued that these two studies did not convey 'real' behavior. Contrary to the study by Abele, Rupperecht & Wojciszke (2008), participants did not perform the task and were asked to imagine being successful or not. We thus designed a third study that involved the participants enacting the task for real.



**Figure 2** Assertiveness and Ability Scores According to the Knowledge of the Economic Consequences of the Task and Feedback (Success or Failure) (Study 2).

Note. Error bars indicate a 95% CI.

## STUDY 3

### PARTICIPANTS

We recruited 160 students (87 women, 73 men; aged 17–45 years,  $M = 22.05$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ) of law and humanities from a French university. They were invited by a third person to attend individual sessions at the university's psychology laboratory. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the study's four experimental conditions ( $n = 40$  per condition). Based on the statistical power of our first two studies, the sample size was again enough to not be underpowered.

### DESIGN AND MANIPULATION

Participants were individually greeted by the experimenter, who explained that the reading task was a competition organized by a university hospital in another region. To make the scenario appear as credible as possible, we pretended that we had volunteered to help the hospital produce a video documentary on spirulina, because it had developed a new technique to grow it. The participants were presented with a mock video featuring images relating to spirulina and the text of their presentation (vaunting the nutritional and health benefits of spirulina) in a slideshow. They were informed that they would have to read this text aloud while the video was being played and that their voices would be recorded (a bogus red light indicated recording in progress). The main instructions and the text of the presentation were presented in a slideshow. The participants were then invited to take the time they needed to familiarize themselves with the instructions and the text of their presentation on their own before starting the recording. In accordance with Studies 1 and 2, we manipulated the purpose of the presentation task. The participants had either the informative (see Study 2) or advertising version (see Study 1) of the instructions. After the presentation, a (bogus) panel of judges, who were supposed to be present in another room, would assess the participants' performance and select the best readings, which would then be used for the video.

#### Advance Knowledge of the Economic Consequences of the Task

As in Studies 1 and 2, half of the participants were randomly assigned to the advance knowledge of economic consequences condition. Those participants were shown graphs indicating a booming market for spirulina as part of the instructions straight before delivering their presentation. The other half did not receive this information (i.e., received no advance knowledge of the economic consequences). The remaining part of the instructional slideshow was the same for both groups.

#### Reading Task and Bogus Success versus Failure Feedback

The participants were each given around five minutes alone to familiarize themselves with the instructions

and the text. The experimenter then returned, checked that the instructions had been fully understood, started the supposed recording and left the room, leaving the participant alone during the test. On average, it took the participants 1 minute 30 seconds to read the text. The experimenter then returned to retrieve the recording, ostensibly to take advantage of the judges' presence to submit the recording to them immediately. Meanwhile, each of the participants was asked to fill in a computerized questionnaire (guaranteed anonymity), purportedly so that researchers from the psychology laboratory could take advantage of their presence to gather information that had nothing to do with the university hospital or the reading test. The first part of the questionnaire served to collect the demographic data we needed (age, sex, course and year of study, any paid work). The participants then answered two questions ('Did you find the topic of spirulina interesting?' 'What was the purpose of the documentary?') that served solely to pass the time while the mock judges purportedly listened to the recording. The experimenter watched unseen from behind a glass panel so that they could reenter the room just before the participant had reached the section on ability and assertiveness self-evaluations. The experimenter came in unannounced and gave the participant bogus feedback about success (recording selected by the judges) or failure (recording rejected by the judges). The experimenter then went out so that the participant could finish the questionnaire. Finally, the participants were thanked and debriefed, for both ethical reasons and to verify the credibility of the global procedure (recording, presence of judges, feedback).

### MEASURES AND MANIPULATION CHECKS

Ability and assertiveness were measured using the same 12 traits as before, presented in random order. We also added two questions to check participants' perceptions of the experimental manipulations. The first asked whether they had succeeded or failed, allowing us to ensure that they had correctly understood the performance feedback (right answer rate: 100%); the second asked participants to indicate how surprised they had been at this result on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all surprised*) to 6 (*Very surprised*) in order to check the credibility of this bogus feedback.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of the Scales

The exploratory factor analysis of the traits (oblique rotation) confirmed the two-factor structure, which accounted for approximately 67% of the variance ( $KMO = .85$ ; 43% for ability, 24% for assertiveness). The reliability of both scales was good (ability,  $\alpha = .90$ ; assertiveness,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Feedback Surprise

An ANOVA revealed that the participants were more surprised by the positive feedback ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ )



than by the negative feedback ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1,156) = 65.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .29$ , which could indicate negative expectations or modesty bias for this unusual task. There was neither a main effect of the economic consequences of the task nor an interaction effect (all  $F < 0.24$ ; n.s.), indicating that knowledge of the task's economic consequences did not influence the perception of the feedback.

