Children's Self-Evaluations following Social Comparison: The Effect of Target Trait Information

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Introduction

- Children over 7 years of age report decreased self-evaluations when they have been outperformed on a task. Conversely, younger children maintain positive self-evaluations in this situation (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980). Younger children report low self-evaluations only when they have social category information about a target (i.e., gender; Rhodes & Brickman, 2008).
- Young children often use personality traits to categorize individuals and organize their social world (e.g., Heyman & Gelman, 2000). Additionally, children use traits when reasoning about task success and failure (Benenson & Dweck, 1986). Thus, target trait information may facilitate the use of social comparative feedback in young children, who typically disregard such feedback.
- The inclusion of target trait labels may also improve or impair older children's self evaluations depending of the nature of the trait. Specifically, trait valence (i.e., positive vs. negative; Boseovski, 2010) and trait relevance (i.e., relevant vs. irrelevant; Stipek & Daniels, 1990) should affect children's interpretation of comparative feedback.
- The current study assessed the effect of upward social comparisons on 5- to 6- and 9- to 10-year-olds' self-evaluations when trait information was provided about a target character. Inclusion of the younger age group allowed us to assess whether target trait information facilitates the use of social comparative feedback akin to social category information. Further, we assessed how this information may alter the way that older children interpret comparative feedback.

Method

- Sixty-two children completed an intelligence task and received predetermined feedback that they were outperformed by a target child. Targets were labeled with traits varying in relevance to task performance (e.g., athletic vs. smart) and valence (i.e., positive vs. negative). Table 1 displays the traits used in the study.

Method (continued)

- Then, children rated their affect about their own performance on a 17 point face scale (0 = *very sad*, 9 = *neutral*, 17 = *very happy*).
- Children also rated their perception of their ability at the task on 9 point scale that displayed circles of increasing sizes (0 = *not good at all*, 9 = *very good*).

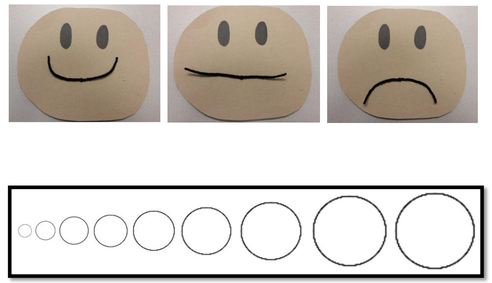
Table 1. *Comparison target traits by relevance and valence*.

		Trait Valence	
		Positive	Negative
Trait Relevance	Relevant	Smart	Not Smart
	Irrelevant	Athletic	Not Athletic

Results

Data for each outcome measure were analyzed with a 2 (age: 5- to 6-year-olds vs. 9- to 10-year-olds) x 2 (trait valence: positive vs. negative) x 2 (trait relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant) between-subjects ANOVA.

- **Affect**
  - Older children felt worse about their performance than younger children, $F(1, 30) = 10.45$, $p < .01$.
  - Children felt marginally worse when outperformed by a target with a negative trait than a positive trait, $F(1, 30) = 3.63$, $p = .07$.
  - There was a marginally significant interaction between age and trait valence, $F(1, 30) = 3.43$, $p = .09$. Follow-up tests indicated that only older children felt worse when outperformed by a target with a negative trait rather than a positive trait, $t(12) = -2.71$, $p < .02$. Younger children's affect did not differ significantly by target trait valence, $t(14) = 0.95$, $p > .10$.
  - There were no other significant main effects or interactions, p's $> .10$
- **Ability**
  - Older children also reported significantly lower ability perceptions than younger children, $F(1, 30) = 7.59$, $p < .05$.
  - There were no other significant effects or interactions, p's $> .10$.



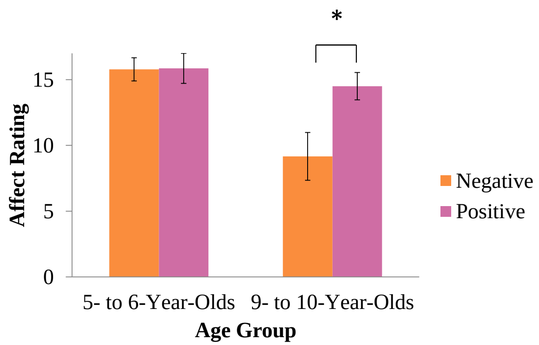


Figure 1. Children's affect ratings by age and valence

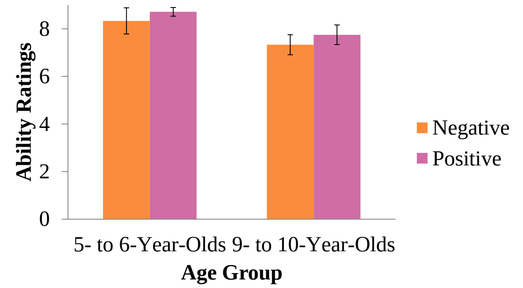


Figure 2. Children's ability ratings by age and valence

Discussion

- Consistent with findings in contexts that are not self-evaluative (Boseovski, 2010), the valence of traits was salient to children. In contrast to previous research (Stipek & Daniels, 1990), even the oldest children did not differentiate between relevant and irrelevant traits.
- The threatening nature of upward comparisons may interfere with children's reasoning about trait relevance (Dweck, 2002). Perhaps children would consider such information more appropriately in the context of downward comparisons (i.e., when children perform *better* than other children).
- Target trait information had no effect on children's ability perceptions. As has been observed in domains that are not self-evaluative (Boseovski & Lee, 2006), a greater amount of information may be necessary to affect dispositional attributions about the self. Indeed, social comparison effects on children's ability perceptions have been documented only after multiple upward comparisons (Ruble et al., 1980; Ruble, Parsons, & Ross, 1976).
- Unlike previous research (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008), contextual information did not encourage social comparison in the youngest children. Previous findings suggested that this facilitation was due to increased perceived similarity with the target (e.g., females felt more similar to female targets; Rhodes & Brickman, 2008). Trait labels may not increase similarity perceptions to the degree that social categories do because young children perceive traits as relatively malleable (Stipek & Daniels, 1990). Additionally, greater variability may exist in children's perceptions of their own traits in comparison to largely immutable social categories, such as gender.

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