

*Prominent psychologists
explain how the way
we perceive our own
abilities affects
our performance and
our mental health*

*Edited by Robert J. Sternberg
and John Kolligian, Jr.*

COMPETENCE CONSIDERED

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C O N S I D E R E D

EDITED BY

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AND JOHN KOLLIGIAN, JR.

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P R E F A C E

JOHN KOLLIGIAN, JR., AND
ROBERT J. STERNBERG

There's a lot of talk about competence these days. As a society, we worry about the competence of our students, our teachers, our leaders, and ourselves. Over the past few decades some researchers have gone so far as to characterize the search for competence as *the* basic motivation for behavior. Of course, there are different dimensions of competence, and it manifests itself in different ways. For instance, behaviorally, competence may take the form of maintaining control over external events; neurophysiologically, competence may be achieved through the brain's ability to establish order among the disparate stimuli received by the senses; sociologically, competence may consist of a healthy adaptation to an environment or social context; and psychologically, competence may be experienced through the ways in which one perceives, judges, and evaluates oneself. This volume focuses on the last important dimension of competence—that of self-perceptions and self-evaluations. It takes as a guiding premise that at all points in the life cycle it is one's construal of reality, rather than reality itself, that most accurately predicts self-concept, goals, academic performance, and overall mental health.

Many important, strikingly fundamental questions about competence have not previously been answered or even asked: What determines the nature of subjective perceptions of competence and incompetence? How does what we think about our competences depend on where we are in life? How do these perceptions develop, and what are their consequences? Why do some people perceive themselves as incompetent even though such negative perceptions are inaccurate or unfounded? In different ways, from diverse perspectives, the distinguished contributors to this book ask and grapple with these challenging questions.

In recent decades only a handful of isolated papers in the psychological literature has directly addressed issues related to the development and consequences of perceived competence and incompetence at different points in people's lives. But within the last few years, some distinguished scholars have begun to investigate the subject more thoroughly. We became convinced that although many new contributions have been made, they are not all as well known or as well integrated as they should be. Our conviction that the field is awakening and that there is a need to bring the various works on self-perception together motivated this book. Further, we believe the book is unique in assembling in one place alternative accounts of how questions of perceived competence can illuminate many dimensions of human experience.

In this collection of essays, the authors consider competence—its role, determinants, manifestations, and consequences—in the broader context of the developing, evolving person. The book's primary focus is on competence as it is viewed by the self as opposed to others. It also focuses on the processes and mechanisms that are at work (or that fail to work) when competence judgments are either accurately or inaccurately low—that is, when the self is viewed as incompetent. The intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics that may be in operation in these self-perceptions are a central concern of the essays.

This volume documents the rapid strides that have been made in this field within the last decade. Considering that the topic has implications for most areas of psychology—particularly social-cognitive, developmental, educational, and clinical psychology—as well as psychiatry and sociology, the time is ripe for a collection of different scholarly perspectives that will lay a foundation for future work in this and related fields. The chapters are written both for psychologists and for others who, though they have a general background in psychology, do not necessarily have specialized knowledge about the subfields covered. Many of the chapters review existing studies, but the book is not intended to provide the kinds of literature reviews found in the *Psychological Bulletin* or the *Annual Review of Psychology*. The contributors—who are psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists with many diverse specializations—have avoided such detailed literature reviews. Instead, their theorizing reflects our wish and encouragement for them to stretch their minds and those of their readers by freely expressing their emerging views on the topic. For this reason, we hope readers will find these chapters especially lively and provocative.

This book is intended as an intermediate-level text suitable for advanced undergraduate and graduate-level courses on child and adolescent development, self-concept, social cognition, and personality theory, and could serve as a supplementary text in courses on personality and on developmental, educational, and clinical psychology. It could also be a useful source book for psychologists, educators, and others who are interested in the nature of people's competencies, their positive and negative self-perceptions, and the consequences during different life phases.

The first section of the book is a single chapter by David Elkind. His introductory remarks on the question of competence present some of his current work on the attribution of competence in infants and young children in the contemporary United States. Elkind examines economic, social, and psychodynamic forces contributing to competence attributions, while pointing out the potential harm that competence-related stresses have on children in our society.

The second section, "Developmental Perspectives," comprises five chapters that examine the developmental course of perceived competence and incompetence. In the opening chapter, John G. Nicholls offers a developmental approach to the nature of ability and our mindfulness of it. He is concerned with developmental changes in children's and adults' conceptions of ability and intelligence, shows how these changes influence the growth of competence, and considers the emotional and behavioral consequences of these changes. By showing how differently children, adolescents, and adults construe issues of competence, he demonstrates the subject's complexity. Nicholls ultimately broadens the topic of perceived competence by stressing the importance of focusing on the value or meaningfulness of people's work, not just on their abilities as such.

