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Social comparisons in the classroom: An investigation of the better than average effect among secondary school children

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Abstract

The *better than average* (BTA) effect refers to the tendency for the majority of people to rate themselves as being higher on positive attributes and lower on negative attributes than other people. The present study examined the occurrence of the BTA effect on five important characteristics among 15,806 first-year secondary school Dutch students. In addition, it explored the influence of students' gender, cultural background, and ability level on their evaluations of characteristics relative to their classmates. Results yielded small BTA effects, with the exception of the item "being eager to get high grades," on which the effect was much larger. In addition, larger BTA effects were found among boys than girls, but this difference could not be attributed to actual differences in performance. Likewise, larger BTA effects were found among ethnic minority students from Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds than ethnic majority students, but this difference also could not be attributed to actual differences in performance. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed. © 2010 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

It has long been observed that students, both those with and without learning difficulties, often hold unrealistic images of themselves, overestimating their mental and

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scholastic abilities (Schutte, 1929; Stone & May, 2002; Wylie & Hutchins, 1967). An overly positive picture of their abilities may lead students to believe that they do not have to put forth much effort to succeed in school and may discourage them from completing their homework or preparing well for exams. In the social psychological literature, this type of overestimation or bias is often captured in terms of the *better than average* (BTA) effect. The BTA effect refers to the tendency for the majority of people to rate themselves as being higher on positive attributes and lower on negative attributes than the average or generalized other (e.g., other college students; Silvera & Seger, 2004; Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002). That is, correctly or not, individuals believe that they possess more positive attributes and less negative ones than others. Most people, for instance, think they are more sensitive (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) and altruistic (Epley & Dunning, 2000) than others. It must be noted that, from the individual's point of view, the perception of being better may be completely correct. It is possible that, for instance, one is a better driver than others. However, except for attributes for which the distribution in the population is very skewed, it is not possible for the majority of people to be above average (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). Therefore, on a group level, this perception has been called an illusion (Suls et al., 2002). In contrast, individual evaluations of abilities or attributes relative to others are called *comparative evaluations*. Whether or not these evaluations are biased in nature can only be determined by relating them to factual data that serve as a "reality benchmark".

Both motivational and amotivational theories have been proposed to account for the BTA effect. For instance, from the perspective of motivational theories, it has been argued that people believe in their own superiority because positive illusions help them persist in the face of life's many frustrations, and, as a result, may promote mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In contrast, from the perspective of amotivational theories, people who are unskilled in a particular domain simply lack the meta-cognitive competence to make correct evaluations of themselves relative to others (Kruger & Dunning, 1999, see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004 and Moore & Small, 2007 for reviews).

Although BTA effects are almost exclusively recognized and studied in the social psychological literature, BTA effects are relevant phenomena for school psychologists, too. An important reason is that individuals' comparative evaluations of their abilities have been found to be related to their performance level. For instance, Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, and Kuyper (1999) found students' comparative evaluations in seven courses to be predictive of their academic achievements in these courses 3 months later. As students viewed themselves as better than other students in their class, their achievements improved. Students who hold high comparative evaluations may create a self-fulfilling prophecy; because they view themselves as more capable than others, they are likely to approach tasks with a sense of self-efficacy and high performance expectations, increasing their chances of academic success (Blanton et al., 1999). In this context, it is important to note that Blanton et al. (1999) did not report differences between boys and girls, nor did they examine the potential influence of students' ethnic background. As we will discuss later on in more detail, in our opinion, these two variables—gender and culture—are important in understanding the BTA effects.

Another reason to study comparative evaluations is that they are essential to the understanding of the *big-fish–little-pond effect* (BFLPE; Marsh, 1987; see Marsh et al.,

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