Chapter 9
The Role of Implicit Mechanisms in Buffering Self–Esteem from Social Threats

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that people have the goal of self-enhancing, or viewing themselves in an overly positive light. However, only recent research has examined the degree to which the relationship between self-enhancement goals and outcomes are a result of explicit deliberative mechanisms or implicit automatic mechanisms. The current chapter reviews evidence on unconscious goal pursuit, autobiographical memory, social neuroscience, and implicit self-esteem that suggests that implicit mechanisms play a powerful role in producing self-enhancement outcomes. Furthermore, this chapter reviews evidence that these implicit mechanisms are activated by social threats and thus contribute to successful coping. Finally, the authors discuss the implications of implicit self-enhancement mechanisms for targets of stigma, individuals who frequently encounter threats to well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Psychology has a rich history of studying self-esteem, or the global evaluations a person holds of the self. Indeed, at the time of writing this chapter, a PSYCinfo keyword search for "self-esteem" returned 25,928 publications. Our fascination with self-esteem is well-deserved, as it colors every moment of our conscious experience, and can influence a wide range of social behaviors. Moreover, most people are motivated to see themselves in a positive light, and indeed report moderate to high self-esteem (Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Previous theoretical frameworks suggest that this goal of maintaining high self-esteem stems from positive self-views mitigating the effects of stress and failure (Steele, 1998), reducing existential stress (Greenberg et al.,

1992), increasing mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988), and serving as a barometer of social acceptance and liking (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

The goal of achieving and maintaining high self-esteem fundamentally alters attention, perception, memory, and behavior in ways that cast the self in a positive light. Previous research has referred to the influence of such goals on perception and behavior as self-enhancement. However, as research has largely focused on *explicit self-enhancement outcomes,* little is known about the *mechanisms* of self-enhancement or the speeds at which they occur. In the current chapter, explicit self-enhancement outcomes refer to the conscious consequences of self-enhancement goals (e.g., consciously evaluating one's own abilities as overly positive), whereas self-enhancement mechanisms refer to the processes through which self-enhancement goals produce these consequences (e.g., greater encoding of positive than negative feedback). We define an explicit mechanism as one that is slow, controlled, and linked to conscious self-perception, whereas an implicit mechanism is one that is fast, automatic, and outside of conscious awareness. As such, an explicit self-enhancement mechanism would involve a deliberative and conscious internal dialogue (e.g., "If I think about my experiences in a certain way, then I will feel good about myself"), whereas an implicit self-enhancement mechanism would not involve such dialogue.

The aim of this chapter is to review evidence suggesting that the link between self-enhancement goals and explicit self-enhancement outcomes is driven by mechanisms that are largely implicit. That is, people who have the goal of self-enhancing may consciously perceive themselves in an overly positive light (i.e., the explicit outcome of self-enhancement), but be completely unaware of how and when they modified perceptions of themselves (i.e., the implicit mechanisms of self-enhancement). We begin by reviewing explicit self-enhancement outcomes, after which we describe evidence from behavioral, cognitive, and neuroscience literatures that suggests that self-enhancement goals catalyze implicit mechanisms, which in turn produce self-enhancement outcomes. Finally, we discuss ways in which implicit self-enhancement mechanisms may be activated by social stress, and therefore help targets of social threat cope with stressful situations.

EXPLICIT SELF-ENHANCEMENT OUTCOMES

Previous work has demonstrated that explicit self-enhancement outcomes are evident in perceptions of autobiographical events, current abilities, and predicted life outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, individuals report more internal and global attributions for positive outcomes than negative outcomes (Alicke, 1985; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), consider scientific research less credible if it implies they are susceptible to a disease (Kunda, 1987), and are unrealistically optimistic about future events (Puri & Robinson, 2007; Weinstein, 1980). Demonstrating that these outcomes emerge in domains where self-assessment accuracy is critical, students consistently underestimate the time necessary to complete academic tasks (Bueler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994), and surgical residents are overly confident in their ability to diagnose medical conditions that they fail to detect in X-rays (Oksam, Kingma, & Klasen, 2000).

Although many explicit self-enhancement outcomes correspond with inaccurate assessments of ability (Dunning, Heath, Suls, 2004), other manifestations of self-enhancement involve focusing attention on more successful domains. For instance, self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) posits that affirming the self in successful domains attenuates the effect of negative feedback on self-esteem. Supportive of this view, individuals who define themselves in many unique ways (e.g., "mother", "lawyer", "chess player") demonstrate

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