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# The Frequency of Generic and Nongeneric Praise in the Sports and Academic Settings



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Over the last decade, research has shown a growing literature focusing on the effect of different types of praise on motivation in children. This is an important area of research because of the emphasis our society places on praise use. Generally, it is believed that praise should be used in all contexts and with different age groups (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002), but research indicates that we know little about the types of praise that are most effective in garnering adaptive motivational behaviors in children (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). If this is true, adults may not only be using praise ineffectively, but also in ways that could be detrimental to children; thus, this study aims to investigate natural rates of praise use.

The extant literature has focused on two types of praise: generic and nongeneric types. Generic statements are so named because they describe facts about whole categories (e.g., “Boys are good at math”; Cimpian, 2010; Gelman & Raman, 2003), but can also describe the general regularities of a specific person (e.g., “Joe is a good boy”). Conversely, nongeneric statements describe specific events (e.g., “Joe was good today;” Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007). Generic praise conveys that stable factors such as inherent abilities and traits are the reasons for achievement, while nongeneric praise conveys that more temporary factors such as effort or strategies are responsible for achievement (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Zentall & Morris, 2010).

Evidence suggests that the implicit information conveyed in these types of praise may affect motivational responses in at least two ways. First, generic praise may influence children’s goals for achievement (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Zentall & Morris, 2010). The literature describes two goals that one may adopt in achievement settings: learning and performance goals (Duda, 1993; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Sports psychologist Duda (1993), describes those who hold performance goals as

judging competence normatively, or against one’s peers. These children are externally driven and feel accomplished only when they have beaten someone or have demonstrated their competence. Children with learning goals, however, feel accomplished when they have mastered a challenging task, have exerted effort, or have demonstrated improvement.

In a study by Mueller and Dweck (1998), fifth graders were asked to solve a set of moderately difficult matrices and were given either generic or nongeneric praise after completion of the task; the children were then asked to complete a set of more difficult matrices and were lead to believe that they had been unsuccessful. Achievement goals in this study were measured after the unsuccessful trial by giving the students a choice of four tasks that represented learning and performance goals. Three of the four choices gave the children the option to work on easier matrices for various reasons (e.g., to get fewer wrong, demonstrate intelligence), and represented performance goals; the final choice gave children the option of working on matrices that would develop their abilities and represented the learning goal. This study found that those children who were given nongeneric praise were more likely to choose a learning goal, and those that were given generic praise were much more likely to choose a performance goal. Furthermore, the children in this study displayed fundamentally different behavioral responses after failing to solve the more difficult matrices, leading the researchers to conclude that these distinct goals have a profound impact not only on how children judge their own competence, but also on how they cope with failure.

Those children with performance goals were much more likely to exhibit a helpless pattern of behavioral responding after being unsuccessful; this helpless response pattern, or simply just helpless orientation, is characterized by an inclination to give up when a task becomes difficult, the development of negative self-cognitions about ability, less task

enjoyment, and worse performance over time, a startling phenomenon, given that children's performance on tasks should increase as they become more familiar with them, not decrease (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Another response pattern was also evident in children who participated in this study; these children responded to failure by persisting and increasing performance through strategy development, while maintaining positive self-cognitions about their ability and were said to have a mastery orientation.

This research indicates that the information conveyed by generic and nongeneric praise may influence goals, but also attributions of success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Zentall & Morris, 2010). In the study by Dweck and Mueller (1998), children who were given nongeneric praise were much more likely to attribute success to controllable causes such as the effort they exerted or the strategy they implemented, leading them to develop different strategies when faced with adversity. Conversely, helpless children attributed success to uncontrollable causes such as inherent abilities and traits, leading them to give up when faced with the possibility of failure.

Although the effect of different types of praise on motivation has traditionally been a topic researched and applied in classroom settings, achievement goals have been a topic of interest in many other contexts. Indeed, studies in sports contexts have demonstrated that learning and performance goals influence athletes' persistence (Duda, 1988), performance (Van-Yperen & Duda, 1999), strategy formulation (Newton & Duda, 1993), and intrinsic motivation (Duda, Chi, Newton, Walling, & Catley, 1995). Also documented in this setting is the effect that goals seem to have on attributions of success. Studies by Sarrazin, Biddle, Famose, Cury, Fox, and Durand (1996) as well as Sefriz, Duda, and Chi (1992), found that athletes who held performance goals were more likely to make attributions of ability than those who held learning goals, a finding that echoes that of Mueller and Dweck (1998).

