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Self-Enhancement Tendencies Among People With High Explicit Self-Esteem: The Moderating Role of Implicit Self-Esteem

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Consistent with recent research on initials-preferences, we assumed that people's preferences for their initials reflect an implicit form of self-esteem that buffers them against challenges to their self-worth. Accordingly, we proposed that high self-esteem persons who demonstrated weak initials-preferences would be particularly likely to engage in compensatory self-enhancement activities. Results of two studies revealed converging support for this prediction: Among people high in explicit self-esteem, those with weaker initials-preferences displayed more unrealistic optimism, stronger preferences for an excessively positive personality profile, and smaller actual-ideal self-discrepancies. Findings are discussed in terms of the distinction between secure *high self-esteem—which is generally linked with psychological health—and* fragile *high self-esteem—which is generally associated with personal and interpersonal difficulties.*

From the perspective of most self-enhancement theories, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals high in self-esteem are imbued with positivity (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Although the tendency toward enhancing the self is typically assessed by asking high self-esteem people to report on their *explicit* (conscious, verbal) attitudes and experiences, researchers who study *implicit* (automatic, nonverbal) cognition have argued convincingly that self-enhancement assumes implicit forms as well (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For example, although they may be unaware of doing so, most people hold favorable attitudes toward objects closely associated with the self, such as their name initials and birthday numbers (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985, 1987; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Moreover, recent findings suggest that people high in

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explicit self-esteem report especially strong liking for their initials in the wake of an ego threat, suggesting that implicit self-enhancement may defend the high self-esteem person against unflattering self-assessments, and thus, help to maintain high self-esteem (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002).

Given this, we wondered whether people with high explicit self-esteem, but low implicit self-esteem, would maintain their favorable explicit self-views by seeking enhancement through alternate routes. Although mounting evidence reveals (a) that most people hold highly positive implicit attitudes about themselves (Bosson et al., 2000; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001), and (b) that implicit self-esteem may increase or decrease temporarily in response to situational factors (Jones et al., 2002), there still tend to be persistent individual differences in the extent to which people evaluate their initials favorably. In fact, people's liking for their initials is relatively stable across time ($rs > .60$ across a four-week period), and initials-preferences are typically uncorrelated with explicit self-esteem and other explicit self-evaluations (Bosson et al., 2000; Koole et al., 2001). Thus, whereas some high self-esteem individuals chronically favor their initials over non-initial letters, others exhibit relatively weak initials-preferences. In the current investigation, we examine whether high self-esteem people who have relatively low implicit self-esteem (as indicated by their ratings of their initials) will display heightened self-enhancement tendencies, such as self-aggrandizement and positive illusions (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Why should explicit and implicit self-esteem interact in predicting self-enhancement? To answer this question, it is useful to explore the developmental origins of implicit self-esteem. Many researchers have assumed that implicit associations with the self are more primitive, and develop earlier, than explicit self-views (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Epstein & Morling, 1995; Hetts & Pelham, 2001; Koole et al., 2001). Consistent with this idea, DeHart (2002) found that college students from divorced, as compared to intact, families showed weaker preferences for their initials. Furthermore, students' ratings of their mothers' parenting style (verified by mothers' own reports) were associated with children's initials-preferences: To the extent that mothers were high in nurturance or low in over-protectiveness, their children demonstrated stronger initials-preferences. Similarly, Zeigler-Hill, Bosson, and Brown (2002) found that initials-preferences were positively correlated with reports of childhood attachment security and support from childhood peers. These results provide preliminary support for the idea that implicit self-esteem derives from primary social interactions early in an individual's life (see also Hetts & Pelham, 2001).

Such findings, however, do not explain why implicit self-esteem might sometimes diverge from explicit self-esteem. After all, social interactions are thought to be the source of explicit self-views as well as implicit ones, according to both classic (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and contemporary (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995) perspectives. Thus, it is not immediately apparent why these types of self-esteem are generally uncorrelated. One possibility is that explicit and implicit beliefs are acquired through separate, and largely independent, processes. Explicit self-views are based on logical and conscious analyses of self-relevant feedback and information (Epstein & Morling, 1995), and are linked to complex attributional processes such as self-perception (Bem, 1972) and self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978). In contrast, implicit self-esteem may derive directly from affective experiences in an automatic, holistic, and intuitive fashion (Epstein & Morling, 1995), and may be linked to an individual's temperament (Teglasi & Epstein, 1998). Thus, if different

messages about the individual's self-worth are received via the explicit and implicit modes, discrepant self-esteem might emerge.

For example, consider a person who has negative implicit associations with the self, perhaps due to a troubled relationship with a caregiver in early childhood, but who comes to develop an explicit self-concept that is generally positive due to repeated achievements or popularity among peers. From our perspective, such a person might maintain this explicit-implicit discrepancy into adulthood and accordingly display certain personality and behavioral tendencies that indirectly reveal his or her underlying low self-esteem (for research relevant to state, rather than trait, discrepancies between explicit and implicit evaluations, see Blair, 2002; DeHart, 2002; Jones et al., 2002; Karpinski & Hilton, 2001).

