The Mediating Role of Implicit Theory in Individual Aggression: Does Positive Self-Regard plus Negative Feedback Necessarily Lead to Violence?

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Abstract
This study tested hypotheses concerning the relationships between people’s self-regard, their implicit theories, and aggression. Eighty-six College participants’ self-evaluated social confidence was measured by a translated version of the Self-Rating Scale. A computerized experiment was conducted in which the participants were randomly assigned to two groups and read an article that supported either an entity view or an incremental view of human traits. They then received negative comments on their social competence and were provided with an opportunity to aggress against the evaluator during a paired contest. In general, participants who had been induced to believe in an entity view of human traits responded more aggressively than those in the incremental view group did. For people with low social confidence, those in the entity view group were more aggressive than those in the incremental view group. For people with high social confidence, no significant difference was found between the two groups. Implications of the results were discussed.

Keywords: Aggression, Implicit Theory, Self-esteem, College Students.
Introduction

The relationship between aggression and self-esteem has undergone considerable research during the past decades (Salmivalli, 2001). Although it had long been assumed that low self-esteem led to aggression (Steffenhagen & Burns, 1987), empirical data for the proposition was at best mixed. In the area of child and youth development, some studies have shown a negative correlation between individual’s global self-esteem and aggressive behavior (Lochman & Dodge, 1994; O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001) while others have found no significant differences in self-esteem between aggressive and non-aggressive youth (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Salmivalli, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Moreover, an opposite pattern has been found regarding children’s self-perceived social competence and aggression. There is consistent evidence suggesting that aggressive children hold inflated positive self-perception about their social competence (David & Kistner, 2000; Hughes, Cavell, & Grossman, 1997; Hymel, Bowker, & Woody 1993; Perez, David, Kistner, & Joiner, 2001). Those children often reported an average or higher social competence and did not regard themselves as having interpersonal problems while they were actually rejected by peers. Therefore, it is safe to say that certain individuals with positive self-regard are highly aggressive.
Researchers have recently suggested that it is not high or low self-esteem per se but rather the structural characteristics of one’s self-esteem that contribute to aggression. For example, Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996) have proposed that the combination of a high but fragile self-esteem and ego threat lead to violence. According to this formulation, aggression can be viewed as a defensive mechanism for maintaining a positive self-regard against unfavorable feedback. In a sequent study, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that people with high narcissism showed a high level of aggressive response after receiving personal insults while self-esteem level alone was unrelated to aggression. At the same time, Kernis, Grannemann and Barclay (1989) showed that among high self-esteem people, it was the instability of self-esteem that associated with hostility and anger. Salmivalli and others (1999) measured adolescents’ self-evaluated self-esteem, peer-evaluated self-esteem, and peer-evaluated defensive egotism (i.e., “wants to be the center of attention”, “thinks too much of him/herself”, and “can’t take criticism”) and found that bullying behavior was especially typical among a group of subjects who had high defensive egotism and slightly above-average self-esteem. Given these findings, some researchers have suggested that high self-esteem people are a heterogeneous group that includes both highly aggressive and non-aggressive individuals (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Salmivalli, 2001). In other words, high
self-esteem people who are narcissistic, defensive, and easily threatened by negative feedback may manifest a tendency toward aggression.

Evidence for aggressive people’s sensitivity to potential ego threats can also be found in research on children’s interpretation of social cues. Crick and Dodge (1994) have proposed that hostile attributional bias is one major characteristic in some aggressive children’s social information processing. Not only interpreting others’ feedback as hostile, those children also generate more aggressive retaliations as behavioral responses to ambiguous provocation. The tendency of aggressive children to attribute hostility in ambiguous and accidental situations has been documented in other studies (Guerra & Slaby, 1989; Dodge, Murphy, & Buchsbaum, 1984) and has been suggested as a determinative factor for their violent behavior. From this perspective, retaliatory aggression can be regarded as a defensive behavior against perceived interpersonal threats.

