

Unrealistic Parental Optimism

Gerçekçi Olmayan Ebeveyn İyimserliği

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ABSTRACT

Unrealistic optimism is considered as an optimism bias based on the individual's motives of self-exaggeration and protection and is defined as evaluating oneself more positively than others. An important example of nurturing one's own self through the concept of unrealistic optimism is the parent-child relationship. The parent's having unrealistically positive perceptions about his/her child is reported to play an important role in the parenting experience, nourishing the parent's own self and changing the interaction with the child. An individual's placing parenting at the center of their life is not only limited to seeing themselves as better than they are, but can also affect their evaluations of their child. Unrealistic parental optimism can lead to disappointment, inappropriate persistence and unpreparedness for personal threats. The expectations created by the evolutionarily adaptive ability to look on the bright side of events and the disappointments that may be experienced in line with these expectations are significant for psychological science to be examined in an important context such as child rearing. This review focuses on the motives of parents to exhibit unrealistic parental optimism, what kind of behaviors they exhibit in this context and the outcomes of these behaviors on children.

Keywords: Unrealistic optimism, optimistic bias, self-deception

ÖZ

Gerçekçi olmayan iyimserlik, bireyin kendini abartma, koruma güdülerine dayanan bir iyimserlik yanlılığı olarak ele alınmakta ve kendini diğerlerinden daha olumlu değerlendirmesi olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Gerçekçi olmayan iyimserlik kavramı aracılığıyla bireyin kendi benliğini beslemesinin önemli bir örneği ebeveyn çocuk ilişkisi olarak gösterilmektedir. Ebeveynin çocuğu ile ilgili gerçekçi olmayan olumlu algılara sahip olmasının ebeveynlik deneyiminde önemli bir rol oynadığı, ebeveynin kendi benliğini beslediği ve çocukla etkileşimini değiştirebildiği bildirilmektedir. Bireyin ebeveynliğini hayatının merkezine alması yalnızca kendisini olduğundan iyi görmesiyle sınırlı kalmayıp çocuğu hakkındaki değerlendirmelerini de etkileyebilmektedir. Gerçekçi olmayan ebeveyn iyimserliğinin hayal kırıklığına, uygun olmayan ısrarcılığa ve kişisel tehditlere hazırlıksız olmaya yol açtığı bildirilmektedir. Evrimsel olarak adaptif olan olaylara iyi yönünden bakabilme yetisinin kişide oluşturduğu beklentiler ve bu beklentiler doğrultusunda da yaşayabileceği hayal kırıklıklarının çocuk yetiştirme gibi önemli bir bağlamda da incelenmesi psikoloji bilimi için önemli bulunmaktadır. Bu derleme çalışmasında, anne babaların gerçekçi olmayan ebeveyn iyimserliği sergileme nedenleri, bu bağlamda ne tür davranışlar gösterdikleri ve bu davranışlarının çocuklar üzerindeki çıktıları ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Gerçekçi olmayan iyimserlik, iyimser önyargı, kendini kandırma

Introduction

Positive illusions, explored within psychology literature, have been the focus of numerous studies (Shepperd et al. 2008, Krizan and Windshittl 2009). The concept of positive illusion, or self-deception, pertains to the persistence of one's initial beliefs despite encountering contradictory evidence, often intertwined with unrealistic optimism (DeWeese Boyd 2007). Taylor (1989) characterizes positive illusions as enduring belief patterns rooted in a deliberate distortion of reality concerning the world, self, and future. Individuals harboring such beliefs, sometimes manifesting as the illusion of invulnerability (Perloff and Fetzer 1986), may demonstrate unwarranted optimism in assessing risks associated with forthcoming life events (Valeria et al. 2000; Harris et al. 2011).

Unrealistic optimism, an inclination to perceive oneself as less prone to negative occurrences and more likely to encounter positive ones than others, is a cornerstone of positive illusions (Shepperd et al. 2015, Jefferson et al. 2017). It is construed as an optimism bias driven by individuals' tendencies for self-enhancement and self-protection, encapsulating various phenomena (Bortolotti and Antrobus 2015, Jefferson et al. 2017). Among these, the better-than-average effect stands out as particularly robust, denoting a tendency for individuals to evaluate themselves more favorably than their peers through social comparison (Alicke and Govorun 2005).

