

The Role of Positive Illusions in Transylvanian Hungarians' Mental Health

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Abstract

Contrary to traditional theories according to which a mentally healthy person has realistic perceptions, a new paradigm, still in formation, claims that positively biased perceptions are general, and that they are a condition of mental health. This tendency of ours to see ourselves and the world as if “through rose-coloured spectacles” has been labelled in psychological literature as “positive illusions”. Cross cultural studies have, however, revealed that positive illusions depend on the cultural background. The objective of the present paper is to investigate positive illusions of the Transylvanian Hungarian population, studying at the same time the relationship between positive illusions and mental health on the general non-clinical adult population.

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Introduction

At the present, the exactitude or positive distortion of social cognitions is a key-issue in defining mental health. It seems that no common agreement has been reached; on the contrary, theories seem to be contradictory in this sense. Until the 1990s the conception of mental health was dominated by traditional theories according to which a mentally healthy person's perception of him/herself, of others, and of the world had to be as exact and as near to reality as possible, this representing one of the most important components of psychic health. This conception was supported by prominent theoreticians such as:

Jahoda, Maslow, Fromm, Erikson, Rogers, Allport, or Menninger.¹ According to traditional theories a person considered mentally healthy would probably be characterized as being able to perceive themselves and their environment correctly, without errors and to make a clear difference between the perception of reality and their wishes. Jahoda formulated this in the following way: “The perception of reality is called mentally healthy when what the individual sees corresponds to what is actually there.”²

The study of biases was outlined by cognitive psychologists Kahneman and Tversky.³ They defined a series of cognitive deviations, such as erratic decisions, illusory correlations, and anchoring biases, “short circuits” regarding information collection, processing, or recollection.⁴ In parallel with this, social-cognitive psychology has developed certain theories, such as the causal attribution theory, or the social inference theory, which implied the assumption that individuals observe themselves and interact with the world as a “naive researcher”. Numerous errors and biases have been identified referring to social cognition and comparison, such as: the fundamental attribution error, the actor observer bias, and the self serving bias. In general, the term *error* means a mistake, a distortion caused by a rather accidental negligence, and the term *bias* is used when these errors become systematic.

The general result of these investigations has been that people systematically tend to ignore or minimize the negative information referring to them, thus: they observe more easily the positive information which they store later and recall more easily than the negative ones; they tend to misjudge probabilities favourably to themselves; they tend to have self serving erroneous conceptions about incidents; they have the erroneous belief that positive events are due to their own behaviour or disposition, and the negative ones are due to environmental factors; they perceive their own characteristics as more distinct, more nuanced, and more exceptional than the characteristics of others, which are perceived

¹ Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, “Illusion and Well-being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health”, *Psychological Bulletin* 103, no. 2 (1988): 193–210, 193.

² Marie Jahoda, *Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), 6.

³ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “On the Psychology of Prediction”, *Psychological Review* 80 (1973): 237–251.

⁴ For an overview see the meta-analytic review by Eldar Shafir and Robyn A. LeBoeuf, “Rationality”, *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002): 491–517.

as more blurred, and more common. In social theories it is suggested that the majority of these errors and biases originate from the limitation of cognitive processes, which, however, may also have a motivational or an emotional basis, or both together.¹

Taylor and Brown² succeeded in synthesizing these social biases in an integrative model called the “cognitive adaptation theory”, pointing out that the essence of these errors is not the functional limitation of cognitive processes, which would emphasize the deficiency of the cognitive system, as it had been believed before. According to the theory, the function of positive illusions is to protect, maintain, and enhance the self-image, which later on have an important adaptive function, as well as to preserve the integrity of mental health.

Taylor and Brown mention that instead of the term *error* or *bias* they use the wider term *illusion*.³ According to their definition, the term *illusion* refers to a more general and persistent error pattern, which has a certain form and direction, and which is systematically produced by the cognitive system.

