

## THE OPTIMAL MARGIN OF ILLUSION

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This article proposes that optimal psychological functioning is associated with a slight to moderate degree of distortion in one's perception of self and world. Past evidence suggests that substantial distortions provide a dangerous basis for action, yet recent research has shown that highly accurate perceptions are associated with depression and other maladaptive patterns. By seeing things as only slightly better than they really are, the individual may enjoy the affective benefits of illusions while avoiding the pragmatic, behavioral risks of acting on false assumptions. Departures from this optimal margin of illusion are associated with risks and difficulties, and power hierarchies may be an important arena for studying these problems.

Recent work has provided conflicting views about the value of illusions. Some evidence has supported the traditional view that seeing the world, or the self, in a distorted fashion is a sign of mental illness and a prescription for suffering and disaster. Other evidence has indicated the opposite: that normal, healthy, well-adjusted people systematically distort their views of self and world, and they derive important benefits from doing so. This article will argue that there is merit in both views, and that the best resolution is to say that there is an *optimal margin of illusion* at which people are happiest, function best, and so forth. Further, it will argue that increasing one's margin of illusion—that is, increasing the degree to which one distorts one's perception of reality—from this optimal level produces one sort of problem, while decreasing it (as in seeing the world too accurately) produces a different sort of problem.

In this article, illusions are conceptualized as exaggerations in the positivity of self-perception. One's true abilities and capacities can be regarded as having a certain measurable quantity, such as an IQ score. The margin of illusion is the extent to which the person subjectively increases that quantity, such as the degree to which people recall their IQ scores as being higher than they actually are. A small or negligible

A preliminary version of this material was presented to the American Psychological Association in August, 1988, in Atlanta, Georgia. Requests for reprints should be sent to R. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106.

margin of illusion thus means seeing oneself accurately, and a large margin signifies a hefty exaggeration of one's ability.

Other sorts of illusions do exist, of course. There are indeed dangers associated with gross misperceptions of reality. Ames (1984) described the case of a man who believed he had grown a second head, which sought to steal away his wife. In attempting to shoot the second head, the man inflicted a serious head wound to himself, requiring hospitalization. Illusions like this, although clearly maladaptive, are beyond the scope of this article.

### ILLUSIONS CAN BE HARMFUL

Illusions have long had a pejorative connotation, partly from their association with mental illness. Psychotics have hallucinations and are poorly adjusted, so it is easy to presume that hallucinations cause poor adjustment. This reasoning is clearly fallacious. Still, there are indeed some potential problems associated with seeing the world in a distorted fashion and especially with using distorted perceptions as a basis for judgments (e.g., Ames, 1984).

The dangers of illusions are not confined to the mentally ill, however. Social psychology research with normal people has also revealed several risks and dangers of illusions. A literature review of a dozen different self-defeating behavior patterns in the social psychology research literature found that over a third of them seemed to involve misjudging the self or misjudging the social environment in some way (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).

In particular, overestimating one's abilities and likelihood of success can lead one into various undertakings that consume time and energy and produce failure. Thus, there is some evidence that judgments based on inflated views of self can lead to self-defeating processes. For example, Feather (1961, 1962) showed that optimistic expectations for success can cause people to persist fruitlessly at unsolvable tasks. McFarlin, Baumeister, and Blascovich (1985) showed that people with high self-esteem were especially prone to persist at impossible tasks, even if they had been given (correct) advice that excessive persistence would be counterproductive. It is noteworthy, however, that relatively few studies have confirmed the harmful consequences of erroneous self-perceptions, and further research is necessary.

Some relevant evidence concerns the role of self-esteem in self-handicapping behavior. Self-handicapping entails placing obstacles in the way of one's own performance so that failure will be blamed on the obstacle whereas one's personal credit for success will be enhanced

(Jones & Berglas, 1978). Tice and Baumeister (1985, 1988) found that people with high self-esteem were most prone to engage in self-handicapping, which was operationalized as spending less time and effort preparing for an upcoming test. That study showed that reductions in preparatory effort did lead to poorer performance, so the self-handicapping response was indeed self-defeating. Favorable views of self, which may often involve illusions such as exaggerations of one's abilities, are thus associated with self-defeating performance patterns.

