The empirical distinction of core self-evaluations and psychological capital and the identification of negative core self-evaluations and negative psychological capital

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1. Introduction

Core self-evaluations (CSE), defined as general and fundamental appraisals of the self, is a strong predictor of personal (i.e. well-being) and organizational outcomes (i.e. job satisfaction, performance; Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). The construct is considered to be trait-like and resistant to change, and it consists of four dimensions (trait self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control). Similarly, Psychological Capital (PsyCap), defined as appraisals of the self in regards to circumstances and the perceived likelihood of success, is a strong predictor of personal (i.e. well-being) and organizational outcomes (i.e. job satisfaction, performance; Culbertson, Fullagar, & Mills, 2010; Avey, Luthans, Smith, & Palmer, 2010a; Avey, Luthans, & Youssef, 2010b; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007a; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007b). The construct is considered to be more state-like and readily open to development, and it consists of four dimensions (state self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience).

While prior research has considered the two constructs as distinct, and some authors have suggested that PsyCap may be a mediator between CSE and valued outcomes (Avey, 2014; Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015), very few studies have empirically explored their relationship. Of those that have, results are often similar to Avey, Luthans, and Youssef (2010), who found a correlation of 0.72 between the two constructs but did not explore this relationship with more advanced methods and statistics, such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b; Peterson, Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Zhang, 2011). It is possible that the two constructs are empirically and structurally identical, and scales to measure CSE or PsyCap gauge the same construct. If the case, all prior investigations into the popular constructs of CSE and/or PsyCap may be misleading, and our understanding of positive human functioning may be inaccurate. Using a three-study process, we further test the relationship of CSE and PsyCap to ensure that they are distinct constructs. We also analyze the manner in which the two constructs are distinct, whether due to their differing temporal stability and/or specificity. Thus, even if the constructs are indeed distinct, the current studies still provide novel contributions to our understanding of CSE and PsyCap.

Additionally, both constructs are described as positive attributes, but the most popular CSE and PsyCap scales include items that represent...
negative attributes (Judge et al., 2003; Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b). For instance, Judge et al. (2003) CSE scale includes the items, “Sometimes I feel depressed” and “Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless.” Items that gauge the absence of a construct may be appropriate reverse-coded representations of the construct, but the conceptual opposite of a construct is not the absence of the construct (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Goldsmith, 1986; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). While prior research on CSE and PsyCap considers these items to be reverse-coded representations of the two constructs (e.g. the absence of the construct), we suggest that these items do not actually gauge CSE and PsyCap. Instead, these items may gauge constructs that are distinct from CSE and PsyCap, which we label Negative CSE and Negative PsyCap. Negative CSE is defined as general, fundamental, and negative appraisals of the self, whereas Negative PsyCap is defined as negative appraisals of the self in regards to circumstance and the likelihood of success. Given these considerations, we provide an initial test of whether Negative CSE and Negative PsyCap are distinct from CSE and PsyCap.

In testing the existence of Negative CSE and Negative PsyCap, we explore possible new areas of research on negative self-evaluations and negative evaluations of one’s environment, which may prove useful in obtaining a better understanding of human functioning. Perhaps more important, we provide further inferences about the validity of CSE and PsyCap as well as the validity of modern measures for gauging CSE and PsyCap – a call that has been made by others for CSE and PsyCap specifically (Dawkins, Martin, Scott, & Sanderson, 2013; Johnson, Rosen, & Djurjевич, 2011b; Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014) as well as the broader study of multidimensional constructs (Johnson, Rosen, & Chang, 2011a; Johnson, Rosen, Djurjевич, & Taing, 2012; Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). If these measures are shown to have construct contamination and inadvertently gauge Negative CSE or Negative PsyCap in addition to CSE or PsyCap, future research should consider creating new scales for these constructs.

2. Background

Both, the higher-order (or multidimensional) constructs of CSE and PsyCap, include four first-order constructs that have a conceptual independence and empirically established discriminant validity. Each of these first-order constructs also have strong relationships with the other first-order constructs of their representative higher-order construct (Judge & Bono, 2001; Judge et al., 2003; Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b). A strong set of correlations, however, is not sufficient for a grouping of constructs to be representative of a higher-order construct (Edwards, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Law et al., 1998). To form a higher-order construct, distinct but related constructs must also have a common theoretically-supported effect that links them together, and several such effects have been identified by prior authors (Edwards, 2001; Johnson et al., 2011a; Law et al., 1998).

