

Self-esteem during university studies predicts career characteristics 10 years later [☆]

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Received 26 April 2006

Available online 6 February 2007

Abstract

To examine how self-esteem measured during university studies would impact on the characteristics of the work career 10 years later, 297 university students completed the Rosenberg's self-esteem inventory four times while at university and various career-related questionnaires 10 years later. Latent Growth Curve Modeling showed that a high overall level of self-esteem predicted being in permanent employment 10 years later, having a high salary, and reporting a high level of work engagement, and job satisfaction, and a low level of burnout. By contrast, low self-esteem predicted unemployment, feelings of exhaustion, cynicism and reduced accomplishment at work, and low levels of work engagement and job satisfaction.

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Keywords: Self-esteem; Job engagement; Burnout; Salary; Unemployment; Longitudinal

1. Introduction

Self-esteem is generally regarded as an evaluation in which people express approval or disapproval of themselves and make judgements about their personal worth (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995; Suls, 1989). Although a large body of research has been carried out on self-esteem (For a review, see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), little is known about how self-esteem predicts later life-trajectories, such as the early phase of the career and working life. It might be assumed that high self-esteem,

[☆] This study was funded by grant from the Finnish Academy (121 0319).

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which is a favourable global evaluation of the self, provides a foundation for success in dealing with challenges at work and in the career. In turn, low self-esteem, an unfavourable evaluation of the self, might lead to difficulties in making the transition to work and the early vocational career. The present 15-year, five-wave longitudinal study examined changes in self-esteem among young people during their university studies and to what extent self-esteem predicted their subsequent work experiences, in terms of both the working life situation (a permanent job, unemployment, and level of salary) and work-related attitudes (work engagement, job satisfaction, and burnout), 10 years later.

Self-esteem is defined as the value people place on themselves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). It is the evaluative component of self-knowledge. High self-esteem refers to a highly favourable and low self-esteem to an unfavourable global evaluation of the self (Baumeister, 1993). High self-esteem demonstrates a sense of self-worth with the implication that one will be accepted rather than rejected by others, and that one is not a failure in one's life. Previous cross-sectional research has shown that, after a period of decreasing self-esteem during adolescence (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003), self-esteem typically increases during the 20s and the 30s (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). However, few longitudinal studies have examined changes in self-esteem during young adulthood. In one study, Galambos, Barker, and Krahn (2006) found that self-esteem increased during this period. In another study, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, and Johnston (2005) showed that well-being (a composite measure consisting of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social support) increased in a longitudinal sample followed from age 18 to 24. However, although self-esteem might improve in young adulthood, such trajectories may also show substantial inter-individual variation.

Individuals face many more transitions and life-decisions during young adulthood than at any other stage of life (Caspi, 2002; Grob, Krings, & Bangerter, 2001). Such transitions and decisions include taking responsibility of oneself, achieving financial independence from parents, building intimate relationships and starting a family (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Lefkowitz, 2005; Masten et al., 1999; Schulenberg, Maggs, & O'Malley, 2003; Shanahan, 2000; Shiner & Masten, 2002). One transition that the vast majority of individuals face during young adulthood is the transition from finishing their education to entry into working life. Achieving a certain level of education lays the foundation for entry into a particular occupation. Resolution of work-related challenges then provides the basis for a successful transition to adulthood, whereas failure in such resolution may lead to the risk of later developmental disadvantage and problems (Schulenberg et al., 2003). It might be also assumed that individuals' self-esteem during young adulthood provides the basis for their success in dealing with the major developmental tasks and challenges they face. The transition into working life is a good example.

Entrance into working life, however, is a complex phenomenon involving many processes and outcomes. Not surprisingly, various concepts have been used in describing it, such as occupational success (Judge & Bono, 2001), unemployment (e.g., Kokko & Pulkkinen, 1998; Winefield, Tiggemann, & Winefield, 1992), and re-employment (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & Van Ryn, 1989; Waters & Moore, 2002; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1985). Entry into working life is not only reflected in career characteristics but also in several evaluative components of work, such as work-related satisfaction and engagement on the one hand, and burnout (Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993) and workaholism (Burke, 2001; Taris, Schaufeli, & Verhoeven, 2005) on the other.

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