

Self-inflation harms kids' relationships at school

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

"I am the smartest kid in class." We all want our kids to be self-confident, but unrealistic perceptions of their academic abilities can be harmful. These unrealistic views, a new study of eighth-graders finds, damage the a child's relationship with others in the classroom: The more one student feels unrealistically superior to another, the less the two

students like each other.

Katrin Rentzsch of the University of Bamberg in Germany first became interested in the effects of such self-perceptions when she was studying how people became labeled as nerds. "There is more to being labeled a nerd than just academic achievement," she says. "I really got interested in the question of whether it is OK to brag about achievements in class or if you should rather not display your achievements in the classroom."

But that line of thinking led her in a different direction than bragging, toward something psychologists call "self-enhancement" - when a person feels unrealistically superior to someone else. The poster child for self-enhancement is the character Sheldon on The Big Bang Theory.

"Although Sheldon is a smart person and receives respect for his scientific work, he still thinks that he is even smarter, brighter, or much better as compared to how he is perceived by others," says Rentzsch, who is currently a visiting scholar at Stanford University.

Rentzsch and her colleague Michela Schröder-Abé decided to take a closer look at how such self-enhancement affects relationships, so they turned to the eighth-grade classroom, somewhere they could measure differences between actual academic performance, students' perceptions of their performance, and social popularity. The 358 students came from 20 eighth-grade classes in schools in southeast Germany.

Using a round-robin design, the researchers asked each student to rate their classmates, in terms of their likability and of their feelings of academic superiority (i.e. rating on a scale "I feel academically superior to him/her"). They then contrasted those ratings with the students' grades in math, physics, German, and English. Importantly, they conducted the analysis at two different social levels: "habitual" - the way people act in general - and "[relationship](#)" - the way someone acts around a specific individual.

The differences between these two levels of analysis were stark: Students who tended to have an inflated view of themselves at the habitual level were neither more or less liked by their classmates. However, self-inflation toward specific individuals changed how the students felt about each other.

"The more a student felt unrealistically superior to a specific other student, the less he or she was liked by the other student in return," wrote the researchers in a new study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Interestingly, at both the habitual and relationship levels, students who self-enhanced disliked their classmates more than those with more realistic views of themselves.

The results show, Rentzsch says, that "the specific relationship between individuals matters when it comes to the social consequences of self-enhancement." When a person acts superior to someone else specifically, it can be offensive, whereas if someone has an inflated sense of themselves all the time toward everyone, it feels less personal. Just think of that guy, like Sheldon, you might meet at a party who acts like he's smarter than everyone else, you may feel uncomfortable but not personally offended.

The new study helps to explain past inconsistent findings on the topics of self-enhancement. Past psychology studies had shown both positive and negative effects on relationships. "Our findings may help to explain previous controversial findings on the interpersonal consequences of self-enhancement in that they reveal different effects at two different levels of analysis," the authors wrote.

In future work, Rentzsch would like to look at these effects in adults, perhaps specifically in team work. She is also interested in self-enhancement beyond academic achievements, for example physical attractiveness. And another question to explore is why [students](#)

overestimate their academic abilities. Perhaps it is because of too much praise from their parents or teachers.

More information: "Self-Enhancement 2.0: An Integrated Approach to Measuring Dyadic Self-Enhancement at Two Levels," by Katrin Rentzsch and Michela Schröder-Abé, [spp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 50614558634.abstract](https://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/50614558634.abstract)

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