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Research on unrealistic optimism has expanded to encompass parents' perceptions of their children, particularly regarding positive self-perceptions and future outlooks. Parents influence their children's lives, guiding them toward realizing their potential. While it is natural for parents to hold optimistic views and trust in their children's abilities, there are instances where this optimism can become unrealistic, leading to overly ambitious expectations. This phenomenon, termed unrealistic parental optimism, can significantly impact children's development.

This study aims to highlight the prevalence of unrealistic parental optimism and its potential adverse effects. It underscores the importance of parents realistically evaluating their children's capabilities to establish attainable goals. Doing so is crucial for fostering healthy self-perceptions, equipping children with coping mechanisms for challenges, mitigating anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem, and facilitating the realization of their full potential.

Unrealistic Parental Optimism

Optimism, defined as an individual's hopeful outlook on the future (Özpehriz 2020), serves as a cornerstone for psychological well-being (Carver and Scheire 2014, Li et al. 2023). It encompasses cognitive constructs intertwined with motivation; optimists persist, whereas pessimists tend to relinquish efforts (Carver and Scheire 2014). Castro-Schilo et al. (2013) revealed a link between parental optimism and positive parenting, fostering the child's social skills. Metzger et al. (2015) identified factors influencing both children's and parents' optimism, such as cognitive style and perceived self-efficacy.

However, when parental optimism veers into unrealistic territory, it can detrimentally alter the parent-child dynamic (Lench et al. 2006, Mack et al. 2007, Sung et al. 2009). Wenger and Fowers (2008) highlight the phenomenon of unrealistic optimism, particularly within parent-child relationships.

Parents often infuse their evaluations of their children's future with unrealistic optimistic thoughts (Balı 2022), believing their children will predominantly encounter positive outcomes (Lench et al. 2006). Such parental optimism, when unrealistic, significantly influences the parenting experience, nurturing parental egos but altering interactions with their children negatively (Krizan and Brown 1988, Wenger and Fowers 2008).

Wenger and Fowers (2008) assert that parenthood often brings immense satisfaction, leading individuals to place exaggerated expectations on their children and foster unrealistic optimistic parenting. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) supported this notion, finding that married mothers tended to exhibit less depression and greater optimism compared to their childless counterparts. While centering parenthood in one's life may boost self-esteem, it can also introduce biases. Positive illusions, commonly associated with maternal self-perception, can extend to their children's evaluation.

Causes of Unrealistic Parental Optimism

Various factors contribute to the development of unrealistic optimism among individuals (Weinstein 1980, Weinstein and Lachendro 1982), encompassing ego-defensive mechanisms, cognitive distortions, and optimistic biases (Ross and Sicoly 1979, Weinstein 1982, Kirscht et al. 1966).

Research across psychology domains, including social, clinical, developmental, and personality studies, consistently indicates that neurotypical individuals tend to harbor an unrealistically optimistic outlook on themselves, their future, and their control over events (Taylor and Brown 1988).

One primary driver of unrealistic parental optimism stems from societal pressures propagated by media and popular culture's portrayal of perfect parents and children. This societal influence, particularly affects mothers, fostering unrealistic expectations for their children. Moreover, personal experiences, such as having overly optimistic role models or enduring challenging childhoods, can fuel parental optimism detached from reality. Emotional investment in children's success often leads parents to project optimistic beliefs, seeking validation for their values and achievements through their children's accomplishments. Conversely, in cultures valuing individualism, some parents may fear their children's failure, thereby overestimating their potential, driven by concerns about family reputation or status. Additionally, lacking adequate parenting knowledge can exacerbate unrealistic parental optimism.