### Control of the Advertising versus Informative Instruction

The purpose of the presentation did not interact with any of our independent variables, all  $F(1, 152) < 1.86$ ; n.s., but revealed a small main effect, indicating that agency self-perceptions were higher when the purpose was to advertise ( $M = 4.41$ ) than to inform ( $M = 4.14$ ),  $F(1,152) = 4.99$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ . Because there were no interactions, we did not consider this factor in further analyses.

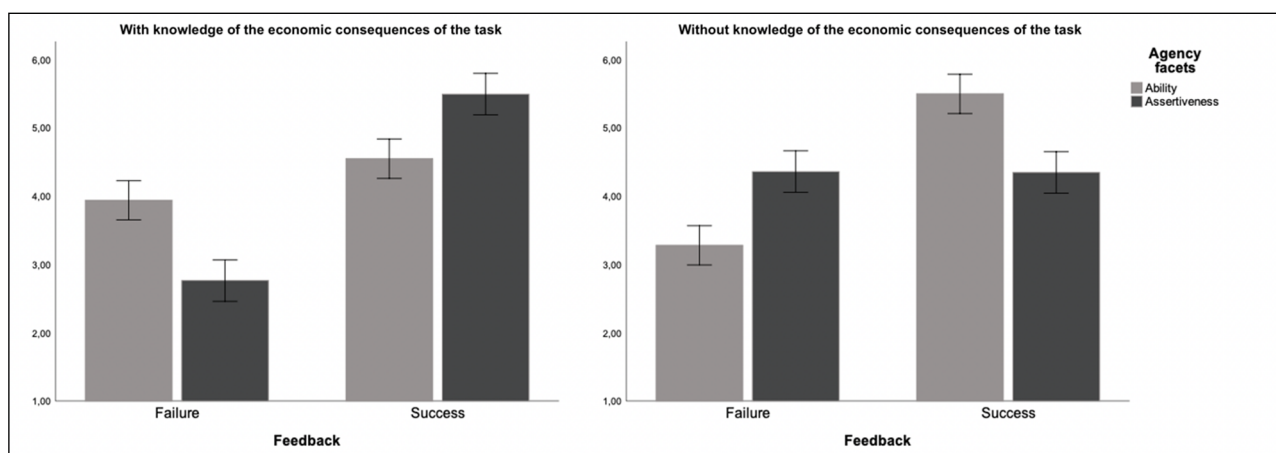
### Main Results

As in the previous studies, we conducted an ANOVA including knowledge of the economic consequences of the task and the bogus feedback as between-participants factors and assertiveness and ability self-perceptions as a within-participants factors (facets). The ANOVA revealed a main effect of the feedback ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) such that self-perceptions were more positive following success than failure ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $F(1, 156) = 128.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .45$ . The interaction effect between the economic consequences of the task and the feedback was significant,  $F(1, 156) = 5.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = 0.03$ . Independently of the specific agency facets, this interaction indicated that the difference in self-perceptions of agency was larger when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned ( $M_{\text{Failure}} = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ;  $M_{\text{Success}} = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) than when they were not mentioned ( $M_{\text{Failure}} = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ;  $M_{\text{Success}} = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ). Neither the facets,  $F(1, 156) = 0.74$ ,  $p = .39$ ,

nor knowledge of the consequences,  $F(1, 156) = 2.30$ ,  $p = .13$ , had significant effects, and this was also the case between the interaction between facets and economic consequences,  $F(1, 156) = 0.21$ ,  $p = .65$ , and between the facets and bogus feedback,  $F(1, 156) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .76$ . However, the expected second-order interaction between feedback, knowledge of economic consequences and assertiveness and ability self-perceptions was again highly significant,  $F(1, 156) = 157.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .50$ . The results are shown in Figure 3.

