



# The impact of biased self-evaluations of school and social competence on academic and social functioning<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The first goal of this study was to determine whether biased self-evaluation of school competence was positively associated with biased self-evaluation of social competence. The second goal was to determine whether biased self-evaluations of school and social competence measured at Time 1 predicted variables related to functioning in these domains three years later. We expected that biased self-evaluation of school competence would be related to biased self-evaluation of social competence and that biased self-evaluation in each domain will be related to the variables in both domains. The sample comprised 406 children (214 girls) whose mean age at Time 1 was 11 years and 6 months ( $SD = 7.64$  months). Results partially confirmed the hypothesis in the school domain, but not in the social domain. In the school domain, a positive bias at Time 1 was associated with better self-regulation three years later, fewer feelings of school alienation and higher school achievement. In the social domain, a negative bias was linked positively with the preference for avoiding social relations and with peers' rejection. Unexpectedly, a negative bias of self-evaluation of social competence was linked to better self-regulation. Furthermore, unlike previous research (Larouche, Galand, & Bouffard, 2008), the positive association between biased self-evaluations of school and social competences was not confirmed. The discussion highlights the importance of broadening the examination of the impact of biased self-evaluation of competence in various domains and the factors associated with their development.

## 1. Introduction

The perception of one's own capacities in a domain is a subjective evaluation that reflects the degree of certainty that one has the resources needed to adequately perform in this domain (Bandura, 1986). This perception is not innate, but is formed through various sources of information. Studies have shown that self-perceptions of school competence are involved in many aspects of students' functioning and adjustment (Assor & Connell, 1992; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Berry & West, 1993; Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1988; Bouffard & Couture, 2003; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004). Likely, self-perceptions of social competence have been repeatedly linked to social adjustment (Bergeron et al., 2007; Brown, Von Bank, & Steinberg, 2008; Caprara, Steca, Cervone, & Artisticco, 2003; Kistner, David-Ferdon, Repper, & Joiner, 2006; Lee, Hankin, & Mermelstein, 2010; McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008). This study focusses on the case

where self-perceptions of school and social competence are biased. Its main objective was to examine whether pupils who present a biased self-evaluation of competence in one of these domains also feel the effects on their functioning in the other domain.

### 1.1. Feelings of competence

According to contemporary motivational models (Bandura, 1986; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harter, 1985), feeling competent in one's environment is a basic psychological need which plays a key role in the motivation and the adjustment in the various domains in which one is engaged. According to Ryan and Powelson (1991), the propensity to pursue goals and challenges that are just beyond one's current level of functioning would be a manifestation of the desire to feel competent, improve one's capacities and develop one's competence and potential in different spheres of life such as the school environment, the world of work, interpersonal relations, leisure and sports, and so on (Harter,

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1986; Reeve, 2012). Harter (1999) maintains that feelings of competence in domains that one considers important are the foundation of self-esteem.

### 1.2. Development of the perception of competence and self-evaluation biases

Self-perceptions of competence are not innate. According to Bandura (1986), these perceptions are constructed mainly through experiences of success or failure, provided that one takes responsibility for these experiences. Comparing oneself with another person, insofar as one considers this “target” to be similar to oneself in terms of ability, is also an important source of information on one's own competence. Seeing this model succeed suggests that one also has the capacity to succeed, whereas seeing this model fail can indicate that one may not have the competence needed to succeed. Verbal persuasion where another person seeks to convince one that one has (or does not have) the capacity to succeed at a task is also a relevant source of information on one's competence. The impact of persuasory comments depends on the perceived credibility and knowledge of the persuader about the task requirements and the resources that one has to perform it (Bandura, 1986). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002) proposed that comparing one's current performance with one's past performance is also a source of information that sustains feelings of competence.

The perception of competence thus results from the way an individual interprets the information stemming from these sources and, therefore, is mainly a subjective evaluation (Bandura, 1986; Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau & Bordeleau, 2003). This perception may be erroneous, that is, people may perceive themselves to be more competent (positive bias) or less competent (negative bias) than they actually are. According to Bouffard, Pansu, and Boissicat (2013), self-evaluation biases can have important repercussions on aspects of functioning in the specific domains involved. This study examined two particular domains: the school domain and the social domain.

