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Be careful what you praise for...

False Praise: Self Esteem and Resilience

"Praise, like penicillin, must not be administered haphazardly. There are rules and cautions that govern the handling of potent medicines." - H. Ginott (1965, p. 39)

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Introduction   Comment on section

Praise has been recognised as playing an **important role in personal development** for for a long time, with references to the value of praise found as historically as the Bible. The use of **praise is very powerful**, but it is important to use praise correctly. False Praise is where praise is used incorrectly and this can have a long term negative impact on the **self-esteem and resilience**. False praise has been described in the Urban Dictionary as:

"After the new intern finished that menial task, the boss gave her a soccer trophy just so she would feel appreciated."

(Urban Dictionary)

While it is recognised that **praise is important for everybody**, research on praise has largely been focussed on **education** and praising children for academic **achievement**. The correct use of praise is the topic of a lot of academic discussion, but when used correctly can promote ideas and attitudes that can help people over a lifetime. False praise can be synonymous with **flattery**, which some modern philosophical theorists name as moral deception (Eylon and Heyd, 2008). However, flattery consists of an **exaggeration in the content of the complimentary attribution** to another person so unlike false praise may be appropriate for the situation. The application of fair and consistent praise can help to build greater resilience, the importance of which is outlined below:

More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true in the cancer ward, it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the boardroom.
(Dean Becker, see Coutu, Harvard Business Review, May 2002)

The importance and relevance of praise, and false praise, are popular topics for discussion in the **media**, however, a lot of the **popular information** available is fairly unsubstantiated, and is not much use in practical application.

The practical application of studies into praise is normally in education, where it is important for teachers to know the **best way to motivate children**. There are several different methods proposed for using praise in education, but they have a lot of similar features.

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If you read one paper...   Comment on section

Bayat provides a comprehensive review of the areas of false praise and how this relates to aspects of a child's development, including self esteem. The cultural roots of praise are discussed and recommendations for best practice are provided.

Bayat, M. (2010). Clarifying Issues Regarding the Use of Praise With Young Children
Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, *31*(2), 121–128. doi:10.1177/0271121410389339

Find the paper **here**

History of The Topic   Comment on section

In the 1970s self-esteem was increasingly becoming a popular psychological topic, the development and rise in popularity of the subject is referred to as the **self-esteem movement**. Elements of the movement are suggested to have risen from the civil rights movement, the growth of the desire for the individual to be who they want. Self-esteem changed from being a **personal and individual problem**, to something which society should be able to manipulate and find the ideal level. The self-esteem movement led to the emergence of many claims of plentiful benefits from **boosting the self-esteem** of the youth; achieved by means such as self-appreciation sessions. Benefits advocated included social and psychological such as depression. The promoter of the movement Nataniel Branden declared that *"self-esteem has profound consequences for every aspect of our existence"*. The main impact of the self-esteem movement was in **educational psychology**. Education sectors began to adopt theories behind the self-esteem movement; the State of California went as far as to create a "Self-esteem Task Force" for their schools.

The wealth of the self-esteem research has thus focused on the role of **children's self-esteem in the classroom** and how this affects their performance. From there the self-esteem movement expanded into research into **praise** in the classroom and how **false praise** and unwarranted self-esteem boosts may positively or adversely affect a child (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Early psychological theory promoted the idea of positive praise and its usefulness in controlling and **improving the behaviour of children with special needs** (Zimmerman & Zimmerman, 1962). The positive use of praise extended to use in adults with Dale Carnegie promoting it as **a way to gain friends** (Carnegie, 1998). However the benefits of praise soon came under question, when research began finding that false praise could have a **negative impact** on children's outcomes (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Graham (1990) found that praise when given whilst children are completing relatively easy tasks can lead to bad performance. Baumeister also agreed that there were negative effects of praise which can **adversely affect performance and motivation** (Delin & Baumeister, 1994) for example through making children more self-conscious (Baumeister, Hutton & Cairns, 1990).

