

## Short Report

## Reality Bites—or Does It?

## Realistic Self-Views Buffer Negative Mood Following Social Threat

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Mental health . . . is characterized by the grasp of reality inside and outside ourselves. (Fromm, 1955, p. 68)

Experiences of social threat (e.g., peer rejection, negative peer feedback) are commonplace in late childhood (Asher, Rose, & Gabriel, 2001). Although many children experience profound emotional distress after being socially threatened, others experience little distress (Reijntjes, Stegge, Meerum Terwogt, Kamphuis, & Telch, 2006). Theorists have emphasized the crucial role of self-views in explaining different responses to social threat. They disagree, however, about which kinds of self-views are adaptive and maladaptive. Positive illusion theory holds that unrealistically positive, inflated self-views promote emotional resilience (Taylor & Armor, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988). According to this perspective, inflated self-views function as a psychological resource to buffer the negative emotional impact of threatening events. In contrast, reality-based theories hold that distorted self-views (inflated and deflated) have detrimental emotional consequences, and that realistic self-views are emotionally healthy (Jahoda, 1958; Kernis, 2003). According to these theories, realistic self-views allow children to form secure social relationships and ultimately create resilience to threatening events.

The work described here pits these two theoretical perspectives against each other. We examined how children's distorted self-views influence their negative mood after experimentally manipulated threatening and nonthreatening social feedback. Because late childhood is a time of great concern about interpersonal acceptance, we studied 9- to 12-year-old children. Positive illusion theory predicts a linear negative relationship between (positively) distorted self-views and threat-induced negative mood. Reality-based theories predict a U-shaped relationship, such that threat-

induced negative mood is highest for individuals with the most inflated and the most deflated self-views.

## METHOD

Participants were 206 children (mean age = 10.7 years,  $SD = 0.9$  years; age range = 9–12 years; 47% boys, 53% girls; 14 classrooms; number of children per classroom = 11–23) participating in a larger study (Thomaes et al., 2009). First, participants rated how much they liked each of their classmates (0 = *not at all*, 3 = *very much*; mean received ratings = 1.75,  $SD = 0.49$ ). Next, they predicted the ratings they would receive from each classmate (mean predicted ratings = 1.64,  $SD = 0.48$ ). Distortion of self-view was operationalized as the difference in standardized scores between children's perceived status and their actual status (Owens, Goldfine, Evangelista, Hoza, & Kaiser, 2007). The correlation between perceived and actual status was .52. Distortions of self-view ranged from quite deflated (–2.73; absolute difference = –1.43) to quite inflated (3.13; absolute difference = 1.41).

Two weeks later, children participated in the main experiment. First, baseline negative mood state was measured using eight adjectives (*angry, nervous, ashamed, sad, irritated, anxious, down, embarrassed*). Participants were asked how they felt “right now, at the present time,” and rated their agreement with these adjectives (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *very much*; Cronbach  $\alpha = .70$ ). Next, they were told they would be competing with four opponents in an Internet popularity contest called “Survivor Game,” in which the least liked person is voted out of the group by a panel of peer judges. Participants completed personal profiles (e.g., “How do you describe yourself?”). After completing the personal profiles, participants in the threat condition ( $n = 100$ ) received threatening feedback on the computer screen (they were announced as least likeable); participants in the no-threat condition ( $n = 106$ ) received neutral feedback on the computer screen (an opponent was announced as least likeable). Participants were randomly assigned to feedback conditions. Finally, negative mood state was measured again (Cronbach  $\alpha = .84$ ). Participants were thoroughly debriefed.

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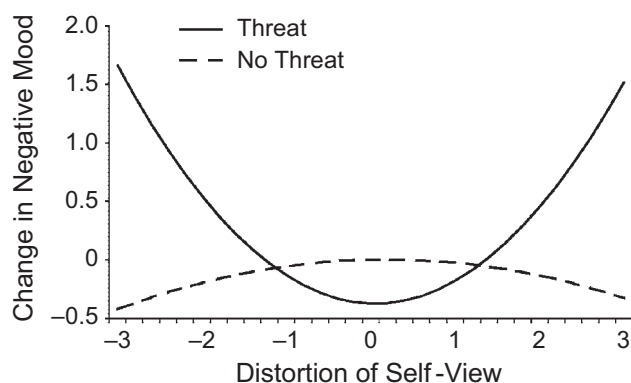
## RESULTS

Distortion of self-view did not differ between conditions ( $p > .81$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} < .27$ ), suggesting that random assignment was effective. Data were analyzed using multiple hierarchical regression analysis. Children's negative mood measured after the Survivor Game was the dependent variable. To adjust for baseline differences in negative mood, we entered the baseline negative mood (measured before the Survivor Game), gender, and age in Step 1. We entered type of feedback, self-view distortion, and the square of self-view distortion (for the U-shaped prediction) in Step 2. We entered the two-way interactions between both self-view distortion terms and type of feedback in Step 3. Continuous variables were standardized to facilitate interpretation and reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991).

In Step 2, there was a significant main effect for type of feedback,  $t(199) = 2.47$ ,  $p < .02$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} > .92$ ,  $b = 0.29$ ,  $\beta = .14$ . In Step 3, the interaction between type of feedback and the square of self-view distortion (for the U-shaped prediction) was significant,  $t(197) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} > .98$ ,  $b = 0.37$ ,  $\beta = .27$  (see Fig. 1). In the threat condition, there was a quadratic relationship between self-view distortion and increases in negative mood,  $t(95) = 3.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} > .98$ ,  $b = 0.32$ ,  $\beta = .31$ . In contrast, in the no-threat condition, there was no quadratic relationship,  $t(101) = -0.94$ ,  $p > .35$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} < .61$ ,  $b = -0.07$ ,  $\beta = -.07$ , or linear relationship,  $t(100) = 0.25$ ,  $p > .80$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} < .28$ ,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $\beta = .02$ , between self-view distortion and negative mood change.

## DISCUSSION

Positive illusion theory (Taylor & Brown, 1988) predicts that overly positive, inflated self-views buffer the negative emotional



**Fig. 1.** Negative mood change as a function of self-view distortion. Distortion of self-view was calculated as the difference between children's standardized perceived status (i.e., how much they predicted their classmates liked them) and their standardized actual status (i.e., how much their classmates actually liked them). Negative mood change was indexed by standardized residual values obtained by regressing children's negative mood after the Survivor Game onto their negative mood at baseline. Results are shown separately for the threat and no-threat conditions.

impact of social threat. Our results directly contradict that prediction. In fact, inflated self-views increased (rather than decreased) children's emotional distress after threatening feedback; deflated self-views also increased emotional distress after threatening feedback. No such effect occurred after non-threatening feedback, highlighting the specificity of our findings to conditions of social threat. These results support the view that distorted self-views promote emotional vulnerability and that realistic self-views promote emotional resilience. Repeated experiences of social threat can have a pervasive, lasting impact on children's well-being, especially if children fail to cope effectively with the emotional impact of these experiences (Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2003). Our results suggest that vulnerable children holding positively or negatively distorted self-views may benefit from interventions that target their biased social-reasoning processes. If such interventions set off developmental processes that result in a more realistic sense of self, they may help children to cope more effectively with threatening events in their social lives.

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