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# **Illusions, Well-Being, and Health**

**A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of  
Arts in Psychology, at  
Massey University.**

**Keren Mary Lavell**

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigates unrealistically positive biases in human thought, and their relationship with subjective well-being and perceived physical health. Taylor and Brown (1988) refer to these biases as illusions, as most individuals hold more positive perceptions for themselves than they do for most others. Three separate illusions exist - self-perception, control, and expectations for the future - and these are claimed to be an important element of mental health. Traditionally, definitions of mental health have included accurate perception as a criterion. Recent evidence has found that those with accurate perception are instead mildly depressed, while those who have unrealistically positive perceptions are non-depressed. The present study extends the research on illusions and depression, to examine the illusions in relation to well-being and health.

A self-report questionnaire, consisting of five scales, was completed by 300 Psychology students. The Anderson (1968) scale of personality trait adjectives was used to assess self-perception. For control, items were based both on previous experimental measures (Langer & Roth, 1975) and on locus of control measures (Rotter, 1966). Optimism was assessed using the Weinstein (1980) scale. The Mental Health Inventory (Viet & Ware, 1983) was used to measure well-being, and the Cohen Hoberman Inventory of Physical Symptoms (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was used to assess perceived physical health.

Three distinct illusions were found. Self-perception was related to positive well-being; control was not related to the outcomes. Optimism was related to positive and negative well-being, and to physical health, and was the strongest predictor of the outcomes. As the measures of self-perception and control were developed for the present study, further research is necessary to confirm their suitability. To the extent that relationships were found, Taylor and Brown (1988) were supported. The present study finds that illusions play a small but significant role in both subjective well-being and physical health.

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