The self-esteem movement suffered a similar fate to the early research of praise. By the 1990s, research by such prominent figures as Baumeister and Seligman had suggested that heightening self-esteem was **not the wonderful solution** to the problems as they had first thought. The promising results at the start of the movement were **inconsistent and glorified**, and it was now suggested self-esteem boosts could lead to depression. More current research by Twenge (2006) further dismissed the self-esteem movement, acknowledging the possibly damaging affects of the misdirection of self-esteem programmes.

The growth of positive psychology lead to a desire to understand how and why people **remained happy** with their lives **despite difficultie**s. One of the theories that came from this was **resilience** theories. Early research focused on children who were surviving and developing well psychologically despite their disadvantageous and sometimes high risk living environments. The first notions of resilience in children suggested that they were survivors who were special so they could adapt to their poor conditions, an early article on resilience by Pines (1975) was titled **"the invulnerables"**. However these early theories were actually found to be misleading and in reality resilience became thought to be a much more ordinary aspect of the human make up (Masten, 2001). Now resilience is thought to be a **coping method** that all children have, and is part of coping with both out of the ordinary situations and the average growing up problems. Resilience research has expanded so that useful findings from resilience research can be applied in real life, our ability to be resilient is seen to benefit us positively and should be utilised in difficult situations. Resilience has become an important part of the science of positive psychology and how as humans we remain happy (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000).

Although the ideas of how **praise, self-esteem and resilience** should be utilised have changed since they first became important ideas within positive psychology, they are still popularly applied within educational situations. They have similarities to other educational program's such as **the strength-based approach**. The strength-based approach in education encourages children to focus on their strengths to attain their goals, which similarly to praise and self-esteem could produce negative effects. In the strengths approach critical theories suggest that if one ability is focused on too greatly then other abilities are weakened and will not flourish (Grant and Schwartz, 2011). Also if the praised or desired goal is not reached, self-esteem may be damaged. Similarly if a child is praised incorrectly then they will focus their efforts in one area and their other abilities will suffer. If they fail to succeed in the praised area, this could also have

a detrimental emotional affect and lead them to be less encouraged in the future to achieve. The strength-based approach also like resilience, encourages children to focus on the strengths so that they thrive in difficult situations, a growth of their resilience for this reason it is often used as social care strategies (Powell et al., 1997).

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Old Cultural Connections   Comment on section

Across several **religious traditions**, praise is a well engraved concept that can be observed in the bible's scriptures and psalms. For example, according to Psalm 100, our natural response to being in the holy presence of God should be to praise and adore him. This is a clear demonstration of worship present in religion and it can also be assumed that God wants to be praised unconditionally. In fact, **praise** has been described as an essential emotion to cultivate and maintain in followers, and it is viewed as a **universal religious statement** (Emmons and Kneezel, 2005). Religious affiliation has been associated with many personal characteristics such as self-esteem and resilience. In a study by Sherkat and Reed (1992) it was shown that church attendance increased **self-esteem** and not simply due to the social support that religious groups may provide, but for the act itself. Religion has also been associated with **resilience** and studies have tried to understand how it impacts people after crisis. Resilience can be understood as the capacity of people and communities to overcome adversity move on and recover. During the late 18[th]century, Philippe Pinel is thought to have introduced the concepts of resilience and recovery to the field of **psychiatry** and **mental health** (Davidson et al., 2010). However, this was only systematically studied considerably later, during the 20th century (Rutter, 1985). Resilience has been associated with **spirituality**. Connor et al (2003) define spirituality as a belief in a transcendent power separate from one's own existence. In their study they found that spirituality is more likely a **coping method** during times of high stress **instead of a protective factor** against post-traumatic stress disorder.

