Predicting Accuracy of Judgment of Contingency

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PEOPLE ARE OFTEN INACCURATE in judging response–outcome contingencies (Jenkins & Ward, 1975; Langer, 1975). Alloy and Tabachnik (1984) indicated that people were usually biased in the direction of their initial expectations, particularly in the absence of congruent and unambiguous current information. Beck (1976) argued that people’s affective state, especially severe depression, also influenced their judgment and that depressives tended to underestimate the contingencies between their responses and environmental outcomes. However, past research has not examined how people respond when a monetary incentive is provided for accuracy of judgment of contingency. The present study investigated whether previous expectations, situational information, and individual’s affective state remain salient predicting factors when a monetary incentive is provided.

Subjects were 96 American college students with a mean age of 21.93 years. Before the experiment, each subject completed the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendleson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961), the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), the Self-Rating Scale (Fleming & Watts, 1980), and the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List Today Form (Zukerman & Lubin, 1965), and provided some demographic information.

The subjects were randomly assigned to reward or punishment conditions, tested individually, and given four tasks. Each task consisted of 20 trials during which a green light would or would not come on, depending on the subject’s response (press, no press) and on the control and frequency of the tasks (Alloy & Abramson, 1979). These tasks varied as to the level of control and frequency of light onset. Monetary incentives were provided for light onset for all tasks and for accuracy of judgment of contingency after the second task. Prior to each task, subjects indicated their expectation of control on

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