Because of their underlying, relatively negative implicit associations with the self, individuals who possess high-explicit/low-implicit self-esteem may be said to have *fragile* high self-esteem. This reasoning derives from research suggesting that there are at least two distinct types of high self-esteem: one that is relatively secure, stable, and non-defensive, and another that is relatively fragile, unstable, and defensive (for reviews see Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002; Kernis, in press; Kernis & Paradise, 2002). The distinction between secure and fragile high self-esteem has been conceptualized in a multitude of ways, but most perspectives converge on the notion that people with secure high self-esteem are not easily threatened by failure, do not rely on approval from others to sustain their sense of self-worth, and readily accept both their good and bad qualities (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 1993; Rogers, 1961). Accordingly, these people present themselves in a favorable but modest fashion, and are not preoccupied with opportunities to proclaim their superiority. On the other hand, people with fragile high self-esteem are not entirely convinced of their own worth and tend, therefore, to compensate for their self-doubts by exaggerating their strengths when the opportunity arises (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991).

Based on this distinction between secure and fragile high self-esteem, we propose that people with high-explicit/low-implicit self-esteem will exhibit heightened self-enhancement tendencies relative to those who are high in both explicit and implicit self-esteem. Although others have considered the possibility that high explicit and low implicit self-esteem combine to produce a form of fragile self-esteem characterized by amplified self-enhancement (e.g., Epstein & Morling, 1995; Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999), this notion has thus far received only limited empirical support (see Jordan et al., 2002).

To test our ideas, we conducted two studies in which we explored the relations among explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem, and self-enhancement. We assessed participants' explicit self-esteem using the *self-liking* items from Tafarodi and Swann's (1995) Self-Liking and Self-Competence Scale (SLCS); these items, which correlate strongly ($rs > .70$) with the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, capture the extent to which people like themselves and believe that they are worthy of social acceptance.[1] As noted, we relied on people's evaluations of their initials as our measure of implicit self-esteem. Initials-preferences demonstrate fairly sound psychometric properties and have been used with success in past research (e.g., DeHart, 2002; Jones et al., 2002; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Koole, et al., 2001). Our indices of self-enhancement were an unrealistic optimism scale, responses to a series of personality profiles that ranged from very unflattering to very flattering, and actual-ideal self-discrepancies. Across all measures, we predicted significant explicit-self-esteem $\times$ implicit-self-esteem interactions, such that people high in self-liking

and low in initials-preferences should demonstrate stronger self-enhancement tendencies than people who are high on both measures of self-esteem.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 116 undergraduates (40 males, 73 females, and 3 who did not indicate gender) received course credit for completing various measures of self-enhancement—as well as several other personality variables that are not relevant to the current investigation—in groups of up to 30. Several weeks prior to completing the self-enhancement measures, participants indicated their Self-liking and rated their liking for the letters of the alphabet in a mass pre-testing session. During the experimental sessions, participants completed a measure of unrealistic optimism and rated the accuracy of several personality profiles in a randomized order; because order did not qualify any of our findings, we do not mention this variable further. After completing these measures, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Measures

Self-liking. During the pre-testing session, we measured Explicit Self-esteem with the 10-item Self-liking subscale of the SLCS (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Items are rated on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and demonstrate good internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). Final scores are computed by averaging across the 10 items (after reverse-coding appropriate items).

Initials-preferences. Also during the pretesting session, participants evaluated each letter of the alphabet using scales of 1 (*I dislike this letter very much*) to 7 (*I like this letter very much*). From each participant's rating of his or her first and last name initials, we subtracted the normative rating of that letter (averaged across all participants); we then summed these two differences to create final scores,[2] which reflect the extent to which participants like their initials better than the "average" person does. As a measure of internal consistency, we computed a correlation between people's preferences for their first and last initials; the two were correlated at $r = .38$, $p < .01$.

Unrealistic optimism. Weinstein's (1980) measure of Unrealistic Optimism requires respondents to estimate the likelihood that they, relative to their peers, will experience five pleasant future events (e.g., liking their job) and five unpleasant future events (e.g., developing a drinking problem) during their life. Estimates are made on scales ranging from 1 (*extremely below average*) to 9 (*extremely above average*), and are internally consistent ($\alpha = .70$). To calculate scores, we averaged across all ten events (after reverse-coding the unpleasant events).

Personality profiles. We offered participants four, 75-word personality profiles that had ostensibly been written by clinical psychology graduate students (see the Appendix for copies of the profiles). The profiles ranged from highly flattering to highly unflattering in tone.[3] Written instructions asked participants to read each profile "as if it had been written about *you*"; following each profile, participants indicated how accurately it described them on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*very much*).

Results

Correlations among all measures appear in Table 1 along with each measure's descriptive statistics. To test our predictions, we treated responses to the self-enhancement measures as criterion variables in simultaneous multiple regression analyses. Predictor variables were Gender, Self-liking, Initials-preferences, and the Self-liking × Initials-preferences interaction (we first centered all continuous predictors on their respective means, Aiken & West, 1991). Because our predictions concerned the self-enhancement of people with high explicit self-esteem who had high versus low Implicit Self-esteem, we followed the regression analyses with simple slope tests in which we explored the relations between Initials-preferences and Self-enhancement among people high in Self-liking. Differing degrees of freedom in the analyses reported below reflect the fact that some participants did not complete all measures.

