AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION OF THE

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS EFFECT

IN HUMANS

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SUMMARY

The term "learned helplessness" was first used by Overmier & Seligman (1967) and Seligman & Maier (1967) to describe the severe interference with subsequent escape and avoidance responding they observed in mongrel dogs exposed to prior inescapable shock. Since then, the learned helplessness effect has been demonstrated in a wide variety of species including man. The learned helplessness theory postulates the crucial step to be the learned expectation that responding and outcome are independent, which results in motivational and cognitive deficits.

The primary purpose of the experiments presented in this thesis was the investigation of the empirical characteristics of the learned helplessness effect in man. Subjects were generally presented with an instrumental pretreatment resulting in uncontrollable outcomes, and then tested on an instrumental task. Unlike in most learned helplessness research employing instrumental procedures, the outcome was not an extremely aversive one, but rather a neutral buzzer. Several situational, motivational and individual difference variables were investigated and found to determine the severity of subsequent performance deficits.

More specifically, Experiment 1 demonstrated a very strong learned helplessness effect in a similar situation but none in a dissimilar situation. It was concluded that there was very
little generalization of helplessness across situations.

Similarly, there was little evidence of much generalization across time, as shown by the dissipation of the helplessness effect with time in Experiment 1(a).

In contrast, Experiment 2 demonstrated a marked helplessness effect with only a small amount of helplessness training. Experiment 3 reassured that the obtained effects were not an artefact of the methodology employed, in particular the use of a signalling system.

Experiment 4 failed to find any significant difference in performance between subjects allowed to choose the nature of their training task and subjects given no choice. Experiment 5, employing a cognitive pretreatment, failed to produce a significant helplessness effect, attesting to the difficulty of using such a pretreatment. In Experiment 6, greater helplessness was obtained for highly achievement motivated individuals than for individuals low in achievement motivation, which it was suggested may be subsumed under the notion of greater helplessness with increased importance.

And finally, Experiment 7 produced equal helplessness deficits following uncontrollable positive as well as uncontrollable negative outcomes. Together with the results of the controllable negative outcome group of Experiment 7(a), this demonstrated that the effects of uncontrollability could not simply be subsumed under the effects of failure.
While most of these experiments were conducted prior to the publication of the reformulated theory of learned helplessness and hence were not undertaken in an attributional framework, the results were generally compatible with the reformulation. A further consideration of all the experiments together suggested that the different experimental manipulations might differentially influence motivational and cognitive deficits.

The final study presented in the thesis consisted of an attempted application of the learned helplessness theory to a study of the unemployed. Young people were found to suffer some negative psychological consequences as a result of unemployment. Contrary to expectation, however, these did not include a feeling of lesser control over what happened to them. It was nevertheless suggested that learned helplessness might still provide a useful theoretical framework for investigating specifically the adjustment of the unemployed.