ABSTRACT
     Learned helplessness has recently incorporated
attribution theory to predict the specific occurrence/nonoccurrence
of the motivational, cognitive and affective deficits characteristic
of helplessness. College students (N=50) participated in a study to
investigate the effects of a personal-universal helplessness
manipulation on subsequent task performance. Subjects were divided
into three groups: contingent, noncontingent, and control. The
noncontingent group was subdivided into two groups and given false
feedback about the performance of their peers. All subjects completed
the Lubin's Adjective Checklist as well as the Levine Problem-Solving
task which measured performance differences among the groups. In
agreement with learned helplessness theory, the group exposed to
noncontingency manifested longer latencies on the Levine task
solution than the contingent or control groups. However, contrary to
predictions, this deficit was observed only in the universal
helplessness condition. No emotional deficits were revealed by the
Adjective Checklist. The findings suggest that the often observed
behavioral deficit in depressed college students may be primarily
motivational in nature. (Author/JAC)

Universal and Personal Helplessness:

A Test of the Reformulated Model

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universal and personal helplessness are characterized by
motivational, cognitive and emotional response deficits.
Personal helplessness is additionally characterized by a
loss in self-esteem. Little research has yet been done to
test this aspect of the revised theory.

This study was designed primarily to investigate the
effects on subsequent task performance of a personal-
universal helplessness manipulation. It was hypothesized
that a deficit in self-esteem would occur only in subjects
exposed to a personal helplessness situation.

Method

Subjects. Subjects consisted of 50 college students
enrolled in an introductory course in psychology at the
State University of New York at Albany. Subjects were told
that the study was an investigation of reward and its
effects on a subsequent cognitive task. By participating
in the study, subjects received partial credit toward
fulfilling a course requirement. One male subject was
dropped because he refused to follow experimental
procedure; one female subject was dropped because of
external disruption in the lab during the test phase; one
female subject was dropped because of procedural error.
Half of the subjects were male, and half were female.

Procedure. Subjects were randomly divided into three

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Half of the subjects were male, and half were female.

Procedure. Subjects were randomly divided into three

groups: contingent (13), noncontingent (22) and control

(12). In order to examine the resulting behavioral

deficits of personal versus universal helplessness, the

noncontingent group was further divided into two groups

(N=11) given false feedback about the performance of their

peers. After completing the helplessness training phase of

the study those assigned to the universal helplessness

group were told that other college students could not learn

the appropriate response in the previous task, while those

assigned to the personal helplessness group were told that

other college students readily learned the appropriate

response. Each noncontingent subject was yoked to a

contingent subject of the same sex, and received the same

schedule of reinforcement as that of his/her partner.

Three women, one undergraduate and two graduate students,

served as experimenters. Each of the experimenters

individually tested approximately the same number of

subjects in each of the three conditions. Experimental

instructions stressed that this was a study of reward and

its effects on a subsequent cognitive task.

     Each subject was given the Lubin's Adjective Checklist

Form C, consisting of 32 words which could be classified

generally as reflecting positive or negative feelings about

onesself (Lubin, 1967). Subjects were not given Lubin's

standard instructions for administering the checklist

because the present study did not share Lubin's intent to

assess stable personality dispositions. Because change in

feelings attributable to treatment condition was of focal

interest, subjects were instructed as follows:

"This questionnaire lists words which describe different
kinds of moods and feelings. Check the words which
describe how you feel right now--at this moment. Some of
the words may sound alike, but check all of the words which
describe how you feel at this moment."
        Although Lubin's Adjective Checklist is most often

used as an index of depression, investigators have found

that many of the Checklist's adjectives assess affective

states other than depression, and that there is no evidence

that the DACL is differentially sensitive to depression

(McNair, 1972).

