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Linking challenge and hindrance stress to safety performance: The moderating effect of core self-evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The buffering effect of core self-evaluation (CSE) in stress research has received academic attention. However, most research in this area focused on its moderating effect on well-being. In the present study, we take a closer look at the moderating role of CSE in the relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance. Results indicated that challenge and hindrance stress were both negatively related to safety performance. More importantly, CSE acted as a buffer in the negative relationships between challenge stress and safety compliance and between hindrance stress and safety participation. Contrary to our prediction, the negative relationship between hindrance stress and safety participation was stronger for people higher on CSE. Based on our findings, we discuss the theoretical implications for personality and safety research.

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1. Introduction

Recently there has been an emerging trend to examine the critical role of higher-order personality constructs in personality research (Johnson, Rosen, & Chang, 2011; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). Among them is the construct of core self-evaluation (CSE). According to Judge et al. (1997), core self-evaluation refers to the fundamental evaluations that people hold about themselves. Although originally proposed to explain its pivotal influence on job satisfaction (Judge et al., 1997), CSE has been studied in a wide array of areas such as decision making (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012) and stress (Creed, Lehmann, & Hood, 2009).

In the present study, we take a closer look at CSE in job stress research. CSE is the underlying trait of four personality traits: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control (Judge et al., 1997). To better capture the common core underlying these personality factors, Judge, Erez, Bono, and Thoresen (2003) developed a 12-item scale to directly measure the fundamental trait of CSE. Although some criticisms exist regarding the limitation of directly measuring CSE (Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008), this approach has been useful in capturing the underlying trait among the four personality indicators (Judge et al., 2003) and predicting a wide arrange of outcomes (e.g., Stanhope, Pond, & Surface, 2013). Moreover, since self-esteem

(Rector & Roger, 1997), generalized self-efficacy (Jex & Bliese, 1999), emotional stability (Korotkov, 2008), and locus of control (Keenan & McBain, 1979) have similar moderating effects in the relationship between stressors and outcomes, directly assessing their shared underlying factor might prove to be equally, if not more, valuable in revealing its potential moderating effects in job stress research.

The construct of CSE readily lends itself to stress research in that the fundamental appraisal of self might “color” how people appraise and respond to stress (Judge et al., 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, the main effect of CSE on stress has received consistent support such that people high on CSE tend to experience less stress (e.g., Creed et al., 2009). In addition to its main effect, personality researchers are also interested in its moderating effect in the stress process. Despite the intuitive appeal of CSE as a moderator, some studies failed to find empirical support (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998; Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009). Among studies that supported CSE as a moderator, the outcomes of interest were limited to well-being such as health (Tsaousis, Nikolaou, Serdaris, & Judge, 2007) and job satisfaction (Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2009). Comparatively, there is a dearth of research examining the moderating effect of CSE on behavioral outcomes, which might lead one to question the bottom-line implications of CSE. As such, the present study is aimed to extend this line of research into a behavioral domain, safety performance. Safety performance is a proximal determinant of safety outcomes such as accidents and injuries (Christian, Bradley,

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Wallace, & Burke, 2009). In doing so, we hope to add credibility to CSE as a leveraging personality factor in influencing people's behavioral responses to stress.

Safety performance refers to the behaviors that individuals carry out in the workplace to promote safety and consists of two dimensions, safety compliance and safety participation (Griffin & Neal, 2000). Safety compliance deals with the core safety activities that maintain safety whereas safety participation is citizenship behaviors that help promote workplace safety. In the workplace, stress can be either triggered by challenges, which have the potential to promote personal growth and mastery, or hindrances, which tend to thwart personal growth and goal attainment (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000; Clarke, 2012). Although meta-analytic evidence is available for challenges and hindrances and their relationships with safety behaviors (see Clarke, 2012), the putative intermediary role of stress was not directly examined. In the present study, we look directly into the relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance. By challenge/hindrance stress, we refer to the stress that an individual experiences as a result of encountering different job situations (i.e., challenges and hindrances; Cavanaugh et al., 2000).

