



## Reference

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Dear Editor,

### AGENDA FOR CONCEPTUALISING AND RESEARCHING PRAISE AND CRITICISM

We write to suggest a novel conceptualisation of praise which may inform future research. Praise is commonly used as a motivational tool (e.g. to encourage, socialise, ingratiate, seduce, reward and influence other people<sup>1</sup>). How praise may motivate learning and academic performance, or influence a recipient's self-esteem, both continue to attract scholarly attention. In contrast to some recent views (e.g. Brummelman *et al.*<sup>2</sup>), we suggest that praise is a construct that probably resides on a bipolar continuum, ranging from one pole that is a strong positive message about performance (praise), through a zero-point, to an opposite pole that is a strong negative message about performance (criticism). This view suggests that interpersonal messages about performance consist of a praise–criticism continuum, while intrapersonal messages about performance consist of a self-affirmation–self-criticism continuum. This conceptualisation now requires empirical testing.

Carol Dweck's<sup>3</sup> influential work has demonstrated that *what* is praised is important, because this can engender a 'fixed mindset' (the belief that basic qualities like talent or intelligence are fixed and cannot be changed), or a 'growth mindset' (the belief that basic qualities are malleable) in the recipient. However, researching praise and its consequences clearly extends beyond considering just what is praised because perceptions of praise (i.e. how praise is *received*) have been shown to be attenuated by a range of interacting variables.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, two individuals working on the same task may interpret exactly the same praise message differently, depending on a wide range of factors. The most useful praise probably comes from people who know and understand us and whom we respect. These points suggest that when investigating the effects of praise on task performance or self-esteem, it is important that researchers examine the characteristics of praise and performance *and* how these are each perceived by the recipient. Relationships between praise, self-esteem and performance presumably differ depending on an individual's effort during a

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task and whether they perceive that their performance actually represents their ability level (cf. Mueller and Dweck<sup>4</sup>). Measuring perceptions of praise is necessary because it corroborates that intended and received messages are in fact the same (verifying experimental manipulations), and allows researchers to explore whether any effects are mediated by an individual's interpretation of the praise they received.

In our view, for praise (or criticism) to be useful and motivating to a recipient, it needs to be specific, realistic, plausible, context-appropriate, personalised and promote a growth mindset. Praise is likely to be less useful or motivating if it is generalised, unrealistic, implausible, de-contextualised, de-personalised or if it promotes a fixed mindset. Under one or more of the latter conditions, praise (or criticism) is vulnerable to being disregarded as irrelevant, experienced as invalidating, or to have an unintended demotivating effect.

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