Resilience, Praise and Self-Esteem Across Cultures

A shortcoming in the literature is that research on resilience has mainly focused on **western cultures**. The outcomes are mainly related to individualistic aspects of resilience, and there is a failure to acknowledge a difference in definition of the concept across different cultures (Ungar, 2008). The author believes that resilience should be a culturally embedded concept that looks more widely at good outcomes after adversity. He proposes that resilience should include global as well as **cultural and contextual aspects**. This therefore means that outcomes should be sensitive to all of these aspects and take into consideration which will be the most important for those concerned.

The same is true for psychological wellbeing in general. Ryff (1989) suggested that for positive psychological functioning to occur, one needs to maintain positive attitudes towards oneself. This is consistent with having high **self-esteem**, which is another concept that might not be appropriate cross culturally because society might not attribute much value to the "self" (Christopher, 1999). Instead, in collectivist cultures such as China, Japan and Taiwan, modesty is the norm while others reciprocate with **evaluation and praise**. These views suggest that in non-western cultures, praise and self-esteem are less seen as a right but something that is **conquered** (Christopher, 1999).

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Applications   Comment on section

The applications of the findings from the literature around false praise are most pertinent to the areas of **educational psychology** and child development. Carol Dweck , as mentioned previously, is one of the most eminent researchers in this field and has taken her research beyond simply reporting the effects of false praise, to developing practical resources which can be used by teachers and parents.

As mentioned above, Dweck's model relies upon the existence of two mindsets about our beliefs about our own abilities and intelligence. In a recent interview Dweck defined the **fixed and growth mindsets**:

"In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb.

"In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it."

"Stanford University's Carol Dweck on the Growth Mindset and Education" . *OneDublin.org*. 19/06/2012

Dweck believes that by praising a child for their intelligence ("You are very clever", "You are good at that"), parents and teachers encourage the child to have a fixed mindset and to attribute all success but also all failure to themselves personally. Those who are praised for their effort ("You tried really hard at that", "That was a good way to do it") are encouraged to believe that by applying effort they are doing well . It also means that all students, not only those who ultimately attain the final goal of the task, can receive praise. This leads not only to an increase in academic achievement but also to an **increase in self-esteem and resilience** (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck and her collaborators have developed programs for both teachers and students. The student program is referred to as "Brainology" and places an emphasis on teaching children a growth mindset. This program emerged from the paper by Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck,(2007), in which they demonstrated that intervention programs which taught

children a growth mindset and encouraged them to engage with their learning improved the childs academic motivations and achievements. The experimental group who experienced the intervention showed an increase in their classroom motivation as well as in their grades, but also showed improved resilence to change when transitioning from one school phase to another. (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007)

In this clip, Dweck describes how a growth mindset can be taught to students, and how this can help to improve the student's outlook on their studies.

For further information on the Brainology program, including video demos of the software used, see Dweck website; **http://www.mindsetworks.com/**

There is evidence besides that of Dweck and her collaborators that an incremental theory of intelligence has a positive effect on students (e.g. Jones et al 2012). There are those however who feel that Dweck approach is too simplistic and does not take account of confounding variables, such as contentiousness. Furnham et al (2002) demonstrate that conscientiousness and its related attributes can account for the beliefs an individual holds about their own ability.

Aside from Dweck's programs, there are few other interventions which aim to change the way in which children respond to praise. There are however, a small number of programs which aim to improve children's resilience levels. One such program is the **UK Resilience Program**, which applied the Penn Resiliency Program to a large cohort of UK school children. the children received workshops on cognitive-behavioural and social problem solving skills to challenge negative beliefs and employ better **coping mechanisms in adverse situations.** The analysis of the outcomes of this intervention showed however that although there were improvements in children's attendance level and depression scores, these effects were short lived.There was some evidence in the qualitative analysis of individual benefits to children, the extent of these benefits is unknown (Challen et al 2011).

There are many proponents of Dweck's approach, although it can be incredibly difficult to decipher the true accomplishments of this method from the **propaganda.** However, in the absence of any other coherent approach to a practical application of effective praise for children , Dweck's model would seem to be the most viable approach.