As we have discussed, the literature has demonstrated that praise plays an important role in the development of

motivational patterns by influencing achievement goals and attributions of success, yet little observational research has studied praise use at the level of generic and nongeneric. Survey data suggest that over 80% of parents believe that praising children's traits and abilities is important (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), indicating that a majority of parents may be using generic praise. A study conducted by Reissland (1994) in the homes of children corroborates evidence for this survey. In this study, very young children were instructed to play a game while their mothers watched, and the type of praise given to the children was recorded. No mother used solely just person praise in this study, but 38% of mothers used inconsistent praise which contained both generic and nongeneric components. Thus far, the research on the effects of inconsistent praise are limited, but a study by Zentall and Morris (2010) suggests that 75% of the praise a child hears must be nongeneric in order for high persistence and self-evaluations to be preserved for failure situations.

Observational studies of generic and nongeneric praise in the classroom are just as scarce as those in children's homes, yet some general trends in the use of classroom praise and approval are well established. In a meta-analytic study of approval, disapproval, and praise, Beaman and Wheldall (2000) concluded that disapproval was more common than approval in the early studies they examined but that this trend had generally been shifting since the 1980s. Another interesting finding was that appropriate academic behaviors were much more likely to be praised than appropriate social behaviors. This same conclusion has been drawn by many other researchers of approval and praise (Brophy, 1981; Wyatt & Hawkins, 1987), and has been explained by White (1975) as the result of the lack of reinforcement that teachers receive for using praise in classroom settings.

Another trend evident in the literature is the increasing rates of praise. Brophy (1981) and White (1975) reported praise frequencies as low as 5 times per hour even in early grades, but in more recent studies praise frequency has been cited at more than once per minute in elementary

classrooms (Harrop & Swinson, 2000). Although this trend may be the result of change in teacher behavior, we cannot rule out the possibility that the varying definitions of approval and praise are cause for this apparent change. Very few studies have documented generic and nongeneric praise, but a study conducted by Chalk and Bizo (2004) observed teachers during a math lesson, and found that all but one teacher used generic praise more often than specific praise, a type of praise defined similarly to nongeneric praise. Finally, in one relatively recent study of the classroom, researchers examined the rates of individual versus group praise and found that teachers gave individual praise at vastly greater rates than group praise (Harrop & Swinson, 2000), a tendency that may contribute to the overall low rates of praise found in the classroom.

Another context that few researchers of praise have focused on in recent decades is the sports context. It is estimated that over 46 million youth participate in sports (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009), and thus it seems an important area to continue praise research. Many of the studies that do examine praise in these settings are often broadly focused on a variety of coach behaviors. These observational studies consistently find that praise is used repeatedly by coaches in athletic practices and used more often than disapproval (Cushion & Jones, 2001; Smith, Zane, Smoll, & Coppel, 1983). In a study by Smith et al. (1983) over 22% of youth basketball coach behaviors fell into the category of reinforcement, and in another study examining little league coaches, 40% of behaviors consisted of praise or encouragement (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1978). Despite this growing body of literature on coach behaviors and praise, we still know very little about the quality of praise that children are receiving.

A study by Chaumeton and Duda (1988) categorized praise used by coaches during basketball practices and games into praise that focused on performance outcomes and praise focused on the performance process. This study found that the level of praise from coaches who focus on performance outcomes increases as youth progress to higher levels of competition, but the level also depends

on whether coaches are observed during a practice or game. The study also found that the relative emphasis on mastery goals remains through all levels of competition examined, an optimistic finding.

In conclusion, the observational studies that examine the natural rates of generic and nongeneric praise are limited, although the importance of these types of praise for achievement goals and attributions of success is well-documented. Our study aims to add to the body of observational research on praise by investigating the frequency of generic and nongeneric praise in the academic and sports settings, specifically in the classroom and during the practices of elementary-aged children. Researchers know that certain types of praise are detrimental and others are beneficial, but what has not been investigated thoroughly is the frequency of these types of praise in natural contexts. Ultimately we attempt to answer some basic questions on the relationship between praise use and context. We would like to know if one context offers more of one type of praise than the other, and if frequency of praise is different between these contexts. Additionally this study aims to replicate some well-established trends in observational research, which include the use of social versus academic praise and individual versus group praise.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were recruited from three schools and two sports organizations in the Midwest and included four volunteer soccer coaches and four elementary school teachers. All of the teachers were female, and all of the coaches were male. The mean age of the coaches was 41.25 years ( $SD=2.63$ ), and the mean age of the teachers was 27 years ( $SD=2.94$ ). The children ranged in age from 6-10 years. The soccer players were female.