The dangers of overconfidence have been amply indicated in historical and anthropological work. The Crusades, for example, appear to have been undertaken with the belief that divine favor and Christian military prowess would ensure victory, and Europe was shocked by the colossal defeats and failures (Runciman, 1951-1954). Evidence suggests that the participants in the Children's Crusade earnestly believed that the children's innocence and virtue would ensure divine support, which in turn would ensure reconquest of the Holy Land. Indeed, they believed that God would part the Mediterranean as He had parted the Red Sea according to the Bible. These illusions led to death or lifelong enslavement for most of the participants (Cohn, 1970).

The Moslem response to the Crusaders was itself not without illusion (Maalouf, 1987). The first wave of Christian invaders was a motley collection of peasants (of both sexes and all ages), adventure-seekers, and miscellaneous warriors who were too eager to wait for the organized expeditions and so set out at once to conquer the Holy Land. News of this unorthodox expedition caused some concern to the Moslems who lay first in their path. The Moslem ruler Kilij Arslan organized a careful military response and annihilated these Christians. Unfortunately, this initial success convinced the Moslems that their troops were so superior to the Christians that they need not worry about further invaders. When the main Christian armies came through, Kilij Arslan's army was unprepared, and they were completely defeated.

This incident is of particular interest because it suggests a sequence of initially appropriate response, followed by initial success, which leads to increasingly favorable views of self, which in turn open the way for self-defeating errors in judgment. Such a career trajectory suggests the expansion of the margin of illusion and the destructive consequences of that expansion.

Careers of local prophets throughout the Middle Ages show the same trajectory. In Cohn's (1970) classic analysis, most began with limited goals and promises, gradually acquired followers and admirers, and eventually proceeded to calamitous grandiosity, such as proclaiming themselves divine and promising miraculous military victories. These movements generally ended with the prophets themselves captured and

executed and their followers massacred. The same trajectory, with the same tragic consequences of the illusions, is apparent in Burrigge's (1969) international survey of millenarian movements. Indeed, only a century ago in America, a similar pattern was seen in the Ghost Dance movement among Indians, who came to believe that their new spirituality would enable them to reconquer their land from the white invaders. Initially, the claims of the Ghost Dance were modest and effective, but they became progressively more grandiose, promising among other things that their shirts would be capable of repelling the bullets of white soldiers. These illusions culminated in the disastrous and atrocious massacre at Wounded Knee, from which Indian nationalism never recovered (Miller, 1959).

Wilson's (1973) provocative account of the lives of famous magicians also shows this trajectory. Wilson's account is controversial, partly because he tends to credit the magicians' claims to supernatural powers, but he still notes that most of them provoked their own downfall by excessively grandiose claims and pronouncements. Regardless of whether one follows Wilson's acceptance of genuine supernatural abilities, it is apparent that these magicians generally believed in their own abilities, and that across their lives they became increasingly confident in them and brought about their own downfalls by believing too much in their own capacity to produce miraculous results.

It would be reckless to propose that overconfidence always leads to disaster, for sometimes remarkable successes crown improbable, seemingly foolish undertakings. Perhaps probability theory offers the best way of conceptualizing such undertakings. Overconfidence entails that one overestimates the subjective likelihood of success, which may induce one to undertake difficult, inappropriate projects with inadequate resources or safeguards. Such projects will tend to fail, although a percentage of them will succeed. Setting out in childhood on a quest for an Olympic gold medal, for example, will likely consume over a decade of sacrifice, pain, and exertion. Most who try will fail, but a few do receive the medals. Thus, these illusory dreams of future glory lead to disappointment and waste for many, but to extraordinary success for a very few. It requires a difficult value judgment to decide how many wasted years, injuries, and bitter disappointments, for how many people, are compensated for by the superior achievement of another person's success.

There is also some evidence that optimistic illusions, when combined with institutional power, can create a social trap (cf. Platt, 1973). Becker's (1986) account of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia furnishes an especially vivid example, although similar processes are suggested in Arendt's (1951) and Lifton's (1986) accounts of the totalitarian bureaucracies in

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Europe. The Khmer Rouge believed that they could make Cambodia a self-sufficient, economically prosperous land of farming collectives, without needing any sort of foreign assistance (indeed, they expelled or executed all the foreigners they could find). The illusory nature of this belief is apparent, for the obstacles were formidable; the Khmer Rouge were ignoring the fact that the Cambodian economy had really only been viable through foreign aid and that they lacked indigenous technical knowledge (e.g., dams were built beaver-style without proper engineering, and the rainy season washed them out, killing many people and destroying vital crops). They mobilized the entire population as farmers, including all urban dwellers who had never farmed at all. Although it is fashionable simply to deplore the Khmer Rouge regime as an episode of cruelty and atrocity, a proper understanding of it should recognize that they (like the Nazis, the Crusaders, and others) were guided and motivated by fairly articulate Utopian illusions.

