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BRIEF REPORT

On Feeding Those Hungry for Praise: Person Praise Backfires in Children With Low Self-Esteem

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Child-rearing experts have long believed that praise is an effective means to help children with low self-esteem feel better about themselves. But should one praise these children for who they are, or for how they behave? Study 1 (N = 357) showed that adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem more *person praise* (i.e., praise for personal qualities) but less *process praise* (i.e., praise for behavior) than they give children with high self-esteem. This inclination may backfire, however. Study 2 (N = 313; M_{age} = 10.4 years) showed that person praise, but not process praise, predisposes children, especially those with low self-esteem, to feel ashamed following failure. Consistent with attribution theory, person praise seems to make children attribute failure to the self. Together, these findings suggest that adults, by giving person praise, may foster in children with low self-esteem the very emotional vulnerability they are trying to prevent.

Keywords: person praise, process praise, self-esteem, shame, failure

> Praise, like penicillin, must not be administered haphazardly. (Ginott, 1965, p. 39)

Many adults use praise as "emotional nourishment" for children, in an attempt to help children feel better about themselves. Adults might therefore be especially likely to praise those children who seem to need it the most—children with low self-esteem. Accordingly, child-rearing experts typically believe that children with low self-esteem benefit most from praise (e.g., Talbot, 2009; Youngs, 1991). We propose, however, that certain forms of praise can backfire, especially in children with low self-esteem.

Person Praise and Process Praise

Child-rearing experts have long believed that praise is invariably beneficial to children's psychological functioning. Yet, theorists have proposed that the effects of praise may depend on how such praise is phrased. In particular, theorists have distinguished between *person praise*—praise directed at a child's personal qualities (e.g., ability)—and *process praise*—praise directed at a child's behavior (e.g., effort; Ginott, 1965; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). For example, when children succeed at an academic task, they can be praised for their ability (e.g., "You're so smart!") or for their effort (e.g., "You worked really hard!"). Research has shown that when children later make a mistake on the same academic task, those who were praised for ability experience more negative affect and evaluate themselves more negatively (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). These findings suggest that person praise might backfire when children fail.

What may explain this adverse effect of person praise? One theory proposes that person praise directs children's attention toward the self (Lewis, 1992). If children then fail, they may be more likely to attribute the failure to the self (e.g., "I'm not smart enough") than to their behavior (e.g., "I didn't work hard enough"). Such negative self-attributions are more painful than negative attributions of one's behavior (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Another theory holds that person praise implies conditional regard, conveying to children that they are valued as a person only

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when they succeed (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). When children subsequently fail, they may infer they are unworthy. Thus, person praise may make children feel that they must continuously prove that they are worthwhile—a mind-set that makes them emotionally vulnerable to failure.

Self-Esteem and Praise

Do adults dole out person and process praise to all children alike? Surprisingly, no empirical data have addressed this important question. Several researchers have argued that adults often praise children with the intention of raising their self-esteem (e.g., Damon, 1996; Hewitt, 1998; Twenge, 2006). When children have low self-esteem, it seems particularly intuitive for adults to praise these children for who they are. After all, such person praise directly contradicts these children's insecurities—unlike process praise, which is not focused on children's worth as a person. Adults might therefore be specifically inclined to give children with low self-esteem more *person* praise than they give children with high self-esteem.

But does person praise ultimately make children with low self-esteem feel better about themselves? Perhaps not. Children with low self-esteem are easily triggered to focus their attention on themselves (Brockner & Hulton, 1978; Harter, 1993). In addition, individuals with low self-esteem are quick to infer that others' regard is conditional upon their achievements (Assor et al., 2004; Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), and they are afraid of losing others' regard (Rudolph, Caldwell, & Conley, 2005). For example, they often try to hide their weaknesses, avoid making mistakes, and seek reassurance from others (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). Person praise may magnify low self-esteem children's self-focus and feelings of conditional regard and thereby make them susceptible to losing feelings of worth following failure. Thus, although well-intended, person praise may ironically backfire following failure, especially in children with low self-esteem.

Overview

We first examined whether adults are in fact inclined to give children with low self-esteem more person praise than they give other children (Study 1). Next, we examined whether person praise causes children to feel ashamed following failure and whether this effect is especially strong for children with low self-esteem (Study 2). We focused on shame because shame is a typical and aversive response to failure, especially in late childhood (Harter, 2006). Attribution theory holds that children feel ashamed when they attribute failure to the self (e.g., "I'm no good"; Lewis, 1992). When ashamed, children feel worthless, inferior, and exposed (Tangney & Dearing, 2002)—the same feelings that adults want to protect children with low self-esteem from by providing person praise.