#### 1.2.1. Biased self-evaluation of school competence

In the school environment, self-perceived competence has been clearly linked with several aspects of pupils' functioning. Some studies have even shown that self-perceived competence may be a better predictor of pupils' performance than a standardized objective measure of their real competence (Bandura, 1997; Bouffard, Boisvert & Vezeau, 2003; Bouffard-Bouchard, Parent, & Larivée, 1991). These studies thus confirm Bandura's view (Bandura, 1986) that one's motivation and achievement are based more on one's self-representation of capacity than on objective capacity. In addition to jeopardizing the satisfactory and balanced personal development of pupils, a negative bias of self-evaluation of school competence can have major repercussions on pupils' success and threaten their academic path in both the short and long term (Bouffard, Vezeau, Roy, & Lengelé, 2011; Bouffard, et al., 2003; Miserandino, 1996; Phillips, 1984, 1987; Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990). Concerning the impact of a positive bias of self-evaluation of school competence, there are no much studies and their results diverge. While some studies suggest that this bias appears to have an adaptive value in terms of school functioning and performance, other studies draw contrary conclusions (Bouffard et al., 2011; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2006; Dupeyrat, Escribe, Huet, & Régner, 2011; Lopez, Little, Oettingen, & Baltes, 1998).

#### 1.2.2. Biased self-evaluation of social competence

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), a fundamental need of humans is to feel competent in their environment, which means, among other things, feeling socially competent. A negatively biased self-evaluation of one's social competence could have negative effects on one's psychological well-being. Indeed, the results of McElhaney et al. (2008) show that participants who were well liked and accepted by others but believed they were not reported social anxiety and dissatisfaction with their social integration and tended to avoid social

situations. In the study conducted by Whitton, Larson, and Hauser (2008), negatively biased self-evaluation of social competence was correlated with an increase in depressive symptoms. In Bédard, Bouffard, and Pansu (2014) involving 544 adolescents, negatively biased self-evaluation of social competence was also associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, social anxiety and social avoidance behaviours. We also know that youths who expect to be rejected may develop high sensitivity and negative responsiveness to any cues indicating even a small risk of rejection (Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998) and thus choose to avoid peer relationships (Kaplan & Lin, 2000; Owens, 1994; Scheff, Retzinger, & Ryan, 1989). In doing so, they impede their social relations and thereby miss opportunities to develop social skills and benefit from the social support that derives from positive social interactions (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006)

### 1.3. General or specific nature of correlates of self-evaluation biases in various domains

Studies have suggested that biased self-evaluation of competence could have effects in domains other than those related to the bias. Larouche, Galand, and Bouffard (2008) showed that pupils with a negatively biased self-evaluation of competence in the school domain felt less well accepted in their peer group than those with a more accurate self-evaluation. However, the sociometric evaluation conducted with their peers showed that they were as well accepted as their other classmates. This result suggests that a negative and erroneous perception of one's school competence is related to a similar perception in the social domain (Larouche et al., 2008) and may lead to believe that self-evaluation biases might be generalizable to other domains of competence. This raises the question of whether the correlates associated with a self-evaluation bias are specific to the domain to which this bias pertains or whether they also tend to be generalized.

To our knowledge, the study by Gresham, Lane, MacMillan, Bocian, and Ward (2000) is the only one to have directly examined the school and social correlates of biased self-evaluations of competence in both domains. The results revealed that pupils with a positively biased self-evaluation of social competence and those with an accurate but negative perception of their social competence were deemed to be less socially competent by their teachers, had more behavioural problems, were less well accepted by their peers and had poorer academic results than pupils with an accurate and positive perception of their social competence or those with a negatively biased self-evaluation of this competence. The same pattern of results was found for biased self-evaluation of school competence. Thus, pupils with a positively biased self-evaluation of school competence and those with an accurate but negative perception had poorer academic results, were deemed to be less socially competent by their teachers, had more behavioural problems and were less well accepted by their peers than pupils with an accurate and positive perception of their school competence. These results suggest that pupils who present a biased self-evaluation of competence in one domain may also feel the effects on their functioning in another domain. However, as pointed out by Gresham et al. (2000), their use of only one measurement time and one sample of pupils who had been referred for behavioural and learning problems seriously limited the generalization of their conclusions. Consequently, the question of whether the effects of self-evaluation biases can be generalized to other domains of competence remains unanswered.

### 1.4. The present study

This study examined whether self-evaluation biases in the school and social domains were linked only with the variables specific to functioning in the respective domains. Two sources of information on

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