

Study Summary Sheet

“Praise for intelligence can undermine children’s motivation and performance”

Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 75(1), 33

In the paper “Praise for intelligence can undermine children’s motivation and performance” Mueller and Dweck report the results of a series of experiments that they conducted to investigate the effects that different types of praise have on children’s motivation, persistence, and performance.

Experiment 1: Introduction and Methodology

In the first experiment in this paper, they tested 128 children between the ages of 10 and 12. The children were asked to work on three sets of 10 puzzle-like problems from a test called the Standard Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1976). The first set of 10 problems (Trial 1) were of moderate difficulty. Children were told to complete as many as they could in 4 minutes. At the end of the 4 minutes, the experimenter scored the children’s solutions and the children were given feedback. All children were first told “Wow, you did very well on these problems. You got [number of problems] right. That’s a really high score”. No matter what their actual score was, all children were told that they had correctly solved 80% of the problems that they had answered. After this initial feedback, one third of the children were praised for their ability and told “You must be smart at these problems”. One third of the children were praised for their effort and told “You must have worked hard at these problems”. The rest of the children acted as a “control group” and were given no further feedback.

For the second set of problems (Trial 2), children were then given 4 minutes to work on more difficult problems. This time all of the children were told that had performed “a lot worse” on these problems, and that they had only solved 50% of the problems that they had answered. After receiving this negative feedback, children were asked to rate their enjoyment of the problems, their desire to persist on the problems, and their failure attributions (i.e. why they think they didn’t do as well on this set of problems).

Children were then given 4 minutes to work on the third and final set of problems (Trial 3), which were equal to the first set in terms of difficulty. After this, children were debriefed about the experiment.

The Results

As shown in Figure 1, there was no significant difference between the groups' performance on the problems in Trial 1. There was also no significant difference between groups' scores on Trial 2 (when they were all told that they had got 50%). However, as shown in Figure 1, on Trial 3 (when problems were the same difficulty as those in Trial 1), the children who were praised for intelligence did worse than they had in Trial 1, whereas those children who had been praised for effort did better.

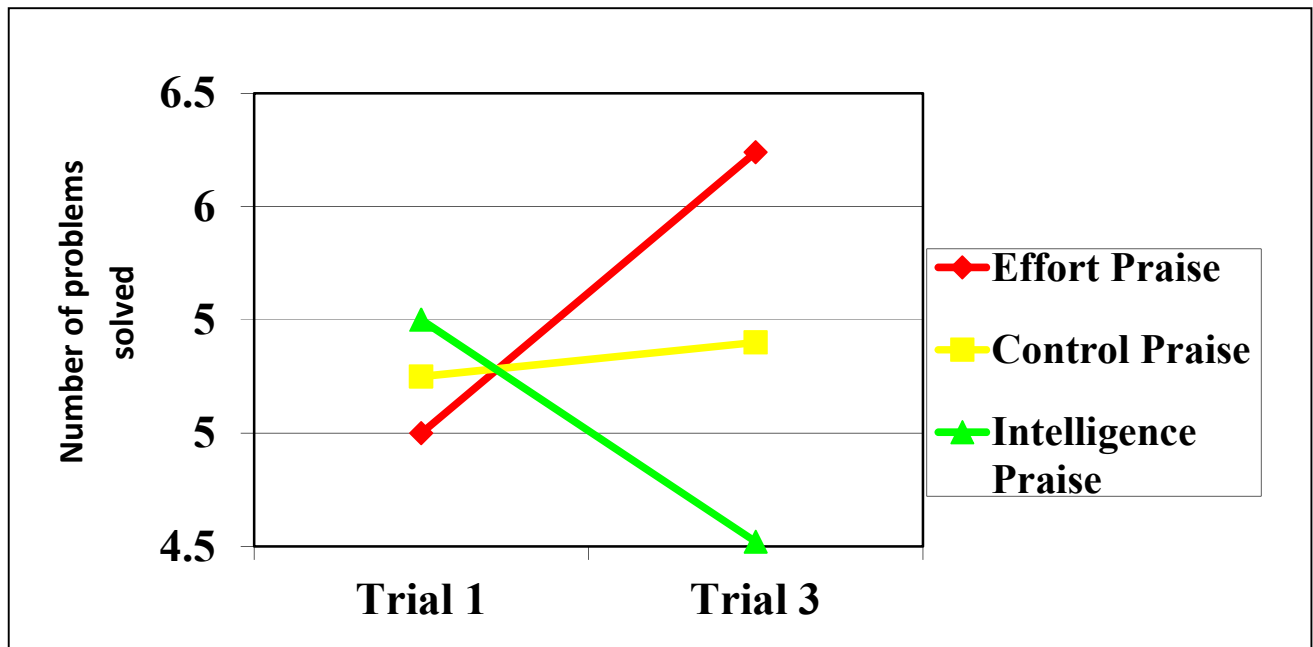


Figure 1. Number of problems children solved before failure (Trial 1) and after failure (Trial 3).

Mueller and Dweck also found that after Trial 2, children who had been praised for intelligence were more likely to attribute their “poor performance” to a lack of ability, whereas those praised for effort were more likely to attribute their “poor performance” to a lack of effort. After Trial 2, children praised for intelligence also reported that they enjoyed the tasks less and were less likely to want to persist on the problems than the children who were praised for effort.

Questions to answer and discuss

What was the aim of this experiment?

What was the difference between the three groups of children?

What was the effect of praising children for intelligence?

What do you think the purpose of Trial 2 was?

Why do you think it was important to debrief children about the experiment?