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Regina T. Kabatay

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Self-Defeating Personality and Learned Helplessness

Regina T. Kabatay

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Advisor: Thomas Schill

Abstract

This study attempted to determine whether people who engage in a higher frequency of self-defeating behaviors show a greater degree of those characteristics which define learned helplessness. Such a relationship was expected because chronic self-defeating patterns fail to lead to reinforcements in achievement and interpersonal situations and therefore should be associated with a higher number of characteristics found in learned helplessness (such as attributing causes of uncontrollable events to self, constant factors, and factors present in a variety of situations.).

Subjects were 43 undergraduate women, majors and non-majors, from an introductory psychology course. The measures used to examine the association between self-defeating behaviors and learned helplessness were Schill's (1990) Self-Defeating Personality Scale and Seligman's (1978) Attributional Style Questionnaire.

Results failed to support the hypothetical relationship between self-defeating patterns and learned helplessness. Reasons for the failure to find results were discussed.

Self-Defeating Personality and Learned Helplessness

The DSM-III R describes Self-Defeating Personality Disorder as: "A pervasive pattern of self-defeating behavior, beginning by early adulthood, and present in a variety of contexts" (DSM-III R, 1987). The person may often avoid or undermine pleasurable experiences, be drawn to situations or relationships in which he or she will suffer, and prevent others from helping him or her. This personality disorder is exhibited through behaviors which are harmful or defeating and provokes a negative response from the behaving individual's physical or social environment (Curtis, 1989). People with self-defeating personalities frequently show cycles of despair and hold negative beliefs about themselves (Cudney & Hardy, 1991). Individuals with this disorder have little awareness that he or she is deliberately self-destructive. Men and women who suffer from this disorder find themselves trapped in repetitive patterns of soured pleasure and missed opportunities. Happiness and fulfillment elude them, no matter how hard they work towards their goals (Seligman, 1975). People with self-defeating personalities also see themselves victimized by the world and the people in it (Schill, 1990).

Schill (1990) developed a scale to assess self-defeating personality as a part of a research program to understand why people engage in self-defeating behavior. The scale includes 48 true/false items which assess the eight criteria found in the DSM-III-R for diagnosing self-defeating personality disorder. The eight criteria are: (1) chooses people and situations that lead to disappointment, failure or mistreatment even when better options are clearly available, (2) rejects or renders ineffective the attempts of others to help him/her, (3) following positive personal events responds with guilt or behavior that produces pain, (4) incites anger or rejecting responses from others and then feels hurt, (5)

rejects opportunities for pleasure or is reluctant to acknowledge enjoying him/her self, (6), fails to accomplish tasks crucial to his/her personal objectives despite demonstrated ability to do so, (7) is not interested in or rejects people who consistently treat him/her well, and (8) engages in excessive self-sacrifice that is unsolicited by the intended recipient of the sacrifice (DSM-III R, 1987). Schill (1995) reported that women and men who were more self-defeating on the scale were found to be less assertive, less able to defend their rights, had less confidence, and believed others viewed them in a negative manner. Besides coping more poorly with stress (Schill & Beyler, 1992) they also get less enjoyment from individual and social activities (Schill, Beyler, & Sharp, 1993). Scores on the measures also correlate with measures of self-handicapping (Schill, Morales, Beyler, Tatter, & Swigert, 1991) and chronic self-destructiveness (Sharp & Schill, 1995). The scale also correlates highly with Coolidge's measure of self-defeating personality (Schill & Sparenberg, 1997).

Those with self-defeating personality are more apt to place themselves in situations in which they are defeated and helpless. The results of such experiences are likely to cause them to make attributions consistent with the theory of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness results when feelings of incompetence are acquired which are often from repeated failure experiences (Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1995) and usually follow in the wake of uncontrollable events (Curtis, 1989). The thoughts and attributions which are acquired are typically internal (It's my fault), stable (It's going to last forever), and global (It's going to undermine everything I do). Seligman developed this theory in 1975. He found that dogs which were forced to stay in a box where they were repeatedly shocked, soon gave up and ceased trying to escape. Even after the box

was modified to be easily escapable, the dogs still did not try; they remained helpless in the situation and laid down and whined. This apparent giving up generalized to other situations and eventually led to helplessness and apathy. It was further discussed in Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale's study (1978) that the generalization of expectations of uncontrollability across time and tasks depends on the attributions the person makes for their failure.

Seligman (1975) developed a scale to assess the theory of learned helplessness. The questionnaire consists of 12 hypothetical good and bad events pertaining to achievement and affiliation. In each case, subjects are asked to imagine the event happening to them. They then write the one major cause of the event and rate it in terms of internal (something about the person) or external (something about the situation) explanations; internal explanations are associated with a loss of self esteem; stable (non-transient factors) or unstable (transient) explanations for bad events; stable explanations are associated with long lasting helplessness deficits; and global (various situations/tasks) or specific (circumscribed cause) explanations of bad events; global being associated with pervasive deficits (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Peterson & Villanova, 1988).

