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Running Header: EFFECTS OF TEMPERAMENT ON YOUTH'S SELF- PERCEPTION

A Study Looking at How Youth's Self- Perception is Affected by Their Temperament

By

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of the Requirements for the  
Honors-In- Discipline in Psychology Program  
East Tennessee State University

Abstract

Self- perception is defined as the “distinctive combination of personality characteristics and social style by which one defines oneself and by which one is recognized by others” In children, self-perception can influence how they will approach a new situation, whether that is in school, at home, or a public outing with their family. Our study aims to expand on this research by defining the relationships between proximal influences, global self- worth, self- perception, behavioral conduct and how youth's temperament influences these variables. We will be using the Rothbart Temperament Questionnaire and the Susan Harter Self- Perception Profiles to obtain data for our study. We hypothesize that youth's temperament will affect two specific domains on the Susan Harter Self- Perception Profiles. We found that based on parents' reports of their child's temperament, a higher level of negative affectivity decreases the child report of self-perceived behavioral conduct.

A study looking at how youth's self- perception is affected by their temperament.

“Self-identity is inextricably bound up with the identity of the surroundings.”

— [Lars Fr. H. Svendsen](#)

Self- perception is defined as the “distinctive combination of personality characteristics and social style by which one defines oneself and by which one is recognized by others” (Tsang, Hui, Law, 2011). In children, self-perception can influence how they will approach a new situation, whether that is in school, at home, or a public outing with their family. Also, previous research has shown that youth temperament has the ability to specifically affect their overall perceptions and everyday behaviors (Berdan, L. E., Keane, S. P. & Calkins, S. D., 2008). Our study aims to expand on this research by defining the relationships between proximal influences, global self- worth, self- perception, behavioral conduct and how youth's temperament influences these variables.

Our overall study looked at proximal influences (PI), which includes figures in the immediate situation that influence thoughts, feelings, or behavior. Proximal influences are individuals such as school teachers, teachers' aides, immediate family, daycare workers, and peers. The study looked at negative and positive proximal influences and the affect that they have on youth's self- perception. An example of a negative influence may include a teacher who treats a certain child negatively because they may not be able to regulate their behavior, or one of their peers says something inappropriate to the teacher or another friend so now they think that it is okay for them to do the same thing. In an article by Pascal Bressoux and Pascal Pansu (2015) on pupils' self- perception, they discovered that a teacher's judgment is significantly related to two domains of youth self-perceptions, namely pupils' self-perceptions of peer acceptance and

pupils' self-perceptions of behavioral conduct. In both domains, the higher the teacher's judgment of the student and their work, the better the pupils' self-perceptions were of themselves. Researchers also found that the students who struggle with their academics seem to lower the scholastic bar for themselves which makes it easier to be satisfied with themselves both scholastically and with their behavior because they feel like they are reaching their self-made goals at that point. They also found that there are other students that are held to such high standards that they cannot achieve them, which may cause those students to have poor behavioral self- concept because they feel they are not reaching their goals and in turn act out. The student's teacher(s) may be negatively judging them, which is a negative proximal influence, and this may lead the child to misbehave out of embarrassment because they cannot reach expectations. Over time, this failure to meet expectations can lead youth to lower their self-made standards and possibly not complete their school work at all, which may in turn create behavioral conduct issues in the classroom and contribute to poor self- concept.

Even though research for self-identity development has grown tremendously throughout the years, there is still more to be discovered. For our specific study, we will be looking at the areas of temperament and self- identity. We will be using several constructs; temperament will be the first that we discuss. Our study considered the child's temperament, which is defined as "constitutionally based individual differences in reactivity and self- regulation, influenced over time by heredity, maturation, and experience" (Rothbart, M. & Ahadi, S., 1994). Researchers state that temperament is a concept appropriate for life span analysis that is based on constitutional attributes of the individual, and can be used to describe individuality in the young infant, as well as the older child and the adult. Temperament can also be seen as the core of

developing personality in children and adolescents (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000).

