



# A comparison of general and work-specific measures of core self-evaluations

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 December 2009

Available online 10 February 2010

### Keywords:

Core self-evaluations

Job attitudes

Employee well-being

Extra-role behaviors

## ABSTRACT

During the past decade, considerable research attention has been given to core self-evaluations (CSEs). Although this research has found that CSE is related to several important work-related outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, job performance), we believe that researchers' reliance on general rather than work-specific CSE has resulted in underestimates of the importance of CSE. Based on the literature on frame-of-reference effects in personality assessment, we predict that work-related CSE will yield stronger relationships with work-related criteria than general CSE will and that work-specific CSE will be related to work-specific criteria after general CSE has been controlled. Using two independent samples, we found that when compared with general CSE, work-specific CSE generally failed to yield significantly stronger zero-order relationships with work-related criteria. However, we found several instances in which work-specific CSE predicted incremental variance in work-related criteria after the effects of general CSE were controlled.

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## 1. Introduction

Several recent studies have examined core self-evaluations (CSEs) as predictors of work-related attitudes and behaviors (Bono & Judge, 2003; Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008; Judge, 2009; Judge & Bono, 2001a). The CSE construct, which represents the fundamental beliefs that one holds about his or her own competence and self-worth, consists of four personality traits that have historically been examined separately from each other: self-esteem, general self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability (Judge & Bono, 2001b; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). Evidence for the validity of the CSE construct can be found in studies that show that the four constituent CSE traits load onto a common latent factor (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Judge et al., 1998).

Much of the extant research has examined the potential work-related consequences of CSE. Meta-analytic evidence, for example, suggests that CSE is positively related to both job satisfaction and job performance (Judge & Bono, 2001a). Other research has linked CSE to goal-setting and task motivation (Erez & Judge, 2001), stressors, strains, and coping (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009), and perceptions of the work environment (Judge et al., 1998).

Despite these promising findings, we believe that the existing research has generally underestimated the extent to which CSE predicts work-related outcomes. This is because organizational research has utilized general rather than domain-specific measures of CSE. Whereas general CSE measures ask participants to report how competent and worthy they are in general, a

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domain-specific measure would ask participants about how competent and worthy they are in a specific setting, such as at work, at home, or at school.

Drawing upon the growing literature on frame-of-reference effects in personality assessment (Bing, Whanger, Davison, & VanHook, 2004; Hunthausen, Truxillo, Bauer, & Hammer, 2003; Lievens, De Corte, & Schollaert, 2008; Schmit, Ryan, Stierwalt, & Powell, 1995), we argue that organizational research can benefit from the use of work-specific CSE measures. More specifically, we used two independent samples to examine whether work-specific CSE yielded stronger relationships with work-related attitudes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention) and behaviors (organizational citizenship and counterproductivity) than does general CSE and whether work-specific CSE is related to these criteria after general CSE has been controlled.

### 1.1. *Work-specific personality measures*

Some scholars have criticized personality measures for their generally low levels of predictive validity (Morgeson et al., 2007). Indeed, personality often yields weaker relationships with work-related criteria than do other predictor variables. Compared with employee personality, for example, mental ability is consistently a better predictor of job performance (see Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Hunter & Hunter, 1984) and situational variables are generally better predictors of job satisfaction (see Fried & Ferris, 1987; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002).

In an effort to improve the predictive validity of personality measures, several recent studies have compared the validity of general and domain-specific personality scales (Bing et al., 2004; Hunthausen et al., 2003; Lievens et al., 2008; Schmit et al., 1995). This research has examined Five Factor Model personality traits and with a few exceptions (e.g., Heller, Ferris, Brown, and Watson (2009) examined work-specific personality as predictors of job satisfaction) has exclusively used performance as the criterion variable. Hunthausen et al. (2003), for example, found that domain-specific measures of extraversion and openness yielded stronger relationships with performance than did general measures of these same personality variables. Furthermore, Bing et al. (2004) found that domain-specific measures of conscientiousness predicted unique variance in performance after general conscientiousness was controlled.

Although the above studies comparing domain-specific and generally personality measures were conducted to help better understand frame-of-reference effects in organizational settings, most used student samples to examine the relationship between school-specific personality and college performance. Indeed, employee samples have been used in only two published articles of the predictive validity of domain-specific personality measures (Heller et al., 2009; Hunthausen et al., 2003). The widespread use of student samples raises some concerns about the generalizability of this research. Thus, the current research utilized employed samples.

Based on the evidence presented above, we predict the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Work-specific CSE yields stronger relationships with work-related criteria than does general CSE.

### 1.2. *Incremental validity of work-specific CSE*

In addition to work-specific CSE having a relatively stronger relationship with work-related criteria than does general CSE, we also expect that work-specific CSE will be related to work-related criteria after the effects of general CSE have been controlled. Based on previous research examining the relationship between a domain-specific measure and a general measure of the same personality construct (Bowling, Eschleman, Wang, Kirkendall, & Alarcon, *in press*; Heller et al., 2009; Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, *in press*), we expect that work-specific CSE will yield a strong positive relationship with general CSE, but that this relationship will not approach 1.00. The prediction that work-specific CSE and general CSE are not completely redundant coupled with the prediction that work-specific CSE will yield stronger zero-order relationships with work-related criteria than will general CSE suggests that work-specific CSE will yield unique relationships with work-related criteria after general CSE is controlled.

**Hypothesis 2.** Work-specific CSE is related to work-related criteria after general CSE is controlled.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. *Participants*

We tested the study hypotheses in two independent samples. The data collection strategy and participant characteristics for each sample are described below.

#### 2.1.1. *Chinese sample*

The Sample 1 participants were 260 Chinese workers employed in a number of different industries, including sales, information technology, technology research, and the service industry. The third author enlisted his personal acquaintances to assist with participant recruitment. The average participant was approximately 27 years old, had slightly more than

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