

EXPLORING A NOVEL APPROACH TO STUDY SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN: AN IMPLICIT MODEL

Parky Hansen Lau

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, CANADA

INTRODUCTION

To look at one's self in the mirror and say, "I like who I am," or, "I am worthwhile," and to truly mean it is not a simple task for most individuals. Yet these subjective evaluations of our-selves – our self-esteem – are incredibly influential on a wide range of outcomes. Past research has shown that self-esteem is related to academic achievement (Marsh, 1990), happiness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2005; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and psychological well-being (Kernis, 2003). These findings are especially significant for children, as the development of self-esteem in early childhood may have major implications throughout their course of life. Therefore, extensive research is necessary to begin applying our knowledge of self-esteem development in order to examine specific parental practices and techniques that promote healthy self-esteem in children across different cultures. However, previous research has been based predominantly on the use of explicit measures of self-esteem such as parental report or child self-report (Li-Hua, Li-Zhu, & Fang, 2006; Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). This may be an issue as explicit measures of self-esteem for children are limited (Hughes, 1984) and inherently susceptible to response sets such as social desirability (Nosek & Greenwald, 2005). As well, explicit measures potentially paint an incomplete picture with respect to an individual's self-esteem; self-reports may not necessarily mirror an individual's nonconscious or implicit feelings of self-worth (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005). In this paper, I advocate for the use of a non-deliberative implicit model to help mitigate these issues when

studying children's self-esteem. I will provide arguments emphasizing the need for a multifaceted approach with respect to the study and application of self-esteem research in children and to determine specific factors, such as parental style, that encourage its positive development. Implicit measures for children will be outlined to determine their validity and reliability for future research and directions for future research advocating a holistic and multicultural approach to the study of self-esteem will be discussed.

BENEFITS OF STUDYING IMPLICIT SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

Although there has been extensive research into the development of self-esteem in children, most of these studies have relied on an explicit measure of self-esteem through parents or teachers (Fuchs-Beauchamp, 1996; Hughes & Pugh, 1984) as well as through children's self-report (Hughes, 1984). One potential limitation with this approach is that explicit measures can be affected by response sets such as social desirability (Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998) as well as self-enhancement biases (Taylor & Brown, 1988). On the other hand, implicit self-esteem, which is defined as an "automatic and nonconscious evaluation of the self that guides spontaneous reactions to self-relevant stimuli" (Greenwald & Banaji, 2005; Pelham & Hetts, 1999), may be less susceptible to these biases. This is due to the fact that implicit measures of self-esteem reduce the available mental control required to produce the response and mitigate the role of intentional processes (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007). Implicit measures provide an "automatic"

and “non-deliberative” representation of an individual’s attitude and thus, may be a more reliable indicator of their true attitude (Nosek et al., 2007).

Implicit self-esteem has been implicated in various aspects of mental well-being, such as by acting as a buffer against adverse consequences of failure (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000), as well as mediating anxiety in self-relevant interviews (Spalding & Hardin, 1999). Research by Hetts and Pelham (1999) also highlights the importance of implicit self-esteem as it may aid in coping against stigmatization. In light of these potential benefits of positive implicit self-esteem, it is clear that utilizing an implicit model may prove largely beneficial in developmental research, especially in its application to find specific factors, such as specific types of parental style, that promote positive development of self-esteem.

PARENTAL STYLE AND CHILDREN’S SELF-ESTEEM

One domain that has been of particular interest to researchers is the development of children’s self-esteem in relation to parental style. Previous studies have investigated the differential effects of parental rearing styles on self-esteem across an individual’s lifespan and in different cultural contexts (Antonopoulou, Alexopoulos, & Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2012; Furham & Cheng, 2000; Herz & Gullone, 1999). Specific studies have provided empirical evidence that an authoritative parenting approach (Baumrind, 1971) is related to higher self-esteem in childhood (Li-Hua et al., 2006) and adolescence (Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007). Furthermore, research has provided support for the importance of self-esteem in its relation to individuals’ psychological well-being with respect to both depression (Dumont & Provost, 1999) and happiness (Furnham & Cheng, 2000). However, past research tends to examine parental styles and their relation to the development of self-esteem through a Western-centric lens and may not be generalizable to all cultures. In support of this account, one study found that Brazilian adolescents from indulgent families had comparable social and academic outcomes, as well as greater self-esteem when compared to adolescents of parents that advocated

an authoritative style (Martinez, Garcia, & Yubero, 2007). As well, research into East Asian cultures show that the Chinese have specific concepts embedded in their traditions and language that associates parental love and care with firm governance of the child (Chao, 1994). One implication of this cultural norm is that authoritarian parenting style tends to lead to better outcomes in Chinese households that have adopted these values, in comparison to authoritative parenting.