Although it has been well established that aggressive individuals are highly sensitive and aversive to unfavorable comments, it is not clear why they feel so threatened by negative feedback. To be sure, not all people with positive self-regard manifest such a tendency. Kernis and others suggested that people with stable high self-esteem do not have strong reactions to positive or negative evaluative events (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). Stable high self-esteem people also reported a low tendency to
experience hostility and anger (Kernis et al., 1989). At the same time, aggressive children’s belief of aggression as a legitimate response to the source of negative evaluations is far from universal among high self-esteem people. In one dissertation study on adolescent girls’ aggression (Allison, 2000), non-aggressive girls were characterized by positive self-esteem, pride in self, and low endorsement for the legitimacy of aggression.

The major goal of the present study is to examine the potential factors that contribute to the heterogeneity in aggression between people with similar levels of self-regard. Researchers have utilized terms such as self-esteem instability and narcissism to characterize the distinctive features of aggressive people’s self-esteem structure (Kernis, 1993; Baumeister et al., 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Despite their convenience, those concepts are primarily descriptive and do not provide clear formulations for the mechanisms involved in aggressive individual’s social cognition process. It is important to explore the cognitive elements of narcissism or further investigate the factors that make one’s self-esteem unstable. Such narcissism and unstable self-esteem may consequently lead to a strong aversion to negative feedback and a tendency of being aggressive.
Implicit personality theory

In this study, it was hypothesized that aggressive individuals’ extreme aversion to negative feedback and endorsement of violence resulted from their underlying beliefs about the stability of human traits. It has long been suggested that our implicit beliefs about personal attributes influence how we perceive self and others. Recently, Dweck and associates (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995) proposed that people hold implicit theories about the malleability of individual traits. Two major theories can be identified based on their different hypotheses on this issue. Entity theory views human trait as a fixed entity while incremental theory regards traits as malleable and changeable. These implicit theories shape people’s interpretation and reaction to negative events. In a series of studies Heyman & Dweck, 1998), the authors demonstrated that children who held an entity view tended to perceive negative outcomes and behaviors in terms of the actor’s fixed traits. They made more dispositional judgments and emphasized the evaluative significance of performance outcomes and behaviors. They also endorsed more retribution and punishment in response to other’s transgressions. When they themselves received setbacks, individuals with an entity theory showed greater negative affect and reacted with less further attempts and effort for the task. On the other hand, people with incremental beliefs paid more attention to the specific contextual and psychological mediators that contributed to the negative outcomes (Erdley,
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Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997). When encountering setbacks, they spent more effort on reparative actions.

It should be noted that people’s implicit theories are independent from their self-esteem and self-confidence (Dweck et al., 1995). For any self-esteem level, we should find individuals with entity theory as well as incremental theory. Also, those implicit theories are domain-specific. A person can hold an entity view in one domain but hold an incremental view in another. For the purpose of the present study, we are most interested in people’s beliefs about the malleability of their personality (in stead of academic or physical capability). We believe that children and adults’ assumptions in this domain are most relevant to their reactions to negative social feedback, among which aggression is a common one. So far, few studies have examined the relationship between people’s implicit theories, self-regard, and their tendency towards aggression. However, the previous studies mentioned above have shown several potential areas for investigation. This study thus aims at testing two major hypotheses concerning the mediating role of implicit theory in the relationship between self-regard and aggression.
Research hypotheses

It is proposed that the effect of self-regard on aggression varies with people’s implicit theories. First, for people with low social confidence, those who believe in an entity view will be more predisposed to aggression in the face of criticism than those with an incremental view will. Low self-regard accompanied with an entity view may result in a belief that one’s unfavorable personality is unchangeable. Such beliefs may make people focus more on retaliation or eliminating sources of negative feedback as hopeless and self-protective responses while spending less effort on reparation. On the other hand, the belief of malleable personality is expected to reduce the psychological impact of negative feedback for low self-regard people since the question becomes a matter of effort and there is always space for personal improvement.

Second, for people with high social confidence, it is hypothesized that those in the incremental view group will be more aggressive than those in the entity view group. The belief of changeable personality can make one’s positive self-regard more unstable and vulnerable to negative feedback, which may elicit strong emotional reaction and retaliation. On the other hand, an entity view may make people believe that their superiority is unchangeable and strengthen their self-confidence in the face of negative feedback, which can buffer the impact of criticism and reduces their hostile reaction. In sum, people’s aversion of
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criticism and consequent aggression is expected to be influenced by both the level of their self-regard and the implicit theory they use to process negative social feedback. A computerized experiment was designed to test these hypotheses in which the subjects’ implicit theories were temporally manipulated and their aggressive responses toward a provocateur were recorded.
Method

Participants

Participants of this study were 86 students at National Taiwan University who were recruited via campus advisements. 51.2% of them (n=44) were female and 48.8% (n=42) were male. The mean age of the participants was 21.1. Each participant received 200 NTD as reimbursement.

