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Mood states, self-set goals, self-efficacy and performance in academic examinations

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Abstract

The present study investigated relationships between mood, performance goals, and both written and oral examination performance. Fifty-seven undergraduate students completed a mood measure that assessed the subscales of anger, calmness, confusion, depression, fatigue, happiness, tension and vigor, indicated the grade set as a goal for the examinations, and rated their confidence to achieve this goal. These measures were completed approximately 30 min before each examination. Structural equation modelling results indicated that mood states, self-efficacy and self-set goals predicted 20% of oral examination performance and 7% of written examination performance. In both samples, findings indicate that positive mood states are associated with self-efficacy to achieve self-set goals. We suggest that future research should look at the extent to which intervention strategies designed to enhance mood states are associated with enhanced performance.

Keywords: Emotion; Performance; Self-efficacy; Cognition; Applied psychology

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1. Introduction

There has been an increase in the amount of empirical research suggesting psychological states such as mood to be predictive of performance, especially in situations that have a high degree of personal importance. Defined as "a set of feelings, ephemeral in nature, varying in intensity and duration, and usually involving more than one emotion (Lane & Terry, 2000, p. 16), mood has been reported to influence individuals in a number of situations that have included athletic competition (Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000) and academic examinations (Catanzaro, 1996; Lane, Whyte, Terry, & Nevill, 2005; Totterdell & Leach, 2001). A theoretical position forwarded to explain such effects is the notion that the moods experienced by the individual serve in an informational manner. Thus the 'mood as information' hypothesis suggests that the affective content of mood states provide information on personal resources to cope with task demands, and it is believed that the predictive effects of mood states are especially salient when the outcome of the activity is uncertain (Bless, 2001; Gendolla & Krusken, 2002). With this in mind, it is likely that negative or unpleasant moods will associate with a difficult or problematic situation, where information regarding the self, task and coping strategies are negatively phrased. Should this occur, it is also likely that the negative moods will relate to low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1990). In contrast, positive moods are more likely to provide functional information for the individual regarding the situation, and relate to high self-efficacy.

Acknowledging how 'situations' often influence mood states held by the individual, it is important to be aware that when the situation is one of importance, mood states may influence performance in both a positive or negative manner. Whilst individuals may wish to experience positive moods prior to a difficult or uncertain event, it is often the case that individuals will experience negative moods due to the discrepancy between the demands of the task and the resources that the individual has at their disposal to cope with the situation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Martin & Tesser, 1996). As a result, individuals who experience negative moods may attend to specific information in greater detail to reduce the discrepancy that may be present for the task (Cervone, Kopp, Schaumann, & Scott, 1994). If that is the case then it may be the goals set within the task that are more appropriate to examine, rather than global performance. For example, in an examination, a student may have a very negative mood due to perceiving the task demands to outweigh their personal resources needed to achieve a high grade. As a result, they may use the negative mood state to help them mobilize their effort in a functional manner towards the goal of achieving a threshold pass. Alternatively, the negative mood may act in a dysfunctional manner and disable any mobilization of effort due to the attainability of the goal (task demands) being too high (Gendolla & Krusken, 2002). Thus, as argued by Bandura (1990), individuals with low self-efficacy expectations before doing a personally important task could result in experiencing feelings of despondency, especially if they anticipate failure.

Taking the theoretical suggestions for the relationships between mood states, self-efficacy and performance forward, recent research (e.g., Lane et al., 2005) has found that pre-examination mood states are not only predictive of performance, but are also related to the difficulty of self-set goals, and self-efficacy estimates to achieve these goals. Specifically, Lane et al. reported significant positive intercorrelations between vigor, self-efficacy, self-set goals and examination performance among a sample of 50 undergraduate students for a practical examination. Whilst an insight to the potential influence of depressed mood on mood states, goals, and performance