

Fall 12-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Hennessey, Bridget (2007) "The Effect of Vicarious Learned Helplessness on Critical Thinking," *Mako: NSU Undergraduate Student Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/mako/vol1/iss1/4>

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The Effect of Vicarious Learned Helplessness on Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This study was to determine if critical thinking was affected by vicarious learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which one continues to be hurt or damaged physically or mentally after having learned of one's powerlessness in a situation. The hypothesis was that people who were primed with thoughts or made to believe and think of themselves or others in an abusive relationship would score lower on critical thinking than those primed with thoughts of a healthy relationship. Thirty participants were randomly assigned into two groups; one group listened to an audio recording based on a healthy relationship and the other listened to an abusive relationship. Following the audio recordings a test was administered featuring five critical thinking questions. As predicted, the scores of people primed with thoughts of an abusive relationship scored lower on the critical thinking questionnaire.

The Effect of Vicarious Learned Helplessness on Critical Thinking

The link between learned helplessness and depression has been researched by many psychologists. Clark and Beck (1999) stated, “Seligman noted many parallels between laboratory-induced helplessness and depression, and so suggested that the model of learned helplessness may be an analog for clinical depression” (p.41). Learned helplessness is considered a symptom of depression because of the feelings of uselessness and of a lack of control over one’s actions. Henkel, Bussfeld, Moller, and Hegerl (2002) stated, “It is the experience of uncontrollable events and as a consequence the expectation that no action can control outcomes in the future which finally leads to the production of symptoms of depression” (p.242). Learned helplessness does not mean that a person will become depressed, but it is a possible consequence. Offer (2006) explained,

A type of behavior observed in both animals and humans is the phenomenon of learned helplessness: the experience of being boxed in a corner, and faced with intractable dilemmas or choices with no obvious escape. Numerous studies in both animals and humans show a consistent set of responses: depressed mood, loss on interest, loss of appetite, insomnia, slow thoughts, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, diminished ability to think, and poor concentration. (p.292)

It is a psychological condition in which one continues to be hurt, or to be damaged physically or mentally. A person who becomes helpless believes that they do not have any control over the situation they are faced with. This enables them to believe that they cannot overcome the physical or emotional pain they are receiving. Being in a highly

stressful and negative environment, depression is likely to occur when a person becomes helpless.

Relationships often have an effect on learned helplessness. According to Haley and Braun- Haley (2001), “the learned helplessness syndrome that holds women in abusive relationships develops because of the pattern abuse generally takes: a slow tension-building phase escalates until an explosion or acute battering incident occurs, followed by a calm, loving respite” (p.142). Battered women are classified as being 18 years or older and in a comfortable relationship with the opposite sex who continuously inflicts pain psychologically or physically. Battered women may begin to feel like there is no way out, and may allow other person(s) to control them. This phenomenon is known as Battered Woman Syndrome. It was believed by many people that survivors and victims of the Holocaust showed signs of learned helplessness during their time in concentration camps. Victims involved in the Holocaust had no way out and were completely controlled by the Nazi party. This caused them to gradually feel as if they could no longer control their own actions. Victims of the Holocaust were stripped of all their possessions and beliefs and every move they made were to satisfy the Nazi regime. This was instilled in their minds as they began to learn how to be controlled. Battered women acquire the same intended control where they believe they have no choice but to listen to their partner and take the physical and emotional abuse.

The act of being controlled by someone or something could enable learned helplessness. Learned helplessness was presented in many studies over the years. One study in particular by Maier and Seligman (1976) tested dogs’ reactions to electric shocks to see if they would become accustomed to living in a helpless condition. Maier and

Seligman posited that “the theory of learned helplessness is the expectation that an outcome is independent of responding (a) reduces the motivation to control the outcome and (b) interferes with learning that responding controls the outcome” (p.17). They began this study by putting all of the dogs into a rectangular cage-like structure divided into two halves with a wall that retracts along with an electric shock floor plate. The electric shock plate would give a low level of electric currents to the paws of each dog. This study contained three conditions; first a dog was shocked randomly throughout the study. The second condition was a dog that did not get shocked at all and the last condition, a dog that was continuously shocked for the entire time. They then brought each dog into another box, in which they were able to escape by jumping over the partition. When the shock began in the new box, the dog shocked at random times jumped over the partition, as did the dog that had never been shocked. The dog that had been continuously shocked sat in the box and enabled it to happen. In other words, the dogs who had been constantly shocked had learned that there was no way to avoid the pain; it is assumed that they learned as if getting out of the situation was not possible. Maier and Seligman’s study related to the hypothesis of the present study by reflecting the control over the dogs and how it can control humans in an abusive relationship. This shows the effect on critical thinking or thoughts and actions of getting out of a situation which does not occur when humans or animals are not in control of their lives.