So far, in Romania no study has been made referring to positive illusions on representative samples or on the general population. Taking into account the cultural sensitivity of positive illusions, we consider it important to make such a study. We wish in particular to find out how prevalent positive illusions are in the general non-clinical Hungarian adult population in Transylvania, as well as how positive illusions are connected with mental health components within this population.

Positive cognitive illusions

Starting from the assumption that positive illusions are a condition of mental health and well-being, Taylor and Brown⁴ argue that they function as a shield protecting the self against threats: “Evidence from social cognition research suggests that, contrary to much traditional, psychological wisdom, the mentally healthy person may not be fully cognizant of the day-to-day flotsam and jetsam of life. Rather, the mentally healthy person appears to have the enviable capacity to distort reality in direction that enhances self-esteem, maintains beliefs in personal efficacy, and promotes an optimistic view of the future. These

¹ Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991 – 2nd ed.), 256.

² Taylor and Brown, “Illusion and Well-being...”, 194–210.

³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

three illusions, as we have called them, appear to foster traditional criteria of mental health, including the ability to care about the self and others, the ability to be happy or contented, and the ability to engage in productive and creative work”.¹

The authors define three types of adaptive biases: (1) positive illusions about the self, (2) illusory optimism about the future, and (3) illusory control.

Positive illusions about the self

To perceive the self as a “hero” is more than a suggestive metaphor, it is an empirical reality, says Taylor.² Positive illusions about the self refer to the individual’s self perception and systematic conviction that he/she is above the average with respect to different characteristics and abilities.

The data confirm this assumption, showing that we tend to emphasize the value of positive information and to lessen the negative information relevant for the self. Approximately 90% of the interviewed persons consider themselves to be above the average with regard to positive characteristics and abilities, the result being quite the opposite in the case of negative traits.³ Brown argues that this tendency to see ourselves above the average is a distortion of reality, because, from the point of view of statistics it is impossible for approximately “everyone” to be better than the average.

The contexts in which the positive illusions about the self occur are different and varied. Most people have a good opinion about themselves, and, naturally, they tend to present themselves favourably. When they are asked to characterize themselves briefly, they mention many positive characteristics emphasizing good qualities and talents, lessening at the same time their weaknesses.

How do positive illusions about the self appear? A series of discussions refer to the cognitive structure of the positive illusions about the self. It is assumed that the positive illusions about the self are determined by the particularities of memory and attention. Evidently, we cannot record, store, and recall other persons’ interpretations, thoughts, or emotions, we can do this only for ourselves. Taking into consideration

¹ Ibid., 195.

² Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusion: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 15.

³ Jonathon D. Brown, “Evaluations of Self and Others: Self-enhancement Biases in Social Judgments”, *Social Cognition* 4 (1986): 353–376, 373.

that memories are often completed by interpretations, emotions, or sensations, it is natural that self perception is more nuanced and detailed than the perception of another person. As a scholar hypersensitive to the information which support his theory, so the totalitarian egocentric ego interprets and rearranges the facts, emphasizes the favourable parts, omits the less favourable ones with the aim of maintaining a positive self-image, says Anthony Greenwald.¹ We control the present by using our interests and attributions when selecting and organizing the information, we store it in our memory so that the information should be consistent with the already existing self-image, and we use the present to build a positive image based on the experience of past events we participated in as main heroes; all these in order to construct a coherent future for ourselves.

A series of studies prove the fact that normal and mentally healthy subjects process the information faster and more thoroughly, if this is relevant and positive for the self, and more slowly, if the information is negative or irrelevant for the ego. Similarly, healthy persons recall in general more positive, than negative information on themselves, as compared to slightly depressed persons, whose memories are balanced in their valences. The majority of normal and mentally healthy persons remember with more difficulty their failures, than their successes, and they tend to evaluate their past performances more positively than how these really happened.²

It can be argued that no one can believe that s/he is good, talented and competent from every point of view, and that in reality we often admit our mistakes and weaknesses. Taylor affirms that we have cognitive instruments to face this obstacle as well.³ When people acknowledge and incorporate their weaknesses or incompetence to their self-image, they usually tend to “minimize” the importance of these features, or to consider them temporary, or caused by external factors. Similarly, when people realize that in some domains they are not talented (for example in mathematics), they tend to underestimate the importance of that domain and are inclined to consider that domain a common or general one. They justify themselves by using some arguments such as:

¹ Anthony G. Greenwald “The Totalitarian Ego: Fabrication and Revision of Personal History”, *American Psychologist* 35 (1980): 603–618, 604.

