



On the relationship between implicit and explicit self-esteem: The moderating role of dismissing attachment

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ABSTRACT

Recently, dual models of social cognition have distinguished the implicit (affective) and the explicit (propositional) levels of self-esteem. Many studies have found that implicit and explicit self-esteem are weakly or even not correlated. Concerning the moderating factors of such a relationship, other studies stressed the importance of emotional awareness in the translation of implicit self-evaluations into a propositional format. If so, the defensive strategy which characterizes dismissing attachment should determine a fictitious explicit self-image, by impairing the awareness of self-related emotional experiences. At the implicit level, instead, such defensive processes should not operate. We therefore hypothesized that dismissing attachment would increase the implicit–explicit self-esteem discordance. Participants were 145 university students with a mean age of 20.4 ($SD = 2.75$). Moderated multiple regression analyses were conducted to test for the interactive effects of the Self-Esteem Implicit Association Test and the Attachment Style Questionnaire scales on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Findings revealed an interaction effect only for the *relationships as secondary* scale, confirming that dismissing style, but not other attachment dimensions, increases implicit–explicit self-esteem discordance.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Implicit and explicit self-esteem

In the last decade, an increasing attention has been paid to the use of indirect measures of self-esteem and self-concept (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). Among them, the most popular is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), first developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998) and successively used in many areas of psychological research. A growing body of evidence suggests that implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem are only weakly or not correlated (see Buhrmester, Blanton, & Swann, 2011, for a review). This is in accordance with findings of Nosek and Smyth (2007), who demonstrated that IAT and self-report measures refer to distinct constructs. In order to explain such results, recent models of social cognition distinguished two levels of information processing, that are the implicit (i.e. associative) and the explicit (i.e. propositional) ones (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The associative level is intimately connected to the immediate affective reaction towards a target object, while the propositional level is more connected to deliberative thinking. For instance in the area of attitudes, according to Hofmann, Gschwendner, Nosek, and Schmitt

(2005), implicit and explicit representations are two structurally distinct constructs that may be interrelated if certain conditions are satisfied. The implicit attitudes constitutes the association-based foundation of attitudes, which may be conceived as an activation pattern in an associative network of concepts. This network can be activated fast, automatically, and without the use of cognitive resources. The implicit attitudes is indirectly assessed via implicit measures. In contrast, it is assumed that the explicit attitudes are represented in a propositional format and are formed by reasoned judgments that can be measured with self-report measures. In this vein, implicit self-esteem should be formed by intuitive and affective evaluations towards the self while explicit self-esteem should depend on deliberative and propositional judgments. On the basis of such a distinction we may assume that implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem should not correlate necessarily. Hofmann et al. (2005) suggesting that such a relationship, increases (or decreases) on the basis of many specific conditions, have classified five groups of moderating variables that influence implicit–explicit consistency: translation between implicit and explicit representations factors (e.g., representational strength, awareness), additional information integration for explicit representations factors (e.g., need for cognition), properties of explicit assessment factors (e.g., social desirability concerns), properties of implicit assessment factors (e.g., situational malleability), and research design factors (e.g., sampling bias, measurement correspondence).

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1.2. The emotional awareness facilitates implicit to explicit translation

Of particular interest here are a series of factors pertaining to awareness (e.g., private self-consciousness, mindfulness, faith in intuition, alexithymia) that are able to facilitate the translation from an implicit to an explicit format. According to Hofmann et al. (2005) such a translation process may depend upon the degree to which people are able to form accurate propositional representations of their underlying associative representations. In other terms, the association-based attitudes (e.g., me-good) are able to be integrated into the propositional attitudes (e.g., I am a good person) only if the subjects are able to achieve a sufficient awareness of the internal and external cues of the implicit activations (Hofmann, Gschwender, & Schmitt, 2005). Therefore, all factors that impair (or ameliorate) the ability to identify the internal (e.g., somatic sensations, feelings, mood changes) or the external cues (e.g., self-observation of spontaneous behaviors) of the implicit associative activations, should also impair (or ameliorate) the quality of the translation process and thus should decrease (or increase) implicit–explicit consistency.