Deborah A. Phillips and Marc Zimmerman next examine the developmental course and temporal stability of accurate and inaccurate self-perceptions and judgments of competence among competent children. They focus on the mediational role that subjective perceptions of competence play in determining a range of adaptive behaviors. Phillips and Zimmerman underscore how viewing oneself as competent to achieve valued goals and holding inflated notions of one's competence are essential to adjustment and ultimately to healthy development.

In the third developmental chapter, Susan Harter addresses the question of competence through an examination of the functional role of global self-worth from a life-span perspective. She examines the antece-

dents and determinants of one's level of self-worth, as well as the impact that self-worth has on one's affective and motivational orientation, and suggests a model of self-worth that addresses its antecedents and its functional role as they are applicable across the life span.

In the fourth chapter of this section, Paul M. Janos tackles the special competence dilemmas and perplexities experienced by a select group of individuals—exceptionally gifted young adolescents. Through an analysis of the self-statements of these uncommonly bright youngsters, he illuminates the cognitive and affective costs of intellectual precocity and the central role of social comparison theory and processes in these adolescents' experiences of themselves. Janos also translates his findings into general principles and practical suggestions for helping adolescents cope with giftedness.

Robert J. Sternberg, in the final chapter of this section, argues that the construct of competence is not a maximum level of performance nor incompetence a minimum level but, rather, that both are prototypes—profiles based on people's conceptions of the construct. Viewing competence and incompetence as a labeling phenomenon involving interactions among persons, tasks, and situations, Sternberg goes on to discuss the subcultural, cultural, and overall contextual determinants of children's competence in the schools.

The third section, "Social Perspectives," contains four chapters that investigate the socially related processes involved in self-perceptions of competence and incompetence. Ellen J. Langer and Kwangyang Park, in the opening chapter, grapple with conceptual foundations of the construct of incompetence, proposing that incompetence is predominantly a socially defined perception by the self and others of inadequate performance. The main point of their analysis is that there are at least four broad types of categories of personal incompetence, with each characterized by different causes and consequences. Langer and Park are careful to emphasize the plasticity of incompetence as a function of certain social settings and environments.

Karin S. Frey and Diane N. Ruble then examine variations in preferred standards of competence and the implications of particular standards for self-esteem maintenance. In the course of their analysis, they suggest that a high sense of competence and healthy functioning may depend on one's ability to exhibit flexibility in the choice of standards for comparison and evaluation. While discussing the utility of such a flexible approach, Frey and Ruble also underline the difficult nature of this competence-building

process, suggesting that the readjustment of expectations can indeed be traumatic.

From a social-cognitive perspective, Julie K. Norem and Nancy Cantor discuss how a focus on the processes of motivation and ability can help illuminate the relationships among beliefs about competence, beliefs about tasks, motivation for performance, and actual performance. Specifically, they use the concept of “cognitive strategies” to describe the coherent patterns of appraisal, planning, retrospection, and effort that translate one’s goals and beliefs into actions. Norem and Cantor show how strategic thinking helps one gain a sense of competence and mastery over one’s environment and life tasks.

In the final chapter of this section, social psychologists Hazel Markus, Susan Cross, and Elissa Wurf examine the structures and processes of the self-system that are essential for creating and maintaining competence over the life span. They argue that “felt” competence is an important aspect of “actual” competence and is linked to instrumental action and effective performance in one’s social environment. The authors also explore the role of the self-system in the development, maintenance, and breakdown of perceptions of one’s own competence, illuminating the reciprocal relationship between self-system and competence. Their essential point—and one that resonates throughout the volume—is that competence is rooted not simply in one’s attributes and abilities but also in the structures of the self-system that represent these attributes and abilities.

The next section, “Clinical Perspectives,” contains four chapters that investigate the clinical processes and implications of self-perceptions of competence and incompetence. Carrie E. Schaffer and Sidney J. Blatt open this section by exploring ways in which competence in early interpersonal relationships serves as the foundation for the development of a sense of self and perceived self-efficacy. They discuss the crucial impact of the mother-infant relationship, as well as the physiological and affective dimensions of interpersonal relatedness, on the experience of self-efficacy. Schaffer and Blatt also examine the processes by which important relationships are internalized and contribute to the individual’s sense of personal efficacy.

Viewing competence from a psychodynamic perspective, David W. Krueger examines some clinical factors that facilitate or impede people’s ambition, effectiveness, and sense of competence over time. He traces the phase-specific expressions of ambition and effectiveness from mastery through childhood play to competence through adult work. Krueger

focuses on the pathological manifestations of success inhibition and work compulsion at each life phase.

