



SELF-ESTEEM STABILITY, CYNICAL HOSTILITY, AND CARDIOVASCULAR REACTIVITY TO CHALLENGE

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Summary—This study investigated the contribution of unstable self-esteem as a predictor of cardiovascular reactivity (CVR) during a challenging and ego-threatening task. A sample of male and female adults monitored self-esteem perceptions multiple times daily to provide self-esteem stability scores. Participants also engaged in a competitive task that involved the rapid mental calculation of complex addition/subtraction problems. The task was made more stressful through a manipulation in which participants were made aware that their performance was being monitored and evaluated. Self-esteem stability scores and cynicism scores were used as predictors of systolic and diastolic blood pressure increases and heart rate increases. Results obtained through multiple regression analyses revealed that for men, but not for women, self-esteem instability, relative to cynicism, was a better predictor of increases in systolic blood pressure and heart rate. Neither of these predictors accounted for reactivity in our sample of women, despite the fact that women displayed near equivalent levels of reactivity and equivalent degrees of self-esteem instability. Results suggest that, for men, self-esteem instability may play an important role in the prediction of cardiovascular reactivity to threat that is more dramatic than the contribution of cynicism. Results are also discussed relative to the observed gender differences. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early observations by Friedman and Rosenman (1959) of their young heart diseased patients, researchers have attempted to identify the personality characteristics that contribute to cardiovascular reactivity and ultimately to the onset and exacerbation of coronary heart disease. The history of these efforts is marked by enthusiastic discoveries and the frustrations of failures to replicate (e.g. Dimsdale, Hackett, Hutter & Block, 1980). Over the years, attention has narrowed from the original Type A construct to various dimensions of hostility (Dembroski, MacDougall, Costa & Grandits, 1989). However, like the Type A construct, hostility has been less than a robust predictor of cardiovascular reactivity (CVR) and heart disease pathogenesis (e.g. Hearn, Murray & Luepker, 1989; Sallis, Johnson, Trevorrow, Kaplan & Hovell, 1987; Smith & Houston, 1987).

Inconsistencies observed in the hostility literature may be related to how threatened participants feel by the demands of the task used in the investigation. For instance, some tasks have required participants to perform mental arithmetic, in the absence of any direct social evaluation, whereas others have used blatant interpersonal harassment (see Smith & Christensen, 1992, for a review). Hence, investigations have differed in terms of the degree that participants find themselves to be interpersonally threatened. In addition, the nature of the perceived threat may differ across studies. For instance, threat may be perceived as being to one's physical well-being, or to one's sense of pride. In the case of hostility, hostile individuals appear to display greater CVR when the task is to deal with harassment (Suarez & Williams, 1989), or interpersonal conflict (Hardy & Smith, 1988). One of the critical components of these tasks may be the perceived threat to one's well-being. Yet, in our modern societies, threats are less often to our physical well-being, and more often to our psychological well-being, specifically to our perceptions of self-worth that come from social comparisons (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Festinger, 1954). These evaluative threats, like physical threats, can have strong negative emotions and physiological consequences (Rozanski, Bairey, Krantz, Friedman, Resser, Morell, Hilton-Chalfen, Hestrin, Bietendorf & Berman, 1988; Tesser, 1988; Tesser, Millar & Moore, 1988).

Recent research by Kernis and his colleagues (Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay, 1989) has con-

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sidered the stability of self-esteem. Defined as the “magnitude of short-term fluctuation in one’s global self-evaluations (p. 1013),” self-esteem stability provides an index of the extent to which an individual’s perception of self-worth vacillates from moment to moment, that is virtually uncorrelated with the traditional global view of self-esteem. In our view, self-esteem stability appears to provide a means of assessing vulnerability to threats to perceived self-worth. In their research, Kernis and colleagues suggest that, relative to individuals with stable high self-esteem, individuals characterized by unstable high self-esteem are more sensitive to evaluation, more concerned with their self-view, and more concerned with how well they measure up to others (Kernis, 1993). Furthermore, self-esteem instability is associated with greater anger expression and hostility (Kernis *et al.*, 1989). Considering the long history of research concerning the contribution of hostility to CVR and CHD, self-esteem stability appears to be a useful paradigm for investigating the CVR mediated by perceived threats to unstable feelings of self-esteem.

Perhaps it is in response to perceived threat to self-esteem that hostile feelings are felt and through efforts to rescue compromised feelings of esteem that hostile behaviors are enacted. The current investigation was conducted in order to assess the unique and combined contribution of self-esteem stability and those hostility dimensions that have been demonstrated to predict CVR.

We hypothesized that unstable self-esteem (USE) and hostility (HO) would significantly predict CVR in hierarchical regression analyses. This prediction reflects our contention that HO may primarily be a byproduct of unstable self-esteem and therefore would not significantly predict CVR when the effects of USE are held constant, but that USE would provide unique prediction when the effects of HO are controlled. Because the cynicism dimension (CYN) of the scale has been associated with CVR (e.g. Barefoot, Dodge, Peterson, Dahlstrom & Williams, 1989), we also include this subscale score. We expected a high degree of overlap between HO and CYN and a similar association between these scores and CVR. Both scores were included in the initial analyses with the intention of using the measure that demonstrated a stronger correlation with CVR in the subsequent regression analyses. Finally, because we used a competitive task to create ego investment, we also expected to see a more dramatic result for men than for women.

Results of an earlier study (Rasmussen, 1991) indicated that men and women respond differently to evaluative threat. In this earlier investigation, women who scored low on the control dimension of the General Causality Orientation Scale (Deci & Ryan, 1985)* displayed greater CVR during an interpersonally competitive task, whereas men scoring high on the control dimension had higher reactivity scores. These results were interpreted to support the position that for men, the need for external validation—which characterizes the high control-oriented individual—and participation in a competitive task are associated with CVR, but for women, reactivity to ego-threat is independent of control orientation.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were 28 females and 29 males who ranged in age from 29 to 59 years (mean = 39.77; women = 40.03; men = 39.46). All participants were Caucasian, middle class, and determined—by way of prescreening—to be free of any pre-existing health complication. Participants were obtained through recruitment letters mailed to university alumni and staff. Self-addressed, bulk-rated post-cards were enclosed that the potential participant could return to indicate willingness to be included in the investigation. Ss were paid \$15 for their involvement.

Questionnaire data

Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE is a self-report assessment of global self-evaluation. Ss indicated their agreement with 10 vignettes, using a scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4). Internal consistency coefficients of 0.72 and 0.87 (Wylie, 1989) and test–retest correlations

*Deci and Ryan (1985) describe control oriented individuals as being motivated by imperatives such as should, have to, ought and must. The motivational consequent for these individuals is self-aggrandizement following success and guilt or shame following failure (pp. 157–158).

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