Temperament is best determined while in childhood by focusing on behaviors that are both easily measured and testable such as, negative affect and surgency/extraversion. Negative affect (NA) can be defined as a personality variable that is characterized by a person's general and persistent negative mood. Negative affectivity includes a variety of negative emotions, including anger, contempt, sadness, fear, and nervousness (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2014). Children who are born with this temperament characteristic may experience higher levels of anxiety and hindrances in both their academic and social lives. Children with high Negative Affectivity tend to become easily frustrated, which can lead to a pattern of anger, irritability, or aggression (Berdan et al, 2008). They are also said to have a marker for emotional dysregulation that predisposes them to externalizing behavior problems. This, in turn, may lead the child to have negative behavioral conduct and a poor overall self- worth. Wicks-Nelson and Israel (2014) stated that there is usually a high co- occurrence of depressive and anxiety disorders when a child exhibits high levels of NA. Researchers also found that anxious youths who have high levels of NA may pay more attention to negative stimuli and react more intensely to them (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2014).

The next domain of temperament that our study will be looking at is surgency/extraversion. Surgency/extraversion is defined by high activity levels, high-intensity pleasure seeking, low shyness, and impulsivity (Rothbart & Putnam, 2002). These children may appear to be 'acting without thinking,' lacking impulse control, and have a deficiency in inhibiting behavior (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2014). Children who exhibit a lack of impulse control may cut other kids in the lunch line, or have a hard time taking turns in a classroom/school setting. Researchers have found that children who are high in surgency/

extraversion may experience difficulty regulating their distress and emotions when they are faced with disappointment, or when in a situation that does not turn out the way they had planned; this may result in the child acting out and externalizing their feelings (Berdan et al, 2008).

Additionally, researchers believe that youth who score higher on the measure of surgency/extraversion , are low on internalizing and reticence, which presumably would buffer against their acting out behavior and would benefit their self- perception of themselves (Fox, Henderson, Rubin, Calkins, & Schmidt, 2001).

The next construct in our study that we will be discussing is self- identity. Self- perception/ self- identity has been shown to be affected by contextual factors and adverse conditions. In an article by Tsang, Hui, and Law (2011), adolescents who have a positive self- perception were found to transition more smoothly into adulthood with a clearer sense of who they are as compared to children who have encountered negative influences throughout the stages of self-identity formation. In our study, we will be looking at data for youth participants ages 8- 17. At this age, middle childhood, self- perception is continuing to change from early childhood and is intimately related to cognitive abilities. In middle childhood, children become particularly sensitive to the opinions of others as they begin forming the looking glass self (Harter, 1988). Susan Harter (1988) also stated that an important part of self- identity formation is the ability to control ones' emotions and related behavior, particularly anger. This ability becomes an important dimension of self- evaluation. Around this time children also develop the ability to self-criticize and will do so if they feel they have failed to meet their self- set standards (Harter, 1988). Then in adolescence, youth experience what William James called the "conflict of the different Me's" (Harter, 1988). This idea captures the common adolescent stage in which they struggle to differentiate and decide which self they want to be and when, which can create

conflict within the self. Adolescents see these clashes as inconsistencies in their personality and can become distressed and troubled within their self- system. Tsang and colleagues (2011) further added that adolescence is a stage characterized by rapid and extensive physical and psychosocial changes which often present developmental crises that challenge the adolescent's coping ability. This may lead to problematic coping which makes the individual vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems. If it is important to the individual to be able control their emotions and behaviors, but they are unable to do so because of their temperament, their self- perception may be affected because they will not be meeting their self- expectations.

Also, our current study examined behavioral conduct (BC), which Susan Harter (2012) defines as the degree to which one likes the way one behaves, does the right thing, acts the way one is supposed to act, and avoids getting into trouble. Specifically, we examined how BC is affected by a child's temperament. In previous studies, adolescents with poor behavioral self- concept, those who may view themselves as rebels or delinquent, were found to be at a particularly high risk for substance use (Bressoux and Pansu, 2015). Thus, we anticipate similar relationships may occur in our study.