Unrealistic Optimism

In the model predicting Unrealistic Optimism, people higher in Self-liking reported greater optimism, $\beta = .29$, $t(108) = 3.15$, $p < .01$, and females reported less optimism than males, $\beta = -.17$, $t(108) = 1.94$, $p = .055$. Initials-preferences were unrelated to Unrealistic Optimism, $\beta = .06$, $t < 1$. As predicted, the Self-liking × Initials-preferences interaction was significant, $\beta = -.30$, $t(108) = 3.26$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 1). Moreover, results of a simple slope test revealed that, among people high in Self-liking, Initials-preferences were negatively related to unrealistic optimism, $\beta = -.24$, $t(108) = 2.10$, $p < .05$. That is, high-Self-liking people with *weak*preferences for their initials reported more favorable expectations about their futures than did high-Self-liking people with *strong* preferences for their initials. This effect is illustrated by the predicted values that appear on the right side of Figure 1.

Note also that Initials-preferences appeared to moderate self-enhancement tendencies among people *low* in Self-liking. Results of a simple slope test showed that, among people with low Self-liking, those with stronger Initials-preferences exhibited more optimism than did those with weaker Initials-preferences, $\beta = .37$, $t(108) = 2.56$, $p < .05$ (see the left side of Figure 1). Because of the potential importance of this finding, we decided to perform this simple slope test on all subsequent dependent measures.

Personality Profiles

We predicted that people with high Self-liking and low Initials-preferences—relative to those high on both self-esteem measures—would perceive the flattering profiles as more accurate and the unflattering profiles as less accurate. In addition, we expected this tendency to be particularly strong for the two extreme (flattering and unflattering) profiles.

Very flattering profile. People high, as compared to low, in Self-liking gave higher accuracy ratings to the very flattering profile, $\beta = .43$, $t(107) = 5.13$, $p < .01$, and females rated this profile lower in accuracy than did males, $\beta = -.28$, $t(107) = -3.41$, $p < .01$. Initials-preferences were unrelated to accuracy of the very flattering profile, $\beta = .06$, $t < 1$, but the interaction of Self-liking and Initials-preferences was significant, $\beta = -.26$, $t(107) = 3.12$, $p < .01$. As expected, among people high in Self-liking, those with weak, as compared to strong, preferences for their initials perceived the very flattering profile as more self-descriptive, $\beta = -.21$, $t(107) = 1.96$, $p = .052$ (see right side of Figure 2). Also, consistent with the

TABLE 1 Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

	M	*SD*	Min	Max	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.
I. Gender	–	–	–	–	(113)							
II. Explicit Self-esteem	3.89	0.87	1.00	5.00	−.14	(116)						
III. Implicit Self-esteem	1.86	3.00	−6.98	6.06	.04	−.19*	(116)					
IV. Unrealistic Optimism	3.37	1.69	−3.00	7.80	−.24*	.24*	−.03	(116)				
V. Very Unflattering Profile	2.51	1.98	1.00	10.0	.19*	−.26**	−.10	−.22*	(116)			
VI. Unflattering Profile	4.10	2.73	1.00	10.0	.25**	−.44**	.01	−.30**	.74**	(116)		
VII. Flattering Profile	9.03	1.66	4.00	11.0	−.29**	.43**	−.05	.27**	−.49**	−.68**	(116)	
VIII. Very Flattering Profile	7.08	2.45	1.00	11.0	−.36**	.42**	−.08	.33**	−.38**	−.53**	.55**	(115)

Note. Gender was coded as '0' for males and '1' for females. Values in parentheses are the numbers of respondents who completed each measure.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.

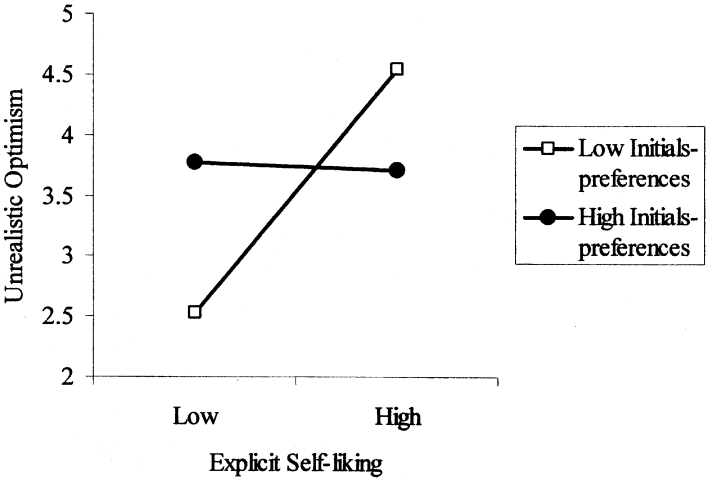

FIGURE 1 Predicted values for unrealistic optimism as a function of participants' Self-liking and Initials-preferences. *Note*: values shown are predicted scores calculated at $\pm$ *SD* from the mean on each type of self-esteem.

Unrealistic Optimism findings, people low in Self-liking and high in Initials-preferences rated the very flattering profile higher in accuracy than did those low on both self-esteem measures, $\beta = .33$, $t(107) = 2.05$, $p < .05$ (see left side of Figure 2).