We studied children during late childhood for two reasons. First, during this age period, children attach great importance to others' opinions of their performance (Dweck, 2002), which makes praise particularly salient for them. Second, children this age have acquired the cognitive capacities to evaluate themselves from the perspective of others and to make global negative self-evaluations (Harter, 2006). These capacities contribute to the experience of shame (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Study 1

Study 1 examined whether adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem more person praise, but not more process praise, than they give children with high self-esteem. We studied parents, who are in a position to praise children in daily life.

Method

Participants. Participants were 357 Dutch-speaking parents (87% mothers) ages 29–66 ($M = 42.9$, $SD = 6.2$), recruited via online advertisements. On average, participants had 2.1 children ($SD = 0.8$, range = 1–5) and had received 10.4 years of education ($SD = 3.5$, range = 1–30).

Procedure. Participants read six short descriptions of hypothetical children ages 8–13—three with high self-esteem (e.g., "Lisa usually likes the kind of person she is") and three with low self-esteem (e.g., "Sarah is often unhappy with herself")—each followed by a description of the child's performance (e.g., "She has just made a beautiful drawing"). Participants wrote down the praise they would give.

All responses were classified by a trained coder (blind to self-esteem) as either person praise (i.e., praise directed at the child's personal qualities, e.g., "You're such a good drawer!"), process praise (i.e., praise directed at the child's behavior [i.e., actions, strategies, or effort], e.g., "You did a good job drawing!"), other praise (e.g., "Great!" or "Beautiful drawing!"), or no praise. Coding was consistent with previous research (Gunderson et al., in press). Twenty percent of responses were also coded by the first author (blind to self-esteem); agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.90$). The frequency of each form of praise was summed, across high and low self-esteem children separately.

Results and Discussion

The frequency of "no praise" did not differ between children with high and low self-esteem, paired $t(356) = 1.11$, $p = .270$. Data were analyzed using a 2 (level of self-esteem: high, low) × 3 (type of praise: person, process, other) within-subject analysis of variance (ANOVA). A significant interaction between level of self-esteem and type of praise was found, $F(2, 712) = 39.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$ (see Figure 1). As predicted, parents gave children with low self-esteem more person praise than they gave children with high self-esteem, paired $t(356) = -9.33$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.49$. In fact, parents gave children with low self-esteem more than twice as much person praise (30%) as they gave children with high self-esteem (14%). In contrast, parents gave children with high self-esteem more process praise and "other" praise than they gave children with low self-esteem, paired $t(356) = 3.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.21$, and paired $t(356) = 4.40$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.23$, respectively. These findings indicate that parents tend to attune their praise to children's level of self-esteem, giving children with low self-esteem more person praise (but less other forms of praise) than they give children with high self-esteem.

Study 2

Study 1 indicates that adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem more person praise than they give children with high self-esteem. How, then, does person praise affect children

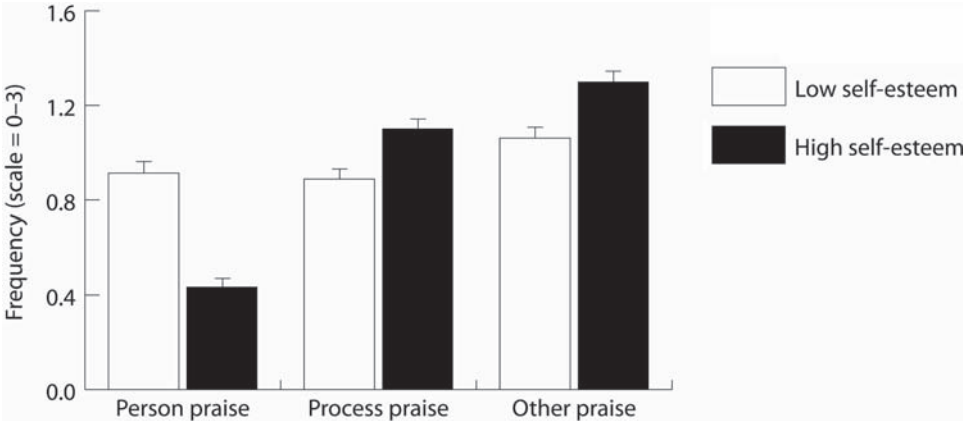

Figure 1. Frequency of person praise, process praise, and "other" praise given to children with high and low self-esteem. Capped vertical bars denote 1 *SE*.

with low self-esteem? Study 2 examined this question experimentally. We predicted that person praise, but not process praise, would backfire in the face of failure, causing feelings of shame, especially in children with low self-esteem.

