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Stability of biases in self-evaluation and relations to well-being among elementary school children

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate to what extent a bias in self-evaluation is an enduring characteristic among children, and whether there is a relationship between the trajectory of children's self-evaluation bias over a five-year period and their psychosocial adjustment. 462 children (200 boys) in Grade 3 (mean age = 8.6 years old) or Grade 4 (mean age = 9.7 years old) at the outset of the study participated following their parents' written consent. The group-based approach using a multinomial modeling strategy allowed identifying five groups based on changes in the children's self-evaluation bias over the five-year period. Children in the stable and highly positive bias group stood out as having markedly more positive scores on all indices of psychosocial adjustment, and also outperformed the other children in achievement in language arts and math.

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Positive self-perceptions are important across an individual's entire lifespan. People may differ greatly in how positively they judge their own abilities, yet a meta-analysis of 266 studies conducted by [Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, and Hankin \(2004\)](#) concluded that although there is significant variability across age, culture, and psychopathology, positive illusions about the self are pervasive in the general population. [Mezulis et al. \(2004\)](#) went so far as to affirm that the overall effect size of the phenomena may represent one of the largest effect sizes ever shown in psychological research on cognition to date. [Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea \(2005\)](#) recently showed that self-enhancement is a universal phenomenon, albeit one whose manifestations are specific to cultural context.

Optimistic self-perceptions are common among young children and are even considered to be a normal developmental phenomenon ([Bouffard, Markovits, Vezeau, Boisvert, & Dumas, 1998](#); [Harter, 1988](#)). Different reasons have been invoked to explain this initial unrealistic optimism. [Ruble, Grosouvsy, Frey, and Cohen \(1992\)](#) proposed that it could be due to the tendency among young children to make judgments that are consistent with their desires. [Flammer \(1995\)](#) argued that since adults want to encourage young children, they usually give them feedback that is relatively arbitrary and positive. [Nicholls \(1978, 1979\)](#) argued that because young children tend to equate effort with ability, when they have tried hard or mastered a task, they feel smart and tend to positively evaluate their own abilities. However, as children get older, they develop a progressively better understanding and differentiation of the concepts of ability, effort and performance ([Nicholls, 1978, 1979](#); [Surber, 1980](#)) and the capacity to evaluate the difficulty of a task with respect to its normative difficulty ([Nicholls & Miller, 1984](#)). They also become better able to use social comparisons and to integrate past successes and failures, leading them to more accurate self-evaluations of competence ([Bouffard et al., 1998](#); [Ruble, 1983](#); [Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989](#)). However, some children persist in viewing themselves as being much more competent than they really are. Are these

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positive illusions about themselves adaptive or do they put these children at risk by leading them to take on excessive challenges or to adopt self-defeating or self-handicapping strategies?

This question has been the subject of debate for many years and remains controversial. There are three main positions. Some authors argue in favour of the positive effect of positive illusions (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 1997; Bouffard, Côté, Larouche, Vaillancourt, & Fleury-Roy, 2006; Catina & Iso-Ahola, 2004; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2006; Cole, Martin, Peeke, Serozinski, & Fier, 1999; Heath & Glen, 2005; Kistner, David, & Repper, 2007; Pajares, 2001; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000; Wright, 2000). Adherents to this point of view hypothesize that optimistic estimates of one's own competence increase effort and persistence and lead to accomplishment in challenging circumstances (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2001). An optimistic person is thus thought to develop skills and resilient self-assurance and to use effective coping strategies in the face of threat (Brown, 1993; Fournier, de Ridder, & Bensing, 2002; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998; Taylor & Armor, 1996). Such a person exhibits positive attitudes towards him/herself and others, who are in turn inclined to view him/her in a favourable light (Taylor et al., 2003). Bouffard et al. (2006) reported two studies in which parents and teachers, although unable to recognize children who had an inflated view of their own school ability, nevertheless reported more favourable judgements (autonomy, self-confidence, motivation to learn) of children who overrated their own competence. Cole et al. (1999) showed that children who overestimated their own competence, as compared to their teacher's rating, were less prone to anxiety and depressive symptoms than those who underestimated it. Self-enhancement has also been shown to serve a self-protective function among particular populations such as the learning disabled (Heath & Glen, 2005) and children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Diener & Milich, 1997). In their seminal article, Taylor and Brown (1988) went so far as to propose that positive illusions are a hallmark of good mental health and psychological adjustment.