² See for example Nicholas Kuiper et al., “Self Schema Processing of Depressed and Nondepressed Content: The Effects of Vulnerability to Depression”, *Social Cognition* 3 (1985): 77–93, 92.

³ Taylor, *Positive Illusion*, 15.

“mathematics is for geeks”, or “all accountants are boring”. On the other hand, the abilities or characteristics they possess are seen as exceptional and rare talents. For example, when one has a talent for painting, this will make him/her believe that artistic talents are special and that they raise him/her above the average, in contrast with “anybody can learn to calculate or to play football”. In order to obtain an authentic image, people sometimes acknowledge their errors and weaknesses; nevertheless, these errors and weaknesses are often carefully chosen having rather the function to emphasize a believable human profile, than to offer a real image.

Some authors (for example Colvin and Block¹) argue that powerful positive illusions may become pathological, and may trigger the appearance of narcissistic illusions. In accord with this standpoint, Taylor and Brown show that not every type of illusion is adaptive: grandomania, the misinterpretation of reality, and hallucination are not adaptive, but pathological illusions.² Taylor argues that functional positive illusions differ from pathological illusions such as hallucinations or grandomania due to their flexibility. Delusions or hallucinations are false beliefs which persist despite the facts. Positive illusions, however, when they contradict reality, are modified and restructured so as to adapt to the requirements of the environment, and they continue to help one to maintain a positive self-image.

Illusory optimism about the future

Optimism, in the most general sense of the word, is defined as an expectation that in the future better things will happen. Illusory optimism, on the other hand, appears in the context of social comparisons, to be more precise, it refers to people’s systematic perception and belief that in comparison with other persons, in the future they are more likely to encounter positive events than negative ones.

Research indicates that the vast majority of people are oriented towards the present and the future (75%), less people are oriented in a

¹ Randall C. Colvin and Jack Block, “Positive Illusions and Well-being Revisited: Separating Fiction from Fact”, *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1994): 28.

² Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown, “Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction”, *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1994): 21–27, 23.

greater measure towards the future (33%), and relatively less people focus only on the present (9%), or the past (1%).¹

When they were asked what they thought would happen to them in the future, the interviewed participants enumerated four times more positive things than negative ones. Even if they face problems in the present, most people tend to believe that things will get better. Janoff-Bulman concludes that, in general, people feel that the present is better than the past, and the future will be even better than the present.²

Study results show that, in general, people see the future “in a rose-colour” with regard to other people, and especially to themselves, saying: “the future seems to be excellent, especially for me”. In this sense a paradox (revealed during some nationwide assessments of the living standards) appears: while people think that the country heads for an economic, educational, or political disaster, that the world is ever worse and more and more unrestrained from a moral point of view (some even affirming that “we will soon face the end of the world”), they also say that their lives will get better from a financial point of view, their children will have access to a better education, and will have a more beautiful future than they, and that they and their families will make progress, and they will become “better”.

In a study made by Weinstein³ the majority (approximately 90%) of the questioned students answered that they have better chances to pass their exams, to graduate, to find a job than their colleagues, but they have smaller chances to fail in an exam, to be expelled from the university, or to be dismissed from their job. Similar results have been obtained by other research works as well, in which the subjects evaluated the probability of having part in negative events in the future, such as: “to fall victim to an accident”, “to fall ill with cancer”, or “to divorce after a year of marriage”. The respondents said that these events are less probable in their than in other people’s case. On the contrary, when they were asked to estimate the probability of having positive events (for example to win at the lottery or to have a happy marriage), approximately 90% answered that they have better chances to these

¹ Alex Gonzalez and Philip Zimbardo, “Time in Perspective: A Psychology Today Survey Report”, *Psychology Today* 19 (1985): 21–26, 25.

² Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, “The Benefits of Illusion, the Threat of Disillusionment, and the Limitation of Inaccuracy”, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 8 (1989): 158–175, 174.

³ Neil Weinstein, “Optimistic Biases about Personal Risks”, *Science* 246, no. 4935 (1989): 1232–1233.

positive experiences in the future than others. Illusory optimism is not the privilege of the young generation. Similar results have been obtained in the case of adults, and elderly people, illusory optimism being independent of age, sex, social class, or education.¹

Which are the psychological mechanisms on which illusory optimism is based? Taylor states that one of the explanations referring to illusory optimism is that the subjects' prediction regarding "what is going to happen" coincides with "what I wish to happen" or "what is desirable to happen".² On the other hand, people usually expect their performance to improve as the time passes, and this optimism increases proportionally with one's interest, motivation, and the effort made to accomplish those tasks.

Illusory optimism seems to be closely related to the positive illusions about the self and especially to the illusion of control. Most people think that they can control future events, and consequently they underestimate their personal vulnerability to accidental events. For example, a driver who believes that he is a better driver than most people and that he/she can avoid accidents due to his/her abilities will think that his/her chances to be involved in a traffic accident are smaller.

The illusion of control

A third domain in which perception seems to be illusory is the perception of personal control. Many theoreticians, belonging to different psychological orientations, agree that the perception of control is an integrant part of the concept of the self, and the feeling that we hold control over life, in general, contributes to our well-being and mental health. Illusory control refers to the individual's biased perception according to which he/she would have control over situations which in reality are not controllable.³ Both laboratory and field studies specify the fact that people believe that they have more control over their lives'

¹ For a survey on these investigations see Vincze E. Anna, "Pozitív illúziók vagy illuzórikus egészség? Az irracionális pozitív kogníciók szerepe a mentális egészség fenntartásában" (Positive Illusion or Illusory Mental Health? The Role of Positive Irrational Beliefs in Mental Health), *Erdélyi Pszichológia Szemle* VI. 3 (2005): 209–246, 210–214.

² Taylor, *Positive Illusion*, 37, 39.

³ Lauren B. Alloy and Caroline M. Clements, "Illusion of Control: Invulnerability of Negative Affect and Depressive Symptoms after Laboratory and Natural Stressors", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 101, no. 2 (1996): 234–245, 235.

events, than proved by reality. Moreover, they believe that they can control their lives better than other people.

Much empirical data referring to the overestimation of control comes from investigations connected with the psychology of gambling, the casino being a perfectly equipped laboratory for testing illusory control.

In such a study the participants felt more comfortable and confident in their winning when they held the cards in their hands, or when they could draw the lottery ticket compared to situations when others did this in their stead.¹ Gamblers also believe that after winning the lottery they are less likely to become extravagant, egocentric, conceited, to spend money unreasonably, or to find opportunistic friends; on the other hand they have the firm belief that they will donate more money to charity, and that they will live more happily than other winners.² Some gamblers develop ritualistic behaviours with the aim of controlling the numbers, for example: they cast the dice softly when they wish for small numbers and more briskly when they wish for big numbers. At the same time, they are convinced that effort and concentration have an important role, so they often do not cast the dice unless everyone is quiet, or they wait for a few minutes and concentrate on the number they wish for. Such behaviour has a sense when the game involves abilities and success depends on one's personal contributions, but they do not have much sense when the result is determined by chance; however to resort to such behaviour makes us believe that the situation is under control.³

The illusion of control has powerful effects on the human psyche. Several studies confirm that people are capable of supporting extremely stressful situations if they are convinced that they can control the source of distress at least in a small degree.⁴

A possible source of illusory control would be that we mistake what is happening to us for what we wish to happen (or with what we have made efforts for), and when the wished for event takes place, we conclude that it is due to the efforts made or to our abilities. In case of

¹ Ellen J. Langer, "The Illusion of Control", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975): 311–328, 313.