Method

Participants. Participants were 313 children (54% girls, 90% Caucasian) ages 8–13 ($M = 10.4$, $SD = 1.2$). They were recruited from five public elementary schools serving lower to upper middleclass communities in the Netherlands. All participants received active parental consent (parental consent rate = 83%; child assent rate = 100%). They were randomly assigned to conditions of a 3 (type of praise: person, process, none) × 2 (performance feedback: success, failure) between-subjects design (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Procedure. Several days before the experiment, participants completed a standard measure of self-esteem, the six-item Global Self-Worth subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). Sample items are: "Some kids like the kind of person they are" and "Some kids are happy with themselves as a person." Participants reported how much they were like these kids (0 = *I am not like these kids at all* to 3 = *I am exactly like these kids*). Responses were averaged across items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$).

In the experiment proper, participants were tested in a quiet room at their school. They were told that they would be performing an online reaction time game called *Go!* against an opponent from another school. Furthermore, they were told that the *Go!* webmaster would be monitoring their performance via the Internet, which highlighted public exposure—a key component of the experience of shame (Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011). Both the opponent and the webmaster were bogus, and the computer controlled all events.

Participants first performed a noncompetitive practice round. Then, they received a text message from the webmaster on their screen, synchronized with a bogus webcam movie depicting the webmaster, a same-sex adult, writing the message. In the person praise condition, the webmaster wrote: "Wow, you're great!" In the process praise condition, the webmaster wrote: "Wow, you did a great job!" In the no-praise condition, the webmaster wrote nothing about participants' performance. In all conditions, the webmaster closed by writing: "The next round is about to start."

In the next round, participants competed against their opponent and then received a message on their screen stating that they had won (success condition: "[Participant's name], you WON!") or lost (failure condition: "[Participant's name], you LOST!"). Shame was measured both before (Time 1 [T1]) and after (Time 2 [T2]) the game using five adjectives (*ashamed, stupid, ridiculous, humiliated, foolish*; Thomaes et al., 2011). Participants reported how they felt "right now, at the present time" concerning these adjectives (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*). Responses were averaged

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Study 2 per Experimental Condition

	Success						Failure					
	Person praise		Process praise		No praise		Person praise		Process praise		No praise	
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age (years)	10.43	1.19	10.54	1.12	10.48	1.15	10.38	1.26	10.35	1.20	10.45	1.21
Self-esteem	2.30	0.51	2.39	0.47	2.37	0.43	2.35	0.48	2.35	0.57	2.46	0.43
Shame (T1)	0.60	0.70	0.41	0.44	0.51	0.61	0.51	0.51	0.54	0.56	0.35	0.45
Shame (T2)	0.17	0.29	0.23	0.32	0.33	0.37	0.77	0.77	0.55	0.50	0.43	0.58

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

across adjectives (Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$ and .67 at T1 and T2, respectively).[1] A thorough debriefing followed.

Results and Discussion

There were no differences between conditions in self-esteem, T1 shame, gender, or age ($ps > .222$), indicating successful random assignment. Furthermore, neither gender nor age interacted with either praise or performance feedback ($ps > .170$).

Overall effects of praise. Data were analyzed using a 3 (type of praise: person, process, none) × 2 (performance feedback: success, failure) × 2 (time: T1, T2) mixed-design ANOVA. A significant interaction between performance feedback and time was found, $F(1, 305) = 34.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. Children experienced increased shame following failure, $F(1, 156) = 6.46$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.21$, and decreased shame following success, $F(1, 153) = 33.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$.

Importantly, a significant interaction between type of praise, performance feedback, and time was found, $F(2, 305) = 5.92$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. As predicted, children experienced a sharp increase in shame following failure after they received person praise, $F(1, 54) = 9.91$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.46$, but not after they received process praise, $F(1, 48) < 1$, $p = .962$, $d = 0.01$, or no praise, $F(1, 52) = 1.45$, $p = .235$, $d = 0.16$. Planned contrasts, with T1 shame as a covariate, indicated that, following failure, T2 shame was higher in the person praise condition than in both the process praise condition, $F(1, 304) = 8.47$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.49$, and the no praise condition, $F(1, 304) = 10.12$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.55$, with no difference between these latter two conditions, $F(1, 304) = 0.05$, $p = .829$, $d = 0.07$. In contrast, children experienced decreased shame following success regardless of whether they had received person, process, or no praise, $Fs > 5.49$, $ps < .023$, $ds > 0.35$. Together, these findings indicate that person praise, but not process praise, caused children to feel ashamed following subsequent failure.

Self-esteem modulating the effects of praise. We predicted that the adverse effect of person praise would be especially strong for children with low self-esteem. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with T2 shame as the dependent variable. In Step 1, we entered T1 shame. In Step 2, we entered type of praise (1 = person praise, 0 = otherwise), performance feedback (1 = failure, 0 = success), and self-esteem (continuous, centered). In Step 3, we entered two-way interactions. In Step 4, we entered the three-way interaction.