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Theory and empirical results: What is the evidence?   Comment on section

When searching for **literature** regarding this theory, it is hard to find any empirical evidence that does not relate to an **academic context**: there is a scarcity of empirical literature concerning the effect of false praise on self-esteem and resilience in an **everyday context**.

Definition of praise?

Praise however, is inherently difficult to define and measure by nature and as such, it is hard to know how false praise is quantified and thus would be tested, which could have led to the lack of literature outside of the education context. As educative contexts are relatively more controlled it is easier to study the effects of false praise. According to the Oxford English Dictionary praise can be defined as the **expression of approval or admiration for someone or something** (**http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/praise**), however, few of the articles that discuss whether the use of

praise is appropriate as a method of raising self-esteem define what they mean by praise or false praise and the **form** that this would take, apart from in the work of Carol Dweck.

False Praise and Academic Achievement

It is thought that false praise that has been encouraged in the **'self-esteem movement'** has had the effect of lowering **achievement** as those who are always told they are doing well, even when they are not, will fail to exert the **effort** needed to improve their grades.

For **Carol Dweck** and her collaborators, false praise has been defined as that given for doing well, rather than exerting effort (Mueller and Dweck, 1998). Hence, they have put forth the idea that praise should be used **selectively** to encourage an incremental view of intelligence, which is meant to lead students towards becoming more self-sufficient and motivated learners. Dweck has outlined 'mindsets', which relate to individuals' beliefs about their abilities as either fixed (**entity theory**) or malleable (**incremental theory**). This view is outlined in the video below:

It is posited that these beliefs are sources of individual differences in goal orientations, which in turn affect achievement.It is thought that "entity" theorists perceive their abilities as **fixed** and tend to adopt performance goals, seeking to **display their competence**; their "incremental" opposites, on the contrary, adopt learning goals, in which they seek to understand and master something new, and, thus, **increase their competence**. Dweck's mindsets theory has been successful in predicting student motivation and approach to learning, in that, although a student's view on their intelligence does not affect achievement directly, it is mediated by student's choice of learning strategies and hence **affected achievement indirectly** (Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck 2007). Nonetheless in this particular study a belief in a fixed mindset meant student's grades did not change but belief in an incremental mindset saw grades improve and so praising for this mindset could have a positive impact. This intervention has also been successfully used to close academic achievement gaps between groups of students (Good, Aronson and Inzlicht, 2003).

Praise and Self-esteem

It is also suggested that unconditional praise can lead to **inflated self-esteem** and **poorer resilience**, as students will be more vulnerable to setbacks. The relationship between praise and self esteem seems particularly hard to unpick, as an extensive literature review by Baumeister et al, (2003) found little evidence that interventions aimed at raising self-esteem had had an impact and that the link between self-esteem and academic performance was hard to quantify. Any studies that found that high self-esteem had a positive affect on achievement generally found **small effect sizes** and some found that self-esteem artificially boosted by means of false praise could have a detrimental effect on achievement. However, among **populations with behavioural, emotional and learning difficulties** it would seem that increased use of positive praise can have a **positive effect on self-esteem** (Swinson and Cordig, 2003)

False Praise and Resilience

It would seem that false praise, as defined by Dweck and colleagues, can affect student's **resilience**, as it is suggested those with an 'entity mindset' will be more vulnerable to negative feedback, given that they tend to aim for competence displays and believe that their performance reflects their intelligence. In a study whereby the student's view of intelligence was measured and then their ability to remember correct answers having been given **negative feedback** was also measured, it was found that those with an incremental mindset were better at

remembering correct answers supplied to them after having been given the negative feedback (Mangels et al, 2006). Outside of Dweck's work, the relationship between resilience and praise seems to remain untested.