Attachment styles emerge as a significant predictor of parental unrealistic optimism (Brennan et al. 1998, Fraley and Waller 1998, Lench et al. 2006). Anxious or avoidant parental attachment styles often correlate with negative relationship models with their children (Rholes et al. 1995). High levels of avoidance predict lower optimism regarding children's positive outcomes and, to some degree, their ability to avoid negative outcomes,

thereby reducing relationship involvement and overall optimism (Lench et al. 2006). Furthermore, research examines how attachment styles influence children's optimism levels, revealing that children with avoidant attachment styles report less distress during threatening situations and perceive their parents as warmer and more caring compared to those with secure attachments (Borelli et al. 2013).

Unrealistic Optimistic Behavior of Parents

Unrealistic parental optimism refers to parents having expectations beyond their child's capacity (Twentyman and Plotkin 1982). It manifests itself as excessive optimism, ignoring negativity and self-deception. A significant relationship has been reported between the favorable self-evaluation rates of parents with preschool children and that of their children (Wenger and Fowers 2008). However, it is noted that when parents' expectations are not met, they may experience disappointment, may become aggressive towards the child, and neglect the child's needs. In a similar study by Twentyman and Plotkin (1982), it is emphasized that parents with unmet expectations have higher expectations than other parents.

Parents not only try to fulfill their unfulfilled desires through their children but also try to compensate for the mistakes they have made in their lives (Heffner 2011). Individuals who become parents without their needs being met by their parents in their childhood are in search of meeting these needs throughout their lives. When they see their child as their last hope, they may have unrealistic expectations towards him/her. They may exhibit abusive behaviors towards their child as a result of the expectations not being met (Twentyman and Plotkin 1982).

Goetting (1986) argues that parents see their parenting efforts as challenging but individually valuable. As Wenger and Fowers (2008) reported, parents expressed that having a child satisfies them and can define this as the foremost satisfaction in their lives (Meredith et al. 1984, Ohashi 1992). Various studies have also supported the idea that parenting satisfaction is an important determinant of overall life satisfaction and personal well-being (Meredith et al. 1984, Cheng et al. 1991, Rogers and White 1998, Elek et al. 2003). However, parents may have unrealistic expectations in return for their investment in their children and an optimistic belief that their children will have more positive outcomes than other children (Lench et al. 2006). Moreover, parents are reported not to consider the negative outcome when evaluating the risk possibilities for their children (Lench et al. 2006). Twentyman and Plotkin (1982) argue that individuals exhibit these and similar situations to maintain high parenting satisfaction.

Whether the parent has a child with typical development or a child with developmental disabilities may influence unrealistic optimism (Twentyman and Plotkin 1982). Parents with children with disabilities who have unrealistic expectations may expect their children to perform beyond their capacities, to behave just like adults, and to understand their reactions with maturity (Steele and Pollock 1974). These findings are in line with the view that neglectful and abusive parents perceive their children to have lower levels of social maturity compared to other children (Hoffman et al. 1980).

In Lindberg et al.'s (2019) study conducted in Turkey, families interviewed were asked about their children's year-end achievement expectations, and 44 out of 50 parents anticipated that their children would meet their expectations positively. Lench et al. (2006) also reported more unrealistic optimism among parents when they avoided negative experiences of their children rather than when they expected their children to have positive experiences.

Existing studies (e.g., Mack et al. 2007, Sung et al. 2009) have reported that parents of children with chronic illnesses (especially cancer) have a high tendency to be unrealistically optimistic about the treatment process. Other studies (Mack et al. 2007, Sung et al. 2009, Nayak et al. 2021) with parents of children who have advanced-stage diseases with poor prognoses indicate that the majority of parents exhibit excessive and unrealistic optimism beyond hope by expecting a higher probability of recovery than predicted by physicians. When all these features are considered, unrealistic parental optimism can be briefly defined as a bias characterized by parental beliefs that go beyond the child's capacity, including phenomena such as better-than-average effect, illusion of control, and excessive hope.

