

Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fiction From Fact

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The differing interpretations of the relation between positive illusions and well-being held by Taylor and Brown and by us cannot be reconciled. We urge motivated readers to evaluate our respective formulations closely and develop their own conclusions.

The preceding remarks by Taylor and Brown (1994) regarding our critique (Colvin & Block, 1994) of their earlier essay (Taylor & Brown, 1988) require little further comment. They have reiterated their position that certain forms of inaccurately positive self-knowledge are related to psychological health and well-being. We continue to believe that the logical and empirical basis for this relation, on which their position is based, is unsound. If we are justified in our doubts, the conjectures offered by Taylor and Brown to explain how positive illusions promote psychological well-being become moot. However, although our critique requires little emendation, several points made by Taylor and Brown (1994) warrant some response.

The Taylor and Brown (1988) essay has certainly enjoyed popularity and influence, as attested by the approximately 250 articles we found that subsequently cited it. However, frequency of citation, per se, does not necessarily imply, as Taylor and Brown suggest, that further evidential support has been found for a relation between positive illusions and mental health. We reviewed almost all of the citing articles and concluded that the vast majority of them had no implication one way or the other for the Taylor and Brown formulation, often only mentioning their article. We judged 45 of these later references to be germane, reporting these in our critique. Of these 45, only 19 are also considered relevant by Taylor and Brown.

Taylor and Brown are troubled that, in our critique, we focus on only "a small portion" of their initial essay and observe that our line of argument is our "own invention" and "not a faithful representation of [the Taylor and Brown] line of argument" (p. 22). Of course, our line of argument is our own invention, and we suggest, in turn, that we have zeroed in on and fairly evaluated the essential basis for the Taylor and Brown argument.

Taylor and Brown, in their earlier summary of their position, concluded that "normal individuals possess unrealistically positive views of themselves . . . [while] individuals who are moderately depressed or low in self-esteem consistently display an absence of such enhancing illusions. Together, these findings appear inconsistent with the notion that accurate self-knowledge is the hallmark of mental health" (1988, p. 197). Presently, Tay-

lor and Brown acknowledge that the evidence for the greater "accuracy" of distressed or dysphoric (i.e., depressed) individuals is muddled. They assert that "resolution of this issue is not, however, critical, to [their] thesis. [Their] concern is with mental health, not depression" (p. 22); the widely received interpretation of their position as implying that depressive subjects are more accurate in their self-perceptions than are nondepressive subjects is now said to be a misconception. We find this change in the Taylor and Brown orientation to be startling and even untenable; in our view, mental health and mental illness are reciprocally and conceptually related.

Both Taylor and Brown and we agree that the question of what constitutes an illusion is a fundamental one, and it is often difficult to distinguish reality from illusion. However, we are more optimistic than Taylor and Brown in believing that, more often than it has been attempted, external criteria for reality can be achieved. They rhetorically ask, "If a person thinks she has a wonderful sense of humor, who is to say that she is wrong?" (p. 22). We respond that a surprisingly valid index of a person's sense of humor can be provided by the consensus of judgments offered by observers who have experienced this person over a variety of opportune contexts and for a significant length of time. As discussed in our critique, we believe the problem of establishing valid criteria for defining the existence of illusions has been slighted in the past.

As is so often the case in controversies, the arguments on each side having been offered, the opposing positions are left unreconciled. It therefore behooves those so motivated to evaluate the competing formulations and supporting evidence closely to develop their own conclusions. If readers review our argument and evaluate its appropriateness vis-à-vis the Taylor and Brown argument, we shall be well satisfied.

References

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