Core self-evaluation: Linking career social support to life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This research examined how core self-evaluation (CSE) develops from social support in the career context and how it influences individuals' life satisfaction. Study 1 used a field survey to collect data from 768 university students for testing the mediating role of CSE in the relationship between career social support (CSS) and life satisfaction. Study 2 employed two experiments with two groups of participants ($n = 103$ for Experiment 1 and $n = 102$ for Experiment 2) to further verify the Study 1 findings obtained from cross-sectional data. The results from these two studies showed that CSE mediated the CSS-life satisfaction relationship in such a way that CSS served as a cause of CSE, which in turn affected individuals' life satisfaction. Among the first to use both field study and experiments to confirm the antecedent (i.e., CSS) and outcome (i.e., life satisfaction) of CSE, this research offers useful insights regarding CSE as a causal mechanism underlying the effect of CSS on life satisfaction and carries important theoretical and practical implications.

1. Introduction

Core self-evaluation (CSE) refers to the "fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world" (Judge, Erez & Bono, 1998, p. 168). As a critical variable in positive psychology, CSE is considered a combinatory construct composed of four evaluation-oriented traits (i.e., self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability) (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Individuals with positive CSE like themselves and think of themselves as capable, worthy, and competent in dealing with issues in various life contexts. Those with negative CSE dislike themselves and are not confident in their capabilities, competence, or worthiness (Judge et al., 2003). Due to these characteristics, people with positive CSE have a greater tendency to experience life with good psychological wellbeing (e.g., life satisfaction) (Jiang & Jiang, 2015). While the traditional view holds that personality traits are relatively stable and change little over time (Costa & McCrae, 1992), some recent scholars have begun to recognize that CSE tends to be more malleable

and can be improved through external support such as training, coaching, and counseling (e.g., Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, & Bar-On, 2012; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). One underlying reason could be that although CSE is a complex of multiple traits, it may differ from a single personality trait, as the sub-traits underlying CSE may interplay internally to promote or confound the overall level of CSE (Jiang, 2015), particularly in the presence or absence of certain external factors.

Given the well-established evidence regarding the ability of CSE to foster positive psychological outcomes in life settings (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012; Jiang & Jiang, 2015), the view that CSE can be developed has opened a research avenue to explore the external antecedents that shape CSE and how the influence of these antecedents can be extended or transmitted to the outcomes of CSE. An emerging topic in this avenue is the role of social support as an antecedent of CSE and the ways social support can influence life satisfaction, a well-researched outcome of CSE (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005). Insights from several empirical studies tend to suggest that social support may increase individuals' life satisfaction/wellbeing through improving CSE or its sub-components (Liu, Li, Ling, & Cai, 2016; Song, Kong, & Jin, 2013; Tian, 2014). However, given that nearly all of these findings are drawn from only a few studies that employed a cross-sectional design, it is premature to conclude that CSE is a solid mechanism in the relationship between social support and life satisfaction. As Liu et al. (2016) suggested, studies using multiple methods in their research designs are warranted to verify the power of CSE in the mediating process. Indeed,

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research involving CSE-related traits has called for using experimental designs to verify the findings obtained in cross-sectional studies (Du, Bernardo, & Yeung, 2015). This call is largely based on the widely accepted perspective that the experimental design can better facilitate evaluations of causal relationships, even though in certain cases experiments may not completely guarantee causal effects (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016). In line with this perspective, previous research has confirmed the usefulness of the combination of cross-sectional and experimental designs in precluding causal relations (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013). Specifically, a possible approach is to use a pre-experimental cross-sectional study to identify correlations between variables, followed by rigorous experimental designs to further evaluate causal effects (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015).

In addition, since this line of CSE research has mainly focused on general social support, it is unclear how domain-specific social support contributes to the development of CSE and its outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction). The understanding of the external support factors that shape CSE (or related traits) will not be comprehensive without the study of social support in specific domains or contexts that are important for an individual as a human being (Lent & Brown, 2008). Given the critical role of career in one's life, it has been argued that the career development setting is an essential context that drives the formation of individuals' general psychological states (e.g., CSE and subjective wellbeing) (Lent & Brown, 2008; Lent et al., 2015). Focusing on the career domain, previous studies have shown the importance of career-related support throughout the entire vocational development process, from the initial planning and preparatory stage to the well-established or mature stage (Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Morgan & Ness, 2003) and across populations (Bimrose & McNair, 2011; Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006). However, scholars also argue that career social support (CSS), defined as the emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance from one's social networks in career-relevant tasks or issues, may differ from general social support in terms of their scope (Jiang, 2016). For example, CSS is often viewed as a subset of general social support though both types of support can potentially lead to positive individual outcomes (Huffman, Casper, & Payne, 2014). Due to the different scopes (e.g., specific support in one area versus overall support in all areas), one cannot run into a firm conclusion that CSS shapes outcomes in the same way as general social support without empirical verification. As previous scholars (e.g., Harris, Winskowski, & Engdahl, 2007; Huffman et al., 2014) indicated, although, theoretically speaking, career support may play important roles in seeking positive evaluations of the self, empirical studies are still warranted to confirm the impact of CSS on positive psychological states that are featured by evaluative focus (e.g., core self-evaluation and sense of satisfaction).

