

# IMPLICIT SELF-ESTEEM

## INTRODUCTION

The most recent issue of the journal *SELF AND IDENTITY*, April-September 2007, is devoted to research on the “**The Implicit Self.**”

Implicit self-esteem refers to those aspects of the self that are represented in memory via routinized associations that are not readily available to introspection. This is another approach to the assessment of self-esteem, along with many of the other concepts of self-esteem reported in the literature. One can now see in the literature references to the construed self, self-perception, intrinsic and extrinsic self-esteem, implicit and explicit self-esteem, stable and fragile self-esteem, authentic self-esteem, defensive self-esteem, self-integrity, self-efficacy, contingent and noncontingent self-esteem, overt and covert narcissism, adaptive and maladaptive narcissism, and hubristic self-esteem. All this certainly adds to the confusion about self-esteem. It doesn't negate the significance of self-esteem, but it underscores its complexity and requires that we take care regarding the generalizations and conclusions we make related to self-esteem.

Recently questions have been raised about the validity of self-report measures of self-esteem since they can only tell us what people believe to be true about themselves. We know that behavior is determined not only by conscious thought but also by emotional reaction. As a result, there is a growing interest in measuring information that people may not be willing or able to report because it is at the unconscious level. Many researchers are now using implicit measures of self-esteem rather than traditional self-esteem assessment instruments such as Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale or Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory.

The most widely used measure of implicit self-esteem is the **Implicit Association Test IAT** (Greenwald & Farnham (2000) “Using the Implicit Association Test to measure self-esteem and self-concept”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 1022-1038.) It assesses the relative strength of automatic positive and negative associations with self and with others. Another widely used measure is the **Initials-Preference Task (IPT)**. (Greenwald & Banaji (1995) “Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes.” *Psychological Review*, 102, 4-27). It indirectly measures self-esteem by capitalizing on individual differences in the tendency to evaluate stimuli associated with the self more favorably than stimuli not associated with the self. For example, individuals rate their preferences for the 26 letters of the alphabet and their preference for letters of their own initials as opposed to other letters of the alphabet.

Implicit and explicit measures assess different elements of self-esteem. Implicit measures do not tap more “genuine” self-esteem than do explicit measures. Implicit measures do, however, provide better access to

associative knowledge than do self-report measures, and thus contain rich possibilities for furthering our understanding of the factors that influence human behavior. Summarized below are some of the findings on implicit self-esteem reported in this issue of *SELF AND IDENTITY* that provide new insights to self-esteem.

### **SOME OF THE FINDINGS BASED ON IMPLICIT SELF-ESTEEM**

#### PERFECTIONISM AND EXPLICIT VS IMPLICIT SELF-ESTEEM

There are often discrepancies between implicit self-esteem and explicit self-esteem. This is particularly important because the resulting attitudinal ambivalence about the self may motivate behaviors intended to resolve the inconsistency between one's conscious and nonconscious feelings of self-worth. Individuals with *high explicit self-esteem* can have *low implicit self-esteem*. Their positive feelings of self can be fragile and unstable because of the underlying insecurity and self-doubts associated with their low implicit self-esteem. Such individuals have been found to be sensitive to challenge, more defensive, react to uncertainty threats with strong compensatory convictions, exaggerated estimates of consensus for personal beliefs, and will engage in racial/ethnic discriminate against others in order to maintain their threatened self-image.

Those with *high implicit* self-esteem tend to *see a glimmer of hope* that results in optimism and less self-protection, even in the face of failure. It also serves as an explanation for perseverance. Perfectionists are individuals who frequently experience distress as a result of their inability to meet their extremely high standards. It is now believed that perfectionism stems from individuals with discrepant low self-esteem as a result of underlying implicit negative interactions with their demanding parents. Individuals with major discrepancies and those who report more fluctuations in their stage of self-esteem also tend to report more depressive symptoms. This indicates that the fragile or secure nature of an individual's self-esteem may be at least as important as their level of self-esteem.

#### AUTONOMY AND CONTROL MOTIVATION AND SELF-ESTEEM

According to self-determination theory, when individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, they are motivated and tend to choose behaviors based on interests, integrated values and goals, and view feedback as informational rather than as threatening. It also allows for genuine or *noncontingent* self-esteem, a sense of self-worth that is based on simply being who one is, rather than on achieving success or obtaining particular outcomes. Genuine self-esteem is stable, and individuals with genuine self-esteem do not engage in a lot of "esteeming," that is, the

incessant process of assessing and protecting self-worth. Genuine self-esteem allows individuals to experience emotions and events nondefensively.

However, when intrinsic psychological needs are unmet, individuals become control motivated. They tend to feel controlled by external pressures and by the need to conform to one's "shoulds" and "oughts." In turn, they tend to be critical and judgmental of others and to be controlling of others. They often feel like pawns and self-worth is called into question. These individuals develop self-esteem that is *contingent* on performance outcomes and acceptance from others. When self-esteem is contingent, maintaining high self-esteem is tied directly to whether one is successful in important domains. *Contingent* self-esteem is always tenuous because the entire basis of self-regard is at stake and these individuals must constantly defend against all information, thoughts, and emotions that do not support self-esteem in order to maintain a sense of worth. Thus, it is considered *unstable*. When individuals start "esteeming", that is, questioning whether they are worthy, their self-esteem is already in trouble and a sign that the level of self-esteem is apt to decline even further.

Unstable or contingent self-esteem creates vulnerability to numerous problems and negative outcomes, including alcohol consumption. This illustrates the need to be concerned about the basis of one's self-esteem as much as the level of self-esteem.

THE MASK OF ZEAL: LOW IMPLICIT SELF-ESTEEM, THREAT AND DEFENSIVE EXTREMISM

Expressing zeal and uncompromising positions helps people with low implicit self-esteem cope with inner troubles. Zeal refers to extremism and exaggerated conviction and consensus estimates for personal opinions. This study found that threats to the self can motivate reactive zeal, though it is at the unconscious level. It is believed that zealous thoughts might help insulate people from concern with threatening thoughts about themselves, thus it masks threats. Individuals with low implicit self-esteem may be particularly vulnerable to such threats. This study found defensive extremism was common among threatened individuals with low implicit self-esteem. They found vulnerable individuals use excessively intense, supervalent forms of moral enthusiasm to defend against self-threats.

.....  
...

It is hoped that this information is helpful and of value to you.

Bob Reasoner, President  
International Council for Self-Esteem