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

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Materialism researchers have found that individuals with high self-esteem are less materialistic than individuals with low self-esteem. However, researchers have examined explicit self-esteem (conscious evaluations of the self) while not considering implicit self-esteem (unconscious evaluations of the self). We propose that implicit self-esteem also influences materialism. Across two studies, we find that individuals with high explicit, but low implicit self-esteem, exhibit higher levels of materialism than do individuals with high explicit and high implicit self-esteem. Thus, contrary to prior findings, high (explicit) self-esteem individuals can be more or less materialistic, depending on the level of implicit self-esteem.

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

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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 (Mick 1996; 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.

Recent developments in self-esteem research suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and materialism may be more complicated. 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 paper, we examine the importance of implicit self-esteem as a contributor to materialistic tendencies. We report two studies that demonstrate the usefulness of this construct for understanding materialism. Each of the studies and findings are described below.

Study 1: The Interaction of Implicit and Explicit Self-Esteem

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. Depending on the level of implicit self-esteem, this group can be categorized into individuals with *congruent high self-esteem* (high explicit/high implicit self-esteem) and individuals 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 self-doubts associated with low implicit self-esteem. To conceal such negative self-feelings, 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, Brown, and Zeigler-Hill 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 high levels of materialism, compared to 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), and implicit self-esteem was measured using the self-esteem Implicit Association Test (IAT: Greenwald and Farnham 2000). In the computerized self-esteem IAT, the participants were asked to categorize words as quickly and as accurately as possible. This test is based on the logic that individuals with high implicit self-esteem will associate the self and positive affect automatically. They will respond faster when they indicate whether a word belongs to the *self + pleasant* category vs. the *other + unpleasant* category than when they indicate whether a word belongs to the *self + unpleasant* category vs. the *other + pleasant* category. Materialism was measured in two ways: (1) Richins and Dawson (1992)'s materialism rating scale; and (2) 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 were supportive of our hypothesis. Individuals with discrepant high self-esteem (high explicit/low implicit self-esteem) were more materialistic than individuals with congruent high self-esteem (high explicit/high implicit self-esteem). Thus, contrary to prior materialism research, we find that individuals with high (explicit) self-esteem are not always immune to the appeals of materialism. Implicit self-esteem must be taken into account to understand what types of high self-esteem individuals are more or less susceptible to materialism.

Also of interest was the fact that the collage materialism measure was most effective in detecting the hypothesized differences. This appears to be related to the fact that the collage measure was less affected by socially desirable responding than the rating scale measure. In fact, when SDR was controlled, the rating scale measure revealed the same patterns as the collage measure. This finding parallels results from implicit attitude research, showing that implicit attitudes predict less controlled responses (Payne et al. 2005).

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

Next, we examined the causal link between implicit self-esteem and materialism by priming implicit high self-esteem. Findings from Study 1 are suggestive, but do not rule out the possibility that materialism affects implicit self-esteem, rather than the reverse. In Study 2, we primed implicit self-esteem through subliminal evaluative conditioning (Dijksterhuis 2004), while measuring the intact levels of explicit self-esteem. In a lexical decision task presented on a computer, the participants were asked to respond as quickly as possible whether the target was a real word. In the priming condition, the self-depicting word "I" (for 17 ms) was immediately followed by a positive word; in the control condition, the word "I" was substituted with the letter "X." Materialism was measured using the collage task, given the results from study 1.

The results replicated those of Study 1. High implicit self-esteem priming reduced materialism; indeed, materialism was lower for the high explicit self-esteem participants in the priming condition than those in the control condition.

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