John Kolligian, Jr., then discusses the concept of perceived fraudulence and views it as a special case—as one possible manifestation—of the broader phenomenon of perceived incompetence. The conceptual relations among perceived fraudulence, perceived incompetence, and other negative self-perceptions are examined. A central point of this chapter is that authenticity concerns and fraudulent ideation in a variety of domains represent important aspects of people's general perceptions and judgments of competence. These concerns are associated with such clinical symptoms as depression and anxiety.

In the last chapter of this section, Marlene M. Moretti and E. Tory Higgins address the clinical side of competence by presenting a model of the development of emotional vulnerabilities within the framework of self-system development. This model charts the interaction between a child's developing cognitive capacity for mental representation and parental socialization practices. Moretti and Higgins consider how changes in one's self-regulatory and self-evaluative processes affect, and are influenced by, both cognitive and social factors in cases of developmental psychopathology. Especially given the relevance to the question of competence, the complexity of people's self-system networks could not have been considered in a more sophisticated manner.

Albert Bandura, in the final chapter of the book, offers a concluding and integrative commentary. He organizes and discusses the main themes of the contributors' views of perceived competence and incompetence and suggests some commonalities among their various perspectives. In bringing together the different ways in which the authors have begun to investigate the origins of perceived competence and the processes by which it affects human motivation, accomplishments, and dysfunctions, Bandura's synthesis of the nonability determinants of competence is unique—it paves the way for the advancement of this burgeoning field. Among other things, his perspective documents the progress that has been made in understanding and enhancing human competence and functioning, whereby many people have been invested with coping skills and resilient self-beliefs of capability, enabling them to exercise some control over their lives.

To conclude, we believe this book is the first text on perceived competence and incompetence that provides a broad and balanced exposure to the field. We hope the accounts here will stimulate further thinking along

these and related lines—that they will encourage other scholars to consider the many fundamental, yet often neglected, questions surrounding the ways we reflect on our own and others' competences, real and imagined. This book is a beginning.

The editing for this volume represents a collaborative effort in which the editors shared equally in performing all editorial responsibilities. It was the publisher's decision to list the editors by seniority.

In editing a volume, one comes to appreciate that the muses inspiring writing are not always on schedule. We would like to thank Jeanne Ferris, our editor at Yale University Press, for her sound, sensible advice and her patience in seeing this project to fruition. Our special thanks to Cecile Watters for her thoughtful, meticulous editing of the manuscript. We also would like to thank Elizabeth Neuse and Sandi Wright for their impeccable administrative assistance; we could not have asked for two more highly competent and gracious technical assistants. We are, of course, grateful to the contributors to this book for taking time out from their busy schedules to write these chapters; we especially appreciated their willingness to take our editorial suggestions seriously. Most of all, we are indebted to Julie Sincoff, our colleague at Yale, for her tremendous support for the project; her involvement with us in all phases of this book has been indispensable.

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Introduction: Changing Conceptions of Competence

DAVID ELKIND

In my work on the origins and effects of stress upon children and youth in contemporary American society, I have found that an erroneous conception of childhood competence has arisen and that it likely has led to an increase in stress among young people. Accordingly, I will present here some evidence showing how pervasive the attribution of competence to infants and young children has become. I will then analyze some of the economic, social, and psychodynamic forces that have contributed to this conception of children and will conclude with a discussion of the harm it can do to young people.

THE ATTRIBUTION OF COMPETENCE TO INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Philippe Aries, in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), argues that in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist—there was no awareness of the special nature of children and their difference from adults. This situation, Aries points out, was the result not of a misguided attribution of competence to infants and young children but rather, of the puerility of medieval society itself. In contemporary terms, the failure of medieval people to recognize the difference between children and adults was a failure of differentiation, not a higher-level attribution that presupposed such a differentiation. With the Renaissance, a new attitude emerged in which the child, “because of his sweetness, simplicity and drollery, became a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult” (128).

The difference between children and adults has been progressively elaborated since that time. What the difference consisted in, however, was

a matter of dispute among both scientists and laymen. Some psychologists during the nineteenth century—notably G. Stanley Hall—believed that children recapitulated the history of the race. Others, like the Buhlers, saw children as simply the young of the species, whose development was very much affected by the child-rearing environment. Rousseau saw children as innocent and good, and adults as bad. Others, like Cotton Mather, thought children were born with original sin and warned parents, “Your child is not too young to go to Hell.”

By the 1960s in this country, children were generally perceived in a humane, responsible way. Child labor laws were in place as were national programs of immunization, fresh-air camps, and subsidized school lunches. Federal Aid to Dependent Children legislation ensured a basic level of care for all children. There was discrimination and injustice to be sure, but it was not directed toward children per se. Moreover, children were regarded as innocent and in need of protection from the seamier side of life. Such television programs as “Leave It to Beaver,” “Father Knows Best,” and “Ozzie and Harriet” reflected this view of childhood.