Although evidence suggests conscientiousness and locus of control are positively whereas risk taking is negatively related to safety performance (Christian et al., 2009), the moderating role of personality in safety research received less attention. Despite the call to examine individual differences in challenge/hindrance stress research (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007), few efforts were made to look at CSE as a buffer in the relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance. Taken together, the present study is aimed to examine the moderating role of CSE in the relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance. In doing so, we aim to extend this line of CSE research beyond well-being outcomes. Moreover, we also help to fill the void in safety research by looking at the relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance and examining CSE as a personality moderator.

1.1. Challenge and hindrance stress and safety performance

Challenge stress might be related to lower levels of safety performance. For example, challenge stress triggered by work overload might motivate individuals to work hard in an attempt to complete the task at hand. In order to do so, individuals might take shortcuts and overlook safety procedures to get the task done. In this sense, challenge stress resulting from these work conditions might divert individual's attention away from safety performance by motivating them to take shortcuts (Halbesleben, 2010; Wallace & Chen, 2006). Consequently, people experiencing challenge stress might not be able to deploy their resources to engage in safety behaviors. As such, challenge stress might be related to lower levels of safety performance (i.e., safety compliance and safety participation).

Hypothesis 1: Challenge stress will be negatively related to safety compliance (H1a) and safety participation (H1b).

Hindrance stress is experienced when individuals perceive work aspects as obstacles to goal achievement and personal growth (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Hindrance stress has been shown to relate to exhaustion, which could leave employees inadequate resources for safety performance (Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Hofmann, 2011). Moreover, when employees experience such hindrances as red tape and role ambiguities, they do not have access to the necessary job resources to improve workplace safety. When employees run into red tape, they might perceive low support for safety performance. Role ambiguity might leave employees confused when they are trying to perform on their jobs. These job resources such as support and role clarity have been documented

to be important antecedents to safety behaviors, without which employees are less likely to engage in safety behaviors (Griffin & Neal, 2000; Nahrgang et al., 2011). Taken together, hindrance stress is expected to negatively relate to safety performance.

Hypothesis 2: Hindrance stress will be negatively related to safety compliance (H2a) and safety participation (H2b).

1.2. The moderating role of CSE

As a fundamental evaluation that one holds about self, CSE might influence how people cope with stress. First, people high in CSE might be less sensitive to the potential effect of stress, consistent with the differential reactivity hypothesis (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). That is, people with greater personal resources such as CSE are less likely to perceive situations as threatening (Harris et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). In other words, those with lower levels of CSE might demonstrate a stronger negative relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance because of their heightened reactivity to stress. Second, people with differing levels of CSE might also differ in the coping mechanisms they choose. People high in CSE might be more likely to use problem-focused coping and less likely to use avoidant coping (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). As a result, their productive coping style might enable them to effectively buffer the negative impact of challenge and hindrance stress on safety performance, consistent with the differential effectiveness hypothesis (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). From a resource perspective, people high in CSE have a greater pool of personal resources with which they can effectively cope with stress (Harris et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). Empirical evidence also lends support to the buffering effect of CSE (Harris et al., 2009; Tsaousis et al., 2007). Together, we expect that people with lower levels of CSE will demonstrate a stronger negative relationship between challenge/hindrance stress and safety performance.

Hypothesis 3: CSE will moderate the relationships between challenge stress and safety compliance (3a) and between challenge stress and safety participation (3b) such that the negative relationships between challenge stress and safety performance dimensions will be stronger for people low in CSE.

Hypothesis 4: CSE will moderate the relationships between hindrance stress and safety compliance (4a) and between hindrance stress and safety participation (4b) such that the negative relationships between hindrance stress and safety performance dimensions will be stronger for people low in CSE.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants in the present study were employees working for a large gold mine company in China. All of the participants were front-line workers. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 335 of them were returned (response rate = 83.75%). 271 questionnaires turned out to be usable. The majority of the study sample were male (75.3%). 89.7% of the participants were 30 years or older and 86.7% of the participants had been working in the company for five years or longer.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Core self-evaluation

Core self-evaluation was measured using the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES; Judge et al., 2003). The twelve items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example item is "When I try, I generally

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