² Julie E. Nelson and James K. Beggan, "Self-Serving Judgments about Winning the Lottery", *The Journal of Psychology* 138, no. 3 (2004): 253–264, 262.

³ Taylor, *Positive Illusion*, 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, 31.

normal and mentally healthy individuals this bias is present only when the results of the effort are positive.

For example, when we learn for an exam, we expect to get high marks, or at least to pass the exam, which has an adaptive value, since if we expected to fail, it would be useless to make efforts. Consequently, we expect to pass the exam, and after we have passed it, we attribute the success to the effort we have made and to our internal qualities (e.g. we are intelligent).

Moreover, people naturally make efforts to obtain success, consequently they expect to be successful, and in this sense they attribute their successes to the efforts they have made, since the result coincides with their expectations. The illusory control, therefore, can be the result of the covariance between the effort one has made, one's expectations and the results.

The optimal margin of positive illusions

In what measure are positive illusions adaptive? The term the "optimal margin of positive illusions" has been suggested by Baumaister,¹ who shows that to swerve from this margin in either direction leads to adaptive difficulties. He argues that exaggerated positive illusions about the self are connected with the subjective overestimation of the probabilities of success, which may result in the individual's assuming some projects difficult to realize, and without the adequate resources and the necessary safety measures. Exaggerated self-esteem may lead to frequent failures, which, on the long run, are threatening from the point of view of self-perception. On the other hand, the persons with a correct and realistic self-perception have fewer successful attempts which might lead to other successes and through this to the positive affective states associated to them. Baumaister concludes that health, adaptation, happiness, and optimal performance are rooted in a slight overestimation of the self.

Depressive realism

What does happen when we lose our positive illusions? If mentally healthy persons have positively biased self-perception, how are those persons who have a correct self-perception?

¹ Roy F. Baumaister, "The Optimal Margin of Illusion", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 8 (1989): 176–189, 176, 187.

Just as mania or narcissism show us that exaggerated illusions are maladaptive, depression offers another useful reference related to the lack or the loss of positive illusions. Many of the studies which have offered us explicit or implicit data on the illusory perception of normal people compared the mentally healthy persons with individuals suffering from moderate depression or a temporary negative affective state.

People who suffer from depression see promise and hope in nothing. They isolate themselves from relationships which have offered them before an energy source, and they withdraw from activities. A depressed individual, even if he/she continues to work, will have a worse performance than he/she is capable of. In severe depression the person becomes even unable to fulfil his/her basic tasks and to satisfy his/her basic needs.

Traditionally, in psychology it was thought that negative perception in a depressed individual automatically implies the distortion of reality as well. In parallel with the development of research referring to positive cognitive biases, a series of studies, beginning with Alloy and Abramson's,¹ have demonstrated that those who suffer of depression do not distort reality negatively. On the contrary, they seem to perceive themselves, the others, and the world more correctly than nondepressed people do. "The depressed person sees the world, self and other through a mud coloured glass" – noted suggestively Taylor.²

Based on the results of this research, the hypothesis of "depressive realism" has been developed. This theory suggests that depressed individuals evaluate themselves better, are less affected by illusory control, and estimate more correctly the incidence of some future events than the non-depressed persons.³ The discovery of depressive realism prompts us to reconsider our conception of depression radically, because depression in this formulation is not the cause of biased perception and cognition, but rather is associated with the lack of bias, having therefore rather a deficit, and not a surplus of bias.⁴

¹ Lauren B. Alloy and Lyn Y. Abramson, "Judgement of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 108 (1979): 441–485, 478, 480.