Moderately flattering profile. People higher in Self-liking, and males relative to females, gave higher accuracy ratings to the moderately flattering profile, $\beta s > .20$, $ts > 2.55$, $ps < .05$; Initials-preferences were not significantly related to the accuracy of this profile, $\beta = .10$, $t(108) = 1.23$, $p = .22$. The interaction term was significant in this model, $\beta = -.26$, $t(108) = 3.03$, $p < .01$, but the association between initials-preferences and perceived accuracy of the moderately flattering profile did not reach significance among people high in self-liking, $\beta = -.16$, $t(108) = 1.49$, $p = .14$,

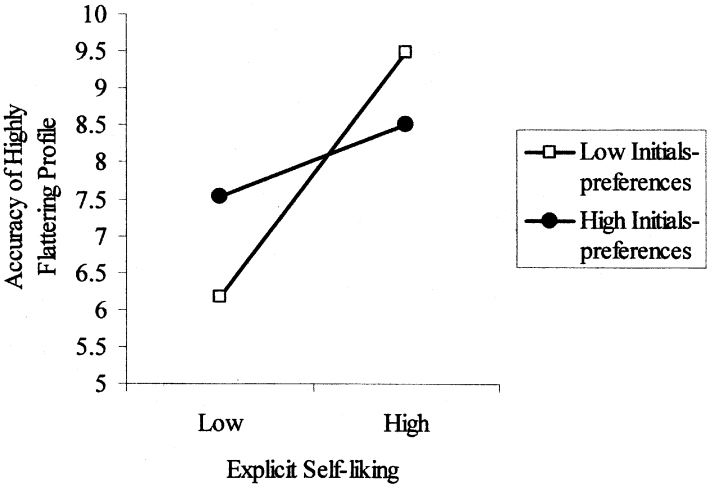

FIGURE 2 Predicted values for perceived accuracy of the highly flattering personality profile as a function of participants' Self-liking and Initials-preferences. *Note*: values shown are predicted scores calculated at $\pm$ 1 *SD* from the mean on each type of self-esteem.

although it was in the predicted direction. Among people low in Self-liking, those with stronger Initials-preferences rated the moderately flattering profile higher in accuracy, $\beta = .37$, $t(108) = 2.76$, $p < .01$.

Moderately unflattering profile. Self-liking was significantly related to perceived accuracy of the moderately unflattering profile, $\beta = -.48$, $t(108) = 5.61$, $p < .01$, females rated this profile higher in accuracy than did males, $\beta = .16$, $t(108) = 1.98$, $p = .05$, and the relation between Initials-preferences and accuracy ratings approached significance, $\beta = -.15$, $t(108) = 1.75$, $p = .082$. The interaction term was significant in this model, $\beta = .26$, $t(108) = 3.11$, $p < .01$, but among people high in self-liking, those with stronger Initials-preferences rated this profile only slightly higher in accuracy, $\beta = .12$, $t(108) = 1.14$, $p = .26$. On the other hand, among people low in Self-liking, those with strong preferences for their initials rated the moderately unflattering profile significantly lower in accuracy, $\beta = -.42$, $t(108) = 3.14$, $p < .01$.

Very unflattering profile. In the model predicting perceived accuracy of the very unflattering profile, Self-liking was a significant predictor, $\beta = -.33$, $t(107) = 3.49$, $p < .01$, but Gender and Initials-preferences were not, βs $< .13$, ts < 1.41, ps $> .11$. Moreover, Self-liking and Initials-preferences did not interact to predict accuracy of this profile, $\beta = .12$, $t(107) = 1.23$, $p = .22$, nor were Initials-preferences related to perceived accuracy of this profile among people high in Self-liking, $\beta = -.03$, $t < 1$. At low levels of self-liking, people with strong Initials-preferences rated the very unflattering profile marginally lower in accuracy than did people with weak Initials-preferences, $\beta = -.27$, $t(107) = 1.81$, $p = .07$.

Discussion

The findings presented here provide partial support for the idea that possessing low Implicit Self-esteem intensifies the self-enhancement tendencies of people high in Explicit Self-esteem. Specifically, people high in Self-liking and low in Initials-preferences were more exaggeratedly optimistic about the future, and they claimed that a highly flattering personality profile was more self-descriptive, relative to those high in both types of self-esteem. Note, though, that the latter were not pessimistic about their future prospects or critical in their self-descriptions—after all, people with high Self-liking and high Initials-preferences predicted moderately positive futures for themselves and claimed that the highly flattering profile did a fairly accurate job of capturing their personality. Still, their responses to our self-enhancement indices were modest relative to the more self-aggrandizing responses given by those with high Self-liking and low Initials-preferences.

Contrary to predictions, people with high Self-liking and low Initials-preferences did not display significantly greater self-enhancement when rating the accuracy of the moderately flattering, moderately unflattering, or very unflattering profiles. Perhaps what is most interesting about this finding is that these people endorsed an excessively favorable profile, but failed to reject an unflattering one. We consider possible reasons for this pattern in the General Discussion.

Finally, and unexpectedly, people with low Self-liking and High Initialspreferences self-enhanced at a level similar to that of people high in both types of self-esteem. In fact, the former group differed significantly or marginally from those *low* in both types of self-esteem on every one of our dependent measures. Thus, the possession of high Implicit Self-esteem may buffer people with low Explicit Self-esteem against negative self-relevant attitudes and beliefs. We explore this possibility further in Study 2.

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate our findings from Study 1 using an additional index of self-enhancement. Raskin et al. (1991) found that smaller Actual–Ideal self-discrepancies were associated with more defensive self-esteem; thus, we asked respondents in Study 2 to rate their actual and ideal standing along eight self-concept dimensions, then explored actual-ideal differences as a function of participants' Explicit and Implicit self-esteem. We expected people high in Self-liking and low in Initials-preferences to report smaller Actual–Ideal discrepancies—that is, to report being closer to their ideal selves—than people high in both types of self-esteem, particularly on self-concept dimensions that are considered important. Also, based on our Study 1 findings, we explored whether people with low Self-liking and high Initials-preferences would self-enhance to a greater extent than people low in both types of self-esteem.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 158 undergraduate students (47 males, 110 females, and 1 who did not indicate gender) participated in exchange for credit toward a course requirement. Participants completed questionnaire packets containing the measures described below as well as several scales not relevant to the current investigation. The Initials-preference measure always appeared first in the packet, followed by the Self-liking scale and the Actual and Ideal self-ratings, in that order.

