



Durability and generalization of attribution-based feedback following failure: Effects on expectations and behavioral persistence



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This experiment investigated, following perceived failure, the immediate, long-term (i.e., durability), and cross-situational (i.e., generalization) effects of attribution-based feedback on expectations and behavioral persistence.

Design: We used a 3 × 2 (Group × Time) experimental design over seven weeks with attributions, expectations of success, and persistence as dependent measures.

Method: 49 novice participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment (attributional feedback) groups: (a) functional (i.e., controllable and unstable); (b) dysfunctional (i.e., uncontrollable and stable); or (c) no feedback. Testing involved three sessions, in which participants completed a total of five trials across two performance tasks (golf-putting and dart-throwing). In order to track whether the attributional manipulation conducted within the context of the golf-putting task in Session 2 would generalize to a new situation, participants performed a dart-throwing task in Session 3, and their scores were compared with those recorded at baseline (in Session 1).

Results: Analysis of pre- and post-intervention measures of attributions, expectations, and persistence revealed that the functional attributional feedback led to more personally controllable attributions following failure in a golf-putting task, together with increases in success expectations and persistence. In contrast, dysfunctional attributional feedback led to more personally uncontrollable and stable attributions following failure, together with lower success expectations and reduced persistence. These effects extended beyond the intervention period, were present up to four weeks post intervention, and were maintained even when participants performed a different (i.e., dart-throwing) task.

Conclusions: The findings demonstrate that attributional feedback effects are durable over time and generalize across situations.

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When athletes are encouraged to attribute their failures to controllable and unstable causes, they experience favorable cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral consequences (e.g., Le Foll, Rasclé, & Higgins, 2008; Rasclé, Le Foll, & Higgins, 2008). In contrast to those who make 'dysfunctional' attributions (i.e., attributions to uncontrollable and stable causes), those making 'functional' (i.e., controllable and unstable) attributions (a) have higher expectations of future success (Le Foll et al., 2008; Orbach,

Singer, & Price, 1999; Rasclé et al., 2008; Rudisill, 1989) and self-efficacy (Coffee & Rees, 2011; Coffee, Rees, & Haslam, 2009), (b) experience more motivating emotions (Le Foll et al., 2008; Orbach et al., 1999), (c) are more persistent (Johnson & Biddle, 1989; Le Foll et al., 2008; Rasclé et al., 2008; Rudisill, 1989; Rudisill & Singer, 1988), and (d) perform more successfully (Coffee & Rees, 2011; Coffee et al., 2009; Orbach, Singer, & Murphey, 1997; Rudisill, 1989; Rudisill & Singer, 1988). Such findings appear to justify the recent resurgence of interest in attributions within sport psychology (e.g., see Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 2005). However, despite these promising effects, it has been suggested that a weakness of the studies is that they tend only to examine relatively short-term

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effects of attribution-based manipulations. The question thus arises as to whether these effects (a) last/endure, and (b) transfer to new situations. The present research addresses this question.

Recent research in higher education settings has demonstrated short-term (e.g., Higgins & LaPointe, 2012) and longer-term (enduring) effects of attribution-based feedback. For example, students receiving functional attributional feedback outperformed their non-attributional feedback counterparts in end-of-year final course grades (e.g., Hall, Perry, Chipperfield, Clifton, & Haynes, 2006; Hall et al., 2007; Haynes, Ruthig, Perry, Stupnisky, & Hall, 2006). One might assume that such effects would be observed in sports settings, but to date, only immediate (short-term) effects of attributional feedback have been observed (e.g., in relation to changes in expectations, and/or persistence). Furthermore, there is little evidence that effects of attributional feedback might transfer (or generalize) to a new task/situation. In athletic achievement contexts, to our knowledge, only Orbach et al. (1999) have examined whether changes in attributions themselves might endure and/or generalize. They observed that changes in attributions were consistent up to three weeks post-intervention and generalized to a similar secondary task. Crucially, however, the latter research did not observe effects of those changes in attributions on assessments of behavior (e.g., persistence); changes in attributions did not lead to changes in behavior, even in the short-term.