The last construct we will be looking at is global self- worth (GSW) in the participant. Harter (2012), defines GSW as "how much one likes oneself as a person, is happy with the way one is leading one's life, and is generally happy with the way one is, as a human being" (p. 04). Susan Harter (2012) states that the global self- worth domain constitutes a general perception of the self. In her self- perception profiles, Harter uses global self- worth as a sixth, and separate, domain to get a sense of the child's overall self- worth. In our study, we use Harter's global self- worth index similarly.



### **Hypotheses**

H1: We hypothesize that youth's temperament will affect two specific domains on the Susan Harter Self- Perception Profiles.

- a. Negative Affectivity is the first measure we looked at, and we believe that it will affect two domains of the SPP.
  - i. We believe youth who score higher in NA will score lower on the domain Global Self- Worth.
  - ii. We believe youth who score higher in NA will score lower on the domain behavioral conduct.
- b. Surgency/ Extraversion is the second measure of temperament that we looked at, and we believe that it will also affect two domains of the SPP.
  - i. We believe youth that score higher in Surgency/Extraversion will score lower on the SPP domain of Global Self- Worth.
  - ii. We believe youth that score higher on surgency/extraversion will also score lower on the SPP domain of behavioral conduct.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

All the participants have been recruited from local schools, social media, their available parent(s), and by word of mouth. A mixed- methods, qualitative design was used to gather data from a total of six participants who have completed the study as of the date of this paper (our final target is at least 50 youth, but recruitment has moved more slowly than anticipated). Out of

our participants, we were able to use the data from all the participants except one individual whose data was excluded from our sample due to a technical error with our recording instruments. The participants involved ranged in age from 6 to 17 years old, but our specific study restricted our sample to youth ages 10 to 17 for the subscale of behavioral conduct on the Harter scales. The majority of participants for our data were female (4 girls, 2 boys). All participants in the study were Caucasian.

## **Measures**

**Rothbart Temperament Questionnaire.** Negative Affectivity and Surgency/ Extraversion are measured with the Rothbart Temperament Questionnaire. Parents were asked to answer questions on a short questionnaire about their child's temperament throughout their development; the version given was dependent upon the child's age. The reliability and validity of the Rothbart Temperament Questionnaires have been supported by previous research (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992; Ellis & Rothbart, 2001), with high internal and test-retest reliability and good convergent validity.

**Susan Harter Self- Perception Profiles (SPP).** The Harter Self- Perception Profiles contain five subscales that are self-reported by the child and assess perceived competence in academics, social acceptance, athletics, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and one scale to assess global self-worth. In this study, we focused on the subscales of Behavioral Conduct, which begins at the age of eight, and Global Self-Worth. The questionnaire uses a format where the children are given two choices for each question, the children then choose whether the question is "really true" of them or "sort of true. These items are scored on a 1-4 point basis, with some questions being scored reversely, depending on what domain is being measured. This question format has been found to be very effective in reducing children's

tendency to give the socially desirable response. It allows children to choose statements that they identify with rather than choosing or denying a bold "I" statement about the self (Harter, 1988). Similar to the Rothbart Temperament scales, Harter's SPP has achieved documented evidence of reliability and validity through many years of research, and is considered the gold standard instrument for evaluating youth self-perception (see Harter, 2012).

### **Procedure**

During data collection, the parent and the child were administered semi-structured interviews in separate rooms, inquiring about various role models and other influences on the youth's own self-perceptions. Each session was recorded for transcription purposes and lasted between 60-90 minutes. Each parent that participated completed several additional questionnaires evaluating demographics, their own parenting style, and their child's temperament. However, in this study, only temperament scales are included in later analyses. In addition to the interview, youth completed a Harter SPP corresponding to their age. . Participants were awarded a \$10 gift card for their participation in the study and each was asked to return in one year to follow-up with the longitudinal portion of the project. However, again, in this particular study, only data from the first wave of data collection are used.