Measures

Self-liking and Initials-preferences. Tafarodi and Swann (2001) published a revised version of the SLCS designed to reduce the methodological overlap between the original Self-liking and self-competence subscales. The Self-liking subscale of the SLCS-R served as our measure of Explicit Self-esteem in Study 2. This subscale consists of eight items that are rated using scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); the items demonstrated good internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .89$). To assess Implicit Self-esteem, we asked participants to rate how well they liked each letter of the alphabet; Initials-preferences scores were computed in the manner described in Study 1. Preferences for first and last initials were correlated at $r = .44$, $p < .01$.[4]

Actual–Ideal discrepancy. To assess Actual–Ideal discrepancy, we modified Pelham and Swann's (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire. Using 19-point scales ranging from 5% (*way below average*) to 95% (*way above average*), participants rated themselves, relative to their peers, on eight self-concept dimensions: Intellectual Ability, Social Competence, Artistic Ability, Musical Ability, Athletic Ability, Physical Attractiveness, Leadership Ability, and Common Sense. Participants then used the same 19-point scales to indicate where they would *ideally* like to fall on each dimension. Finally, on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*), participants indicated the extent to which they personally valued each self-concept dimension as an important part of themselves.

To determine which dimensions were most important to people's self-concepts, we submitted importance ratings to a principal axis factor analysis without rotation. Two factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1.0; combined, they accounted for 49% of the total variance. The first factor consisted of importance ratings for

Intellectual Ability, Social Competence, Physical Attractiveness, Leadership Ability, and Common Sense (factor loadings ranged from .43 to .61). The second factor consisted of importance ratings for Artistic and Musical Ability (factor loadings were .79 and .44, respectively). Athletic Ability loaded equally weakly on both factors, so we excluded this dimension from further analyses. We then created composite importance scores by averaging across the five items on the first factor and the two items on the second factor, and compared these scores using a paired-samples *t*-test. Results confirmed that people rated the five dimensions from the first factor ($M = 6.02$) significantly higher in importance than the two dimensions from the second factor ($M = 3.65$), $t(157) = 18.24$, $p < .001$. To create final Actual–Ideal self-discrepancy scores, we subtracted participants' ideal self-ratings from their actual ratings within each dimension, then averaged across these difference scores separately for the five high-importance dimensions ($\alpha = .71$), and the two low-importance dimensions ($r = .65$).

Results

Correlations among and descriptive statistics for all variables appear in Table 2. As in Study 1, we regressed our self-enhancement measure—composite Actual–Ideal self-discrepancies—onto Gender, Self-liking, Initials-preferences, and the Self-liking × Initials-preferences interaction (after mean-centering all continuous predictors).

In the model predicting Actual–Ideal discrepancies on high-importance dimensions, people higher in Self-liking reported being closer to their ideal selves, $\beta = .57$, $t(150) = 8.39$, $p < .01$, and people higher in Initials-preferences reported being farther from their ideal selves, $\beta = -.14$, $t(150) = 2.11$, $p < .05$. Gender was unrelated to self-discrepancies, $\beta = -.05$, $t < 1$, but the expected Self-liking × Initials-preferences interaction emerged, $\beta = -.16$, $t(150) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. As shown in Figure 3, among people high in Self-liking, those with weaker Initials-preferences claimed to be closer to their ideal self, $\beta = -.29$, $t(150) = 3.07$, $p < .01$. Unlike in Study 1, however, Initials-preferences were unrelated to Actual–Ideal discrepancies among people low in Self-liking, $\beta = .004$, $t < 1$. Finally, follow-up analyses ruled out the possibility that people with high Self-liking and low Initials-preferences were close to their ideal self simply because they lowered their personal standards, i.e. indicated particularly low ideals: Among people high in Self-liking, Initials-preferences were significantly associated with actual self-ratings, $\beta = -.19$, $t(150) = 2.05$, $p < .05$, but not with ideal self-ratings, $\beta = .11$, $t < 1$.

In the model predicting Actual–Ideal discrepancies on low-importance dimensions, no significant effects emerged, βs $< .10$, ts < 1.18, ps $> .24$. Moreover, Initials-preferences were not related to Actual–Ideal self-discrepancies among people high in Self-liking, $\beta = .07$, $t < 1$, or among people low in Self-liking, $\beta = -.10$, $t < 1$.[5]

Discussion

The findings from Study 2 provide additional support for the hypothesis that people with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem exhibit heightened self-enhancement relative to people high in both types of Self-esteem. Among people high in Self-liking, those with lower Initials-preferences reported being significantly closer to their ideal selves in five high-importance self-concept dimensions. Notably, our findings suggest that self-enhancement tendencies among people with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem may be limited to domains that are considered

TABLE 2 Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

	M	*SD*	Min	Max	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.
I. Gender	–	–	–	–	(157)				
II. Explicit Self-esteem	3.93	0.89	1.50	5.00	−.10	(158)			
III. Implicit Self-esteem	2.64	2.24	−5.37	6.31	−.03	.15	(156)		
IV. Actual–ideal Discrepancy, High-importance Dimensions	−17.30	11.70	−70.00	8.00	−.11	.55**	−.05	(158)	
V. Actual–ideal Discrepancy, Low-importance Dimensions	−28.04	19.92	−90.00	5.00	.05	.04	−.01	.34**	(158)

Note. Gender was coded as '0' for males and '1' for females. Values in parentheses are the numbers of respondents who completed each measure. Higher Actual–Ideal discrepancy scores indicate greater self-enhancement.