The purpose of the present study was to find out how learned helplessness affects a person’s critical thinking skills. Critical thinking allows people to be able to analyze a question and give a thoughtful answer. According to Halpern (1998), “The term critical thinking refers to the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the

probability of a desirable outcome” (p.451). By using critical thinking, a person is also able to look at goals and strive to achieve them. The hypothesis was that people who are primed with thoughts of learned helplessness in a relationship will not be able to solve critical thinking questions to their highest potential, as compared to people who are primed with thoughts of healthy relationships. Each participant was randomly assigned into two different groups. Each group listened to a voice recording. The first group was primed with thoughts of learned helplessness; they listened to two women’s stories about their abusive relationships. The second group was primed with thoughts of a healthy relationship; they listened to an audio recording about a couple who are falling in love. Each recording was approximately 15 minutes in length. Each group listened to the recording in the same situation at the same time of day. It was hypothesized that the participants who were primed with stories about an abusive relationship would experience a sort of vicarious learned helplessness. Therefore, it was predicted that this group would receive a lower score on the critical thinking task than the group who was primed with stories about a healthy relationship. An individual may have been influenced by the traumatic story and thus feel cognitive dissonance which may reduce one’s critical thinking.

Method

Participants

All participants were at least 18 years of age. There were 30 participants who were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Participants were recruited in the lobby of the Alvin Sherman library at Nova Southeastern University. The mean age of the participants was 21 years old.

Procedure

All participants signed an Informed Consent Form upon their arrival at the study. Each group then listened to a voice recording; the first group listened to two women's stories about their abusive relationships, taken from the documentary "Defending Our Lives" (Lazarus, Wunderlich & Kabat, 1993) (See Appendix A). The two women told about their personal experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse from a partner or spouse. These women are now in jail for killing these men.

The second group listened to another voice recording based on a couple who are falling in love. Specifically, they listened to an audio recording from the movie "The Notebook" (Cassavetes, 2004) (See Appendix A). This love story was about Noah and Allie who are from different ends of the socioeconomic ladder. This difference did not change the way they felt about each other as their love grew stronger. The voice recordings were broadcasted through a stereo system hooked up in each room. Each recording was approximately 15 minutes in length.

Each group participated in the study in the Alvin Sherman Library at Nova Southeastern University. Five participants were tested in either the healthy or abusive relationship condition at a time. Both groups participated in the study approximately between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. Both groups were given the same five questions on the critical thinking questionnaire (See Appendix B) following the recording. The only major difference between conditions is how the relationship is portrayed in the audio recordings.

After the recording was over, participants were asked to answer five critical thinking questions. Participants had 10 minutes to complete the "critical thinking" task.

Lastly, they listened to a debriefing speech, which included an explanation and reason for conducting the study, a number to contact student counseling, and two references for more information about the topic. The student counseling number was included in the debriefing speech for people who may feel as if what the women were explaining in the recording of their abusive relationships actually occurred to them.

Results

In a between participants design, 30 participants were scored on how many critical thinking questions they answered correct. Their scores were then evaluated through a *t* test to examine the effect of the independent variable (abusive relationship vs. a healthy relationship) on the dependent variable (which was the critical thinking questionnaire). As predicted, people who were primed with thoughts or made to believe or think of themselves in an abusive relationship scored lower on the critical thinking questions than the people primed with thoughts of a healthy relationship $t(28) = 3.29$, $p = .003$. The audio recording of the healthy relationship showed the $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.06$ and the abusive relationship's $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.56$.

Discussion

The results confirmed that there was a significant difference between vicarious learned helplessness and the healthy relationship. People who were primed with thoughts of an abusive relationship scored lower on the critical thinking questions than the people primed with thoughts of a healthy relationship. In relation to previous research studies, the results paralleled those from Maier and Seligman (1976).

Some participants were tested at various hours of the day between 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. It is suspected that if participants were to take the test at the same time, a more

similar result may have been produced. Although there was no ceiling or flooring effect, the significant difference may have been affected by the time of day participants were tested. When testing a group of people in the mid-afternoon participants may be more alert opposed to participants tested at 5:00 p.m. Participants at 5:00 p.m. may be concentrating more on tasks that need to be finished that night as opposed to participants who earlier in the day may feel as if time is not as constricted. People who participated around 5:00 p.m. tend to be getting ready to eat which could possibly have an effect on concentration, on the other hand people who participated at 3:00 p.m. usually already had lunch were well nourished and energized during the study.

