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Effects of Positive and Negative Illusory Biases: Comparisons Across Social and Academic Self-Concept Domains

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Groups of third-grade children who had high or low social and academic self-concepts that were either consistent with or discrepant from external indices of social and academic competence were contrasted on a variety of measures in social and academic domains using multiple assessment methods. Children whose social or academic self-concepts that exceeded external indices of social or academic competence were said to have a positive illusory bias and were rated lower by their teachers in social skills, had more problem behaviors, and had lower academic competence than children in two of the three other groups. Another group of children whose social self-concept was substantially lower than external indices of social competence were said to have a negative illusory bias, and did not differ from children having high social self-concepts that were consistent with external indices of social competence. The current findings appear to suggest that the relation between self-concept and adjustment is not best described by a simple linear relation between these variables, but may be better explained by the consistency or discrepancy between self and external appraisals. © 2000 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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Self-concept represents one of the most frequently discussed and researched constructs in psychology and education. Self-concept is considered a critical variable in both general and special education, as evidenced

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by the large number of studies conducted using self-concept either as an outcome or predictor variable in the self-concept literature (Byrne, 1984, 1996; Harter, 1985; Wylie, 1974, 1979).

An explicit assumption in much of the self-concept literature is that a low self-concept is an important cause of several pejorative outcomes such as violent and aggressive behavior, depression, substance abuse, and achievement difficulties (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bear, Minke, Griffin, & Deemer, 1995). Most of the research with either special education or at-risk populations has focused on the negative effects of having a low self-concept on academic and social functioning (see Gresham & MacMillan, 1998, for a review). In fact, if special education and at-risk students suffer from low self-concepts, then esteem-building activities can be implemented with these students to overcome the detrimental effects of their poor sense of self-worth.

There is, however, a contradictory body of literature suggesting that children with an externalizing behavior pattern (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity) are characterized by *positive illusory biases* in academic and social self-concept as well as global self-esteem (Diener & Milich, 1997; Hoza, Pelham, Milich, Pillow, & McBride, 1993; Milich, 1994). That is, some children maintain an overly positive view of themselves in spite of objective external indices to the contrary. Diener and Milich hypothesized that the inflated self-views of boys with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) served a protective function that buffered them from the negative effects of frequent social failure and negative feedback.

Other research, however, suggests that some children who exhibit aggressive behavior have an overly inflated view of self (Baumeister et al., 1996). These authors suggested that a major cause of aggressive or violent behavior is an unrealistically high level of self-esteem that is challenged by external evaluations that contradict or question an individual's competence or feelings of high self-regard; a phenomenon they termed "threatened egotism." In other words, when an individual's self-evaluations are more positive than their objective characteristics would indicate are warranted, they may react unfavorably, if not aggressively and violently, to negative feedback regarding these characteristics (Baumeister et al., 1996). In their comprehensive review of the cooccurrence of serious and violent juvenile offending and problem behaviors, Huizinga and Jakob-Chien (1998) found no differences in self-esteem between children having different levels of offenses (serious violent, serious nonviolent, and minor) and nondelinquent (control) youths. Thus, the threatened egotism hypothesis of Baumeister et al. (1996) appears to be in direct contradiction much of the popular lore concerning the relation between low self-esteem and students' adjustment difficulties.

Other literature supporting the potentially adverse effects of positive illusory biases shows unrealistically inflated levels of self-esteem in children

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