**$p < .01$.

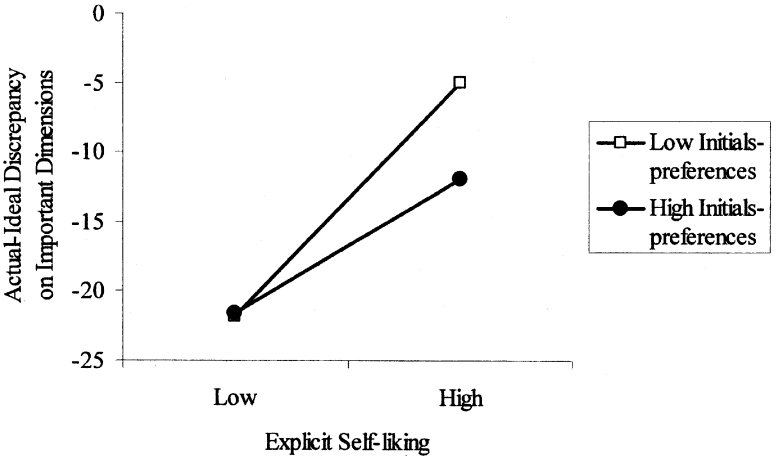

FIGURE 3 Predicted values for Actual–Ideal discrepancy on high-importance dimensions as a function of participants' Self-liking and Initials-preferences. *Note*: values shown are predicted scores, calculated at $\pm$ 1 *SD* from the mean on each type of self-esteem. Values closer to zero indicate smaller Actual–Ideal discrepancies.

personally important; on dimensions that are peripheral to most people's self-concepts, the Explicit $\times$ Implicit interaction was unrelated to Actual–Ideal discrepancies, consistent with the notion that such unimportant domains offer little in the way of self-enhancing benefits. Finally, we found no evidence in Study 2 that Initials-preferences moderate self-enhancement among people low in Self-liking, despite the occurrence of this effect in Study 1. We discuss this issue further in the next section.

General Discussion

Taken together, the findings from these two studies provide converging evidence that not all high-self-esteem persons seek enhancement with the same fervor. Across three different indices, people who had high Explicit Self-esteem and low Implicit Self-esteem significantly "out-enhanced" their counterparts who were high in both types of self-esteem. Indeed, people with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem predicted a virtually trouble-free future for themselves, perceived a highly flattering personality profile as very self-descriptive, and claimed to be quite close to their ideal selves on several important self-concept dimensions such as intellectual and social abilities. In contrast, the self-enhancement tendencies of people high in both Self-liking and Initials-preferences were relatively modest. This is the opposite of the pattern one might expect if Explicit and Implicit Self-esteem combined in a simply additive manner.

To our knowledge, the findings presented here constitute some of the first evidence that discrepancies between people's explicit and implicit self-assessments predict a style of self-esteem management characterized by amplified self-enhancement (see also Jordan et al., 2002). This is not to say, however, that the assumptions behind our research are novel: Over 100 years ago, Freud hypothesized that intense, self-critical attitudes residing in the unconscious were fuel for the self-aggrandizing, narcissistic personality style (cf. Kris, 1994). More recent theorists have generally agreed with the idea that narcissism reflects a combination of underlying self-doubts and overt, excessively positive self-views (see Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1976).

Although we do not focus here on narcissism per se, our findings are certainly consistent with the classic view of the narcissist as somebody who strives for explicit enhancement to compensate for a lack of implicit self-love. Indeed, the highly flattering personality profile, to which our participants with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem were particularly drawn, described a narcissist: a self-aggrandizing individual who, though viewed as highly competent, is not particularly well-liked (see Endnote 3).

Note also that our findings are consistent with Tesser's (2000; Tesser, Martin, & Cornell, 1996) notion of the "self-zoo," in which different self-maintenance mechanisms can be substituted for one another. According to Tesser and his colleagues, a variety of self-protective mechanisms—such as social comparison and self-affirmation—can be utilized interchangeably to help the individual restore a satisfactory level of self-esteem or self-integrity following an ego threat (Tesser, Crepaz, Beach, Cornell, & Collins, 2000). Although we are not concerned here with self-enhancement following an overt threat, the idea of the self-zoo may still be relevant: Both Initials-preferences and explicit self-enhancement strategies are thought to serve self-regulatory functions by boosting and/or maintaining high self-esteem (Jones et al., 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Thus, high-self-esteem persons who are relatively low in preferences for their initials may maintain their self-esteem by relying more heavily on a "substitute" mechanism, such as unrealistic optimism or self-aggrandizement (see also Martin, 1999, for a similar model of compensatory self-processes).