We broke down this interaction with the same contrasts as those used in Studies 1 and 2. The global pattern was replicated. Assertiveness self-evaluations were more sensitive (than ability) to success or failure feedback when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned: contrast 1,  $estimate = 1.06$ ,  $CI95[0.82, 1.30]$ ,  $t(156) = 8.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely, ability self-evaluations were more sensitive (than assertiveness) to success and failure when the economic consequences of the task were not mentioned: contrast 2,  $estimate = 1.11$ ,  $CI95[0.87, 1.36]$ ,  $t(156) = 9.09$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, assertiveness was also more sensitive to the feedback when the economic consequences of the task were mentioned than when they were not: contrast 3,  $estimate = 1.37$ ,  $CI95[1.08, 1.66]$ ,  $t(281) = 9.15$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As in Studies 1 and 2, the simple main effects analysis supported our hypotheses. Participants who received success feedback reported more assertiveness when they knew about the economic consequences than when they did not,  $F(1,156) = 52.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , but reported more ability (than assertiveness) after success when they did not know about the economic consequences of the presentation,  $F(1, 156) = 46.57$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely, participants who received failure feedback reported less assertiveness when they knew about the economic consequences than when they did not,  $F(1, 156) = 59.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , and less ability when they did not know about the economic consequences than when they did,  $F(1,$



**Figure 3** Assertiveness and Ability Scores According to the Knowledge of Economic Consequences of the Task and Bogus Feedback (Success or Failure) (Study 3).

Note. Error bars indicate a 95% CI.

156) = 22.57,  $p < .001$ . In summary, Study 3, in which participants did not imagine but rather performed the respective behaviors, also supported our hypotheses.

## DISCUSSION

This research aimed to study the dynamics of agency facets according to people's success and knowledge about the economic consequences of their behavior. Our findings confirm the influence of perceived success and failure on agency self-evaluations (e.g., Abele et al., 2008; Baryła & Wojciszke, 2019) and further offer a closer look at its facets. They also add support the relevance of the recent distinction between the two facets of agency in self-evaluation (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Carrier et al., 2014) and provide hints on how the assertiveness versus ability facets of self-evaluation differ.

Across the three studies, we consistently found assertiveness and ability self-evaluations to be responsive to success and failure in distinct ways as a function of the knowledge of the consequences of one's performance. Supporting our hypotheses, assertiveness was more responsive to participants' performance when they knew about the economic consequences of their success or failure, whereas self-evaluation of ability was more responsive in the absence of knowledge about such consequences. Those results may be explained by a socially learned associative process between socioeconomic status and the assertive personality traits (Koch et al. 2016). Individuals who are attributed with the most assertive traits are those who occupy the highest ranks or socioeconomic levels (Carrier et al., 2014; Dubois, 2010; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). Those individuals are also supposed to have greater power and control over a group's resources, and especially its critical economic resources. Our studies support this idea. Knowing that one's behavior has serious economic consequences for an organization would increase feelings of self-value toward the group, status and control over critical resources (Anderson et al., 2012), which are better captured by assertiveness than ability (e.g., Lammers et al., 2017).

Research on the relationship between self-esteem and agency self-evaluations also offers interesting insights for interpreting and extending our findings (e.g., Abele et al., 2016; Hauke & Abele, 2020). Self-esteem is related to status (Twenge & Campbell, 2002; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007) and more strongly related to assertiveness than ability (Abele & Hauke, 2019; Hauke & Abele, 2020). The mere knowledge of the serious consequences of one's behavior for an organization could thus potentiate its effects on self-esteem through assertiveness ratings. This finding invites exploration of the relevance of a potential moderator in the relationship between self-esteem and the agency facets (Abele et al., 2016; Baryła & Wojciszke, 2019; Hauke & Abele, 2020;

Wojciszke et al., 2011): self-esteem could be dominated by assertiveness (and less by ability) in for-profit contexts, or when behavior is strongly consequential—with the reverse being true in nonprofit contexts (or when success is less consequential). Our manipulation checks showed that people were surprised by the positive feedback, as if they had felt ineffective during the task. By showing more assertiveness when a task has strong economic consequences, people are in fact sensitive to the consequences of their performance regardless of their sense of competence during the task. Future work could thus investigate the specificity of the sense of competence in self-evaluating ability and show that no matter whether or not people feel effective, they can evaluate themselves positively in terms of assertiveness traits (and self-esteem) when their success has serious implications.