### **Statistical Analysis Plan**

For hypothesis testing, four separate simple regression (single linear) analyses were performed. Mean scores for Negative Affectivity and Surgency/ Extraversion were obtained by parent report on the Early Adolescence Temperament Questionnaire and were scored as outlined by Rothbart (1999) and entered as separate continuous predictors. Mean scores for Behavioral Conduct and Global Self-Worth were obtained by youth report on the Harter Self Perception

Profiles for Children and Adolescents and were scored as outlined by Harter (2012). Behavioral Conduct and Global Self-Worth scores were entered as separate and continuous dependent variables. In the first model, Surgency/ Extraversion was used to predict Behavioral Conduct. The second model tested the predictive effects of Surgency/Extraversion on youth's Global Self-Worth. The third model tested the predictive effect of Negative Affectivity on Behavioral Conduct. And the fourth model tested the predictive effect of Negative Affectivity on youth's Global Self-Worth. Regression coefficients with  $t$  values that were significant at the .05 alpha level indicated a meaningful effect of temperament on youth's self-perception.

## Results

To test the hypotheses of our current study, four simple linear regression analyses were calculated to predict different domains of self-perception based on the two sub-measures of temperament described previously. With regards to hypothesis 1, a significant regression equation was not observed,  $\beta = .434$ ,  $t = 0.834$ ,  $p = 0.465$ , such that scores for Behavioral Conduct could not be predicted by scores for Surgency/Extraversion in the overall sample. We also found that scores for Global Self-Worth could not be predicted by scores of Surgency/Extraversion ( $\beta = 0.61$ ,  $t = 1.32$ ,  $p = .27$ ), nor by Negative Affectivity ( $\beta = -0.127$ ,  $t = -0.222$ ,  $p = .838$ ). However, Negative affectivity was found to be a significant predictor of Behavioral Conduct,  $\beta = -0.958$ ,  $t = -5.79$ ,  $p = .01$ . Based on parents' reports of their child's temperament, a higher level of Negative Affectivity decreases the child report of self-perceived behavioral conduct.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence that a child's temperament has on their self- perception. We looked at negative affectivity and surgency/extraversion as the primary

predictors and behavioral conduct and global self-worth as the dependent variables. It was hypothesized that (1) youth who score higher in NA will score lower on the domain Global Self-Worth, (2) youth who score higher in NA will score lower on the domain behavioral conduct, (3) youth that score higher in surgency/Extraversion will score lower on the SPP domain of global self-worth, and (4) youth that will score higher on surgency/extraversion will also score lower on the SPP domain of behavioral conduct. The only significant relationship we found after our analyses was that negative affectivity does predict behavioral conduct in youth. These findings were consistent with previous research and theory (see Berdan et al., 2008) and suggest that the temperamental factor of negative affect does correlate with and explain some of the variance in a youth's own sense of self with regard to how they perceive their behaviors. In other words, such youth tend to have a poor outlook on their behaviors as a whole, viewing themselves in a negative light and as more apt to do things that get them in trouble. Given our small sample size, the significance of this result suggests the relationship is quite large ( $\beta = -.958$ ), meaning that for every 1-point increase in NA, there is nearly a 1-point decrease in BC. ). Our other hypotheses were found to be not significant.

A limitation to this research is the small sample size that we had to work with (n=6). Our small sample in the current study limited power of statistical analyses and reduced our ability to confidently reject our null hypotheses. In other words, there may yet be some connection between our variables that we were simply unable to detect due to the small sample. We also used convenience sampling to collect our data, which will make it more difficult to generalize to a larger population. Our study participants are also a local sample only, which means that caution should be exercised in translating the findings across the US. Nonetheless, these initial findings do provide important baseline data for our local sample and will assist in interpreting later results

and making more refined hypotheses, especially once we enter a phase of coding qualitative data. Knowing these results, we can now generate qualitative hypotheses that specifically investigate how children relate NA and BC in during their interviews. These insights can also help us better understand how youth of different ages talk about these constructs in their interviews.

As this study continues in the years to follow, to improve research outcomes, alternative procedures for recruitment should be utilized. Other recruitment procedures include options such as branching out to online survey data and going to participants homes for the semi- structured interview rather than requiring them to travel to our campus. I believe using alternative procedures for recruitment will expand our sample to a potentially national sample, which will make our data more generalizable. Also in the future, at some point I think it would be interesting to get the child to report on their temperament and self- perception instead of only getting temperament from the parent interview.

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