The objective of the present research was to examine whether attributional feedback manipulations would indeed lead to short- and long-term changes in expectations and persistence following perceived failure on a motor skill task, and whether effects would generalize to a new task situation. We focused on two principal attribution dimensions: controllability and stability (cf., Coffee & Rees, 2008; Rees et al., 2005). Controllability refers to whether a cause is perceived to be within (controllable) or beyond (uncontrollable) one's control; stability refers to whether a cause is considered as likely to recur (stable) or unlikely to recur (unstable). There were three key hypotheses: First, it was hypothesized that, following failure, functional (controllable and unstable) attributional feedback would lead to immediate (short-term) increases in expectations and persistence, and dysfunctional (uncontrollable and stable) attributional feedback would lead to decreases in expectations and persistence. Rasclé et al. (2008) showed that it is possible to modify, in a functional or dysfunctional way, novice participants' attributions about perceived failure, expectations, and free-practice behaviors. The functional attributional feedback produced improvements in causal attributions about failure, as well as in success expectations, and lower persistence after failure. In contrast, dysfunctional attributional feedback produced deterioration in causal attributions about failure, and lower success expectations, and persistence after failure. Le Foll et al. (2008) revealed similar results. Furthermore, Le Foll et al. (2008) showed that the effects of the attributional feedback overrode individuals' initial functional or dysfunctional attributions about failure; that is, improvement or deterioration depended on the type of feedback received rather than the initial attributions. Second, according to Orbach et al. (1999) and Hall et al. (2006) in higher education or sport settings, it was hypothesized that these changes in expectations and persistence would be maintained (would endure) four weeks after the manipulation when participants were faced with the same task. Finally, it was hypothesized that these changes in expectations and persistence would be maintained four weeks after the manipulation when participants were faced with a new task. Similar to teachers' expectations about lasting changes in their students' learning, coaches expect athletes' transformations/learning to be durable. However, in sports settings, intervention programs are often delivered in experimental conditions with a rigorous control of causes - controlled or manipulated by the

experimenter - which could explain the size of observed effects. Thus, it is possible that the immediacy or vividness of the experimental situation produce short-term effects which disappear when subjects are no longer in the experimental context. The underlying question in the present study was to estimate the efficacy, over time, of an intervention to change athletes' cognitions and behaviors. Furthermore, like teachers, coaches expect athletes' transformations/learning to transfer to other domains or tasks. Thus, in the present study, another important question about attributional feedback following perceived failure was to examine the generalizability of intervention effects - that is, whether an intervention effect would be powerful enough to produce an impact on a different task.

Method

Participants

Participants were 56 male students ($M = 19.8$ years, $SD = 1.2$), with no golf-putting and dart-throwing experience, from a University in the north-west of France.

Procedure

The experiment was approved by an institutional ethics committee, and students provided informed consent. Testing involved three sessions, in which participants completed a total of five trials across two performance tasks (golf-putting and dart-throwing).

In *Session 1* (in Week 1), the students were invited to a laboratory to complete a dart-throwing task, the results of which served as baseline assessments of expectations and persistence for comparison on the same task later in the experiment (in *Session 3* in Week 7). After the task was explained, all participants completed three familiarization throws (e.g., Le Foll et al., 2008; Rasclé et al., 2008), followed by an assessed trial consisting of six throws (Trial 1). Following this trial, participants indicated whether they perceived their performance to be "rather like a success" or "rather like a failure", and they then completed a measure of their attributions and their expectations of success on a subsequent trial, before being provided with a "free-practice" period of two minutes (in reality, an assessment of persistence—see below under *Measures*). During the free-practice period, the experimenter stepped into an adjoining room and was out of sight. A video camera filmed each participant's entire session in the laboratory. The participants were informed of the presence of the camera at the beginning of the study but not that free-practice was being assessed. Participants could refuse to be filmed, although none chose this option. After completion of this session, participants were thanked for their participation and informed that they should return two weeks later to complete a golf-putting task.

In *Session 2* (in Week 3), the participants returned to the laboratory to complete the golf-putting task. After the task was explained to them, all participants completed three familiarization putts, followed by an assessed trial consisting of six putts (Trial 2). Following this trial, participants indicated whether they perceived their performance to be "rather like a success" or "rather like a failure", and they then completed a measure of their attributions and their expectations of success on a subsequent trial, before being provided with a "free-practice" period of two minutes. Seven participants (three during Session 1, when they were not yet distributed across experimental groups, and four during Session 2, two participants of the no feedback group and one for functional attributional feedback and dysfunctional attributional feedback groups), perceived their performance to be "rather like a success". They were removed from the experiment at the end of their

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