Parents are encouraged to incorporate unrealistically optimistic thoughts when they assess their children's likelihood of experiencing positive and negative situations (Balı 2022). The unrealistic parental optimism referred to at this point is the belief of parents that their children will be more likely to experience positive situations in the future and less likely to experience negative situations (Lench et al. 2006). Parents consciously or unconsciously instill their unrealistically optimistic beliefs in their children (Agliata and Renk 2008). They may convey this through messages or psychological control mechanisms (Rudy et al. 2014). Parental unrealistic

optimism varies by culture, with Asian parents reported to have higher expectations compared to other cultures (Naumann et al. 2012). In this context, Asian university students report higher stress levels and obligations than European university students (Oishi and Sullivan 2005).

Unrealistic optimism research on positive perceptions of oneself and one's future has been extended to include parents' perceptions of their children. In a study with parents of 2- to 5-year-old children (Wenger and Fowers 2008), parents attributed significantly more positive and fewer negative behaviors to their children than the average child. In a separate study (Chadi et al. 2020), most parents who rated their own children's likelihood of starting to use tobacco, cannabis, and drugs before the age of 18 and their perceptions of parental control reported high levels of optimism and control compared to other children. Parents with a history of smoking only reported low control over smoking, which the researchers attributed to increased realism.

Effects of Unrealistic Parental Optimism on the Child

Unrealistically optimistic attitudes can lead to adverse outcomes for parental relationships and interactions with their children. Research suggests that prior to a child's birth, overly optimistic expectations among prospective parents can lead to depressive symptoms and decreased marital satisfaction after the child's arrival (Bouchard 2009). These parents may also exhibit inappropriate child-rearing attitudes, further complicating their adjustment to parenthood (Harwood et al. 2007). Studies indicate that women who maintain cautiously optimistic attitudes experience fewer postpartum depressive symptoms compared to those who are unrealistically optimistic or pessimistic (Robakis et al. 2015). Additionally, research highlights that overly optimistic parental behaviors can impede early interventions for their children's health (Hart 2003, Drouin 2019).

Parents' unrealistic optimism, particularly regarding their children, often results in setting unattainable expectations (Bouchard 2009). Studies show that parents tend to be more optimistic about their own children's prospects compared to other children (Lench et al. 2006), and they anticipate positive experiences for their children before the age of thirty (Wright et al. 2018). While such positive illusions may seem beneficial for the parent-child relationship, they can also contribute to heightened motivation, stability, and effective performance (Wright et al. 2018). Furthermore, research on stepparents and their children underscores the positive impact of optimistic perceptions on the stepparent-child relationship, aiding in navigating challenges and fostering a functional family dynamic (Cohen et al. 2004).

Discussion

Recent research has shown the detrimental impact of parents' unrealistic expectations on both their own mental well-being and their capacity to safeguard their children's physical health. Armor and Taylor (1998) and colleagues indicate how unrealistic optimism leads to disappointment, inappropriate persistence and unpreparedness for personal threats. The expectations created by the evolutionarily adaptive ability to look at the bright side of events and the disappointments that may be experienced in line with these expectations are crucial for the science of psychology to be analyzed in an equally relevant context such as child rearing. Considering that unrealistic optimism can shape a person's perspective and this effect is reflected in their behavior, the importance of parents having realistic expectations before the child is born becomes clear. Various studies (Harwood et al. 2007, Robakis et al. 2015) emphasize the significance of parents having realistic expectations during the process of having a child. Churchill and Davis (2010) suggest having a realistic disposition is more protective than optimism or pessimism. However, finding the balance at this point seems to be very critical. Because attempting to stand against positive illusions only for the sake of finding the right thing weakens one's performance and does not enable one to reach the desired accuracy (Gilovich 2013).

The reviewed studies in this study indicate that unrealistically optimistic parental perception negatively affects the child's control, risk assessment and emotion prediction, whereas it may be a protective factor for children with developmental difficulties. When parents' inappropriate expectations are not met, they may experience disappointment, become increasingly hostile towards the child, disregard the child's basic needs, and result in child abuse (Twentyman and Plotkin 1982). The negative effects of abuse for the child who grows up by modeling the attitudes and behaviors of the parents can last a lifetime (Plotkin et al. 1981, Twentyman and Plotkin 1982).