Upon completion of this form, control Ss were asked to

wait until it was time to continue. Each subject was left

alone in a cubicle for twenty minutes, a period of time

equivalent to pretreatment. At this point each contingent

and noncontingent subject received the pretreatment with

the folmowing instructions:

        "You will be given trials on this apparatus. Each
trial will be signalled by the onset of a yellow light.
When you see the yellow light on, there may be something
you can do to make the green light come on. If you do not
make the appropriate response, the red light will come on
signalling the end of the trial and the fact that you have
not made the appropriate response. Taking apart the
apparatus is not the appropriate response. I can repeat
these instructions, but cannot answer any questions for you
at this time. If you are ready, we will begin. I will
return when you have completed the task."
        The apparatus used was similar to one employed by

Hiroto and Seligman (1975). Three spring-loaded buttons.
were mounted in a row on a plexiglass black box (dimensions
23 cm x 14 1/2 cm). Five cm above each button was a light
with the green light on the left signalling reward, the
yellow light in the middle signalling trial onset and the
red light on the right signalling unsuccessful trial
termination. In the contingent condition pressing the
middle button four times caused the reward light to go on.
In the noncontingent condition none of the buttons had any
effect on reward.

Contingent subjects could turn on the green light by
pressing the middle button four times. Noncontingent
subjects received the same schedule of reinforcement as
that of their yoked partners. Pilot testing had indicated
that contingent subjects would find it moderately easy to
learn the appropriate response after several trials.

When the experimenter re-entered the cubicle, she gave
false feedback to noncontingent subjects. Those assigned
to the universal helplessness condition were told: "Many
college students are not able to do this task very well.
They cannot quickly learn how to make the green light come
on each time." Those assigned to the personal helplessness
group were told: "Many college students do very well at
this task. They are able to quickly learn how to make the
green light come on each time."

Subsequent to the pretreatment/waiting period,
subjects were given Lubin's Adjective Checklist form G,
consisting of 34 words, in order to assess mood change.

The Levine Problem-Solving task was used to test
whether or not there were differences in performance among
the four groups (Levine, 1966). Tapping hypothesis-testing
skills, the Levine task has been used in previous
helplessness research as both a pretreatment and a test
(Hiroto and Seligman, 1975, Griffith, 1977). A problem
consisted of eight 4 x 6 inch cards characterized by four
dimensions (letter, color, size, border), with each
dimension manifested in two ways (B,X; green, black; large,
small; circle, square). Eight problems were administered
to each subject preceded by the following instructions and
a practice problem:

"You will now be presented with several problems. Each
problem is made up of 8 cards just like this one (show
sample card). Each card will always have two different
letters -   B and X; each letter will be green or black.
There will be a circle around each letter or a square
around each letter. Each letter will be large or small.
"B", "X", green, black, circle, square, large, small are
all called characteristics. There are 8 characteristics in
all; can you name them? (pause). For each problem, or set
of 8 cards, I have chosen in advance one characteristic to
be correct. This characteristic could be the letter B, the
letter X, the color green, the color black, the circle, the
square, large or small. Your job is to try to figure out
which one of the 8 is the correct characteristic. You are
to pick one side on each card which you think has the right
answer. I will tell you if your answer is correct or
incorrect. I have already marked on the sheet what the
correct characteristic will be for each problem. After you
go through 8 cards, you can tell me what you think is the
correct characteristic. Then we will start a new problem.
You can take as much time as you want for each problem set,

but your answer will be timed. By my telling you correct
or incorrect, you can figure out what the right answer is.
Try to figure out what the right answer is as soon as you
can. Let us start with a practice trial."

All subjects correctly solved the practice problem

before receiving the eight test problems to ensure that

everyone understood task instructions. Response latency to

solution was taken as a measure of motivation, while number

of problems solved correctly was taken as a measure of

cognitive deficits.

Subjects were then asked to complete Lubin's Adjective

Checklist form E consisting of 34 words. Contingent and

noncontingent subjects were then asked to indicate on a 7

point scale how much control they believed they had during

the button-pressing task, and why they felt this way.

