



Reports

Regulating connection: Implicit self-esteem predicts positive non-verbal behavior during romantic relationship-threat[☆]Julie Longua Peterson^{a,*}, Tracy DeHart^b^a Department of Psychology, University of New England, USA^b Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- We propose that implicit self-esteem regulates connection after relationship-threat.
- Experimental and observational methodologies were used to test this idea.
- Implicit self-esteem predicted nonverbal connection behavior following the threat.
- Partner commitment moderates the effect of implicit self-esteem on connection.

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ABSTRACT

In the current research we suggest that in response to relationship-threat implicit self-esteem regulates connection, and this process is moderated by perceptions of a partner's commitment. We used experimental and observational methodologies to explore this possibility. Study 1 indicated that, in the relationship-threat condition, participants high (vs. low) in implicit self-esteem reported engaging in more positive nonverbal behaviors when they perceived their partner as more committed. Participants high and low in implicit self-esteem did not differ in behavior when partner commitment was low. This pattern was not evident in the control condition. Study 2 similarly revealed that participants high (vs. low) in implicit self-esteem were observed engaging in more positive nonverbal behavior during a conflict interaction when they perceived their partner as more committed. Participants high and low in implicit self-esteem did not differ in behavior when partner commitment was low. The results suggest that implicit self-esteem predicts connection and may be particularly sensitive to evidence of a partner's availability.

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Introduction

The need to belong and feel accepted is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1982). Not surprisingly then, a lack of belongingness can lead to goal-directed behavior and activity aimed at maintaining relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Because romantic relationships provide one of the most crucial kinds of relationships for satisfying belongingness and acceptance needs, it is important to understand how people maintain these relationships following threats to acceptance. Interestingly, the potential effects of implicit self-evaluations on responses to relationship-threat have been largely

overlooked in the literature on self-esteem and relationship functioning. Much of the research exploring how people respond to threat in their romantic relationships has focused on the moderating role of explicit self-esteem. Though such previous research highlights the importance of explicit self-evaluations for regulating the risk of rejection in close relationships (e.g., Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), it also suggests that explicit self-esteem influences the relatively controlled end of this risk-regulation process.

In the current research we propose that the more automatic goal of connection (see Murray et al., 2008) is regulated by the more automatic, implicit self. In addition, because implicit self-esteem is most likely to manifest in nonverbal behavior (e.g., Pelham & Hetts, 1999; Rudolph, Schroder-Abe, Riketta, & Schutz, 2010; Spalding & Hardin, 1999), we specifically explored how implicit self-esteem regulates the use of nonverbal behaviors that should promote connection during threat. Finally, we hope that by providing empirical evidence for the behavioral effects of implicit self-esteem, the current research will inform the debate about the validity of implicit self-esteem measures (Buhrmester, Blanton, & Swann, 2011).

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Implicit self-esteem and nonverbal behavior

Implicit self-esteem (like explicit self-esteem) has social origins, developing based on how people are regarded by significant others (e.g., DeHart, Longua, & Smith, 2011; DeHart, Pelham, & Tennen, 2006; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). For example, the sociometer theory suggests that self-esteem functions as an interpersonal monitoring system, working preconsciously to monitor social acceptance (Leary, 2005; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Consistent with this theory, people's level of implicit self-esteem corresponds to the quality of their early interactions with parents (DeHart et al., 2006), and predicts interpersonal reconnection following negative social events (DeHart, Tennen, Armeli, Todd, & Mohr, 2009) and communal motivations following negative feedback about a partner (Lemay & Clark, 2009). Unlike explicit self-esteem, however, implicit beliefs about the self are thought to develop earlier, and overtime become over learned and automatically elicited (Bowlby, 1988; Koole & DeHart, 2007; Koole et al., 2001). While some researchers suggest implicit self-evaluations are nonconscious (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Pelham & Hetts, 1999), recent work argues that these evaluations can sometimes be consciously experienced (e.g., Jordan, Whitfield, & Zeigler-Hill, 2007; Koole, Govorun, Chang, & Gallucci, 2010).

Research exploring the behavioral correlates of self-esteem suggests that implicit self-evaluations should be most predictive of nonverbal (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Hetts & Pelham, 2001; Rudolph et al., 2010; Spalding & Hardin, 1999) and spontaneous behaviors (Conner & Barrett, 2005; Rudolph et al., 2010). For example, experimental research by Spalding and Hardin (1999) showed that during a threatening self-relevant interview observer-rated nonverbal anxiety was related to participants' implicit self-esteem, but not their explicit self-esteem. Rudolph et al. (2010) similarly showed that implicit (but not explicit) self-esteem predicted nonverbal anxiety and spontaneous self-confident behavior following a threatening self-relevant interview and public speaking task respectively. Presumably, the effect of implicit self-esteem on nonverbal behavior will extend to other threatening contexts, such as threatening romantic relationship interactions.