### Procedure

On recording day we gave participants a digital audio recorder that was to be carried in their pocket and a lapel microphone which attached to the collar of their clothing. We demonstrated the basic functions of the audio recorder and asked coaches and teachers to record their lesson or practice for 45 minutes. This recording

period was 15 minutes shorter than a normal soccer practice. A study by Wyatt and Hawkins (1987) suggests that there is little variation in praise from activity to activity in the classroom, and thus we gave teachers the option of choosing the lesson that was to be recorded.

We did not disclose to the coaches and teachers that the variable of interest was praise use but instead described to them that we were analyzing instruction techniques. All participants were reminded that they could pause the recording at any time they felt it was necessary; several coaches and teachers took advantage of this option. The investigator remained present for the full 45 minutes in case of questions, or emergency, but was outside of the recording location. After the recording, participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

### Coding and Categories of Praise

The 8 recordings were coded by the principal investigator, and a second person was selected to code 20% of the recordings. Each praise event was classified into three categories: the type of praise used (i.e., generic, nongeneric, ambiguous), target of the praise (i.e., individual, group), and setting of the praise (i.e., social, academic) which applied only to teacher praise. Ambiguous praise, not discussed previously, was a necessary subcategory in "type of praise" because some praise events could not be categorized clearly as generic or nongeneric. Mean interrater agreement before discussion was type (93%), target (92%), and setting (97%). The categories are described in further detail below.

### Type of Praise

*Generic:* A positive verbal evaluation focused on making an assessment of a specific trait or ability; this type of praise conveys to children that their success was due to an inherent ability or trait and leads them to believe that achievement is due to stable factors (e.g., "I think you would make an excellent defender;" "You're the best player on the team").

*Nongeneric:* A positive verbal evaluation focused on a particular behavior, event, or the effort used; this type of praise conveys to the child that the success was due to more temporary circumstances and leads children to believe that achievement is due

to nonstable factors (e.g. "Good job;" "Nice try;" "Great kick"). Feedback that only provided the child with information on correctness of behavior was not recorded (e.g. "That's right").

*Ambiguous praise:* A positive verbal evaluation that cannot clearly be classified as generic or nongeneric praise. To date, the effects of this type of praise on children's motivation have not been researched. (e.g. "Nice!;" "There you go!;" "Way to go!")

### Target of Praise

*Individual:* Praise directed at only one student or team member.

*Group:* Praise directed at more than one student or team member. (e.g., "You guys are a special team").

### Setting of Praise (Teachers only)

*Social:* Praise for behaviors unrelated to academic work, including praise for following directions, conduct, and use of manners (e.g. I sure do like how you are facing forward).

*Academic:* Praise for behaviors related to academic work, including correct answers, reading, and writing (e.g. That was an excellent explanation of the answer).

## Results

### Proportion and Frequency of Praise

To make comparisons between and within the contexts we first calculated the absolute frequencies for each of the 7 subcategories of praise (Table 1). This data was then used to calculate the frequency of each subcategory of praise as a proportion of the total number of praise events in the larger category to which it belongs (Table 2). We also calculated the rate per minute that each subcategory of praise was observed (Table 3). A total of 776 praise events were recorded in the 360 minutes of audio collected. On average, coaches praised 3.4 times every minute, and teachers .89 times every minute. The most frequent type of praise was nongeneric (57%), followed by ambiguous (42%), and finally generic (1%).