The most common conceptualization of multidimensional constructs specifies three types: aggregate, latent, and profile models (Edwards, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Law et al., 1998). In research, the former two are much more popular than the third, and we only discuss these two. Aggregate constructs are created through the combination of lower-order constructs, such that causality flows from the lower-order constructs to the higher-order construct. Aggregate constructs are the combination of shared and unique variance in their lower-order constructs. For this reason, the lower-level constructs that compose aggregate constructs do not need to be strongly related (Johnson et al., 2011a). On the other hand, latent (or superordinate) constructs manifest as the lower-level constructs, such that causality flows from the higher-order construct to the lower-order constructs. Latent constructs are only the shared variance in their lower-order constructs. For this reason, the lower-order constructs that compose latent constructs should be strongly related. Prior research has considered both, CSE and PsyCap, to be latent constructs (Judge et al., 2003; Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b). To define and study a latent construct, however, the common relation among the lower-order constructs must be identified.

In the case of CSE, Packer (Packer, 1985, 1985/1986) originally proposed that peoples’ appraisals of themselves alter how they appraise the world, which prompted Judge, Locke, Durham, and Kluger (1998) to suggest that certain dispositional and fundamental assessments of the self may influence job satisfaction. To best represent these “dispositional and fundamental assessments of the self,” Judge and Bono (2001) developed the concept of CSE. CSE is a multidimensional construct derived from evaluative, fundamental, and broad indicators (lower-order constructs; Chen, 2012; Zhang, Kwan, Zhang, & Wu, 2012). In other words, these indicators “involve evaluations of the self … are relatively stable and central to the self-concept … extend to all life domains” (Johnson et al., 2011a, p. 245). Based on this theoretical backing, Judge and Bono (2001) identified four indicators that they believed satisfied these requirements: trait self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control. The authors also used this theoretical backing to identify constructs that do not satisfy these requirements. For instance, conscientiousness is a stable and important aspect of the self that extends to many life domains, but it is not evaluative and is more distal from the self-concept (Johnson et al., 2011a; Judge et al., 1998; Judge et al., 2003). Thus, the common theoretically-supported effect that links the constructs of CSE together is their relation to fundamental and broad evaluations of the self.

In the case of PsyCap, the construct arose from the early study of positive organizational behavior (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2002), which is defined as, “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement” (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). Using this definition, Luthans et al. (2007a) sought constructs that represented these “positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities,” and they used the following criteria to do so:

“(a) grounded in theory and research; (b) valid measurement; (c) relatively unique to the field of organizational behavior; (d) state-like and hence open to development and change as opposed to a fixed trait; and (e) have a positive impact on work-related individual-level performance and satisfaction” (p. 542).

Using this criteria, the constructs of hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy were identified, and they were collectively believed to be representative of a broader higher-order construct of PsyCap. PsyCap itself, however, has a definition that is notably different than these inclusion criteria: “an individual’s positive psychological state of development” (Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b, p. 3). Even yet, Luthans et al. (2007a) also note that the “commonality or underlying link [of PsyCap] is a mechanism shared across each of the facets that contributes to a motivational propensity to accomplish tasks and goals” (p. 548). Taken together, we believe that the following description of PsyCap best represents these cumulative efforts to identify the common link between its respective first-order dimensions, “PsyCap, representing one’s positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance” (Luthans et al., 2007a, 2007b, p. 550), but we also note that PsyCap involves appraisals of the self in regards to circumstances and probability for success (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

It is possible, however, that these justifications for the existence of CSE and PsyCap are one in the same. Both constructs involve evaluations and appraisals – whereas CSE involves evaluations of the self, PsyCap involves appraisals of the self in regards to the environment. As suggested by the work that CSE is founded upon (Packer, 1985, 1985/1986), evaluations of the environment are painted by evaluations and feelings of the self (Ferris et al., 2012; Judge et al., 2003). In turn, we suggest that the common variance between evaluations of the self (CSE) and
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