Implicit self-esteem and the regulation of connectedness

Research has strongly supported the role of explicit self-esteem for regulating responses to relationship-threat (e.g., Bellavia & Murray, 2003; DeHart, Tennen, Armeli, Todd, & Affleck, 2008; Murray et al., 2006, 2008; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002; cf., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Though none of this research has explored whether implicit self-esteem also moderates responses to relationship-threat it does point to the potential role of implicit self-esteem in the relationship-regulation process. Specifically, Murray et al. (2008) have shown that interpersonal risk automatically activates connectedness goals, which are followed by an executive control system that either prioritizes these goals for connection or overrides them with self-protection concerns. Similar to Murray et al.'s (2008) assertion that goals for connection come online first, some researchers have argued that implicit self-esteem also comes online first, while explicit self-esteem comes online as a corrective process (e.g., Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007). Because both implicit self-esteem and connectedness goals appear to come online initially, levels of implicit self-esteem ought to predict whether people pursue goals for connection. For example, if implicit self-esteem functions as an indicator of social acceptance (Leary, 2005; see also DeHart et al., 2006, 2009; DeHart, Pelham, Fiedorowicz, Carvallo, & Gabriel, 2011), people high (vs. low) in implicit self-esteem should be more likely to engage in nonverbal behaviors that promote connection with their partners in response to relationship-threat.

However, there may be relationship factors that moderate the relation between implicit self-esteem and the pursuit of connection.

Researchers exploring implicit relationship-regulation have shown that implicit beliefs are more sensitive to fluctuations in current relationship dynamics than explicit beliefs (DeHart, Pelham, & Murray, 2004; Murray, Holmes, & Pinkus, 2010). DeHart and colleagues found that, for people with low explicit self-esteem, implicit evaluations of romantic partners were contingent on perceptions of current relationship quality. Longitudinal research has similarly revealed that daily interactions that convey partner responsiveness predict implicit evaluations of romantic partners over time, but do not predict explicit evaluations of the partner (Murray et al., 2010). Finally, Murray et al. (2011) report that, when participants are not cognitively taxed, implicit trust for a partner predicts approach oriented behavior differently depending on explicitly held doubts about a partner's love (Study 5).

Because implicit beliefs appear to be affected by explicit cues of partner availability, the implicit self may be particularly sensitive to insecurities about a partner's commitment. That is, when perceptions of a romantic partner's commitment are low (vs. high), even people with high implicit self-esteem may resist automatically activated goals and regulate connection in ways similar to their low implicit self-esteem counterparts. Consistent with this reasoning, previous research on explicit self-esteem has found that when reminded of an un-forgiven partner transgression, people with high explicit self-esteem regulated risk much like people with low explicit self-esteem (Murray et al., 2008; Study 7).

The present research

Using both experimental (Study 1) and observational (Study 2) methodologies the present research examined whether implicit self-esteem predicts nonverbal behaviors that promote connection during relationship-threat, and whether perceptions of a partner's commitment moderates this effect. Because implicit self-esteem serves as a gauge of social acceptance (Leary, 2005; see also DeHart et al., 2006, 2009), we predict that people high (vs. low) in implicit self-esteem will pursue goals for connection by engaging in nonverbal behaviors (e.g., maintaining eye-contact, smiling) that increase closeness during threat. However, people high in implicit self-esteem may only respond to threat by engaging in more positive nonverbal behavior when they perceive their partners as committed to their relationships. Consequently, we predict that when perceptions of a partner's commitment are low (vs. high), people high and low in implicit self-esteem will regulate connection similarly and not differ in positive nonverbal behavior. Finally, consistent with research on the behavioral activation system (BAS; Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1987) and approach social goals (Gable, 2006), the current research conceptualizes connectedness behaviors as approach oriented attempts to establish closeness. Because avoiding negative behaviors in response to relationship threat should be more in line with the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), and engaging in negative behaviors seems more reflective of self-protection goals (e.g., Murray et al., 2003), we do not expect implicit self-esteem to interact with commitment to predict negative nonverbal behaviors after threat.

Study 1

Participants

One hundred and twenty-eight (83 female) undergraduate students involved in a monogamous romantic relationship of at least 1 month were recruited for participation. The students' mean age was 20.4 years ($SD = 2.4$) and average relationship length was 17.9 months ($SD = 16.3$).

Overview of procedure

Participants came to the research lab to complete computer-based surveys, including demographic information, a relationship questionnaire and a measure of implicit self-esteem. Participants were randomly

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