This study attempted to determine whether or not the more self-defeating a person is, the more learned helplessness they demonstrate. Given their chronic self-defeating patterns which fail to lead to reinforcements in achievement and interpersonal situations, one would expect that the stronger these patterns, the more characteristics we should find of learned helplessness. It was assumed that high scores on the Self-Defeating Personality scale would be related to high scores for internal, stable and global attributions on the Attributional Style Questionnaire.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 43 female undergraduate student volunteers, both majors and non-majors, in an introductory level psychology class. The participants were anonymous as a research number was assigned to ensure confidentiality. Compensation was in the form of research points which helped the student meet their research requirement for introductory psychology.

Measures

The Self-Defeating Personality scale has 48 T/F items, six each for the eight criteria used to identify self-defeating personality (Schill, et al., 1991). For the Self-defeating scale, Chronbach Alpha is .68 and 3-week test-retest is .71 for men and .75 for women.

The Attributional Style Questionnaire includes 12 hypothetical good and bad events. The subjects were asked to imagine the event happening to them, and to write a response to "the one major cause of the event" (Peterson & Villanova, 1988). They then rated the situation on a scale from one to seven. Specific items on the test measured internal-external explanations for events, stable-unstable explanations for events, and global-specific explanations for events (1988). Chronbach Alpha for each subscale was in the .40 to .70 range.

Procedure

Participants were tested in groups of up to ten subjects. In each session, participants were given a packet containing the informed consent, the two standardized questionnaires, and answer sheet. Instructions were given verbally. Participants were

given one hour to complete the questionnaires. The researcher was present at all times. A feedback sheet was given to the participant when the packets were completed and returned.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data for the measures used in the study appear in table 1. Pearson correlations between the scores on the Self-Defeating Personality Scale and the scores from the Attributional Style Questionnaire are presented in table 2. None of these correlations was significant. A multivariate analysis of variance was also used to explore the relationships between the high and low scores from the Self-Defeating Personality scale and each of the attributions measured by the Attributional Style Questionnaire: Internal, Stable, and Global. High and low scores were obtained by using a median split ($Md=17.88$). For the MANOVA, Wilks' Lambda was .95 and was non-significant; $F(4,38) = .54, p>.05$. See table 3.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Measures Used in the Study

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SDPS	43	6	31	17.86	4.86
ASQI	43	23	76	55.63	8.13
ASQS	43	43	77	55.65	7.85
ASQG	43	29	69	54.77	9.67

** SDPS = Self-Defeating Personality Scale

ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire

I = Internality

S = Stability

G = Globality

TABLE 2

Pearson Correlations Between Self-Defeating Scores and Scores for Internal, Stable, and Global Attributions

	SDPS	ASQI	ASQS	ASQG
SDPS	---	.018	.040	-.132
ASQI		---	.080	-.020
ASQS			---	.425
ASQG				---

++ SDPS = Self-Defeating Personality Scale

ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire

I = Internality

S = Stability

G = Globality

TABLE 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Participants Scoring High and Low on the
Self-Defeating Scale for Internal, Stable, and Global Attributions

	SDSSPLIT	MEAN	S.D.
ASQI	low	56.90	(8.06)
	high	54.52	(8.21)
ASQS	low	54.50	(8.31)
	high	56.65	(7.46)
ASQG	low	54.70	(11.15)
	high	54.83	(8.45)

** Wilks' Lambda = .95 [F(4,38) = .54, $p \geq .05$]

SDSSPLIT = Self-Defeating Personality median split

[low (≤ 17): n=20 high (≥ 18): n=23]

S.D. = Standard Deviation

ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire

I = Internality

S = Stability

G = Globality

Discussion

The non-significant results indicate that self-defeating behaviors are not associated with learned helplessness, at least for subjects studied in this sample. The non-significant results could be due to subjects' scores on the Self-Defeating Personality Scale not being extreme enough so no relationship with characteristics of learned helplessness was found. The fact that subjects were all college students, apparently in good standing, shows that they have been able to cope and achieve academically, currently and in the past. Doing the study on people who come to the clinical or counseling center might have been a better group to study in this regard. Other factors, which may have limited any chances of significance are the limited sample size and lack of male subjects. It is possible that such self-defeating patterns could have more impact for one sex rather than the other given the number of sex differences found in previous research.

Also, the Attributional Style Questionnaire may not have assessed the person's own attributions. Some subjects in the study said they answered it to represent the attributions they believed other people would have made in these situations rather than themselves. In addition, this measure has just six positive and six negative hypothetical events which may be why it has only modest reliability. Future research in this area might want to use a measure with more good and bad events.

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