Other researchers maintain the opposite opinion, claiming that inflated self-views have a "dark side" and that they are detrimental to adjustment (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; David & Kistner, 2000; Gresham, Lane, MacMillan, Bocian, & Ward, 2000; John & Robins, 1994; Metcalfe, 1998). These scholars argue that self-enhancement is related to external attributions of failure, defensiveness and self-handicapping strategies serving to protect an individual's self-image (Baumeister et al., 1996); these attitudes are then thought to detract from the adoption of a learning orientation that would be conducive to the full use of feedback in enhancing competency. According to Metcalfe (1998), inflated beliefs that result in overconfidence contribute to the cessation of effort before correct solutions are ascertained or before adequate learning of new material has been reached. Poor achievement and a decrease in self-esteem may ensue. Poor social skills, emotional and behavioural problems (Gresham et al., 2000) and psychological maladjustment such as neuroticism and narcissism (John & Robins, 1994) have also been proposed as correlates of unrealistic positive self-perceptions. Self-enhancers behave with arrogance and hostility towards others, and inflated self-perceptions among young adults, particularly over the long-term, have been associated with deficits in both coping and interpersonal skills (Colvin et al., 1995). Gresham et al. (2000) reported that elementary school children whose social or academic self-concepts exceeded external indices of their social or academic competence were rated lower by their teachers in social skills, displayed more disruptive behaviour in the classroom and had lower academic competence than children whose self-concept was either inferior to or consistent with external indices.

Finally, a third group of researchers have a less definite opinion, proposing that the positive or negative effect of illusory competence depends on various factors. Brendgen, Vitaro, Turgeon, Poulin, and Wanner (2004) showed that the negative effects of children's illusion of social competence were found only for children who were highly aggressive. Paulhus (1998) and Robins and Beer (2001) showed that illusions of competence had positive short term effects, but negative effects over the longer term. Gramzow, Elliot, Asher, and McGregor (2003) showed that performance benefits were associated with self-exaggeration when the latter was prompted by achievement motivation whereas a negative association was observed when it was prompted by a desire to hide actual poor performance. Other scholars have argued that the valence and strength of association depends on the type of outcome measure and self-enhancement measure used (Bonanno, Field, Kovacevic, & Kaltman, 2002; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Roberts & Robins, 2000).

This brief overview of the debate on the benefits or costs of positive illusion reveals several problems underlying the controversy. One problem, as argued by Gramzow et al. (2003) and Robins and John (1997), is the variation in the criteria used by researchers to assess bias in self-evaluation. We agree with Robins and Beer (2001) that the study of positive bias requires an external criterion that provides an explicit standard for gauging bias in a person's self-evaluations and thus makes it possible to separate illusory biases from well-founded positive self-views. Another problem is the variety of domains and outcomes examined. As pointed out by Gramzow et al. (2003), positive illusions may be maladaptive in one domain but promote adaptation and success in another domain. Finally, as exemplified by Paulhus (1998) and by Robins and Beer (2001), the effect of positive illusions may change over time or take time to appear. In the same line of reasoning, we would add that positive or negative illusions may also change over time, particularly among children, who are known to readjust their self-perceived competence with age and school experience (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield et al., 1997). We believe that while the effect of a temporary positive illusion may not be substantial, a lasting illusion may induce more significant consequences. Since a self-evaluation bias is usually assessed at a single point in time, this issue remains to be investigated.

The aim of the present five-year longitudinal study was twofold. First, we investigated to what extent a bias in self-evaluation was an enduring characteristic among children. Second, we examined whether the trajectory of children's self-evaluation bias over a 5-year period was related to positive indicators (self-esteem, social acceptance and sense of fulfilling

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