Design

Participants were randomly assigned to read an article that supported either an entity view or an incremental view for the malleability of individual’s personality. Forty-six people in the entity view group and 40 in the incremental view group had valid data and they constituted the final sample of this study. Participants whose social confidence scores were below average were classified as the low social confidence (LSC) group while the others were classified as the high social confidence (HSC) group. The volume and duration of the noise that the participant set up (which were explained below) were used as two indictors of aggression. Data were analyzed using a 2 (entity vs. incremental view) x 2 (LSC vs. HSC) ANOVA procedure.

Measures and procedure

Participants were led into an empty room with a desktop computer and Internet connection. They first completed a translated version of the Self-Rating Scale
developed by Fleming and Courtney (1984), which was a self-report questionnaire with a 7-point Likert scale (1=never, 7=always) assessing five major domains of people’s self-concept such as social confidence and school abilities. The original Self-Rating Scale has been shown to have satisfactory reliability with coefficient alphas ranged from .77 to .88 and test-retest r between .79 and .83 for the five subscales (Fleming & Courtney, 1984). It was also correlated with other self-esteem measures such as the Rosenberg Scale. For the purpose of this study, only the 12-item social confidence subscale was used. This domain is regarded as most relevant to the issue of interpersonal violence, and it is also strongly connected to previous research on the relationship between aggressive children’s self-perceived social competence and their aggression.

Upon the completion of the questionnaire, the research assistant activated a computer program and asked the participant to follow the instructions shown on the computer. Participants read a scientific article about the malleability of individual’s personality on screen (see Appendix for the article). They were randomly assigned to read an article that either supported an entity view or an incremental view. Afterwards, they were told that a same-sex person in another room (who was actually non-existent) was already online and they would take a paired contest together. Before doing the task, each participant recorded a 30-second self-introduction voice email and sent it to the online partner. After sending out
their own self-introductions, the participants received the self-induction of their partners, which was actually a pre-recorded same-sex voice played by the computer program. They were asked to evaluate their partner’s self-introduction and were told that the partner would evaluate theirs, too. Shortly after the participants sent out their evaluation, they received a voice mail from the partner, which contained negative ratings and comments about the participants’ social competence (e.g., “He/she seems to be a boring person” and “I think he/she probably has few friends”).

Next, participants were asked to do a quiz contest in which they competed with their partners online. The task was designed following a widely used laboratory reaction time task for measuring aggression (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001) but with certain modifications. In short, 10 questions regarding the content of the article they just read will show up on the screen once at a time and they need to select the right answer as soon as possible. Before each round, each participant should decide the volume (1 minimum – 10 maximum) and duration (1-10 seconds) of a noise blast that his/her partner will receive if the person loses. The volume and duration that the participants set for the first round were used as indictors of their aggression. The noise volume and duration of other rounds were disregarded because they were confounded by the contest results of prior rounds.

The participants were explicitly told that the range of noise volume was safe to human hearing and would not cause
any damage to the receiver. Debriefing was also provided right after the experiment. In order to avoid eliciting distress for the participants, the program was set up to make them win all the 10 rounds of the quiz contest.
Results

A two-way ANOVA was conducted using implicit theory (entity vs. incremental) and social confidence (high vs. low) as independent variables and the noise volume as the dependent variable. The number of participants and the descriptive statistics of the four cells are shown in table 1. The result showed a significant main effect of implicit theory (F (1,82)=5.912, p=.017) (see Table2 for a summary). Participants who had been induced to believe an entity view of human personality were more aggressive in the face of negative feedback than those in the incremental view condition did. No significant effect of social confidence level was found.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Confidence</th>
<th>Implicit Theory</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Entity</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Incremental</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Entity</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Incremental</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Entity</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Incremental</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable (Noise Volume) for the experimental conditions

