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Big five personality and effort–reward imbalance factors in employees' depressive symptoms

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Abstract

This study investigated the joint effects of the big five personality factors and an extended model of work stress based on Siegrist's (1996) work on effort–reward imbalance (ERI), on employees' depressive symptoms. The elements of the extended model included the effort–reward ratio (ERI ratio), the intrinsic effort tendency of overcommitment (OVC), and workplace social support. Participants were 224 Australian employees (106 males, 116 females, and 2 with unspecified gender) who volunteered to complete an anonymous survey on occupational health. As expected, we found an association between neuroticism (N) and OVC. Regression analysis of depressive symptoms revealed a medium effect of N, followed by small effects of workplace social support, conscientiousness (C), and ERI ratio, accounting for 44% of the variance in depressive symptoms and providing support to the utility of considering both big five and work stress factors. These findings have implications for future work stress research and the design of stress prevention and management programs for enhancing individual employees' wellbeing.

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Keywords: Big five personality factors; Neuroticism; Effort–reward imbalance; Work stress; Social support; Depression; Occupational health; Employee wellbeing

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1. Introduction

Depressive symptoms linked to personality traits and workplace characteristics can be detrimental to both individual employees (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2005) and the organisations they work for, in view of productivity losses due to increased absenteeism and job turnover (Lerner et al., 2004), and reduced performance (Park, Wilson, & Lee, 2004). It is conceivable that employees with particular personality traits are more prone to experiencing work stress, which can in turn exacerbate their development and reporting of depressive symptoms (Mak & Mueller, 2001). This research set out to examine the relationships between the over-arching big five personality factors (McCrae & Costa, 2003) and the elements of an extended model of work-related stress adapted from Siegrist's (1996) theory of effort–reward imbalance (ERI).

2. The big five personality factors and depressive symptoms

The big five personality theory proposes that individual characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and responding to environmental demands can be described in terms of their scores on five personality domains – extraversion (E), neuroticism (N), agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C), and openness to experience (O) (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Previous personality studies have found N to be a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in Canada (Saklofske, Kelly, & Janzen, 1995), and in Australia (Jorm et al., 2000). N was also related to depression in a workplace sample of doctors from England (Newbury-Birch & Kamali, 2001). In two recent studies that utilised all of the big five personality dimensions, depressive symptoms were found to be associated with high N and low levels of E and C in women intending to relocate (Kling, Ryff, Love, & Essex, 2003), and among university students (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2005).

Clark, Watson, and Mineka's (1994) earlier review has also found an association between lower E and depressive symptoms. However, investigations by Jorm et al. (2000) and Saklofske et al. (1995) have not identified E as a predictor of depressive symptoms.

2.1. *The effort–reward imbalance model and depressive symptoms*

A work stress model that utilises both personal and work-related situational factors is Siegrist's (1996, 2002) effort–reward imbalance (ERI) model, which has recently been linked to employees' depressive symptoms (Siegrist, 2005). This model is based on the idea of distributive justice, whereby individuals expect that the efforts they put into society will equal the rewards that society provides in return, and has both extrinsic (or work-related) and intrinsic elements. In the workplace, employees may perceive stress due to high extrinsic efforts (such as a demanding job where they are expected to achieve high results), or stress due to inadequate rewards (such as job security and promotion prospects). Employees who expend much energy on their job without receiving adequate rewards are said to experience a state of ERI, or have a high effort–reward ratio (ERI ratio), and are at risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes (VanVegchel, DeJonge, Bosma, & Schaufeli, 2005).

In addition to ERI ratio itself, the ERI model of work stress further incorporates an intrinsic effort variable known as “overcommitment” (OVC) (Siegrist, 2002; VanVegchel et al., 2005), a

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