To advance these areas, this study employed multiple study designs (i.e., a field study and two experiments) to examine CSS as an antecedent of CSE and how CSS leads to life satisfaction via the mediating effect of CSE. Below we elaborate the relationships between CSS, CSE, and life satisfaction.

1.1. Career social support (CSS) and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is defined as an overall evaluation of quality of life based on a person's own unique set of criteria (Shin & Johnson, 1978). It is a cognitive and judgmental process through which people reflect on their current life circumstances versus what they think to be appropriate or ideal standards (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Social support can be a resource leading to life satisfaction, due to its facilitation role in coping with crises, adaptation, and stress in life (Cobb, 1976). Across disciplines, social support is consistently regarded as a type of social capital that is acquired via social interactions within various human groups (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). The literature indicates that general social support from family, friends, and significant others can facilitate the development of a sense of life satisfaction (Aquino, Russell, Cutrona, & Altmaier, 1996; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008).

This well-established relationship between general social support and life satisfaction has shed light on the contribution of CSS to one's life wellbeing, given the importance of the career development journey across one's life span (Savickas, 2013). For instance, extended to the career setting, research has found that support received from social networks can help individuals fit into the career environment and thereby enhance one's satisfaction with one's life status (Jiang, 2016; Jiang & Jiang, 2015). This occurs to a large extent because CSS received from network ties (e.g., family and peers) enables people to optimistically face career-related difficulties and develop positive attitudes toward important life events (Guay et al., 2006).

1.2. Core self-evaluation (CSE) as a mediator

We propose that CSS influences life satisfaction because CSS can shape one's positive CSE. Cutrona and Troutman (1986) theorize that the mechanism underlying the effects of social support is a facilitation process which maintains individuals' positive psychological traits (e.g., CSE and its componential traits). Their perspective implies that social support may serve as a facilitator in building and sustaining a person's positive self-evaluations. This conceptual view has been verified in studies showing that social support leads to positive CSE and its sub-traits (Theofilou, 2012). Applying this theorization in vocational contexts, scholars (e.g., Restubog, Florentino, & Garcia, 2010) contend that contextual support of career endeavors is an effective approach to increase people's positive affective reactions to their own mindsets, behaviors, abilities, and worthiness, which form the core of the CSE conceptualization (Judge et al., 1997). Despite the lack of direct empirical evidence for the CSS-CSE relationship, existing findings in career settings demonstrate that career-specific support is a source of positive self-evaluations characterized by psychological states such as self-efficacy (Jiang, 2016; Restubog et al., 2010) and self-esteem (Emmanuelle, 2009). These empirical and theoretical insights suggest that CSS is likely to lead to positive CSE in contexts involving career reflection, exploration, planning, and pursuit.

In addition, the self-concordance theory (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) indicates that individuals attain the greatest life satisfaction or happiness when their goals (as personal strivings) match their enduring needs, interests, and values. Building upon this theory, Judge et al. (2005) argue that people with positive CSE, due to their positive self-regard think, tend to choose, engage in, commit to, and attain self-concordant goals, and this ultimately makes them more satisfied with their lives. In accordance with the self-concordance perspective, theories (e.g., dynamic equilibrium theory and the top-down theory) of subjective wellbeing also support the contributions of psychological traits such as CSE in forming feelings toward one's life status (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). Indeed, empirical research has consistently demonstrated that CSE is a positive predictor of life satisfaction (Jiang & Jiang, 2015; Judge et al., 2005). Taking into account previous findings that highlight the contribution of career-specific support in the development of CSE-related traits (e.g., Emmanuelle, 2009; Restubog et al., 2010), as well as the above-mentioned theoretical bases and empirical evidence for the CSE-life satisfaction association (e.g., Judge, Locke, Durham & Kluger, 1998; Rey & Extremera, 2015), CSE is likely to be a mediator in the CSS-life satisfaction relationship.

1.3. The present study

In summary, the present study sought to advance our knowledge of how CSE develops from external sources in the career context and how CSE functions to affect individuals' satisfaction with their life status. Specifically, it examined the mediating effect of CSE in the relationship between CSS and life satisfaction using two studies. Study 1 used a field survey administered to university students to explore the relationships among CSS, CSE, and life satisfaction, with the mediating role of CSE tested using cross-sectional data. Study 2 employed an experimental