**Dependent Variable: Volume**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>31.56</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.52</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>619.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>619.95</td>
<td>214.24</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Confidence</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Theory</td>
<td>17.11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.11</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Confidence*Implicit Theory</td>
<td>14.70</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.70</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>237.29</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>911.00</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>268.85</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 ANOVA for the effects of Social Confidence and Implicit Theory on Noise Volume
A significant interaction effect between implicit theory and social confidence was found \( (F(1,82)=5.91, p=.027) \) (see Figure 1). In order to further examine this interaction effect, separate t-tests were conducted for participants in the entity view group and the incremental view group. Among people with high social confidence, those in the entity view group were more aggressive than those in the incremental view group \( (t=-3.87, df=33.82, p<0.01) \). For the subjects with low social confidence, no significant difference was found between the two groups.

A separate ANOVA analysis was conducted using the duration of the noise as the dependent variable. The result showed similar trends but did not reach significant level (see Figure 1).
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Table 3 and Figure 2).

**Dependent Variable: Duration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>8.010</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.670</td>
<td>1.418</td>
<td>.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>363.707</td>
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<td>363.707</td>
<td>193.135</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Theory</td>
<td>2.126</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.126</td>
<td>1.129</td>
<td>.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Confidence</td>
<td>1.711</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.711</td>
<td>.909</td>
<td>.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Theory * Social Confidence</td>
<td>4.843</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.843</td>
<td>2.572</td>
<td>.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>154.420</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1.883</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>535.000</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>162.430</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 ANOVA for the effects of Social Confidence and Implicit Theory on Noise Duration

**Estimated Marginal Means of LENGTH**

Figure 2 Noise duration of the four experimental groups
Discussion

Prior research has shown that aggression often happens as a response to perceived threat to one’s self-regard. However, factors other than the level of self-regard are involved in determining people’s tendency towards aggression. A number of factors such as self-esteem stability and narcissism have been suggested to account for the sharp differences among high self-esteem people regarding their reaction to negative events. In the present study, the importance of people’s implicit theory as mediating the relationship between self-regard and aggression is highlighted. Those implicit theories are people’s fundamental assumptions about self and others and they significantly influence our judgment and reactions to social events. However, the results of this study were different from the predicted outcomes. First, although it was originally hypothesized that an entity view can strengthen one’s high self-regard and reduce the impact of negative feedback, the results showed that among participants with high social confidence, those who were induced to believe in an entity view of personality were more aggressive than people in the incremental view condition. One possible explanation is that people with an entity view may stick to their positive self-images in the face of negative feedback under the assumption of attribute stability. Since one’s positive characteristics are expected to be stable, negative feedback from others are likely to be viewed as an expression of
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hostility and insult. In other words, a strong belief of unchangeable positive attributes makes people narcissistic and reactive to criticism. On the other hand, those who believe in an incremental view of positive attributes may be willing to consider the information value of negative feedback and focus on ways of self-improvement and reparation. Therefore the incremental theory buffers one’s emotional reaction and retaliation in the face of criticism and setback.

It was also hypothesized that for people with low social confidence, those in the entity view group will be more aggressive than those in the incremental view group. This hypothesis was not supported, either. In fact, for subjects with low social confidence, the two groups were not significantly different in aggressiveness. It seemed that the influence of implicit theories were only salient for people with positive self-regard. Further research needs to be done to explore the cognitive mechanisms influencing the aggressive responses of people with low self-regard.

The results of the present study did not only suggest potential models for the cognitive processes involved in individual’s aggression but also provided insightful information to explain the existing research as well. For example, as discussed earlier, previous studies showed that people with unstable high self-esteem tend to be more aggressive and experience more anger and hostility than people with stable high self-esteem do. The present study
suggested that this instability might result from an implicit theory emphasizing the fixity of human personality. For people who hold such beliefs, negative feedback can elicit strong reaction and hostility. At the same time, other researchers have found a positive relationship between narcissism (inflated positive views of themselves, defensive and reactive to unfavorable feedback, low empathy toward others, etc.) and aggression. Consistent with such findings, it is suggested that people’s implicit theories may account for their narcissism and reactivity. In fact, the aggressive behavior among high self-regard people with entity beliefs has similarities with narcissist’s reaction to negative feedback. Their simplistic and depositional view of people impact their ability to consider the contextual and psychological factors involved in other people’s behaviors and feelings, which makes them fail to consider the content of negative feedback from others. They are also likely to attribute hostility to people who provide negative feedback to them, and they react aggressively to perceived threats.