² Taylor, *Positive Illusion*, 211.

³ Punnam Anan Keller, Isaac M. Lipkus, and Barbara K. Rimer, "Depressive Realism and Health Risk Accuracy: The Negative Consequences of Positive Mood", *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (2002): 57–69, 58.

⁴ Taylor, *Positive Illusion*, 223.

The adaptive role of positive illusions from the perspective of the cultural theories regarding self-development

Cross cultural studies have challenged the idea that positive illusions are universal. For example, Markus and Kitayama,¹ respectively Heine and Lehman² affirm that positive illusions – seen as self enhancement strategies – are exclusively the product of individualistic cultural values, and in certain cultures people will be less motivated to develop positive illusions. In other words, the authors argue that the need for a positive self image is not universal; on the contrary, it is rooted in individualistic cultures. The “undermotivation” for developing positive illusions has been associated especially with collectivistic cultural values.

Cross cultural studies elaborated under the influence of Markus and Kitayama’s theory have given considerable support to Taylor and Brown’s model. Most intensely the European-American cultures have been studied; cultures which are often called “western”, “individualistic”, or “independent” as compared to Asian or Latin-American cultures considered “collectivistic” or “interdependent”. The general conclusion of these studies is, however, that positive illusions about the self, illusory control, as well as illusory optimism are not universal; they are developed, maintained, and enhanced in particular by individualistic cultural values.

Other studies point out that Asians do not merely lack positive illusions, but also have negative cognitive illusions, evaluating themselves more negatively than a reference person.³ Heine and Lehman⁴ drew the conclusion that in the case of the Japanese, illusory optimism does not exist, and that a tendency to negative bias called “pessimistic bias” can rather be pointed out.

Research on the phenomenon of positive illusions in Western Europe show similar values to those recorded in the United States and Canada. These investigations have been made in the following Western

¹ Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Cultural Variation in the Self Concept. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Self”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (1991): 18–48.

² Steven J. Heine and Darrin R. Lehman, “Cultural Variation in Unrealistic Optimism: Does the West Feel More Invulnerable than the East?”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995): 595–607.

³ Steven J. Heine, Shinobu Kitayama, and Darrin R. Lehman, “Cultural Differences in Self-evaluation: Japanese Readily Accept Negative Self-relevant Information”, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32 (2001): 434–443, 441.

⁴ Heine and Lehman, “Cultural Variation...”, 605.

European countries: Sweden,¹ Great Britain,² Austria and Germany,³ and Holland.⁴

With their suppositions based on Markus and Kitayama's theory, several researchers also connected the lack of positive distortions with Eastern-European countries (referring to the former communist countries). However, this hypothesis has not yet been explored, at least not on the general population of Romania.

Markus and Kitayama proposed a theoretical frame which could integrate the differences originating from the cultural disparity in the development of the self.⁵

According to the theory these two cultural backgrounds have significant influence on the development of the self, on emotions, cognitions, and social motivations. Conforming to the theory, positive self perception is a powerful motivational factor in the individualistic or independent cultural background, but this does not apply to the collectivistic or interdependent cultural background. In accord with the above named authors, the process of self enhancement or self aggrandisement is defined as a special sensibility to positive information relevant for the self, and, respectively, insensibility to negative information from the same category. Self enhancement is a process which emphasizes the values of the self, underlines its unity, and differentiates us from the mass.

The formation of positive illusions in the individualistic cultural background

Typically, western cultures define themselves as individualistic because of the emphasis laid on the necessities of the individual, which become a priority as compared needs of others. Usually, individuals are

¹ Ola Svenson, "Are We All Less Risky and More Skillful than Our Fellow Drivers?", *Acta Psychologica*, 47 (1981): 143–148, 145.

² Frank Myers and Lynn Mckenna, "Illusory Self Assessment – Can They Be Reduced?", *British Journal of Psychology* 88 (1997): 39–50, 47.

