



The Effects of Stimulus Intensity and Task Complexity on Learned Helplessness in Humans

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Learned helplessness theory proposes that experience of uncontrollability over an outcome should lead to subsequent behavioural debilitation, regardless of the physical properties of stimuli associated with that outcome. Evidence contrary to this has been presented here.

Following an experience of response-outcome noncontingency in a treatment task, test task performance debilitation was found to be affected by the intensity of the sounds used in these tasks. Furthermore, the extent of this debilitation was influenced by the order of presentation of the sounds. Specifically, performance was debilitated in a test task requiring escape from a low intensity sound if the preceding treatment sound intensity was high, but not when it was low. On the other hand, when the test intensity was high performance was facilitated, regardless of treatment intensity.

The effects of stimulus intensity were also found to interact with task complexity. In contrast to the findings with high complexity treatment tasks above, when low complexity treatment tasks were used the subsequent test task performance was debilitated regardless of the intensity of the treatment sounds. This difference between high and low complexity treatment tasks was attributed to response-outcome contingencies being easier to perceive when complexity was low. Nevertheless, the size of the performance deficits was not affected by increases in treatment task complexity, nor by increases in test task complexity.

There was some indication that the effects of sound intensity may be attributable to the yoking procedure used in the experiments, as Ss treated with high intensity sounds experienced greater levels of exposure to uncontrollable outcomes than did Ss treated with low intensity sounds. Support for this was provided by a lack of differentiation in the effect of sound intensity when the treatment task involved a fixed pattern of sounds.

A disproportionate number of studies in the research literature reporting performance debilitation have used treatment tasks involving high intensity sounds and low complexity problems. As these factors have been found to increase the likelihood of observing performance debilitation, some doubts are raised over the claimed generality of 'learned helplessness' effects and the assertion that they are solely attributable to the experience of uncontrollability of an event, regardless of any associated stimulus properties.