More Than Meets the Eye: the Influence of Implicit Self-Esteem on Materialism

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Materialism researchers have consistently found that individuals with high self-esteem are less materialistic than those with low self-esteem. Self-esteem has been measured with self-report scales, which tap conscious evaluations of self-worth, known as explicit self-esteem. In this article, we propose that implicit self-esteem, defined as unconscious evaluations of self-worth, is also an important determinant of materialism. We explore the joint effect of implicit and explicit self-esteem on materialistic tendencies. Contrary to prior research, we find that individuals with high explicit self-esteem can be quite materialistic when these feelings of self-worth are accompanied by low implicit self-esteem.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the most consistent findings reported in the materialism literature is the link between self-esteem and materialism, with lower feelings of self-worth related to higher levels of materialism (Chaplin and John 2007; Richins and Dawson 1992). Material goods are viewed as a way for individuals with low self-esteem to cope with or compensate for doubts about their self-worth.

However, recent self-esteem research suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and materialism may be more complicated than current findings suggest. Two forms of self-esteem have been identified: explicit versus implicit self-esteem (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). Explicit self-esteem is defined as conscious evaluations of the self, whereas implicit self-esteem is defined as unconscious evaluations of the self. Consistent with Wilson, Linsey and Schooler (2000)’s dual attitude model, people can have two different attitudes toward the self, such as implicit versus explicit self-esteem. In fact, explicit self-esteem is only weakly correlated with implicit self-esteem, which is considered a distinct dimension of self-esteem (Bosson, Brown, and Zeigler-Hill 2003).

In this article, we propose that explicit self-esteem alone is not sufficient to capture the relationship between self-esteem and materialism, and that implicit self-esteem is an important determinant in the adoption of materialism. We report three studies that demonstrate the usefulness of this construct for understanding materialism. Each of the studies and findings are described below.

Study 1: The Joint Effect of Implicit and Explicit Self-Esteem on Materialism

Prior research has found that individuals with high (explicit) self-esteem exhibit lower levels of materialism. However, individuals with high (explicit) self-esteem are not a homogeneous group. In fact, this group includes two distinct subgroups of individuals: those with congruent high self-esteem (high explicit/high implicit self-esteem) and those with discrepant high self-esteem (high explicit/low implicit self-esteem).

Not surprisingly, these two groups exhibit different behavioral patterns. Individuals with discrepant high self-esteem have underlying negative self-feelings associated with low implicit self-esteem. To conceal such nagging self-doubts, these individuals use various forms of self-enhancing strategies. Relative to individuals with congruent high self-esteem, they tend to exhibit overt grandiosity, higher levels of narcissism, and indirect forms of self-enhancement, such as out-group derogation and in-group biases (Bosson et al. 2003; Jordan et al. 2003; Kernis et al. 2005). In sum, individuals with discrepant high self-esteem possess some of the same characteristics usually attributed to individuals with low (explicit) self-esteem, with both groups engaging in self-enhancing strategies to compensate for negative self-feelings.

Thus, we predict that individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will exhibit higher levels of materialism than individuals with congruent high self-esteem. We measured intact levels of implicit and explicit self-esteem, comparing how combinations of these types of self-esteem relate to materialism. Explicit self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965); implicit self-esteem was measured using the self-esteem Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald and Farnham 2000). As a measure of materialism, we used a qualitative task in which levels of materialism were revealed by asking participants to construct a collage to answer the question: “What makes me happy?” (see Chaplin and John 2007).

The results support the idea that materialism depends not only on the levels of explicit self-esteem, but also on implicit self-esteem. Contrary to prior materialism research, individuals with high (explicit) self-esteem are not always immune to the appeals of materialism. Indeed, individuals with discrepant high self-esteem (high explicit/low implicit self-esteem) are more materialistic than individuals with congruent high self-esteem (high explicit/high implicit self-esteem).

Study 2: The Causal Impact of Implicit Self-Esteem on Materialism

Next, we proceed with our examination of implicit self-esteem by examining the causal relationship between implicit self-esteem and materialism. In Study 1, intact levels of implicit and explicit self-esteem were measured rather than manipulated, leaving open the possibility that materialism affects implicit self-esteem rather than the reverse. In Study 2, while measuring the intact levels of explicit self-esteem, we primed high implicit self-esteem through subliminal evaluative conditioning (Dijksterhuis 2004).

The results replicated those of Study 1. High implicit self-esteem priming reduced materialism; indeed, among participants with high explicit self-esteem, those in the control group who did not receive a prime were more materialistic than those primed with high implicit self-esteem.

Study 3: Why Does Discrepant High Self-Esteem Cause Materialism?

Individuals with discrepant high self-esteem, who tend to have relatively strong materialistic tendencies, present the most interesting case when compared to prior materialism research. In Study 3, we explore why discrepant high self-esteem can lead to materialism in more detail. They tend to use self-protective and self-enhancing strategies, not only to compensate for underlying negative self-feelings, but also to deal with threats to the self (McGregor et al. 2005). Because these individuals are concerned about protecting their exaggerated self-images, they overly react to self-threats.

We thus predict that individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will respond to a situation where a self-threat is present by focusing on material possessions as a self-enhancing behavior. Further, we expect their response to self-threats to be unique, in that not all individuals with low implicit self-esteem will react this way. We manipulated the level of self-threat in performing a memory task. As in Study 1, we measured the intact levels of explicit and implicit self-esteem, and used Richins and Dawson (1992)’s materialism scale as a measure of materialism.

We found that individuals with discrepant high self-esteem exhibit defensive responses to threats to their self-image. When a self-threat was present, individuals with discrepant high self-esteem exhibited heightened materialistic tendencies, which was not the case for individuals with low explicit and low implicit self-esteem.

Summary

Prior research has found that individuals with high self-esteem are less materialistic than those with low self-esteem. We add to these findings by distinguishing two types of self-esteem—explicit
and implicit self-esteem—and demonstrating that they have a joint influence on materialism. Specifically, we find that individuals with high explicit self-esteem vary in their tendency to self-enhance through material things as a function of their levels of implicit self-esteem. Thus, contrary to prior research, individuals with high explicit self-esteem can be susceptible to materialism.

REFERENCES