One limitation of the present study is its lack of direct measures for the impact of negative feedback on participants’ self-regard. Since it is hypothesized that aggression is a response to self-esteem threats, high aggression should be associated with more serious self-perceived threat. The perceived magnitude of the threat thus needs to be assessed in order to provide more direct support for our model. The respondents’ orientation of implicit theory before and after
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the experimental manipulation was not measured, either. Without assessing how much they believe the perspective presented in the article, the impact of the manipulation remains unknown, which raises the issue of internal validity for the present study. These variables need to be better assessed in future research to ensure the validity of the results.

The present study provides significant implications for research and practice. It emphasizes the importance of examining the factors that mediate the impact of negative events on one’s aggressive responses. More investigations should be done on this issue. We need to better understand the structural characteristics of aggressive individuals’ self-concepts and how those factors contribute to their aggressive behavior. The results suggested that the implicit theories people held were one of these factors. It was further shown that the combination of high self-regard and an entity theory make people aggressive. Future studies should go beyond formulating one single aggressive personality to examine the combination and interactions between multiple risk factors. The present study echoed past research and showed heterogeneity among high self-regard people. Practitioners and educators have traditionally paid much effort in raise students’ self-esteem. The focus may need to be changed from simply heightening self-regard to ensuring an adaptive and flexible self-regard. For students with high self-regard, to develop an incremental view may reduce their
reactivity to negative feedback and maladjustment in face of obstacles. It is hoped by providing a board framework that integrates various relevant findings this present study can contribute to a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of individual’s aggressive behavior in the face of negative social feedback and help to design more effective prevention/intervention strategies for this issue.
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References


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The Mediating Role of Implicit Theory in Individual Aggression. 魏希聖、歐陽秀宜

Appendix

研究證實：人[不會]會改變
美國特派記者 / 加州柏克萊報導

加大柏克萊分校人類發展研究中心於本週一發表一項長期追蹤調查的結果，顯示人們的個人特質在一生中非常[不]容易變動。

這項研究在加州鄉村與都會地區共抽樣一千七百位受試者，並且對其進行長達三十五年的追蹤。從三歲開始，這些人的智力和人際能力等特質每年受到測量，測量方式包括自填問卷、父母/同儕填寫之問卷、訪談，以及在實驗室進行觀察。所有資料皆顯示，人們的特質[不會]會隨著時間和地點而改變。

本計畫的主持人羅特曼博士表示，此項研究結果的高度支持「個人特質具有高度可塑性[固定性]」的看法。人們在各種情況下會出現不同[類似]的行爲舉止。他們童年時的特質和三十年後的現狀也非常不相似[相似]。

羅特曼博士說，「我們的結果呼應了長久以來對於人類特質可塑性[穩定性]的研究。人們為了解決這些特質所作的努力，效果比我們預期的更好[更差]。我現在可以很穩當地結論：一個人很容易[很難]改變自己的人格特質。」

羅特曼博士最後說「看看你現在擁有哪些特質，你以後大概也會是這個樣子[如果你想改變，以後你大概不會是這個樣子]。」
內隱理論對於個人攻擊行為的中介作用研究—正向自尊感遭遇負面回饋必然造成暴力反應？

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歐陽秀宜
陽明大學 神經科學研究所

摘要
本研究探討大學生之自尊感、內隱理論，以及攻擊行為間關係。86 名受試者先填寫自我評分量表(Self-Rating Scale)，評估自己在人際方面的信心，隨即參與一項電腦實驗，在其中被隨機分成兩組，並閱讀一篇關於個人特質的文章，內容強調了實體論(entity)或增長論(incremental)觀點。接著，他們的人際能力遭到批評，而且他們有機會在一場雙方競賽中攻擊批評者。整體而言，相較於受到增長論影響的受試者，受實體論影響的受試者在實驗情境下有較高的攻擊傾向。單以高人際自信者而言，實體論組的攻擊性比增長論組為高。對於低人際自信者而言，實體論組與增長論組在攻擊性方面則未發現顯著差異。本文最後討論了這些研究結果的意義。

關鍵詞：攻擊行為、內隱理論、自尊、大學生