



# Trajectories of self-evaluation bias in primary and secondary school: Parental antecedents and academic consequences

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## ABSTRACT

Using a longitudinal approach spanning nine years of children's formal education, this study investigated the developmental trajectories of self-evaluation bias of academic competence. The study also examined how parenting styles were associated with the trajectories of bias in mid-primary school, and how those trajectories predicted academic outcomes at the end of secondary school and the beginning of college. A total of 711 children in 4th and 5th grades (mean age = 10.71 years old; 358 girls) participated in this study. Using a latent class growth modeling framework, results indicated that children can be classified in three latent growth trajectories of self-evaluation bias: the optimistic, realistic and pessimistic trajectories. These trajectories differed in their initial status of bias and also in their development over time. Children's adherence to a specific trajectory was associated with parenting variables in childhood. Finally, the optimistic, realistic, or pessimistic trajectories distinctively predicted achievement and persistence.

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## 1. Introduction

Are there distinct developmental trajectories of self-evaluation bias of academic competence? Self-evaluation bias of academic competence (SEB) has been conceptualized as the discrepancy between children's perceptions of competence at school and assessments taken from more objective measures of academic competence (for example, taken from IQ or scholastic ability tests; Bouffard, Vezeau, Roy, & Lengelé, 2011; Cole, Martin, Peeke, Seroczynski, & Fier, 1999; Gresham, Lane, MacMillan, Bocian, & Ward, 2000). Biases in self-evaluation of competence can broadly be categorized into three groups: positive (optimistic), unbiased (realistic), and negative (pessimistic). Depending on the direction of the perception of bias, children are more or less likely to be involved in their school learning and consequently to take active steps when they learn. However, research on the trajectories of SEB in childhood and adolescence is scarce. The lack of research in this area lays mainly in an absence of information on the predictors of SEB, the paucity of multiple informers to evaluate the results, the use of arbitrary cut-off scores to separate biased and unbiased children, and the absence of large samples to evaluate the trajectories of SEB over long periods of time. Few empirical studies have documented the factors that may be linked to an overly positive or negative self-evaluation of children's own competence at school (Bouffard et al., 2011; Cole et al., 1999). In addition, no consensus exists in the benefit of being either realistic or optimistic in one's own self-evaluation of competence. Clear associations have been found between holding a negative bias in self-

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evaluation of academic competence in childhood, and poor motivation, reduced self-image, lack of confidence, depression, and lower levels of achievement (Bouffard, Boisvert, & Vezeau, 2002; Cole et al., 1999; Gresham et al., 2000). Given the poor adjustment negatively biased children display, and the lack of consensus regarding the benefits of being either unbiased or positively biased (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Taylor & Brown, 1988), further research in this area is needed to understand the correlates, longitudinal trajectories, and consequences of school-related SEB.

Discrepancies between children's self-evaluation of their own competence and objective cognitive abilities may be in part rooted in the child's immediate social environment, such as parental behavior, that shapes these evaluations (Côté, Bouffard, & Vezeau, 2014). Thus, a critical component in understanding the effect of SEB is to examine how parenting can influence the development of self-evaluation bias, how this bias develops over a long period of time, and finally how SEB can predict persistence and achievement in the long run. In the present study, we examined three aspects of the development of self-evaluation bias. First, we longitudinally assessed the types (negatively or positively biased, or unbiased) and trajectories of bias. Second, we evaluated parental influences on those trajectories. Finally, we examined the consequences of having self-evaluations biases at the end of an important school cycle: the end of secondary school. Based on Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory framework, we assumed that children's trajectories of SEB should be influenced by significant social agents, such as parents, and should also be an important predictor of their academic success at school.

### 1.1. Development of self-evaluation biases of academic competence

Positive self-evaluations of academic competence are widespread among children at the beginning of primary school, and may be part of a common developmental path (Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau & Bordeleau, 2003; Bouffard, Markovits, Vezeau, Boisvert, & Dumas, 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). These positive competence beliefs decrease throughout elementary school (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002). Further, children gradually develop a better understanding of the similarities and differences between the concepts of ability, effort and performance, across domains (Bong, Cho, Ahn, & Kim, 2012). Children also become better at making social comparisons and at integrating past successes and failures, leading them to develop more realistic self-evaluations of their own competence (Boissicat, Pansu, Bouffard, & Cottin, 2012; Bong & Clark, 1999; Bouffard et al., 1998). However, positive biases remain pervasive in a subgroup of children whereas other children come to develop a more negative view of themselves.

The developmental trajectories of SEB are less clear from the end of primary school through secondary school. Cole et al. (1999) have found distinct trends in SEB for boys and girls. Whereas boys tended to increasingly overestimate their academic competence over the course of three years, girls increasingly underestimated their competence. Bouffard et al. (2011) examined five developmental trajectories of SEB. They have found that, whereas the optimistic and realistic trajectories remained mostly stable between the ages of nine and 14 years old, some pessimistic children became even more pessimistic over time, and the negative bias of a minority of children decreased to become more realistic over time. In sum, it appears that the trajectories of SEB are not fixed in childhood and adolescence.

### 1.2. Self-evaluation bias of competence and academic outcomes

The optimistic, realistic, and pessimistic classes of SEB have been shown to be related to a wide range of social and psychological consequences in childhood (Gramzow, Elliot, Asher, & McGregor, 2003; Gresham et al., 2000). According to the theory of positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988), holding moderately positive (optimistic) views of oneself leads to adaptive psychological consequences (Baumeister, 1989). In spite of this, significant disagreements still exist about the benefits of holding an enhanced bias of academic competence in relation to academic functioning, including interest, achievement, and persistence. When positive consequences have been found, they were related to higher mean-levels of academic achievement and motivation (Bouffard et al., 2011; Côté et al., 2014; Dupeyrat, Escribe, Huet, & Régner, 2011; Kurman, 2006; Wright, 2000). However, negative links between positive illusions and achievement in reading and mathematics have also been observed (Gresham et al., 2000). Finally, some studies have revealed mixed effects of positive biases on academic adjustment measures (Gonida & Leondari, 2011; Gramzow et al., 2003). For instance, Gonida and Leondari (2011) have found that positively biased pupils had higher mean-level scores on interest in maths and language, but did not significantly differ from the other groups on the persistence measures.

Gresham et al. (2000), have hinted that an overly positive SEB in childhood may hinder academic adjustment in the long run. The researchers have suggested that optimistic pupils may be cognitively immature, or that this optimism may have a self-protective role against repeated negative feedback. According to this view, a positive SEB may be volatile, and optimistic pupils may regain a realistic view of their competence later in childhood, when they reach the appropriate level of maturity, or when they are exposed to increasingly complex knowledge. Furthermore, these children may be less likely to persist when their optimistic self-views are challenged by the demands of secondary school. Longitudinal research on the long-terms effects of positive SEB on academic adjustment (e.g., Bouffard et al., 2011; Cole et al., 1999) has not reached a definitive conclusion. Bouffard et al. (2011) have found that positively biased children still outperform other pupils in the language and math domains at age 14, but nothing is known about the effects of the trajectories of SEB beyond the first years of secondary school.

Does a realistic view of one's own competence lead to adaptive academic adjustment? According to Colvin et al.'s (1995) realistic knowledge theory, a realistic understanding of oneself leads to better psychological functioning. Empirical research is scarce on the relations between realistic self-views and academic functioning in childhood and adolescence. Gonida and Leondari (2011) and others (e.g., Bouffard et al., 2011) have found that realistic pupils scored significantly lower than optimistic pupils in terms of

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