Then a period of upheavals ensued in the sixties. For our purpose—the understanding of what brought about a transformation in our conception of children—two movements are of particular interest: the civil rights movement and the women’s movement. Both grew out of long-standing resentments over discrimination, unequal educational and job opportunities, and negative, often puerile, portrayals in the media, which depicted both minorities and women as incompetent.

As women and minorities asserted their competence and demanded equal opportunity, what the learning psychologists used to call a “spread of effect” took place: many of their feelings of outrage “spread” to minority and female children. They, too, were now regarded as being discriminated against and denied equal opportunity, and advocates arose to speak on their behalf.

Perhaps the most well known of these spokespersons was Jerome Bruner. His statement in the best-seller *The Process of Education* (1962) that “you can teach any child any subject at any age in an intellectually honest way” gave expression and direction to the advocates of minority and female children. Adding to the force of this statement was Benjamin Bloom’s argument in *Stability and Change in Human Behavior* (1964) that children attained half of their intellectual ability by age four. Further, because intellectual growth was more rapid at this age than at any later point in life, it was a critical time for instruction. Finally, J. McV. Hunt

argued forcefully in *Intelligence and Experience* (1961) that intelligence was malleable and not fixed.

These writers, I am sure, had no awareness of the broader repercussions of their work but assumed only that they were aiding the cause of the disadvantaged. Certainly some positive results occurred: in 1964 Congress passed the first Head Start legislation and in 1965 a half million young children were enrolled in comprehensive programs of education and health care. These programs have had lasting beneficial effects, although it is clear, after decades of research, that they improve social skills and motivation rather than IQs or levels of academic achievement (McKay et al. 1985).

Nevertheless, the ideas that you can teach a child a subject at any age, that the early years are critical because intelligence is growing so rapidly, and that intelligence is potentially malleable were not lost on middle-income parents. If low-income children had a Head Start, should not middle-class children also be given a bit of a lead? One unfortunate consequence of this reasoning was that education has come to be seen as a race. Parents now believe that earlier is better, that an early start means an early and better finish—in sports and the arts as well as academics.

It is easy to document how widespread the notion of child competence has become. Programs such as Glen Doman's "Better Baby Institute" train parents how to teach their babies to read and do math. Swimming, exercise, ballet, music, and karate lessons for preschoolers are common around the country. "Educational materials" for young children are abundant and range from reading to computer programs.

One point about our changed conception of young children needs to be underscored. The changes in the conceptions and treatment of minorities and women came about in response to flagrant injustices. Although they have not all been eliminated, significant progress toward equality for both groups has been made. But the change in our conception of children did not come about because of any unbearable injustices being visited upon them. To the contrary: the middle decades of this century constituted a golden period for children in our society. By any measure—health, education, welfare—children are worse off today than they were in the fifties and early sixties.

An important factor in the acceptability of this new idea of childhood has been the transformation of the American family, which was at least partly a consequence of the women's movement. The traditional profile of the American family—two parents, only one of whom works outside

the home, and an average of 2.5 children—characterized more than 50 percent of households in the 1950s but less than 10 percent today. The majority of contemporary American families have either one parent or two parents both of whom work outside the home.

The movement of large numbers of women into the work force was unprecedented and unplanned for. In particular, mothers with children under three years of age represent the fastest growing segment of the female labor force. Yet good, affordable child care is relatively scarce. Parents often have to make do with substandard day-care or latchkey arrangements. The government is moving sluggishly to provide the funds required to meet this basic need. In the meantime, working parents worry about finding child care and then about its adequacy—a situation conducive to parental anxiety and guilt. Moreover, though many contemporary parents have embraced feminist ideology, not all have fully abandoned the values that prevailed when they were growing up. The conception of children as innocent and in need of parental protection and guidance during the early years persists, compounding the guilt many parents feel when they must secure out-of-home care for their children. The concept of child competence helps relieve this guilt. If children are ready and able to handle all that life has to offer—indeed, if they profit from early exposure to everything and anything—then one does not need to feel guilty about putting them in day care or even about their watching television for many hours a day.

Another factor in the acceptance of the new idea of childhood derives from the parents' image of schools. Because schools have safe, regularly inspected buildings; licensed, trained, and reasonably paid teachers; and a history of stability and continuity, parents trust them and look to them for help with child care. In response, many schools have expanded their half-day kindergartens to full-day programs, and more than twenty-three states are providing or thinking of providing programs for four-year-olds.

But this expansion has to be paid for by taxpayers. The idea that young children are competent to engage in academic learning, and indeed benefit from it, is a strong selling point. Full-day kindergarten and prekindergarten are suddenly seen as *necessary* for preventing later school failure. This strategy is working because citizens and officials do not really understand early childhood education; they feel comfortable voting for academic programs but not for fingerpaints and gerbils. The schools, for their part, have accepted and reinforced the concept of the young child's academic competence.