Unrealistic expectations of parents may lead children to perform at a lower level than they would exhibit by making them think that the goal is unattainable, and encouraging parents by creating common goals with their children in line with their potentials is deemed to have a positive effect on the process (Ballı 2012). Vadillo et al.

(2013) provided additional information about the reasons for the results in order to protect individuals from the harmful effects of illusion and observed a decrease in unrealistically optimistic behaviors. This method, which has proven to be effective, could also be applied in different cultures.

While we have proverbs describing unrealistic parental optimism such as "Hedgehog loves its young as cotton" and "Raven loves its young as a phoenix", there have been a limited number of scientific studies in Türkiye to carry this beyond folk wisdom (e.g. Çekiç et al. 2019, Aydın and Buğa 2020). Conducting such studies in our country will be beneficial to the existing cross-cultural research in this field.

It is logical to incorporate a concept into relevant literature when it can be effectively measured. Reviewing studies within our cultural context highlights that one dimension of the Unrealistic Optimism and Perception of Control over the Environment Scale, as devised by Elmas and Akfırat (2015), aims to measure unrealistic optimism but lacks specific adaptation for parental assessment. Developing a measurement instrument tailored to parents would significantly enhance the existing research literature.

Children of parents with unrealistic optimism tendency may exhibit low academic performance (Aderanti et al. 2013, Cho et al 2013, Metzger et al 2015). This study suggests that unrealistic optimism in the formation of digital awareness of parents may be one of the reasons why the majority of children spend long hours with computers and parents do not prefer / do not want to exhibit consistent control in this regard. Research studies with digital parenting awareness and unrealistic parental optimism as variables are highly recommended.

For the current review study, the relationships between parents' unrealistic optimistic behaviors and children's academic skills and well-being were examined (Zang et al. 2007, Aderanti et al. 2013, Aoki 2019). Focusing on children's academic outcomes as well as outcomes in other areas in the future studies will increase diversity and may contribute to the relevant field. In addition, a small number of studies have been conducted on parents' unrealistic optimistic behaviors in Türkiye, and conducting more studies at this point may increase diversity as a cultural output and contribute to the literature. Considering that the modern capitalist order is a power that dominates and instrumentalizes reason, whether unrealistic optimism expectations turn into a necessity is among the questions that await an answer.

For parents to make more informed decisions regarding their children's future, it's crucial for them to critically assess the realism of their optimistic outlook. Therefore, it becomes imperative for healthcare institutions to ensure that parents have access to proficient psychologists, starting from the prenatal phase. While the studies referenced in this review primarily focus on the adverse effects of unrealistically optimistic attitudes, it's worth noting that parents often perceive their children as exceptionally special, potentially influencing the level of investment they allocate towards their offspring. Investigating this phenomenon within contexts such as educational attention and the encouragement of the child's interests could yield valuable insights. Longitudinal studies appear essential for comprehending the enduring significance of parental attitudes, in addition to the immediate outcomes. Furthermore, when planning future research, it's essential to incorporate parents' attachment styles as a variable for consideration.

Considering the results, intervention programs for parents may be beneficial in order to prevent unrealistic parental optimism from overshadowing the ability to recognize and prevent risk factors. Likewise, organizing optimism studies for parents with children who are undergoing treatment or have developmental problems may be helpful for children and families.

Conclusion

Parents' attitudes significantly impact their relationships with their children and how those children behave as adults (Kaya 2010). This highlights the need for further research on unrealistic optimism in parents. We need to better understand how parents form unrealistic expectations and how those expectations influence their risk assessments for their children (Azar et al. 1984). At the same time, developing psychoeducational programs and therapeutic approaches to help parents identify and manage unrealistic optimism in their parenting style would be valuable (Kaya 2010). Research suggests that Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) could be an effective tool to help parents identify and challenge unrealistic expectations, ultimately improving their well-being and their children's (Ellis 1991, Kaya 2010). Future research should explore factors that contribute to unrealistic parental optimism. Areas of interest could include self-esteem, attachment styles, and the influence of cultural shifts. These studies could provide valuable insights into Generation Z and offer new explanations for the concept of "mortgaged identity".

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