AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS
OF VARIETIES OF PRAISE

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ABSTRACT

After an examination of several areas of psychological literature, a series of propositions was developed which integrated key findings in a variety of fields of general and social psychology. These propositions related to the effects of praise on behaviour, and to the interaction of the praise with the praisee's prior self-concept in the praised domain. Other individual difference variables were also considered. The thesis is a report of the work conducted to investigate these propositions. Both experimental and questionnaire studies were undertaken.

It was hypothesized that different praising locutions might have differential effects on behaviour. A preliminary system for classifying such locutions was devised, and the effects of some specific praise types were examined. Those studied were the attribution of a characteristic, the expression of an expectation about future behaviour, social comparison, and "social reinforcement". The attribution of a characteristic, termed "attributional praise", was examined in greatest detail, and it was hypothesized that there might be differential effects of such praise depending on the nature of the attributed characteristic.

Self-schema theory (e.g., Markus, 1977) was reviewed thoroughly and different techniques of measuring self-schematism were used in an attempt to establish whether the prior status of the praisee in the praised domain interacted with the praise to affect behaviour. Some incidental findings relating to the possibility of the existence of an individual difference variable, termed "self-construction", were noted. This was described, broadly, as the tendency to think about oneself and to know one's personal characteristics.

In a further aspect of the work a series of questionnaire studies in which parents and their children acted as respondents was undertaken. Data were collected relating to the likelihood of use, within this relationship, of the varieties of praise, as was information about children's preferences for the different types of praise.

Overall the results of the experimental studies implied that if there are differential effects of varieties of praise they are likely to be weak and difficult to demonstrate in terms of the main dependent behaviour. Some important findings did emerge however. Consistent with the results of many studies investigating Deci's (e.g., 1975) cognitive evaluation theory (e.g., Ryan, Mims and Koestner, 1984), different kinds of praise were found to affect the ratings of tasks differently. It was concluded that any differential effects of varieties of praise were most likely to be evident in the affective reactions of the recipients of the praise.