As expected, the three-way interaction was significant, $t(295) = 2.99$, $p = .003$, $\beta = .25$. To interpret the interaction, simple slopes were calculated for all six conditions with T1 shame as a covariate (Holmbeck, 2002; see Figure 2, with self-esteem dichotomized into 1 *SD* above and below the mean). As predicted, lower self-esteem predicted increased T2 shame only in the person praise by failure condition, $t(295) = -3.88$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.45$. Self-esteem was unrelated to T2 shame in all other conditions ($ts < |-1.25|$, $ps > .213$). Thus, the shame-inducing effect of person praise in the face of failure was especially strong for children with lower levels of self-esteem.

Figure 2. Time 2 shame (adjusted for Time 1 shame) at high ($M + 1$ *SD*) and low ($M - 1$ *SD*) levels of self-esteem, depicted per experimental condition. * $p < .001$. No other slope was significant ($ps > .213$).

General Discussion

It has been said that children are "fed with milk and praise" (Lamb, 1823/1838, p. 292). Unfortunately, little is known about how praise affects those who seem to need it the most—children with low self-esteem. Study 1 showed that adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem more person praise, but less process praise, than children with high self-esteem. Adults may feel that children with low self-esteem will benefit from praise that directly discredits or contradicts their insecurities. However, Study 2 showed that person praise backfires, especially in children with low self-esteem, causing them to experience the aversive feeling of shame in the face of failure. Note that baseline shame was controlled for, taking into account that children with low self-esteem routinely experience more shame than do others. These findings suggest that adults, by giving person praise, may foster in children with low self-esteem the very emotional vulnerability they are trying to prevent.

Theoretical Implications

These findings suggest that person praise contributes to a self-perpetuating downward spiral of self-derogation. Adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem person praise. But person praise may inadvertently put these children at risk to experience decreased—rather than increased—feelings of worth. Decreased feelings of self-worth, in turn, could invite more person praise from adults, thereby perpetuating the downward spiral.

The adverse impact of person praise on children with low self-esteem may have multiple origins. Person praise may trigger these children's feelings of conditional regard and, consequently, make them feel unworthy following failure (Assor et al., 2004; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). In addition, person praise may make

[1] Because shameful situations can trigger aggression (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), we also included a behavioral measure of aggression (i.e., a version of the noise blast paradigm that we tried to adapt for children this young). Fidelity checks indicated, however, that many children did not understand that their opponent received noise blasts. Therefore, results for this measure are not discussed further.

children with low self-esteem highly self-focused, thereby inducing them to attribute subsequent failure to the self (Lewis, 1992). To disentangle these processes, future research can test whether the adverse impact of person praise can be prevented by phrasing such praise as unconditional (e.g., "You're great, *no matter what*"; Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996) or by redirecting children's attention away from the self and onto the task after they have been praised (Brockner & Hulton, 1978).

This research contributes to previous research in important ways. It is the first to suggest that common sense can lead adults astray in their attempts to help children with low self-esteem feel better about themselves. Furthermore, this research shows that adults attune their praise to children's traits. Previous research has primarily focused on the consequences, rather than the antecedents, of adults' praise (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Additionally, this research adds to the growing body of research indicating that seemingly minor differences in socializing messages can have considerable impact on children's conceptions of themselves and the world around them (Cimpian, 2013).

Practical Implications

The finding that person praise has adverse effects in children with low self-esteem has important practical implications. Prevention and intervention programs, educational programs, and parent training programs often rely on praise to raise children's low self-esteem (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007; O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006). To be sure, our results do not imply that adults should refrain from praising children altogether. In fact, research has suggested that process praise often does benefit children's academic motivation (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). For example, praise for effort may help children persist in the face of academic failure (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Furthermore, within caring family or classroom contexts, adequate forms of praise may communicate to children that they are loved and cared about, which is key to their psychological adjustment (Rohner, 2004). Our results do imply, however, that adults must be careful using person praise in performance contexts, especially with children with low self-esteem.

Limitations and Future Research

Our research is not without limitations. First, the studies were conducted in Western samples. Western society is generally more concerned than non-Western society with building children's self-esteem (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), which suggests that non-Western adults might be less inclined to give children with low self-esteem person praise. Second, the studies were conducted in controlled settings. Future research is needed to establish to what extent our findings generalize to naturalistic settings (e.g., teacher–child interactions in the classroom).

Conclusion

Western society has a strong belief in the power of praise—especially for supporting children with low self-esteem (e.g., Talbot, 2009; Youngs, 1991). The present research indicates that adults are inclined to give children with low self-esteem person praise but that such praise ironically backfires. Thus, much like penicillin, person praise can have adverse side effects and must not be administered haphazardly.

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