The social trap came about as the Khmer Rouge organizational planners (Anka) began to set the goals for production. Many of these were unrealistically optimistic; the motley teams of undernourished, untrained, displaced, and desperate individuals, working without equipment, simply could not produce as much food as the planners specified. The illusion had to be sustained, however, that the organization and its plans were infallible. Consequently, the repeated shortfalls of the harvest had to be blamed on individuals—incompetents and especially traitors or saboteurs. When local officials began to be executed because the harvest yields in their sector were below quotas, other officials began to turn in inflated reports, to protect themselves. But then the central organization wanted a large share of the nonexistent rice to distribute elsewhere, so the officials, to sustain the deception, had to make up the difference out of the share that was to be kept for feeding the people in their sector. This resulted in near-starvation of the farmers, whose reward was then to be assigned an even higher quota for the following year. In view of their illusory success the previous year. Ultimately, of course, it would prove impossible to sustain the deception that the harvests were so successful, and the falsified reports were regarded as proof of sabotage—adding to the wave of executions (Becker, 1986).

Indeed, there may well be a general pattern of internal terror that forms part of revolutionary movements. The phrase "revolutions devour their own children" has been widely quoted and attributed, although one of the earliest to use it was a member of the ill-fated Girondist faction in the French Revolution, who was himself executed early in the Reign of Terror (Palmer, 1969). Many revolutions are begun with Utopian aspirations, and these are rarely realized, perhaps because they are neither economically nor psychologically feasible. To sustain the illusion that a

revolution is infallible, its failures must be attributed elsewhere, and fairly soon internal enemies get the blame. So the purges begin. In the early stages, revolutions prey on their victims and enemies; but after a while these have less to fear, as the revolutionaries begin to destroy each other. Not all revolutions have these purges—the American Revolution seems to have avoided them—but they are common. In short, Utopian illusions may often furnish revolutionary movements with attributional requirements that lead to a wave of internal violence.

Military operations furnish perhaps the clearest illustration of the dangers of making decisions based on illusions, for the costs of failure are apparent and dramatic, often including deaths. Gabriel's (1985) critique of recent American military operations repeatedly shows failures to make decisions using proper information, to allow for difficulties and problems, and so forth. He also notes a tendency for commanders not to be willing to revise the plans to which they have committed themselves, which resembles the counterproductive persistence of individuals with high self-esteem in the studies cited above.

Other examples could be cited, although space limitations preclude adequate discussion here. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 was caused in part by a stock market that had been overextended because of the illusion that America's boom would not end; people had invested the profits they had not yet received but merely anticipated, and the drop in prices ruined many financially. In health and sexual behavior, many individuals seem to know about objective dangers (of disease, unwanted pregnancies, etc.) yet believe that "it cannot happen to me," and their resultant failure to take adequate precautions increases their risk, sometimes with disastrous results. Burger and Burns (1988) have labeled this the "illusion of unique invulnerability" to the consequences of sexuality (cf. Perloff & Fetzer, 1986) and documented some of the dangers associated with this illusion. Finally, Janis's (1972) analysis of groupthink indicated that a group's illusion of invulnerability is a common and dangerous pattern of overconfidence in decision making.

To conclude: Self-flattering illusions often make a poor basis for action. In many cases there is a process of gradual self-correction through feedback from the social environment. Sometimes, however, great undertakings are attended by great risks, and undue optimism can expose oneself (and one's associates) to catastrophic outcomes.

## ILLUSIONS CAN BE HELPFUL

On the other hand, evidence has accumulated through the past decade that illusions may be beneficial, at least insofar as some illusions are

associated with adaptive functioning. A recent review by Taylor and Brown (1988) has stated this argument forcefully and convincingly. Taylor's contribution to this special issue summarizes some of this material, which therefore needs only brief recapitulation here.