³ Jens B. Asendorpf and Fritz Ostendorf, "Is Self-enhancement Healthy? Conceptual, Psychometric, and Empirical Analysis", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (1998): 955–966, 960.

⁴ Frank Van der Velde, Joop Van der Pligt, and Christa Hooyokaas, "Perceiving AIDS-related Risk. Accuracy as a Function of Differences in Actual Risk", *Health Psychology* 13 (1994): 25–33, 30.

⁵ Markus and Kitayama, "Cultural variation...", 40, 41, 42, 44.

considered “unique” both in physical and psychological features, which differentiate them from the others.

In the individualistic model, independence is emphasized, this being perceived as a necessary quality of mentally healthy individuals. In this cultural background the incapacity to experience personal pleasure (anhedonia), as well as dependence are considered the symptoms of psychical inadaptation.

In this cultural background personal development is synonymous with self development and the emphasizing of individuality. The ideal person in such a culture is: independent, oriented towards personal performance and success; he/she sets his/her objectives according to his/her qualities; evaluates his/her life according to the achievement of the proposed objectives; makes independent decisions; directs his/her behaviour autonomously, and is responsible for the consequences of his/her behaviour. Often, the individual’s objectives are regarded as competing with the group’s objectives, or even opposed to these, and the group’s pressure is sometimes regarded as an obstacle of personal development.¹

In this cultural background, parents and teachers consider that their role in the children’s education is to help each child to discover, activate, maintain and enhance his/her talents, capacities, and qualities. The caretakers of each child strive to contribute to the development of some individual traits which would differentiate that child from other children and make him/her valuable. Thus children are encouraged from an early age to take care of themselves and to become autonomous. They are taught “to stand on their own feet”, for “in need you can rely only on yourself”. Most parents strive to give their child a room of his/her own, a bed of his/her own, individualized objects, and to make possible for him/her the integration in an educational environment (primary, then secondary school) which suits his/her qualities and talents; they encourage the child to choose his/her friends and career freely. In this cultural background many schools deliberately have chosen as a main objective to support self-realization since early childhood. Modern education encourages children to be special, to distinguish themselves, and to consider themselves special. In classes they are often divided in groups and taught according to their individual abilities. Even when they have inferior abilities or are less skilled in some fields, modern education

¹ Susan T. Fiske et al., “A szociálpszichológia kulturális mátrixa” (The Cultural Matrix of Social Psychology), in *Kultúra és pszichológia* (Culture and Psychology), ed. L. L. N. Lanh and M. Fülöp (Osiris: Budapest, 2003), 173.

encourages them to accept themselves, to be happy, and to find their strong points. The programmes which emphasize individual educational strategies developed according to individual abilities, style of studying, interests, etc. are more and more popular. In this background children are encouraged “to remain true to themselves, even in case of a failure; to have firm convictions and beliefs, which they are to maintain even if they clash with the group’s beliefs. This shows that to give up one’s convictions holds the danger of being perceived and labelled inconsistent and weak. Consequently, the individual is motivated since early childhood to enhance his/herself.”¹

Another important characteristic of individualistic cultures is that they emphasize the importance of autonomous decisions since they show respect for personal opinions, decisions, tastes, or preferences. People perceive (experience) their own person as one who makes decisions based on his/her individual preferences, tastes, and intentions; and the decisions thus taken serve to strengthen and outline his/her individuality, to clarify the differences between him/herself and the others. Society is constructed to offer the individual a large variety of options when making decisions starting with the most insignificant ones such as choosing between chocolate, vanilla, strawberries, or caramel ice-cream, leading to much more important choices. The mass-media overwhelms us with information intended to enhance our individuality through the preferences we show, and companies sell their products by means of slogans such as: “the most suitable for you”, “created especially for you”, “for your enjoyment”; “because I deserve it”. It is not accidental that these statements often represent the best key to the customer’s pocket. Besides the evident benefits, this cultural background has its dark sides as well (isolation, egoism). With a little exaggeration we may say that in these cultures we experience a cult of the self.

