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UNLEASHING THE HIDDEN POWERS OF THE MIND THROUGH MANIPULATING BELIEF IN COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT DEVICES

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Grant 76/16

Background: Despite the availability of different cognitive enhancement techniques (e.g., brain stimulation; microdosing with psychedelics; neurofeedback), the efficacy of these techniques has been contested and it is unclear to what extent effects can be attributed to placebo- and expectancy-effects.

Aims: This project investigated whether people can be induced to experience cognitive enhancement by using different placebo-induction procedures.

Method: We presented participants with a sham brain stimulation device (Study 1 & 2A and 2B) or with a placebo cognitive enhancement pill (Study 3), allegedly capable to improve their performance. We used verbal suggestion to induce expectations about the effects (all studies), a performance conditioning procedure (Study 2A), a false feedback conditioning procedure (Study 2B) and a subjective experience conditioning procedure (Study 3).

Results: In all studies we found that participants' subjective experience and performance was in line with the induced expectations. However, we did not observe an effect on objective performance (e.g., on EEG measures in association with error-detection or on creativity) in any of the studies. Highly suggestible participants overall experienced the strongest improvement in subjective performance.

Conclusions: Expectations about cognitive improvement induced through cognitive enhancement devices can induce effects of subjective experience. Future studies on cognitive enhancement techniques should aim to measure participants' expectations, use more ecologically valid tasks and measures and include individual difference measures related to suggestibility and belief in neuromyths.

Keywords: Placebo-effects, Cognitive enhancement, Brain stimulation, Microdosing

Publications:

van Elk, M., Groenendijk, E., & Hoogeveen, S. (2020). Placebo brain stimulation affects subjective but not neurocognitive measures of error processing. *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, 4, 389-400. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41465-020-00172-6>

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