Subjects were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

Pretreatment. As suggested by pilot work, the

students in the contingent group easily mastered the

instrumental task. This group, and therefore both of the

yoked noncontingent groups, received the positive outcome

on the average of 7.92 (S.D.=3.5) trials on the last 10

trials of the pretreatment, but only on the average of 1.38

(S.D.=2.75) on the first 10 trials, with an average of

24.62 (S.D.=13.61) on all 45 trials. A t-test performed on

the first and last block of ten trials indicated that

subject performance significantly improved over time (t

(24)) $= 5.304$, $p < .001$).

Levine Task. The main result of this study was that
subjects in the universal helplessness group showed a
pattern of decrements in task solution latencies
significantly different from the patterns displayed by the
remainder of the groups. Figure 1 illustrates that all

Insert Figure 1 about here

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groups showed a decrease in latencies across trials. (F (7,
273) = 9.84, p < .01); however the universal helplessness
group had initially longer latencies than the remaining
groups. This pattern of changes in latencies resulted in a
marginally significant Groups (4) x Trials-quadratic (8)
interaction (F (3,39) = 2.52, p = .072). Decomposition of
this interaction supports the impression given by Figure 1
that the universal helplessness group differed signifi-
cantly from the remaining three groups (F (1,39) = 7.86,
p < .01), none of which differed from each other (F's
< 1.0).

Analyses of the number of correct hypotheses on the
Levine task failed to show any significant effects of the
treatment variable, the sex variable, or any interaction
between the two (p's > .10). This is not surprising
because all subjects had successfully completed a sample
problem before they were presented with the task problems.
Analysis of the potential changes in feelings about

onesself as a function of treatment or sex variables also
failed to demonstrate any significant effects (p's > .10).

Perception of Noncontingency. As a check on the
effectiveness of the noncontiogent manipulation, subjects
were asked to rate the degree of control they felt they had
on the instrumental task using a 7 point scale (0 = no
control, 7 = complete control). Both of the noncontingent
groups reported that they had little if any control over
the instrumental task. Mean degree of control reported by
the personal helplessness group and the universal help-
lessness group was 0.42 (S.D.=.35) and 0.80 (S.D.=1.20)
respectively. A t-test revealed no significant difference
in the perception of controllability between the two
noncontingent groups (p > .10). Mean degree of control
reported by the contingent group was 3.5 (S.D.=3.2).
T-tests revealed a significant difference in the perception
of controllability between the contingent and universal
helplessness groups (t(16) = 4.5, p <.001) and between the
contingent and personal helplessness groups (t (13) = 5.23,
p < .001). The data strongly suggest that our noncontin-
gent preteatment was indeed effective.

Discussion

In support of helplessness theory, the noncontingent
pretreatment was found to retard response latencies on the
Levine task in the group which had received feedback

designed to induce universal helplessness. This group had
been told that "Many college students are not able to do
this task very well. They cannot quickly learn how to make
the green light come on each time." This feedback should
have induced universal helplessness, even though subjects
had received a high frequency of positive outcomes: I did
not learn the approriate response to elicit the green
light, but neither did my peers. These subjects had
perceived the noncontingency as evidenced by their
responses on the contingency perception feedback
questionnaire. Perceiving the noncontingency between
response and outcome should cause the subject to feel that
he had not learned the appropriate response to control the
outcome.

In the present study the personal helplessness
manipulation did not produce a deficit. This finding seems
to be inconsistent with the results of Hiroto (1974) and
Hiroto and Seligman (1975) who found motivational deficits
as indexed by longer latencies to initiate responding and
cognitive deficits as indexed by fewer number of correct
problems solved compared to the contingent and control
groups. It must be recalled that Hiroto's experiments were
done prior to the reformulated model, and did not include
universal/personal feedback manipulations. It is conceiva-
ble that a large portion of Hiroto's subjects may have

attributed their experience of uncontrollability to the
universal case -- neither they nor their peers could have
controlled the outcome in this situation.

