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"Good job, you're so smart": The effects of inconsistency of praise type on young children's motivation

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that generic praise ("good drawer") is related to children giving up after failure because failure implies the lack of a critical trait (e.g., drawing ability). Conversely, nongeneric praise ("good job drawing") is related to mastery motivation because it implies that success is related to effort. Yet children may receive a mixture of these praise types (i.e., inconsistent praise), the effects of which are unclear. We tested how inconsistent praise influenced two components of motivation: self-evaluation and persistence. Kindergarteners ($N = 135$) were randomly assigned to one of five conditions in which consistency of praise type was varied. After two failure scenarios, children reported self-evaluations and persistence. Results indicated that more nongeneric praise related linearly to greater motivation, yet self-evaluation and persistence were impacted differently by inconsistent praise types. Hearing even a small amount of generic praise reduced persistence, whereas hearing a small amount of nongeneric praise preserved self-evaluation.

Introduction

Children face frustrating tasks and failure daily. An important question is why some children are less frustrated by failure and more motivated to persist after failure than other children. Children who persist after a failure or setback are described as having a *mastery orientation*, whereas children who give up in frustration are described as having a *helpless orientation* (e.g., Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980). Motivation orientations are complex concepts most commonly assessed using multiple

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behaviors (Jennings & Dietz, 2003). Task persistence and self-evaluations represent two components of motivation often used to measure motivation orientation (e.g., Barrett, Morgan, & Maslin-Cole, 1993; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Compared with children with mastery orientations, children with helpless orientations gave more negative self-evaluations (e.g., "I am not good at this") and were less likely to persist on a task after failure (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Furthermore, helpless children were more likely than mastery children to choose a different task that would "conceal their ability or protect it from negative evaluation" (Dweck, 1986, p. 1041) rather than persist at a task at which they failed.

Dweck and colleagues (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) also described a subgroup of children who engaged in self-protective behaviors such as attempting to disengage from the task and reporting successes on other tasks. Self-protective behaviors demonstrate how children might protect their self-evaluations by not persisting, thereby allowing self-evaluations to remain high but persistence to be low. The choice not to persist is also protective in that it ensures that there will be no further evidence of failure.

Generic versus nongeneric praise

A child's motivation orientation is strongly influenced by the environment such as the type of praise that children experience (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; White, 1959). Specifically, different types of praise provide different information about what matters in achieving a goal and, thus, lead to different motivational outcomes (e.g., Cimpian et al., 2007). Two types of praise have been linked to motivational orientations: generic and nongeneric. Children as young as 2 years of age were able to distinguish generic statements from nongeneric statements and use this information to create different expectations about kinds (Cimpian & Markman, 2008; Gelman & Raman, 2003; Heyman & Gelman, 1999). Generic statements convey information more central to a category than do nongeneric statements (Cimpian, Gelman, & Brandone, 2010; Gelman, 2003). For example, stating that "cows have hooves" goes beyond the information of any individual cow and implies a stable factor common to all members of the category. Generic praise implies that stable factors are associated with goal achievement. Stable factors may be seen as "uncontrollable" for the individual (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). For example, stating that "you are a good drawer" suggests that drawing ability explains the achievement of the specified goal—in this case, producing a "good drawing". In contrast, nongeneric statements convey information about specific individuals rather than categories (Gelman, 2003). For example, stating that "this cow is named Jane" carries no implication about the names of other cows. Nongeneric praise implies that nonstable factors (i.e., factors that might differ among individuals and situations) are associated with goal achievement. For example, stating that "you worked hard at drawing" suggests that the effort put into drawing explains the good drawing. Effort put into drawing is a nonstable controllable factor, which suggests that failure can be changed (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

The relation between praise and motivation

Motivation refers to "internally driven engagement" related to achieving a particular goal (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002, p. 775), and the type of praise creates expectations about how goals can be achieved (e.g., Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Previous research has demonstrated that a relatively small amount of praise can influence young children's motivation (Cimpian et al., 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Kamins and Dweck (1999) engaged 5- and 6-year-olds in role-play scenarios with puppets representing a teacher and the children. In the scenarios, the child attempted four tasks (e.g., building a tower with blocks). After successful completion of each task, the teacher gave the child one of three types of praise: (a) generic praise (e.g., "You're a good girl"), (b) nongeneric praise on the outcome (e.g., "That's the right way to do it"), or (c) nongeneric praise on the process (e.g., "You must have tried really hard") depending on the assigned condition. Next, the child role-played a failure scenario (e.g., a Lego house missing windows). Those who heard generic praise rated themselves and their products (e.g., the Lego house) less positively (i.e., lower self-evaluations) than both of the nongeneric groups. Children given generic praise on the process