Coaches used 4.4 times more nongeneric praise than teachers, and 3.2 times more ambiguous praise. Teachers and coaches tended to give larger amounts of nongeneric praise than ambiguous praise, but this trend was only significant

for coaches ( $t(3) = 8.3, p < .01$ ; Figure 1). Academic praise given by teachers was found to be much more prevalent than social praise ( $t(3) = 6.1, p < .01$ ). Teachers, on average, gave 8.5 praise statements for appropriate social behaviors and 30.75 praise statements for appropriate academic behaviors. Finally, an analysis of the targets of praise revealed that both coaches and teachers similarly directed praise to individuals more often than groups ( $t(7) = 4.8, p < .01$ ). Over 85% of total praise was directed at individuals.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study have given us important insight into praise use in two different contexts: the sports and academic contexts. The first of these insights was somewhat unexpected. The use of generic praise was infrequent in this study, occurring only 10 times in the 360 minutes of audio collected. Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy (1979), conducted an observational study of first grade reading groups and found that only 5 percent of praise was directed towards specific behaviors, or was nongeneric in nature, while Chalk and Bizoe (2004) found that generic praise before intervention was at least somewhat more common than nongeneric praise for 4 elementary school teachers who were observed twice in 15 minute sessions. We posit that this may be a cohort effect that is a result of the dissemination of the research on praise and motivation which began in the late 1970s. Only one participant in our study was over 40 years, and in an older sample we might find that generic praise is more frequent. An analysis such as this is likely as we expand the study further.

Another insight we gained by conducting this study was on the frequency of ambiguous praise. We do not know of any research that has studied the effects of this type of praise, although it seems to be quite frequent, accounting for 42% of total praise use in this study. The implications of research on ambiguous praise may be especially important for teachers, as we found no significant difference between their use of this type of praise, and nongeneric praise.

We also found that teachers and coaches directed their praise towards individuals a majority of times. Harrop

and Swinson (2000) also differentiated between individual and group praise. These researchers contend that because teachers focus on the individual they may miss opportunities to praise; this may also be true of coaches who had similar proportions of group and individual praise. Social praise was also infrequent when compared to academic praise, as described in previous studies (Beaman & Wheldall, 2000; Chalk & Bizoe, 2004; Wyatt & Hawkins, 1987; Brophy, 1981), but in general it was much greater than previously found. In this study, social praise occurred approximately once every 5 minutes while in the studies analyzed by Brophy (1981) social praise occurred only once every 2-10 hours. The rates of social praise for early elementary classrooms observed in White's (1975) study were only slightly better. Social praise in these classrooms occurred only once every 30 minutes to 2 hours. Social praise is important so children learn what is considered appropriate conduct, and not just what is considered inappropriate conduct, as they do when they are punished. White (1975) suggested that disapproval or criticism may be more frequent than approval or praise in social situations because it is more reinforcing to a teacher. Teachers perceive that punishment extinguishes misbehavior immediately, while praise does not result in an outcome that a teacher can directly relate to its use. For example, a teacher may assume that a student became quiet because he or she was scolded but cannot confidently assume that a student was following directions because they had previously been praised.

Finally, there was a large difference between rates of praise use by coaches and teachers. Coaches used praise at a higher rate than teachers, a finding that is not too surprising in light of the extant observational research. Praise is consistently found to be a frequently observed coach behavior in practices (Cushion & Jones, 2001; Potter, 1988; Smith et al, 1983), while inconsistent levels of overall praise are often reported in classrooms (White, 1975; Wyatt & Hawkins, 2001). Although it seems that both teachers and coaches use large proportions of nongeneric praise, the greater rate at which young athletes hear nongeneric praise may have a role in promoting mastery orientations.

Studies by Smith, Smoll, et al. (2009) and Chaumeton and Duda (1988) found that in general, young athletes perceived that their basketball coaches were creating a much more mastery-oriented climate versus ego-oriented climate during games and practices, leading these researchers to speculate that coaches may be appropriately promoting continued involvement in sport. These are optimistic findings, but we cannot deemphasize the importance of praise that is sincere and contingent on desirable behaviors. Research findings suggest that praise is most effective when a child is not expecting it, and a large amount of praise that is insincere can have detrimental effects (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the results are interesting, the small sample size and gender composition of the samples limit the generalizability of our findings. Future studies should analyze praise use by gender. Data suggest that gender differences of praise use in both classroom and sports settings may exist. In a study of the classroom conducted by Burnett (2002), boys received more praise from male teachers than from female teachers, and also more ability feedback. In the sports setting, Dubois (1981) reported that female coaches provided their team with 1/3 more positive feedback than male coaches.