However, this raises the question of why individuals emphasize their ability rather than their assertiveness in the absence of knowledge about the economic consequences for their organization. Attributions of ability traits indicate the capacity to perform the tasks people are assigned (Struthers, Weiner & Allred, 1998; Weiner, 1995) with less specific responsivity to socioeconomic status (Carrier et al., 2014; Louvet et al., 2019). Accordingly, we expected ability to be responsive to failure or success independently of the knowledge of the economic consequences. However, we did not expect this obvious and consistent opposite pattern when compared with assertiveness self-evaluations. Researchers have highlighted the process of compensation between agency and communion (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Judd et al., 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt & Judd, 2010). This somewhat unexpected result invites exploration of the possible existence of compensation processes between the assertiveness and ability facets of agency as a means of supporting a meritocratic vision of the socioeconomic world (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Ledgerwood et al., 2011).

We have manipulated knowledge of the economic consequences of success versus the absence of knowledge of such consequences. Establishing the specificity of the relationship between economic consequences and assertiveness self-evaluations opens up interesting research perspectives. On the one hand, the specific relationship between assertiveness self-evaluation and knowledge of the economic consequences of success is supported both by research on the effects of money reminders on behaviors and self-perceptions that are captured by assertiveness (Vohs, 2015) and by research on interest in social judgments for profit or market value (Dubois & Beauvois, 2011; Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010). On the other hand, mere knowledge of the serious global consequences of the presentation should also emphasize individuals' self-value to the group and in turn trigger status-related cognitions (Anderson et al., 2012) and assertiveness self-evaluations (Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016).

Finally, our findings provide a first insight into the relevance of studying the consequences of behavior

in investigations on the specific determinants of assertiveness versus ability self-evaluations, as it has already been shown for judgment about others' agency (Abele & Brack, 2013; Cislak, 2013; Vonk, 1999; see also Imhoff, Koch & Flade, 2018). Going one step further, it should be of interest to extend our findings by manipulating different kinds of consequences, both for the self (i.e., self-profitability, status, financial reward) and for an organization (economic consequences vs. merely positive consequences), as well as their intensity. Studying the mediating role of the desire for status, self-perceived value to the group or self-esteem following success or failure should also bring a better understanding of the determinants of assertiveness and ability self-evaluations. Finally, future research in this area should also be extended to communion traits to investigate compensation and halo process among agency, communion and their facets.

To conclude, congruent with the DPM and eDPM Models (Abele & Wojciszke 2007; Hauke & Abele 2020), our studies confirm the key role and malleability (Abele et al., 2008; Uchronski, 2008) of assertiveness and ability in self-perception. Because the Big Two are relevant both for self- and other-perception, it would be of interest to replicate our study in the context of other-perception. We have shown that people can imagine how assertive they would feel as a function of their economic contribution. We could thus expect our results to be mirrored when judging other people with or without knowledge about their economic contribution. This line of research could also have major implications for management by proposing to potentiate the effects of employees' work recognition on self-esteem, future performance or motivation.

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of these studies are openly available on the Open Science Framework at [https://osf.io/zdtvg/?view\\_only=3e09f5bd27a1445192a3b26e1a5ef1d2](https://osf.io/zdtvg/?view_only=3e09f5bd27a1445192a3b26e1a5ef1d2).

## NOTES

1. In line with this prediction, research has shown that money is a key representation of the free-market system and that its induction has a considerable impact on self-perceptions, behavior and endorsement of status-legitimizing beliefs (Caruso et al., 2013; Vohs 2015). Research conducted in this area has indeed shown that money reminders, when compared with neutral concepts, increase feelings of control, self-efficacy, self-confidence and perseverance, a self-sufficient orientation (see Vohs, Mead & Goode, 2006, and Vohs, 2015, for a review) and a set of cognitions that is captured by assertiveness. We thus hypothesize that success should bolster assertiveness more than ability self-evaluations when people know that such success has economic consequences for their organization.
2. We should note that the repartition of traits among assertiveness and ability factors was less clear for the 'self-doubting' and 'conscientious' traits than in Study 1. The self-doubting trait

loaded negatively on the assertiveness facet (as expected) but also positively in terms of ability. The 'conscientious' trait was also problematic because it did not contribute either to ability or to assertiveness. We think that this trait could have been perceived as being more fixed than the others (competent, efficient), which would be malleable across situations. This difference with Study 1 could be due to the informative purpose on participants' concern for accuracy. However, it is also possible that the sample size was a little too small for the analysis to be robust. This interpretation was confirmed by the emergence of a clear bidimensional structure when the samples of Studies 1 and 2 were compiled in an exploratory factor analysis.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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