A second limitation could be the effects of testing a smaller population. If a larger population was tested and the results were not confirmed then there could be some other factors of diversity in areas such as income, race and gender. In a larger population various influences come into account opposed to conducting a study where everyone was a student living in the same area. People who live in other states or in lower income homes may view the situation of being abused differently.

Future research could focus on gender differences between participants. The study could be run twice, once all male and another with all females. The purpose would be to see how gender differences may affect the scores. Also, age might be a factor. Studies could explore whether individuals ages 14 to 18 (high school aged) would score similar or different to people that are 18 years or older. It would seem that females would score lower on the critical thinking questionnaire after listening to an abusive relationship than males.

The results from this study could be used to help college students under pressure

to perform better on critical thinking tasks. This information may help counselors guide and evaluate people to resolve their problems with tests. Counselors would be able to help people with learned helplessness by getting them out of the situation of not being in control. Making a plan to be in control of their lifestyle is the first step. Being in control of their actions allows for a stressful life and the ability to concentrate on their future goals and achievements. Not all who have test taking problems suffer from learned helplessness it is those who are learned helpless that acquire problems when taking tests.

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Appendix A

The learned helplessness group listened to an audio recording of two women who told their stories of physical, emotional and sexual abuse from a partner or spouse from the documentary “Defending Our Lives” (Lazarus, Wunderlich & Kabat, 1993). These women are now in jail for killing these men. They are considered to have Battered Women Syndrome. Each woman has a different story. Patty Hennessy was physically and emotionally abused for ten years and finally escaped a few months after having a child with him. When she was pregnant he would punch her in the stomach and eventually tried to run her over with his truck. He got a court order to take their son to Florida for 30 days and he told her he was going to kill her and take their son forever, he told her to kiss her son goodbye. Her father was a police officer so she grabbed the gun from the house and shot him. She is now serving an 18-20 year sentence for manslaughter. The second woman is Lisa Grimshaw. She was physically, emotionally and sexually abused by her boyfriend. He raped her many times and told her she was asking for it. He tried to kill her with a hammer after she was trying to hammer her windows shut at her home; he broke in the front door and beat her until the cops came. Two men from work saw him terrorizing her and told her they would tell him to stop. She lured him to a place where the two men were in the woods. One guy took a bat to him, she ran back to the car and when they got back they told her that they killed him. She is now serving a 15-20 year sentence for manslaughter.

The second group listened to an audio recording of a healthy relationship from the movie “The Notebook” (Cassavetes, 2004). The movie is about Noah and Allie; they meet over summer vacation where Allie has a summer home. Allie’s family is extremely

wealthy whereas Noah is very poor. They are both around 17 years old, and fall deeply in love. Noah and Allie are walking home from the movies and she is explaining how her days are planned for her. She has tutors for all subjects and takes piano, dance and tennis lessons meanwhile he works at a lumber yard for 40 cents an hour. In this long walk home they learn about each other and he teaches her that she needs to do things because she wants to not because others expect it from her. He makes her lay on the ground in the middle of the road with him as they watch the street lights turn red to yellow to green, he wants her to feel like she is in control of herself. After that night they continue to do things that most would not expect from her and she begins to find herself as their love grows stronger.

Appendix B

Critical Thinking Questions

You will be given 10 minutes to complete this questionnaire.
You may use the back as scrap paper.

1. If New York time is three hours ahead of San Francisco time, what time would it be in New York if a San Francisco clock one hour slow shows 4 o'clock?
 - A) 2 o'clock
 - B) 4 o'clock
 - C) 7 o'clock
 - D) 8 o'clock
2. If Mark is older than Christie, Lauren is older than Christie, Briana is younger than Lonny, and Christie is older than Lonny. Which of the following is true?
 - I) Mark is older than Lauren
 - II) Lauren is older than Briana
 - III) Mark is older than Lonny
 - A) I only
 - B) II only
 - C) III only
 - D) I and II
 - E) II and III
3. Jennifer made a list of numbers from 1 to 100. How many times did she write the number 2?
4. You are running in a street marathon and you overtake the person in second place, what place are you now in?
5. At a recent birthday party there were four mothers and their children. Aged 1, 2, 3 and 4. From the clues below can you work out whose child is whose and their relevant ages?

It was Jane's child's birthday party. Brian is not the oldest child. Sarah had Anne just over a year ago. Laura's child will be 3 next birthday. Daniel is older than Charlie. Teresa's child is the oldest. Charlie is older than Laura's child.

Critical Thinking Questions

Answers

1. D

2. E

3. 20

4. Second

5. Sarah	Laura	Jane	Teresa
Anne 1	Brian 2	Charlie 3	Daniel 4