For one thing, happiness is not based on an objective judgment of one's circumstances but on a subjective comparison of one's perceived circumstances against internal standards and expectations. Seeing things as a little better than they are and carefully choosing one's standards (such as in downward comparison processes) help people become and remain happy. The substantial literature on depressive realism, begun by Alloy and Abramson (1979), indicates that nondepressed people tend to overestimate their successes, efficacy, and good qualities. Seeing self and world accurately is associated with depression.

Further, when traumas and setbacks occur, it seems to help people to construct some meaningful interpretations about these events, and careful study of these interpretations (Taylor, 1983) suggests that they may often be based on illusions, such as the belief that one can control the spread of one's cancer. Making excuses, which has the connotation of being an idle, self-serving activity of lame post hoc rationalization, appears to be positively associated with adjustment and may even have beneficial, adaptive consequences (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Illusions help people cope and adjust better.

Lastly, there are even some performance benefits to overestimating one's abilities. These seem to fall in the category of self-fulfilling prophecies. The confident performer often does better than the doubtful, nervous, or insecure one. Feather's work (e.g., 1966, 1968) has amply documented how performers' favorable expectations can improve performance through self-fulfilling prophecy mechanisms, and many subsequent studies have supported these results (e.g., Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985).

Thus, illusions have some benefits, and losing one's illusions is associated with depression, insecurity, discouragement, and poor coping. Disillusionment appears to be harmful to the individual.

## RESOLUTION: OPTIMAL MARGIN OF ILLUSION

Perhaps the best way to integrate these two seemingly contradictory lines of work is to suggest that there is an optimal margin of illusion. The advantages of illusions seem to be associated with *small* illusions: seeing things as slightly better than they are, overestimating one's capabilities and self-worth slightly, and so forth. The disadvantages seem to be associated with larger distortions. There may be a certain bandwidth of illusion, within which the individual can generally reap the benefits of illusions while avoiding most of the negative consequences.

This formulation seems to fit the evidence in a broad way. In review of self-defeating behaviors, Scher and I repeatedly found that esteem was involved in various ways, but there was no consistent pattern—for example, sometimes it was people with high self-esteem, other times people with low self-esteem who were most prone to one or another self-defeating tendency (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). This could be because seeing oneself too favorably or too unfavorably can be maladaptive. Likewise, the bargaining literature indicates that overestimating or underestimating the strength of one's position can lead to negotiation failures. Underestimating one's position leads to giving away the store, while overestimating it leads to a reluctance to compromise and to making unrealistic demands, which can produce a stalemate.

Swann's work on self-verification (e.g., Swann, 1987) may be relevant here. His data show that people strive to maintain their conceptions of themselves despite events that might either raise or lower these self-concepts. His work is sometimes understood as suggesting that people want to maintain *accurate* concepts of themselves, but this I think is a misinterpretation. What people want to maintain is their self-view that is based on these mild illusions. In other words, people seek to verify their inflated views of themselves rather than to establish accurate concepts of self.

Mathematically, it seems impossible for everyone to be above average. It seems, however, that most people *can* be above average, at least in their own individual minds. Indeed, a recent review of the self-esteem literature supports this conclusion (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, in press). Most people score above the conceptual midpoint on a self-esteem scale, regardless of which self-esteem scale is used. Typically, a research sample will have its mean and median about one standard deviation above the conceptual midpoint. The implication is that however self-esteem is measured, most people think themselves a little better than average. Research on false consensus effects and false uniqueness effects is likewise consistent with this conclusion (e.g., Campbell, 1986; Suls & Wan, 1987).

In general, then, people think of themselves as a little above average. This fits the hypothesis that people maintain slightly inflated views of themselves. These inflated views suggest slight but pervasive distortions in views of self, which are consistent with the margin of illusion argument. Most people apparently avoid both extremely inflated self-conceptions and brutally accurate assessments of self.

## OPTIMAL MARGIN THEORY

The preceding discussion has prepared the way for a more formal statement of the optimal margin hypothesis. This view can be stated in four main

points. First, illusions pertaining to the self can be either adaptive or maladaptive. Second, one determinant of whether these illusions are adaptive is the degree to which they distort the truth. A small distortion in the positive direction seems optimal. That is, it may be most adaptive to hold a view of self that is a little better than the truth—neither too inflated nor too accurate. This optimal margin may be thought of as a certain bandwidth of distortion.