In this cultural context self-realization and self-knowledge have received important roles. In many cases self-realization is considered the major objective of the individual’s life. These attitudes, convictions are strongly reflected by the institutions’ theoretical systems, by education, customs, anecdotes, proverbs, and cultural symbols, and they shape almost imperceptibly the individual’s system of convictions.

Therefore, when an individual is born and grows up in these cultural conditions consisting of customs, traditions, symbols, or convictions, it is no wonder that s/he becomes an autonomous

¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

personality, with clearly defined preferences, who pursues his/her individual objectives consistently, and perceives him/herself as being better, and more important than the others in most cases.

The formation of positive cognitive illusions in the collectivistic cultural background

In the countries dominated by a collectivistic cultural background the perception of the self and of others develops in a completely different context. In the collectivistic cultural background people perceive the self in the mirror of social relationships, of roles and tasks. This cultural model emphasizes the importance of belonging and being loyal to a group, the importance of the respect for others, of hierarchies; politeness and social obligations have an essential role in normal adaptation.

The centre of the individual's life is the self determined by others. This model values interpersonal relationships – be they family relationships, friendships, or work relationships –, social norms, and solidarity. The source of happiness and personal satisfaction in this cultural background is to have harmonious relationships built on mutual respect. Initiating, developing, maintaining, and improving interpersonal relationships is a priority for individuals, while self-realization and self-expression are of secondary importance. This mentality is reflected by the representative religious beliefs of this culture. In Buddhist theology the self as an isolated form of existence is regarded an illusion which must be defeated, and the main spiritual aim is the contemplation of the personal self (atman) with the collective self (brahman) by controlling or renouncing personal wishes, emotions, and necessities.¹

In this cultural background the healthy and normal individual has harmonious relationships which he profoundly cares for; he/she belongs to different social networks, which are a major factor guiding his/her behaviour, either inhibiting, or facilitating it; he/she respects the social norms, fulfils his/her duties towards the group, or community he/she belongs to; he/she is open to compromise; he/she relates to his/her own objectives according to the group's necessities and objectives; he/she conforms to the group's requirements; he/she is receptive to the group's necessities and objectives; he/she subordinates his/her wishes, preferences, and objectives to the group's; in communitarian actions mutual responsibility is assumed for the consequences of behaviour.

¹ Ibid., 176.

Punishment is rather understood as a privation of the benefits of relationships, than a privation of rights and possessions. Children are educated in the spirit of self-reflection and sincere self-criticism, which serves the development of self-control.¹

It is not accidental that this socialization process results in an adult receptive to others' necessities, emotions, and mental states, who defines his/her characteristics through the quality of his relationships, perceiving others as being equal to, or even better than him/herself.

The Romanian and Hungarian society of Transylvania, though in the full process of democratization and assimilation of individualistic values, is – probably – still bearing the mark of a mentality which emphasized especially collectivism. The influence of past experiences has not completely faded; they have remained impregnated in our convictions and conditioning, representing in the present a solid cultural fact which cannot be ignored. Especially the older generations seem to be affected by these conditionings and beliefs. It is very probable that the population of Romania presents a mixture of individualistic and collectivistic values. The historical, cultural, religious, and political reasons which could explain the cultural differences in cognitions on the self, be they distorted or realistic, are inexhaustible, and to discuss them is beyond the objectives of the present study. We shall try, however, to make an overview of some major values cultivated in Romania, these being the premises which led us to formulate our hypotheses. They suggest that the population may lack the motivation to manifest so much positive illusions as the typically individualistic cultures.

Since there are no data referring to the level of positive illusions in the Romanian and Hungarian population, we are not able to examine the changes that have taken place at the level of fundamental beliefs. Some of these changes, nevertheless, can be pointed out (detected) by comparing the different samples. The differences in samples will help us to understand better the construct of positive illusion and its sensibility to the changes in convictions.

¹ *Ibid.*, 177.