Although the absence of a deficit in the personal
helplessness condition would seem to be inconsistent with
the Abramson et al (1979) reformulated model of learned
helplessness, it can be accounted for by a revised model of
learned helplessness proposed by Roth (1980). The sequence
of steps Roth has outlined for deficits associated with
learned helplessness to be manifested are as follows: 1)
objective noncontingency must result in the subject
deciding that he either could not or did not have control
over outcomes, 2) this must lead to the subject's
perceiving that response and reinforcement are independent,
3) the subject must perceive a similarity between the
training task and test task contexts and must make general
attributions for the cause of response- reinforcement
independence, 4) this leads to the formation of an
expectancy that future response-reinforcement situations
will be independent, and 5) if the subject places a low
value on his performance on the subsequent test task, he
will manifest deficits associated with learned
helplessness. On the other hand, if at this point the
subject places a high value on his test task performance,
either no learned helplessness effect will occur, or

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perfor[illegible]ll actually be enhanced.

In the present investigation both the universal and personal helplessness groups indicated on a feedback questionnaire that they perceived noncontingency on the instrumental task. Instructional set and procedural details (e.g., same experimenter and the same experimental context) should have led subjects to believe that the situational similarity between the two experimental tasks was high. Experimental instructions had stressed that performance on the instrumental task and the cognitive task would be highly related. It can be speculated that subjects who had perceived noncontingency and were told that many other college students had had difficulty learning the task, would be likely to reduce substantially the value of their performing successfully on that task, as well as on the upcoming task, which should have been viewed as highly related. If an individual felt that his peers were not performing well on a certain task, he would be likely to feel that his own performance on the task was not that important. In contrast, those subjects who had perceived noncontingency and were told that many other college students had done very well at the task would be likely to place a high value on successful task performance. If an individual felt that his peers were performing very well at a task while he was performing very

poorly, he would be likely to feel that it was very important for himself to do well. Consistent with Roth's revised model, the universal helplessness group manifested motivational deficits associated with learned helplessness, while the personal helplessness group manifested no helplessness effects.

The Abramson et al. (1978) reformulated model clearly predicts that both personal and universal helplessness manipulations would result in motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits, but that only personal helplessness situations could generate losses in self-esteem. Any cognitive deficit, operationally defined as number of correct problems, which would have occurred was eliminated by the design's requirement that all subjects successfully complete the practice problem before being presented with the eight test problems. Frequently, this necessitated repeating the practice problem several times. It was essential that all subjects understood the rather complex instructions for the Levine task before assessment, so that any response deficits could be attributed to prior exposure to uncontrollability and not to basic failure to understand instructions.

Neither of the noncontingent groups showed a significant change in feelings about oneself. Some support for an emotional deficit resulting from

noncontingency has been rendered by Griffith (1977) who
found a mood change toward increasing depression in
noncontingent failure subjects and a shift toward
increasing anxiety in noncontingent success subjects. It
should be noted, however, that Griffith did not assess
self-esteem, but focused on changes in anxiety and
depression. He employed the Paired Anxiety and Depression
Scale (Mould, 1975), which consists of a forced choice
scale pairing an anxiety adjective with a depression
adjective, thus restricting subjects to two choices,
neither of which may have accurately described their
feelings. We used a more general, open-ended adjective
checklist to monitor positive or negative feelings about
onesself, that perhaps was not sensitive enough to pick up
shifts.

Perhaps the salient characteristic of human adult
helplessness is the motivational deficit generated by the
perception of noncontingency and the attribution that
relevant others would also find the situation
noncontingent. This is consistent with recent findings of
Alloy and Abramson (1979) who have argued that human
helplessness may be primarily motivational, since the
depressed college students in their study did not show a
deficit in their perception of contingency. The often
observed behavioral deficit in depressed college students

(Klein & Seligman, 1976; Miller & Seligman, 1975) may be
primarily motivational in nature.

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Footnote

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean trial latency to completion of the Levine task for each of the four treatment groups.

Legend:
- ●——● CONTINGENT
- ○——○ PERSONAL HELPLESSNESS
- ▲——▲ UNIVERSAL HELPLESSNESS
- △——△ CONTROL

Y-axis: MEAN TRIAL LATENCY IN SEC.

X-axis: TRIALS