Self Esteem and Resilience

The relationship between **self-esteem and resilience** is also hard to quantify. Baumeister and Tice (1895) investigated the relationship between self-esteem and resilience by measuring motivation to pursue a task after **success or failure**. In one task, they found that people with high self-esteem were more **motivated after success** and those with low self-esteem performed better after failure. In a second task, those with high self-esteem actually performed better after humiliating failure.

Indeed, in a recent article examining whether a resilience intervention for children would have any effect, there was only one small mention for self-esteem and that was with regard to peer-relations (Waaktaar, Christie, Borge and Torgersen, 2004). High self-esteem has been found to be a protective factor against stress and depression as adolescents with high self-esteem were more resilient (Dumont and Provost 1999).

Hence, it is hard to state the relationship between false praise, self-esteem and resilience but it is clear that most advise praise to be used carefully and selectively in order to assure it effects are not detrimental. There are some however, who have jumped on this idea, condemning praise as dangerous, see the section below for some of these claims.

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Wild Untested Claims   Comment on section

As discussed, it is difficult to define the relationship between false praise, resilience and self-esteem as there are many gaps in the research of false praise, yet discussion of how and when to praise children has entered the public domain. This has created many untested claims which are discussed in popular websites and on-line magazine without much empirical evidence to back up the claims.

Kohn (2001) presents us with 5 reasons not to say "good job", yet these claims have very little convincing evidence to support them. Kohn argues that praising children: **manipulates and exploits** them into **fulfilling adults agenda**, creates "**praise junkies**", **steals children's pleasure**, results in **lack of interest and motivation**, and finally **reduces achievement**.

Praise manipulates and exploits:

The suggestion that **praise manipulates and exploits children into fulfilling adult agendas** is a very negative way to examine praise. In this mind set, praise could be seen as the similar to punishment, in the way that it reinforces behaviours. Yet, the fact that praise is a positive force has being neglected here. Praise has been found **to raise self-esteem** (Felson & Zielinski, 1989), and so can be seen as a form of positive reinforcement. There is a lack of examination in research of what praise actually is and its effects. Before we condemn praise as a negative force, we need to further exam it, particularly in non-academic settings.

Praise creates "Praise Junkies".

Some suggest that if we **praise too often children will depend on our evaluations**. Twenge and Campbell found that "Generation Me" (those born in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s) are more narcissistic, have higher self-esteem, and a higher need for praise than previous generations. An Article in the **Wall Street Journal** claims that the characteristics of Generation me are due to the generation being showered praised which has created "**praise junkies**". Infants who are praised too often may be less likely to develop their own judgements and may measure their worth in terms of what others think. Yet these claims are **untested** and there is little mention of praise junkies in academic peer reviewed literature, but still the idea has made its way into the public domain.

Praise steals Children's pleasure.

Kohn suggests that by praising a child you are **taking away the pleasure and pride that they feel for their achievement**. However, there appears to be **little empirical evidence to back up this claim,** and the claim could be very damaging to the relationship between parent and child if implemented. Not praising children for good work may come across as aloof and rejecting of their needs, which could create an insecure-avoident attachment style (Ainsworth, 1979). Praise may in fact help children to understand what is **valued**, and that their parents are **proud** of them. Before we make this claim, children's reactions to praise must be examined in more depth

Praise results on a lack of interest and motivation.

Praise takes away from enjoyment of a task by stopping the task being valuable in its own right. Although there is evidence that praise for prosocial behaviour has a negative correlation with actual prosocial behaviour (Grusec, 1991), this does not mean that praise is reducing the action, as **correlation does not mean causation**. It is possible that parents are aware of their children's lack of prosocial behaviour, so praise it more often to help reinforce it. In classroom observations, praise has been positively correlated with shorter task persistence, more eye-checking with the teacher, and inflected speech such that answers have the intonation of questions (Rowe, 1974). Once again it is possible that children who display these behaviours are praised by their teachers more often as a form of reassurance. The idea that

praise reduces intrinsic motivation for actions, and rather replaces the pleasure of the task with pleasure for praise needs to be explored in more depth before this claim can be made.

