

# Personality Traits Influence the Generation of Learned Helplessness in Adolescents

Yuwen Cheng<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Sociology, Shanghai University, Shanghai, 200444, China

<sup>a</sup>chengyw@shu.edu.cn

## Abstract

**Learned helplessness refers to the inability of an organism to act and resign itself to fate when continually frustrated. Generally, it can be explained by attribution theory and cognitive model. Most of the existing studies have included the generation of learned helplessness in the attribution theory, and there are few studies on the alternative learned helplessness that may be generated under the cognitive model. At the same time, personality traits are already established in adolescence, and imitation of peer learning behavior will produce learned helplessness. This study combined existing research and theories to explore the influence of personality factors on adolescents' autonomous and alternative learned helplessness, and the degree of preference of different personality traits for these two types of learned helplessness, in an attempt to propose a new research paradigm.**

## Keywords

**Personality traits; Adolescents; Learned helplessness.**

## 1. Introduction

Learned helplessness is the inability and resignation that occurs when an organism is repeatedly frustrated. Learned helplessness was first proposed by psychologist Seligman when studying animals. Since then, psychologists have shown that learned helplessness occurs in human behaviors. Learned helplessness proposed by behaviorist school is a kind of expectation that an individual does not think an event depends on his own reaction, and in essence it is a learned negative motivation. The reasons for its emergence can be divided into attribution theory and cognitive theory.

## 2. Literature Review

Attribution theory suggests that learned helplessness arises in the way a person makes attributions. In order to distinguish the widespread and individual helplessness, Abramson introduced causal attribution to revise, supporting that once individuals attributed events to the stable, internal control, common factor, could they produce learned helplessness [1]. It's generally believed that internal attribution to an uncontrollable event leads to a sense of helplessness for that particular event, while external attribution to an uncontrollable event leads to a sense of helplessness for a general event. Harald found that past academic performance had an impact on the attribution model [2]. People who are poor at learning over a long period of time would think that their own incompetence led to failure, thus reducing their sense of self-efficacy and leading to learned helplessness.

Cognitive theory holds that learned helplessness occurs when information feedback and cognition of the problem are inconsistent. Kofta & Sedek believed that, in an uncontrollable situation, cognition could get meaningless or mismatched information feedback, and the

uncertainty of the problem would be increased, resulting in cognitive fatigue [3]. People were tired of making further hypotheses and verifying them, increasing the occurrence of learned helplessness. In contrast to causal attribution, the cognitive school holds that repeated failures do not result in learned helplessness, but rather in long-term experience and incoherence. By studying children's academic performance, Cao Xinmei et al. found that inconsistent feedback in the cognitive process led to learned helplessness, but it would not produce learned helplessness in the evaluation of behavioral results [4].

As mentioned above, learned helplessness results from one's attribution or cognitive model. This explanation is based on the individual's psychological state and can be regarded as autonomous learned helplessness. Some studies have shown that people's attributional preferences are related to personality traits. Wu Xiaoyan et al. measured a negative correlation between learned helplessness and introversion dimension, a positive correlation between learned helplessness and neuroticism dimension, and a positive correlation between learned helplessness and psychoticism dimension according to the self-developed formal scale of learned helplessness [5]. Luana Sorrenti et al. further investigated the influence of personality traits on learned helplessness, and found that conscientiousness, extraversion, openness, and sociability were significantly positively correlated with high school students' self-efficacy [6].

Based on the theory of alternative learning proposed by Bandura, both alternative and ordinary guilt experience regret and guilt for hurting others. Individuals experience vicarious guilt to some extent when they learn that others have committed unethical acts. In the cognitive model, it's reasonable to assume that, like alternative guilty, learned helplessness can also be acquired through vicariously learned, called alternative learned helplessness. In other words, the information feedback presented by the failure experience of others is different from people's initial cognition of the problem, which increases the judgment of the uncertainty of their situation.

### 3. Proposing Research Perspectives

With cognitive model, the experience of others' failure dispels our expectations that things will be good, that is, the information feedback is different from initial cognition, resulting in learned helplessness. However, alternative learned helplessness stems from the feeling of helplessness gained from the continuous failure of others, and autonomous learned helplessness stems from the feeling of helplessness gained from the long-term or consistent failure of oneself. The study of alternative learned helplessness can help understand the source of depression in students' learning process and improve learning efficiency.

At present, the study of learned helplessness is common, but the study of personality factors of learned helplessness is few. Previous studies have investigated which personality traits are more likely to produce learned helplessness, but have not further explored the underlying causes. In addition, most of the research are about autonomous learned helplessness which generates from the attribution theory, there is little research on the possible generation of alternative learned helplessness under the cognitive model. However, the development of personality have been gradually formed since adolescence, and the imitation of peer learning behavior in adolescence is very important. Since imitation learning brings learned helplessness, further research should investigate the influence of personality factors on the two kind of learned helplessness respectively, and the degree of preference of different personality traits for these two types of learned helplessness.

Personality traits produce autonomous learned helplessness by influencing individual attribution style. Foreign studies only show a significant positive correlation between the Big Five and self-efficacy. Domestic research shows that people's attribution preference is related

to the three-factor personality traits. People with low scores of conscientiousness, extroversion are more likely to develop autonomous learned helplessness.

Personality traits influence the bias generated by both types of learned helplessness. Based on the two theoretical models, people with low extroversion and openness tend to adopt the attribution theory to produce autonomous learned helplessness, and people with high extroversion and openness are more likely to produce vicariously learned helplessness due to imitation learning.

#### 4. Discussion

As a disturbance factor of emotion, learned helplessness often affects teenagers' performance by making certain obstacles to the acceptance of knowledge and improvement of learning interest. Identifying the personality factors on learned helplessness helps in four aspects :(1) Students who are easy to imitate others should regulate their cognitive model; (2) It is helpful for teachers to guide students to make correct attribution; (3) The design of teaching materials should conform to the cognitive abilities of students with different personality traits; (4) Students who are easy to imitate others and those who are easy to develop learned helplessness should be divided into different classes to create a good learning atmosphere.

#### 5. Conclusion

By the year when the learned helplessness theory has been put forward for 50 years, Seligman pointed out that the learned helplessness cannot be learned, which means it's not a independent cognitive learning to get the sense of learned helplessness. The theory of personality traits holds that personality is innate. Learned helplessness, according to the new interpretation, is also an innate adaptive response. Therefore, whether personality traits predetermine the probability of learned helplessness should be further investigated in future experiments.

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