The third and fourth points pertain to what happens when people depart from this optimal margin. Negative consequences follow from moving out of this bandwidth, and the consequences are different depending on whether the individual moves out of it in an upward or a downward direction.

As people come to hold views of themselves that overestimate the truth—that is, glorifying the self with more than optimal distortions—certain dangers and problems increase. These large distortions increase the risk of judgment errors and expose one to the self-destructive consequences of such errors. Also, the highly inflated views of self are harder to sustain, so vulnerability to stress may increase. A substantially inflated view of self is difficult to sustain on a day-to-day basis, for even mediocre performance threatens the public and private image of self that one has cultivated. Obviously, at the extreme, if doing the best that one is realistically capable of doing would still fall short of one's inflated expectations, then all performance outcomes will pose a threat to self. You cannot win if your goals are too high. Further, motivations to escape from self-awareness will increase, and these motivations are implicated in a range of activities that include several dangerous and destructive patterns, including alcohol and drug use, suicide, and other self-destructive behaviors, as well as masochism (Baumeister, 1988a, b, c; 1988, in press).

Downward departures from the optimal bandwidth are associated with a different set of problems. Seeing self and world too accurately is depressing; indeed, part of the problem in depression may be the loss of one's rose-colored glasses that make things look better than they are. Seeing one's suffering as meaningless and random does not help people cope and move on, even if the suffering really was meaningless and random. Further, the lack of illusions may leave people reluctant to undertake certain ambitious, risky projects that often may yield the greatest successes and advances. And, of course, when actual performance is involved, the realist has to do without the benefits of confidence, such as the self-fulfilling prophecy effects of thinking that one can accomplish something terrific.

The differences between the problems associated with too small versus too large a margin of illusion may be phrased in terms of adjustment and behavioral pragmatics. In terms of adjustment, larger illusions are associated with greater subjective happiness and satisfaction. A deficit

in illusions will breed negative affect and other forms of unhappiness. A large margin of illusion is problematic only insofar as it renders the individual vulnerable to disconfirmation, which may be acutely unpleasant. Thus, for example, a major failure may cause the painful recognition that one is not as capable as one previously believed (and perhaps as one had presented oneself as being). Still, as long as the large margin of illusion is sustained, the person may be quite happy and well-adjusted; the danger arises only in connection with the loss of illusion, not the illusion per se. Thus, the major problem for adjustment is in having too small a margin of illusion.

Behavioral pragmatics entail making judgments and decisions, and these may be misguided if they are based on illusions. In general, it seems reasonable that accurate information provides the most reliable and trustworthy basis for making sound decisions. A small margin of illusion thus furnishes relatively few problems in this regard, but the larger the margin of illusion, the more the individual is likely to be basing decisions on false premises and erroneous assumptions. There may be occasional pragmatic benefits to large illusions; for example, unfounded confidence may sometimes facilitate performance. Still, in general, it would appear that the major pragmatic problem is based on having too large a margin of illusion.

Thus, subjective happiness and adjustment are mainly endangered by too-small margins of illusion, whereas pragmatic and effective decision making are endangered mainly by too-large margins of illusion. Put another way, falsely positive assessments of self may be associated with emotional benefits and practical risks, whereas accurate assessments of self may be associated with emotional risks but pragmatic benefits.

## APPLICATIONS

Before closing, it may be worth providing some brief speculations on possible applications of the notion of an optimal margin of illusion. Frequent analyses of traditional relations between the sexes have portrayed them as a system where the husband and wife both strive to bolster the man's ego, often at the expense of putting down or degrading the woman. This analysis furnishes the prediction that the departures from the optimal margin of illusion would be in different directions for men as opposed to women. Under this arrangement, men would tend to depart in the upward direction (*i.e.*, having too inflated views of themselves) while women would depart in the downward direction (*i.e.*, seeing things too realistically and without illusions). This analysis seems consistent with familiar views of the male ego, male overconfidence, and male tendencies toward escapist patterns (more alcohol and drug abuse, *etc.*), as well as

the greater prevalence of depression, insecurity, and lack of confidence among traditional women.