Praise reduces achievement.

Praise is argued to raise self-esteem, yet **self-esteem in general does not appear to be related to achievement** (Baumeister et al., 2003), and there is no empirical evidence which suggests that praise is related to achievement. However, high sell-esteem has a strong correlation with **happiness**, (Baumeister et al., 2003) and although causation is not established here, surely if praise raises self-esteem which has a high correlation with happiness we should aim to raise the self-esteem of children.

The wild claims of Kohn (2001) have **not been extensively examined empirically**, and so, could be damaging to the development of children if they are to be practised without first exploring their effects. The type of praise Kohn is describing is also not defined. Dweck's research has shown us that false praise can be damaging to children resilience, but this idea has been adopted across all forms of praise in much of the public domain. Magazines and on-line articles warn of the perils of praising, rather than highlighting the difference between praise and false praise. Different types exist and may have different effects. There is: ability praise, effort praise, descriptive praise and controlling praise, all of which are likely to affect the development of children in different ways. Without defining the type of praise used, important effects of different types of praise may be missed out.

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Practical Exercises   Comment on section

Most of the advice on giving praise is directed towards praising children to enhance their self-esteem. Brophy (1981) argues that false praise is not useful, and children should be praised for specific achievements. However, she argues that praise should be tailored to specific achievements for each child, and different things may be noteworthy indifferent students. This is adapted from her twelve point plan for productive praise.

· Praise should be given for specific reasons, no trandomly and unsystematically

· *"You did well on that maths page"*

· Praise should be specific to the particular achievement

· *"You did well on the multiplication section"*

· Praise should vary from task to task, and be tailored for specific achievement

· *"I know you have struggled with multiplication before, but you have done much better"*

· Praise should be given for attainting specific criteria, which can include effort, but not for general participation in a task.

· *"You finished the entire page before lunch, that was good"*

· Praise should relate back to students own abilities at a specific task

· *"You have clearly been studying your times tables"*

· Students should be able to use praise to evaluate and improve their abilities, but not compare themselves to others.

· *"You have done better at the multiplication than you did last week"*

· Praise should relate back to specific students accomplishments and improvements

· *"You know your 5 times table better than you did last week"*

· Praise should be for noteworthy accomplishments, or difficult tasks

· *"This maths page was a big step up for you, and you managed it"*

· Praise should link effort and success, and point to potential success in the future

· *"You tried really hard for this task, it shows what you can do if you concentrate"*

· Praise should encourage students to foster effort on tasks for their own reasons, rather than external reasons.

· *"Do you feel happy that you have done so well in this task?"*

· Praise should focus students on their own task relevant behaviour

· *"You practiced, so that meant you did better at this task"*

· Praise should encourage students to develop task relevant behaviour in the future.

· *"If you practice in the future you can do more maths tasks well"*

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Further Reading   **Comment on section**

Here are some links to some of the most worthwhile materials:

Carol Dweck's Intervention Programme - **http://www.mindsetworks.com/**

How this topic has infiltrated the public domain - **http://www.alfiekohn.org/parenting/gj.htm**

A BBC article on praising constructively - **http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/physical_health/child_development /primary_praise.shtml**

Carol Craig's resources on resilience - **http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/overview.php?p=c2lkPTU%3D**

A review from Carol Dweck on her research - **http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/summer08 /vol65/num10/The-Perils-and-Promises-of-Praise.aspx**

An older article on strengthening self-esteem in children - **http://www.perpetualpreschool.com/dlc_selfconcept /self5.pdf**

The effects of Dweck's praise intervention - **http://www.stanforduniversity.info/dept/psychology/cgi-bin/drupalm /system/files /Implicit%20Theories%20of%20Intelligence%20Predict%20Achievement%20Across%20an%20Adolescent%20Transition.pc**

Praise in the popular media -

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Comment on section

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