What lies beneath: Parenting style and implicit self-esteem ☆

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Abstract

The current studies extend previous research on self-esteem by examining one of the likely origins of implicit self-esteem. Three studies showed that young adult children who reported that their parents were more nurturing reported higher implicit self-esteem compared with those whose parents were less nurturing. Studies 2 and 3 added a measure of overprotectiveness and revealed that children who reported that their parents were overprotective also reported lower implicit self-esteem. Moreover, Study 3 revealed that mothers' independent reports of their early interactions with their children were also related to children's level of implicit self-esteem. In all three studies, these findings remained reliable when we controlled statistically for participants' explicit self-esteem. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature validating the construct of implicit self-esteem.
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Introduction

In the history of research on the self-concept, no topic has been more heavily studied than self-esteem. Presumably this is the case because low self-esteem is a vulnerability that has been linked to susceptibility to mental illness (Bardone, Vohs, Abramson, Heatherton, & Joiner, 2000; Roberts & Monroe, 1994), relationship dissatisfaction (DeHart, Murray, Pelham, & Rose, 2003; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Swann, Hixon, & De LaRonde, 1992), and even physical illness (Brown & McGill, 1989). However, all of this research has focused on people's explicit (consciously considered and relatively controlled) self-evaluations.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to suspect that there may be more to self-esteem than meets the eye. Specifically, researchers have begun to focus on people's *implicit* (i.e., unconscious, relatively uncontrolled, and overlearned) self-evaluations (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, for a review). Despite the recent interest in implicit self-evaluation, some researchers question the reliability and validity of measures that assess implicit self-esteem (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000). Importantly, Bosson et al. suggested that more studies needed to be conducted to validate the construct of implicit self-esteem.

Over the past few years, a growing body of literature has focused on the name-letter measure of implicit self-esteem (Baccus, Baldwin, & Packer, 2004; Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Dijksterhuis, 2004; Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Pelham et al., 2005; Shimizu & Pelham, 2004) which complements previous research on the name-letter effect (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999; Nuttin, 1985, 1987). For example, Koole et al. reported that name-letter preferences (i.e., the tendency for people to rate their name-letters more favorably than others rate these letters) demonstrated good temporal stability over a 4-week period (also see Bosson et al., 2000). Koole et al. also provided evidence that name-letter preferences reflect automatic self-evaluations. In addition, Jones et al. (2002) demonstrated that name-letter preferences are predictably related to self-evaluation. After a mild self-concept threat, people high in explicit self-esteem show particularly pronounced name-letter preferences. Moreover, Dijksterhuis (2004) found that subliminally pairing self-related words with positively valenced words enhanced people's name-letter ratings (see also Baccus et al., 2004).

Recent research has also demonstrated that implicit self-esteem predicts important psychological and physical behaviors above that of explicit self-esteem. For example, separate research using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and the name-letter measures of implicit self-esteem has linked the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem with greater defensiveness and higher levels of narcissism (see Bosson et al., 2003 for name-letter findings and Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003 for IAT findings). In addition, implicit self-esteem has been associated with physical health above and beyond the relation between explicit self-esteem and health (Shimizu & Pelham, 2004). Finally, implicit self-esteem has been found to be a better predictor than explicit self-esteem of people's non-verbal anxiety (Spalding & Hardin, 1999). Because implicit self-esteem has been linked to several outcomes it seems important to determine the likely origins of implicit self-esteem.

In the present research, we examine one potential origin of implicit self-esteem, early childhood experiences with parents. That is, we believe people's early interactions with their parents are associated with their implicit as well as explicit self-esteem. Another goal of the current research is to contribute to a growing body of literature assessing the construct validity of implicit self-esteem. That is, by showing that implicit self-esteem is associated with reports of early experiences that should be associated with positive or negative self-evaluations, we hope to provide evidence that implicit self-esteem is a valid, psychologically meaningful construct.

Development of implicit self-esteem

Like people's explicit self-evaluations, people's implicit self-evaluations are presumably formed through interactions with significant others (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1982; Cooley, 1902; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Mead, 1934). Theories in the tradition of symbolic interactionism suggest that people develop a sense of self on the basis of how other people treat them (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). In addition, the sociometer theory of self-esteem suggests that people's self-esteem is formed through their interactions with others (Leary et al., 1995). Specifically, individuals with low self-esteem have repeatedly experienced perceived interpersonal rejection. Conversely, most people with high self-esteem have experienced many subjectively successful or non-rejecting interpersonal relationships. It seems reasonable to assume that compared with people high in implicit self-esteem, people low in implicit self-esteem may have experienced repeated interpersonal rejection.

Parents—especially mothers—loom large in the psychological landscapes of most children (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Bowlby, 1982; Harter, 1993; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979; Pomerantz & Newman, 2000; but cf. Harris, 1995). For example, attachment theorists argue that people develop beliefs about the self on the basis of the responsiveness and sensitivity of their primary caregivers in childhood (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1982). Repeated interpersonal experiences within the family thus form the basis for mental representations of the self in relation to others. Over time, how caretakers respond to infants presumably becomes internalized into working mental models, which are a set of conscious and unconscious beliefs for organizing information about the self in relation to other people.

In keeping with these theoretical perspectives, it seems reasonable that parenting style should be related to both implicit and explicit self-esteem (Baumrind, 1971, 1983). Parents who make use of an *authoritative* parenting style provide their children with love and emotional support, as well as clearly defined rules for what is considered appropriate behavior. In contrast, parents who use an *authoritarian* parenting style adopt a more punitive approach to parenting that more typically involves threats, criticism, and enforcement of unilaterally dictated rules. In addition, parents who adopt an authoritarian strategy do not usually provide the love and emotional support that is characteristic of an authoritative strategy. Finally, parents who use a *permissive* parenting style typically provide inconsistent rule enforcement (or lack of structure). Although permissive parents may be affectionate, their failure to regulate their children's behavior can lead to low self-esteem because children fail to learn appropriate forms of self-regulation (e.g., they may experience social rejection when they