The analysis of gender relations brings up the broader issue of power relationships. There may be a general linear relationship between one's power and one's favorable views of self, including self-enhancing illusions. Powerless people, such as slaves and prisoners, have great difficulty sustaining favorable views of themselves, and the people they meet may often take pleasure in emphasizing the unhappy truths of their positions (e.g., Patterson, 1982; Thurston, 1987). In contrast, powerful people are increasingly immune from disconfirming feedback, partly because others are reluctant to provide unfavorable interpersonal evaluations. As people become more powerful, they may tend to hear increasing doses of flattery and agreement, which may impel them toward ever more favorable views of themselves. Thus, very powerful people may well tend to depart from the optimal margin of illusion in the upward direction.

This analysis seems to fit the career trajectories of some highly successful and increasingly powerful individuals. The optimal confidence of rising figures such as young Napoleon and Hitler may have enabled them to achieve great successes early in their careers, but as their margin of illusion continued to expand they undertook grandiose, unrealistic projects, such as invading Russia, with disastrous results for themselves and their followers. The nineteenth-century ruler Shaka used a ruthless realism to forge the Zulu empire, but his egotism appears to have expanded enormously with his successes. The excesses of the later part of his rule caused numerous and needless deaths and at several points nearly destroyed his entire population. Finally his supporters turned on him and assassinated him (Morris, 1965).

The suggestion that power corrupts is hardly new. The point of the present argument is that one important mechanism for the self-destructive consequences of power is the expansion of illusions beyond the optimal margin. Initially, gains in power overcome depressing assessments of the status quo, and the expansion of the margin of illusion may generate excitement and attract additional supporters. But as the margin of illusion continues to expand, it renders the individual or group increasingly prone to make nonoptimal decisions, such as in grandiose undertakings, and these may often contain the danger of self-destructive consequences.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The notion that illusions have an optimal margin awaits careful and rigorous empirical study. At present, the connection between positive

illusions and adjustment appears to be well established (Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988). The only immediate question concerns the force of the causal inference, because much of the evidence is correlational. It would be desirable to confirm that realistic perceptions of self cause depression and maladjustment, and that distorted views of self cause emotional health.

The destructive consequences of illusions about the self need further experimental confirmation. Indeed, the interdisciplinary data base used in this paper was necessitated in part by the shortage of laboratory evidence. Even evidence associating self-defeating or dysfunctional behavior patterns with high self-esteem would be an important step, for past researchers have often assumed that the response of people with high self-esteem is typically the optimal response. It seems likely that people with excessively positive illusions about themselves would usually be found among those who score high in self-esteem, so it would be desirable for research to focus explicitly on harmful or maladaptive correlates of high self-esteem. Based on the hypotheses proposed earlier in this article, the most likely place to search for such responses would be the realm of behavioral pragmatics. People with unfounded good opinions of themselves may be prone to making decisions based on false assumptions, and these decisions may sometimes turn out badly.

Another area for investigation concerns the efforts to sustain an inflated view of self. If the margin of illusion is large, the person may need a great deal of vigilance and exertion to avoid disconfirmatory feedback. The efforts to manage one's affairs so as to avoid such feedback may produce some self-destructive patterns (e.g., Tice & Baumeister, 1985, 1988). Still, to some extent it is a matter of subjective value judgment whether a life spent sustaining a heavily inflated view of self is a well spent life or not.

Interpersonal relationships are another arena in which the helpful and harmful effects of illusions may be examined. A reluctance to admit mistakes or misdeeds, a refusal to apologize, and a pervasive insistence on being superior to others may well create interpersonal frictions and problems for the individual with a large margin of positive illusions about him- or herself. Indeed, in extreme cases the person may become reluctant to acknowledge the successes and virtues of others because of a need to be superior. The excessively competitive individual, the sore loser, and the ungracious winner may reflect the syndrome of striving to sustain highly inflated views about the self, and these illusion-based patterns may alienate others. Presumably, such an individual copes by surrounding him- or herself with a few carefully chosen people who will cooperate in supporting the person's egotism, and this small group may gradually become isolated from the broader social matrix, for encounters

and others present the recurrent risk of accurate, deflating, disillusioning feedback.

## CONCLUSION

There may be both beneficial and harmful effects of illusions. The notion of an optimal margin may be an effective and useful way to integrate these disparate findings. Optimal health, adjustment, happiness, and performance may arise from overestimating oneself slightly. Departures from this optimal margin lead in opposite directions to different sorts of problems. It is depressing and maladaptive to see oneself too accurately, and it is dangerous to see oneself too favorably.

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