Although there has been extensive research examining the relationship between parental style and self-esteem, the studies have primarily focused on an explicit form of self-esteem. Less research has been devoted to examining the effects of implicit self-esteem, especially in children, despite its potential significance. Indeed, Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, and Correll (2003) highlighted the importance of taking a holistic approach in studying self-esteem to develop a more accurate picture of an individual’s personality traits. Specifically, they found that a combination of high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem is related to greater defensiveness and higher levels of narcissism in undergraduate students. The aforementioned example provides insight into the necessity and utility in advancing an implicit model to study self-esteem. This gap in research is especially prominent and concerning in the developmental field as the development of self-esteem may begin as early as three years of age (Li-Hua et al., 2006). However, in order to begin investigating implicit self-esteem in children, we must first consider the plausibility of measuring the construct through examining previous validated implicit measures of self-esteem.

IMPLICIT MEASURES OF SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

The vast majority of methodologies dedicated to measuring implicit self-esteem has focused on catering to the adult population (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). However, there have been recent advances in the development of implicit measures for children. For example, Cvencek, Greenwald, and Meltzoff (2011) successfully adapted the original Implicit Associa-

tion Test (IAT) by Greenwald et al. (1998) to be accessible for children as young as 4-years-old. They found that this child-friendly version of the IAT was sensitive to evaluative preference for flowers over insects. In addition, the study found that implicit preferences for flowers were stronger in girls than in boys, as demonstrated in a previous study by Baron and Banaji (2006), thus providing greater convergent validity. Furthermore, a recent study by Cvencek, Greenwald, and Meltzoff (2016) used this Preschool Implicit Association Test (PSIAT) to examine implicit self-esteem in young children. The self-esteem PSIAT is a double-categorization task that combines a concept classification (me vs. not-me) and an attribute classification (good vs. bad), with these dimensions represented as pictures and words (Cvencek et al., 2011). This task provides a measure of implicit self-esteem by comparing response latency to infer the strength of association between two dimensions. Thus, children who have higher positive implicit self-esteem will respond more quickly when the attribute classification is congruent (good) compared to when the attribute is incongruent (bad).

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There clearly exists great value in examining self-esteem in children due to the various outcomes correlated with the construct, such as its relationship with mental health (Lloyd & Miller, 1997) and life satisfaction (Milevsky et al., 2007). Past research has also shown that various constructs are better predicted by measures of implicit self-esteem, including persistence in failure and coping against stigmatization (Hetts & Pelham, 1999; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Thus, implicit self-esteem may tap into important constructs that are less associated with explicit self-esteem. As well, studies have shown that incongruence in implicit and explicit self-esteem is linked to narcissism and greater defensiveness in adolescence (Jordan et al., 2003). This suggests the importance of taking an implicit model into consideration in order to provide a more complete and accurate account of a child's self-esteem. Further research using this model to examine the factors that impact self-es-

teem will be useful in determining the ideal conditions for a child's growth. Thus, it will be necessary to focus on further developing reliable and valid implicit measures of self-esteem that are accessible for young children. In addition, specific parental practices may have differential effects on self-esteem development depending on the values and attitudes of an individual's culture (Herz & Gullone, 1999; Wang & Ollendick, 2001). Thus, future research may also benefit from cross-cultural studies to determine specific parental styles that are associated with the healthy development of implicit and explicit self-esteem in young children within different cultural milieus.

Although a major part of this paper is dedicated to the exploration of potential benefits and possibilities of using an implicit model to study children's self-esteem, it is important to recognize that future research will benefit most from examining implicit self-esteem and explicit self-esteem in tandem. Indeed, research has shown that it is the congruence of self-esteem in both domains that is essential when considering future outcomes (Jordan et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Through employing these models together, we can begin to create a more holistic and accurate picture of the development of self-esteem in children. In doing so, we can extend and apply these findings to determine specific parental practices and environmental factors that foster positive self-esteem, both explicitly and implicitly.

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