Concerning the ability to identify the internal cues of implicit associative activations, previous studies have examined the influence of private self-consciousness and mindfulness on implicit–explicit consistency (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hofmann, Gschwender, & Schmitt, 2005). Private self-consciousness was defined as the extent to which individuals pay attention to their bodily and emotional experience. Mindfulness refers to the enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality, which may be reflected in more regular or sustained consciousness of ongoing events and experiences. Empirical findings revealed that high scorers in private self-consciousness and in mindfulness exhibited stronger implicit–explicit consistency than low scorers. With regard to the implicit–explicit self-esteem consistency, Jordan, Whitfield, and Zeigler-Hill (2007) argued that implicit self-esteem (ISE) is based on intuitive self-views that are connected to immediate affective reactions toward the self, whereas explicit self-esteem (ESE) is based on deliberative self-views that are connected to evaluative judgements. They found that high scorers in faith in intuition, namely people's confidence about their feelings as bases for decision making (Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996), showed a greater consistency between ISE and ESE than low scorers. In a similar vein, Dentale, San Martini, De Coro, and Di Pomponio (2010) found that alexithymia moderates the relationship between implicit and explicit self-esteem. In particular, they demonstrated that both the difficulties to identify and describe feelings increase the discordance between ISE and ESE. These results indicate that emotional awareness plays a relevant role in the translation of implicit self-associations into propositional and explicit formats. Along this line of reasoning, it is reasonable to expect that personality factors that impair emotional awareness may increase the implicit–explicit self-esteem discordance. Among such personality factors we can find certain traits that defend subjects against too extreme emotions, such as the repressive coping style (Weinberger, Schwartz, & Davidson, 1979), the isolation of affect defense style (Bond, Gardner, Christian, & Sigal, 1983) or the dismissing style of attachment (Bowlby, 1973).

1.3. Dismissing attachment and emotional awareness of the self

According to the literature on the attachment behavioral system (Bowlby, 1973; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), dismissing subjects are characterized by a defensive emotional regulation that induce an impoverished emotional awareness (e.g., Waller & Scheidt, 2006), especially in close relationships: “dismissing status of attachment is linked to the disability or to defensive forms of processing and expressing emotions, whereas attachment security

is associated with open, flexible affect expression and the ability to explore and process emotional experiences without employing defensive strategies (Waller & Scheidt, 2006, p. 19)”. As is well known, recurrent experiences of the attachment figure's availability and responsiveness would warrant for an evaluation of the self as a person toward whom anyone, and the attachment figure in particular, is likely to respond in a helpful way (Kobak, 1999). To preserve their explicit self-image, dismissing subjects tend to divert their attention from distressful attachment signals (Bowlby, 1973; Dixon, 1981) and to suppress the associated negative emotions (Dozier & Kobak, 1992), protecting themselves from attachment relationships that appear too painful. As a consequence, in spite of attachment experiences of refusal or even threat, dismissing subjects usually showed a fictitious explicit self-image that is independent by actual relationships. Such a defensive process permits them to stabilize the explicit self-esteem in respect to extreme fluctuations that may endanger their mental and physical well-being. As a side effect, in our view, it should emerge as an impaired explicit access to the spontaneous self-directed feelings that make up implicit self-esteem. But what about the implicit associative level? On the basis of dual models of social cognition (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004), we have no reasons to assume that dismissing attachment operates by defensively distorting the implicit self-evaluations, as occur for the explicit self-judgments. On the contrary, it seems likely that automatic associations are closely connected to the affective experiences that determine the spontaneous and intuitive self-evaluations.

As a consequence, similarly to what has been hypothesized for other moderating factors pertaining to awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dentale et al., 2010; Hofmann, Gschwender, & Schmitt, 2005; Jordan et al., 2007), dismissing style should impair implicit to explicit translation process, and thus decrease the implicit–explicit self-esteem consistency. Therefore, we expected that dismissing attachment style, but not secure, anxious and fearful/avoidant styles, increase the discordance between implicit and explicit self-esteem.

1.4. Dismissing style decreases implicit–explicit self-esteem consistency

To test our hypothesis, we administered the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ, Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) to measure five styles of attachment: confidence, discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary, need for approval, and preoccupation with relationships. As Fossati et al. (2003) noted, of all ASQ dimensions, only relationships as secondary is fully consistent with Bartholomew's concept of dismissing attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). To assess implicit–explicit consistency, we administered a self-report scale of self-esteem, namely the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965), and two parallel forms of IAT for measuring implicit self-esteem (SE-IAT). Our hypothesis is that high scorers in *relationships as secondary* scale, but not in *confidence*, *preoccupation with relationships*, *need for approval* and *discomfort with closeness*, exhibit higher discrepancies between implicit self-esteem and explicit self-esteem than low scorers.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants in the study were 145 undergraduate students (33 males and 112 females) enrolled in a psychology course at the “Sapienza” University of Rome. The age of the respondents ranged

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