Depression and Judgment of Control: 
Impact of a Contingency on Accuracy

Catherine So-kum Tang
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Joseph W. Critelli
University of North Texas

ABSTRACT  In this study we sought to determine whether mild depressives and nondepressives could respond adaptively and self-correct their judgments of contingency when it was clearly advantageous to do so. Ninety-six undergraduates were given four contingency-learning tasks involving pressing or not pressing a key to turn on a light and to judge the degree of control their responses had over light onset. On the first task, which included a monetary contingency only on light onset, mild depressives were relatively accurate in their judgments of control. Tasks 2 through 4, which also included a monetary contingency and feedback on accuracy of judgment of control, showed a Mood X Task interaction. Mild depressives, but not nondepressives, became more accurate, and by the last task, mild depressives were more accurate than nondepressives. Results were discussed in terms of incentive, feedback, and task exposure.

The traditional view of mental health holds that cognitive biases, distortions, and irrational beliefs characterize pathological functioning (Allport, 1943; Ellis, 1962; Erikson, 1950; Haan, 1977; Jahoda, 1958; Maslow, 1950; Vaillant, 1977). This view also assumes that relatively accurate reality contact typifies the healthy individual. Current cognitive perspectives on depression are consistent with this traditional view. For example, Beck’s cognitive model of depression (Beck, 1967, 1976, 1987) asserts that depressives’ logical errors in interpreting reality lead

This research is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted by the first author to the University of North Texas. Requests for reprints should be sent to Joseph W. Critelli, Department of Psychology, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203.