There is also a need for praise research to continue in these and other contexts. A limited body of research explores praise at the level of generic and nongeneric, in spite of the evidence corroborating its importance in promoting positive motivational outcomes. Finally, the effect of ambiguous praise on motivation is another avenue of research that has been left unexplored by the extant literature. Research should focus on how this type of praise is interpreted by children in different contexts. An interesting question is if interpretation varies from individual to individual or if certain types of ambiguous praise be consistently identified as generic or nongeneric.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

In conclusion, previous research has found that praise is an important predictor of motivational response patterns in the

face of failure (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). For this reason it is important for us to know what types of praise children are receiving in natural settings. The present study has added to the research on generic and nongeneric praise use in natural contexts. We found several similarities between the use of praise by teachers and coaches, most notably that both used nongeneric praise most frequently. There were notable differences as well, such as the significantly higher frequency of praise by coaches compared to teachers. This evidence suggests that the type and frequency of praise that a child hears depends on the setting the child is currently in.

An important implication of this research is identifying contexts that offer greater amounts of nongeneric praise so children can be encouraged to participate in these contexts, and interventions can be designed for the contexts that do not offer nongeneric praise. Interventions with the goal of modifying coach and teacher behaviors have been introduced in the past, with optimistic results. As we continue to expand this study, we hope to gather more conclusive evidence on the frequency of praise types in the academic and sports setting.

Table 1  
*Absolute Frequencies of Praise*

Category	Teachers	Coaches
Generic	1	9
Nongeneric	81	358
Ambiguous	78	249
Other	0	0
Group	33	59
Individual	124	522
Other	3	35
Social	34	0
Academic	123	0
other	3	0

Table 2  
*Praise as a Proportion of the Total Number of Praise Events*

Category	Teachers	Coaches
Generic	0.01	0.01
Nongeneric	0.51	0.58
Ambiguous	0.49	0.40
Other	0.00	0.00
Group	0.21	0.10
Individual	0.78	0.85
Other	0.02	0.06
Social	0.21	0.00
Academic	0.77	0.00
other	0.02	0.00

Table 3  
*Frequency of Praise in Number of Times Per Minute*

Category	Teachers	Coaches
Generic	0.006	0.05
Nongeneric	0.45	1.99
Ambiguous	0.43	1.38
Group	0.18	0.33
Individual	0.69	2.9
Social	0.19	0
Academic	0.68	0
Total Praise	0.89	3.4

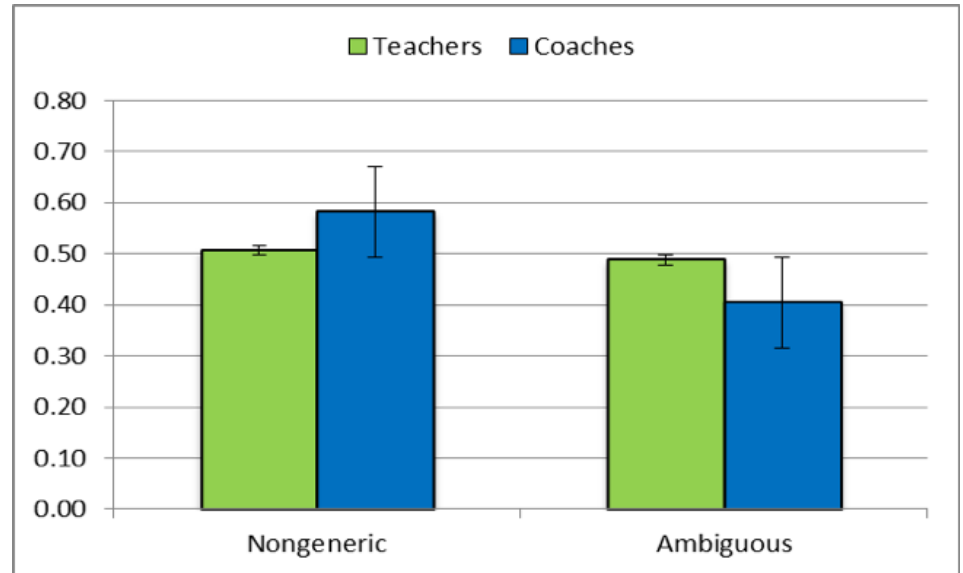


Figure 1. Proportion of generic and nongeneric praise across coaches and teachers

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