

Do you underestimate your child's worry?

It's well established that parents frequently overestimate their children's intelligence and the amount of exercise they get. Now a team led by Kristin Lagattuta has uncovered evidence suggesting that parents have an unrealistically rosy impression of their kiddies' emotional lives too. It's a finding with important implications for clinicians and child researchers who often rely on parental reports of young children's psychological well-being.

It's previously been assumed that children younger than seven will struggle to answer questions about their emotions. Undeterred, Lagattuta and her colleagues simplified the language used in a popular measure of older children's anxiety and they developed a pictorial scoring system that involved the children pointing to rectangles filled with different amounts of colour. Time was taken to ensure the child participants understood how to use the scale.

An initial study with 228 psychologically healthy children aged 4 to 11 from relatively affluent backgrounds found that the children's answers to oral questions about their experience of worry (including general anxiety, panic, social phobia and separation anxiety) failed to correlate with their parents' (usually the mother's) written responses to questions about the children's

experience of worry. Specifically, the parents tended to underestimate how much anxiety their children experienced.

A second study was similar, but this time the researchers ensured the parents and children answered items that were worded in exactly the same way; the parents were reassured that it was normal for children to experience some negative emotion; and the parents were able to place their completed questionnaires in envelopes for confidentiality. Still the children's answers about their own emotions failed to correlate with parents' answers, with the parents again underestimating the amount of worry experienced by their children.

A revealing detail in this study was that parents also answered questions about their own emotions. Their scores for their own emotions correlated with the answers they gave for their children's experiences. 'These data suggest that even parents from a low-risk, non-clinical sample may have difficulty separating their emotional perspective from that of their child,' the researchers said.

Finally, 90 more children aged 5 to 10 answered questions about their optimism, whilst their parents also answered questions about their own and their children's optimism. Again, parents'

and children's verdicts on the children's emotions failed to correlate, with the parents now overestimating their children's experience of optimism. And once more, parents' own optimism was related to how they interpreted their children's optimism.

Lagattuta and her colleagues admitted that it's theoretically possible that the children were the ones showing a distorted view of their own emotions, and it's the parents who were painting the true picture. However, they think this is highly unlikely. For starters it's revealing that parents underestimated their children's negative emotion and yet over-estimated their positive emotion, which argues against the idea that the children were simply answering more conservatively, or giving systematically extreme answers in one direction. Moreover, the new findings fit with the wider literature showing how parents tend to have an unrealistically rosy impression of their children's well-being. An obvious study limitation is the focus on middle-class US participants, so there is of course a need to replicate with people from other backgrounds and cultures.

'From the standpoint of research and clinical practice, this mismatch between parent and child perceptions raises a red flag,' the researchers concluded. 'Internally consistent self-report data can be acquired from young children regarding their emotional experiences. Obtaining reports from multiple informants - including the child - needs to be the standard.'



In the October issue of the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*



The price of anonymity

In the November issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*

Thousands of psychology papers are based on data derived from questionnaires that were filled out anonymously. That's because most psychologists have reasoned that the best way to get people to be honest about their practice of undesirable behaviours is to promise them anonymity. But in a new analysis, Yphtach Lelkes and his colleagues point out that anonymity comes with a price. Participants will feel less accountable and may be less motivated to answer questions accurately.

To test this, Lelkes' team devised a cunning methodology in which dozens of undergrads conducted internet research for what they thought was a study into the way that people search for information on the web.

After each student had spent 45 minutes researching the mountain pygmy-possum, a researcher made a show of deleting the student's search history before their eyes, ostensibly to prevent the next participant from accessing the browser's archives. In fact, a spyware programme was installed on the computer and kept track of all the sites visited. After the research session, each student answered a questionnaire about their use of the internet in general and their experience of the internet research task, including which sites they'd searched. Crucially, half the students were instructed to fill out their name and other personal details at the top of the questionnaire; the



When self-management and surveillance collide

In the June issue of *Group and Organization Management*

others were told to leave it blank to ensure anonymity.

Students who answered the questionnaire anonymously admitted to more embarrassing internet behaviours, such as looking at porn, but with regard to their searches during the research task they answered with less accuracy. There was also evidence of a lack of variety in the answers to many of the anonymous students' later answers, consistent with the idea that they were putting less thought into the questionnaires as they grew tired.

Two follow-up studies involved dozens more students having the opportunity to eat sweets while they completed questionnaires. A question at the end asked them to report how much they'd eaten and once again, students who answered anonymously were less accurate about how much they'd indulged. This was the case whether anonymity was promised before or after the opportunity to eat the snacks.

Lelkes and his colleagues were cautious about how far these findings can be generalised. For example, the same problems might not apply when people are interviewed face-to-face but promised confidentiality. However, they warned researchers against assuming that promising participants anonymity means that they will provide better-quality answers. 'Particularly among college students who often complete questionnaires to fulfil course requirements, such a guarantee may serve to sanction half-hearted survey completion rather than freeing students up to respond with greater honesty.'

Good things can come when members of an organisation are allowed to manage their own work, such as greater job satisfaction and better adherence to organisational policy. But this involves management doing an uncomfortable thing: surrendering control. Often, organisations compensate by coupling self-management with surveillance techniques of the close-up or electronic variety. New research suggests that self-management has even more benefits, but that mashing it with surveillance can end up bringing out the worst in people.

Jaclyn Jenson and Jana Raver conducted two studies, the first looking to establish whether people given freedom would use it to perform more positive, discretionary acts, so-called organisational citizenship behaviours or OCBs. By mocking up a fictional consultancy, the researchers could recruit 211 participants (in their own minds, employees on a one-off, very short-term contract) to show up, review investment advice, and write it up in the form of a report. Before starting their short-term shift, they were given Terms of Service both printed and read aloud; these either emphasised self-management or other-management, a promise realised by the shift supervisor sitting passively or actively pacing the room. The work involved discretionary elements, such as how long the report was and whether to complete or skip some optional questionnaires. The amount of discretionary

effort was turned into an OCB score: individuals in the self-management condition scored higher, making efforts over and above what was demanded.

Study 2 surveyed individuals across a range of organisations, to offer a field replication and extend the investigation to understand how surveillance interacts with self-management. The survey introduced a further outcome measure, counter-productive work behaviours (CWBs): choosing to undermine the organisation in some way, such as deliberately dragging your heels on a task. The data from the 423 respondents suggested that surveillance in itself encouraged CWBs, but this was driven by its interaction with self-management. When individuals believed they were supposed to be self managing – 'It is my responsibility, and not my organisation's, to monitor my own workplace behavior and job performance' – but the

reality was that they were being monitored, their CWBs were markedly higher. Jensen and Raver predicted this finding, seeing it as an example of psychological reactance: when freedom you believe you deserve is seemingly taken away, you will try to recover autonomy through other means, even at the expense of the organisation. The survey also revealed that the normally observed relationship between self-management and higher trust in the organisation was severed once surveillance entered the mix.

This research suggests that if you don't want to evoke petty revenges from employees, it's vital that cultures of self-management aren't tempered by close surveillance. By resisting that temptation, you're likely to yield benefits.

I This item is taken from the Society's Occupational Digest, written by Dr Alex Fradera. See www.occdigest.org.uk.



The material in this section is taken from the Society's **Research Digest** blog at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog, and is written by its editor **Dr Christian Jarrett**. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.



Subscribe by RSS or e-mail at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog



Become a fan at www.facebook.com/researchdigest



Follow the Digest editor at www.twitter.com/researchdigest