Most importantly, our findings may point to a relatively easy way to distinguish between secure and fragile high self-esteem styles, i.e., by considering Initials-preferences in conjunction with explicit self-esteem. As such, the results presented here address a growing need among self-esteem researchers, who have long recognized that self-report measures of self-esteem, when used alone, cannot sufficiently account for the full scope of self-esteem-related traits and behaviors. For example, although high self-reported (i.e., explicit) self-esteem is associated with happiness, social skills, popularity, persistence at difficult tasks, and mental health (for a review see Taylor & Brown, 1988), accruing evidence suggests that a tendency to report high explicit self-esteem may also come with a cost: Some high-self-esteem individuals make poor impressions on both strangers and friends (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & John, 1997) and suffer relatively large declines in well-being after graduating from college (Robins & Beer, 2001, Study 2). Moreover, when threatened, some individuals high in explicit self-esteem exhibit heightened aggression (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) and physiological arousal (Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). We (along with others, e.g., Kernis, in press; Kernis & Paradise, 2002; Shedler et al., 1993), believe that these divergent findings reflect the fact that there are (at least) two different types of people who score high on self-report measures of self-esteem: those who possess a secure, well-grounded sense of self-worth, and those who possess a more fragile sense of self-worth that is relatively vulnerable to threat. Our findings suggest that implicit self-esteem, as measured by Initials-preferences, may play a key role in differentiating between high-self-esteem people who are likely to experience favorable versus unfavorable outcomes.

Of course, the results presented here establish only that people high in Explicit self-esteem and low in Implicit Self-esteem demonstrate a particularly strong need for self-enhancement in their self-assessments and expectations for the future; we cannot conclude that high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem is necessarily associated with

poor adjustment or other undesirable outcomes. Still, given that high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem individuals have an exceptionally strong hunger for positive evaluations, it seems like a relatively small step to assert that such persons will react in a particularly strong manner to threats to their self-worth (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1996; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Shedler et al., 1993), and might even seek retribution on those who have threatened their fragile perceptions of self-worth. At the very least, accruing evidence suggests that excessive self-enhancement tendencies predict interpersonal and emotional difficulties (e.g., John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001). The high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem individuals that we have identified in the present studies thus appear to be strong candidates for a host of personal and interpersonal difficulties, despite the short-term benefits that might be obtained from self-enhancing.

We note, however, that some limitations of this research deserve mention. First, in Study 1, people with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem, as compared to those high in both types of self-esteem, differed in their accuracy ratings for the very flattering profile but not in their ratings of any other profile. This pattern is conceptually consistent with the finding in Study 2 that individuals with high-Explicit/low-Implicit Self-esteem reported relatively small Actual–Ideal discrepancies on important, but not unimportant, self-concept dimensions. It is possible that this pattern can be understood in terms of the defenses—self-enhancement versus self-protection—that underlie people's reactions to feedback. Specifically, people with high self-esteem tend to maintain their favorable self-views by focusing attention on their positive qualities, or self-enhancing, rather than by diverting attention away from their negative qualities, or self-protecting (e.g., Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Sommer, 2001; Tice, 1991). If high-self-esteem persons are generally more concerned with achieving success and praise than they are with avoiding failure and criticism, this could explain why our participants with high Explicit and low Implicit Self-esteem rated the very flattering profile particularly *high* in accuracy but did not rate the unflattering profiles particularly *low* in accuracy. It remains unclear, however, why Implicit Self-esteem did not significantly moderate perceived accuracy of the moderately flattering profile among high Explicit Self-esteem people. Perhaps this profile was simply not positive enough to capture the attention of people with high Explicit and low Implicit Self-esteem. This possibility requires additional exploration, and we believe that such exploration may prove useful in establishing the boundary conditions of self-enhancement.

Furthermore, the findings from Study 1 revealed an interesting effect that was not replicated in Study 2. Specifically, in Study 1, participants with low Explicit and high Implicit Self-esteem self-enhanced more than participants low in both types of self-esteem; in Study 2, however, there were no differences in the self-enhancement tendencies exhibited by people with these two combinations of Explicit and Implicit Self-esteem. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know whether the different findings for people with low Explicit Self-esteem were caused by differences in the self-enhancement indices used in the two studies, the populations from which participants were drawn, or some other variable. Still, the patterns obtained in Study 1 suggest that Implicit Self-esteem levels may play an important role in shaping the self-enhancement tendencies of people with low Explicit Self-esteem, and this trend clearly calls for replication.

Finally, a note about the measurement of Implicit Self-esteem is in order. Although we refer to the construct that is captured by people's initials preferences as "implicit self-esteem" throughout this article, we recognize that there are several

other measures of implicit self-esteem that do not correlate with Initials-preferences (e.g., Bosson et al., 2000). Clearly, these measures cannot all be tapping into precisely the same construct, and it is therefore possible that the findings presented here would not replicate with a different measure of Implicit Self-esteem, such as the self-esteem Implicit Associations Test (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). In support of the Initials-preferences task, however, we note that: 1) it can be administered quickly in group settings (unlike many other measures of implicit self-esteem, see Bosson et al., 2000); 2) it is stable across time; and 3) evidence of its validity as a measure of implicit self-associations continues to accrue (e.g., Bosson et al., 2000; DeHart, 2002; Koole et al., 2001). In our efforts to map the implicit self-concept, we may find that people's attitudes toward their name-letters provide a surprisingly rich source of information, allowing researchers to clarify the relations between explicit and implicit self-regard and understand the complexities of their interactions.

Appendix

Highly unflattering profile: I suspect that this person has a fairly negative attitude toward him/herself a lot of the time. He/she comes across as someone who doesn't really like him/herself very much, and maybe even has a tendency to *dis*like him/herself. Furthermore, I sense that he/she is seriously lacking in confidence about his/her ability to succeed at things; much of the time, he/she feels that he/she is incapable of success, and that failure is inevitable.

