



The Effect of Conditioning Implicit Self Esteem On Attributional and Defensive Judgments



Sean Mackinnon & Christian Jordan
Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada

Background

In the past, explicit self-esteem has typically been measured using self-report scales (e.g. Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem can also be measured indirectly, often through measures of reaction time which are difficult for the participant to control or falsify. This is called “implicit self-esteem” and is broadly defined as an “...automatic, overlearned, and nonconscious evaluation of the self that guides spontaneous reactions to self-relevant stimuli” (Bosson, Swann, Pennebaker, 2000, p. 631).

Baccus, Baldwin and Packer (2004) have devised a classical conditioning procedure designed to increase implicit self-esteem. Participants first generate a list of self-relevant words. Baccus et al. found that by presenting pictures of smiling, pleasant faces for 400ms after each self-relevant word, implicit self esteem can be increased significantly after 80 trials.

We are interested in how increasing implicit self esteem through this conditioning procedure influences defensive behaviour. Specifically, we predict that defensive behaviour will decrease for participants low in implicit self-esteem.

Method

Participants

96 Participants (51.5% male) were recruited from introductory psychology classes. Ages ranged from 18 to 28, though 84.4% of participants were ages 18 or 19.

Procedure

1. Implicit Association Test*
2. Implicit Self Esteem is increased via Baccus et al.'s (2004) conditioning procedure for **half** of the participants
3. Self-esteem is threatened when all participants fail a rigged word association task (Remote Associates Test)
4. Causal Dimensions Scale**
5. Over-claiming Questionnaire***
6. Demographics and Debriefing

*The *IAT* is a computer-based response mapping task that measures the degree of association between an attitude-object and positive or negative affect by examining reaction times. Faster reaction times between pleasant (such as “holiday”) and self words (such as “me”) indicate higher implicit esteem (and conversely, slower reaction times when unpleasant and self words are combined) indicate higher implicit self esteem.

**The Causal Dimensions Scale assesses the participant’s causal reasoning for his or her performance on the Remote Associates Test. Responses are measured on 9-point bipolar scales. The “Stability” subscale consisted of the following bipolar pairs: Permanent/Temporary, Stable over Time/Variable over time, Unchangeable/Changeable.

***The *Over-Claiming Questionnaire* asks participants to rate their familiarity with a list of general knowledge items (persons, places, things), 20-50% of which are fictitious. A defensive individual will claim heightened familiarity to all items, including those that do not actually exist. When participants say they are familiar with persons, places and/or things that do not actually exist, participants can be said to be acting defensively.

Results

Figure 1

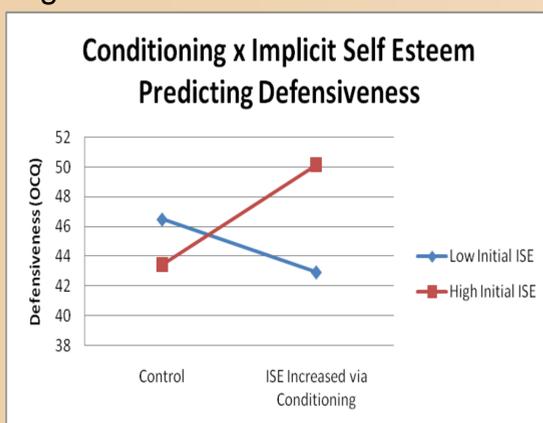
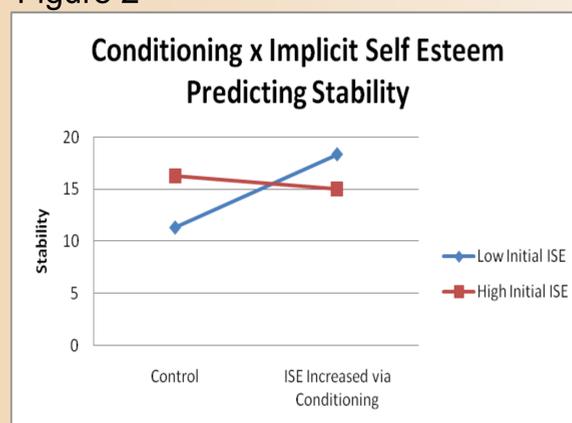


Figure 2



Stepwise Multiple Regressions

1. For those who originally had low implicit self esteem, our conditioning procedure lowered their defensiveness. However, those who started out with high implicit self-esteem were actually *more* defensive after the conditioning procedure, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 87) = 4.543$, $p = .036$ (see figure 1).
2. After conditioning, people with low implicit self esteem thought that their failure was more due to stable, permanent aspects of themselves, which is considered a sign of less defensive responding, $R^2 = .116$, $F(1, 87) = 5.725$, $p = .005$ (see figure 2).

Take home message: When it comes to implicit self-esteem (ISE), a person can conceivably have too much of a good thing. Though increasing a person’s ISE can reduce defensiveness in people who are low in ISE to begin with, it can exacerbate the problem for people who already have high levels of ISE.