Moderately unflattering profile: It seems to me that maybe this person has some difficulty with liking him/herself—perhaps he/she tends to have a negative attitude toward him/herself at times. If I had to guess, I would say that this person has a tendency to experience doubt about his/her self-worth. I also sense that this person has some concerns about his/her level of capability, and sometimes experiences doubt about his/her ability to succeed at things.

Moderately flattering profile: It seems that this person feels pretty good about him/herself, and he/she probably feels deserving of the affection of others. Overall, this seems to be someone who feels like a worthwhile person, doesn't have a lot of hang-ups, and is comfortable with him/herself. Moreover, it seems that this individual thinks of him/herself as a competent person. He/she seems to feel confident that he/she will succeed at the things he/she sets out to do.

Highly flattering profile: I get the feeling that this person thinks extremely highly of him/herself, and possesses a very positive attitude toward him/herself. He/she is firmly convinced of his/her own self-worth, and knows that affection and admiration from others are well-deserved. Also, this person seems to have the utmost confidence in his/her ability to excel at any task he/she attempts; this person tends to feel that he/she can do things better than most other people.

Notes

1. The SLCS is designed to capture two fundamental components of global self-esteem—*self-competence* (beliefs about one's skills and abilities) and *self-liking* (beliefs about one's lovability). We chose to focus exclusively on the self-liking component of global self-esteem for several reasons. Theoretically, fondness for one's name initials reflects a spreading of self-relevant positive affect to objects closely associated with the self (Nuttin, 1985); therefore, the explicit analog to this implicit, self-directed fondness is best captured by measuring people's feelings of self-liking,

rather than their self-competence or a combination of the two. Furthermore, pilot data collected independently of those presented here showed that, when self-liking and self-competence were used together to assess explicit self-esteem, the predicted patterns of self-enhancement did not emerge consistently or strongly (Bosson & Swann, 1998; Brown, 2001; Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2001). Thus, we assessed explicit self-esteem using only the self-liking items from the SLCS.

2. Initials-preferences scores might also be computed by subtracting each participant's average liking for all non-initials letters from his/her liking for his/her initials. We avoid this purely idiographic scoring strategy because it does not control for the normative popularity of different letters, which are both highly variable across individual letters (e.g., 'A' is generally liked better than 'V,' etc.), and highly stable across different samples that we have examined (e.g., ratings of the letter 'A' are consistently high from one sample to the next). Still, in Study 1, the two different scoring strategies produced highly correlated scores, $r = .87$, $p < .001$, and the idiographic Initials-preferences measure interacted with Self-liking to produce patterns nearly identical to those presented here.
3. To ensure that the profiles were perceived in the intended manner, we asked a separate sample of 59 judges who were blind to all procedures and hypotheses of the study to rate the profiles along eight dimensions (each judge rated only one profile). First, on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), judges indicated how flattering the profile was. Next, judges were instructed to "imagine a person who fits this description," and then use the same 7-point scale to rate how confident, modest, arrogant, likable, competent, conceited, and nice that person seemed. A principal components analysis on ratings of the hypothetical target person yielded a *friendly*-factor (likable and nice; $r = .71$), and a *superior* factor (confident, modest [reverse-coded], arrogant, competent, and conceited; $\alpha = .84$).

   We performed planned contrasts on judges' ratings of the profiles using linear weights of -1.5, $-.5$, $+.5$, and $+1.5$ for the highly unflattering, moderately unflattering, moderately flattering, and highly flattering profiles, respectively. The *t*-test results were significant for all three ratings, and the patterns of means generally confirmed our expectations. For ratings of how flattering each profile was, means for the profiles (ranging from highly unflattering to highly flattering) were 1.79, 2.47, 5.40, and 5.07, $t(54) = 9.13$, $p < .01$. For ratings of the hypothetical target person's friendliness, Ms $= 3.82$, 4.40, 5.10, and 4.57, $t(54) = 2.06$, $p < .05$. For ratings of the target person's superiority, Ms $= 2.57$, 2.81, 4.53, and 5.56, $t(54) = 10.34$, $p < .01$. Thus, observers perceived the profiles as generally increasing in positivity. Note, though, that they rated the highly flattering profile as slightly *less* "flattering" and "friendly," and as slightly *more* "superior," relative to the moderately flattering profile. Based on these patterns, it appears that the highly flattering profile describes a person with narcissistic tendencies who *thinks* he or she is superior, but is not necessarily liked better than others.
4. In Study 2, Initials-preferences scores computed using the two different scoring strategies (see Endnote 1) were correlated at $r = .69$, $p < .001$. When we re-ran analyses using the idiographic scoring procedure, the Self-liking $\times$ Initials-Preferences interaction was not significant in the models predicting Actual–Ideal discrepancies on high-importance or low-importance dimensions, βs $< .09$, ts < 1.
5. We also ran a regression analysis in which we treated Actual–Ideal discrepancies, averaged across all eight self-concept dimensions, as the criterion variable. This analysis yielded only a main effect of Self-liking, $\beta = .43$, $t(150) = 5.69$, $p < .01$. The interaction term was not significant, $\beta = -.04$, $t < 1$, nor were Gender, $\beta = -.03$, $t < 1$, or Initials-preferences, $\beta = -.12$, $t(150) = -1.56$, $p = .12$.

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