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Affect-regulated indirect effects of trait anxiety and trait resilience on self-esteem

Celeste Benetti^a, Nicolas Kambouropoulos^{b,*}

^a Faculty of Life and Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia

^b School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne Campus, Victoria 3125, Australia

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of trait resilience and trait anxiety on self-esteem and investigated the mediating role of positive and negative affect in this relationship. Specifically, it was proposed that trait resilience and trait anxiety may exert indirect effects on self-esteem by promoting increased positive and negative affect, respectively. The final sample comprised of 240 participants (age, $M = 21.55$, $SD = 4.16$) who completed questionnaire measures of trait resilience (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003), trait anxiety (STAI-T; Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983), affect (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and self-esteem (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). Path analyses (AMOS), controlling for measurement error revealed significant indirect effects of trait anxiety and trait resilience on self-esteem via negative and positive affect. The indirect model provided a very close fit to the data; estimation of the full model (direct paths) did not yield a significantly better fit. It was concluded that the impact of trait anxiety and trait resilience on self-esteem may be due to their effects on regulating affective experiences which in turn may be more proximal predictors of individual feelings of self-worth.

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Keywords: Self-esteem; Trait resilience; Trait anxiety; Positive affect; Negative affect

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9244 6596; fax: +61 3 9244 6858.

E-mail address: nickamb@deakin.edu.au (N. Kambouropoulos).

1. Introduction

A number of studies have investigated the individual personality and affective factors associated with self-esteem (e.g., Francis, 1996; Swickert, Hittner, Kitos, & Cox-Fuenzalida, 2004). This is of particular theoretical interest as recent discussions have conceptualised self-esteem as a fundamental psychological need serving an important adaptive function related to well-being (e.g., Sheldon, 2004). Historically, self-esteem was also described in Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs. Maslow postulated that in order for an individual to reach the highest level in the hierarchy (self-actualisation), the more pressing preceding needs (including self-esteem) must first be met. Given this, it would seem relevant to investigate the manner in which particular individual characteristics serve to increase or decrease self-esteem. Research has focused to a large extent on trait anxiety as a possible factor involved in harming self-esteem (e.g., Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), whilst there is some emerging evidence to suggest that the construct of trait resilience, the ability to adapt to the demands of stressful experiences (Lazarus, 1993), may be important in facilitating positive feelings of self-worth (Bonanno, 2004). An alternative line of research has examined the role of affective states, highlighting the importance of both positive and negative affect regulation in self-esteem (Smith & Petty, 1995; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). The aim of this study is to draw these two lines of research together to investigate the processes underlying the associations between trait anxiety, trait resilience and self-esteem. Specifically, this paper is focused on the possibility that trait anxiety and trait resilience exert their effects on self-esteem indirectly by influencing negative and positive affective states, respectively.

This 'affect-regulation' argument is based on the assumption that individuals are motivated to facilitate positive states and alleviate or avoid negative affect (see Larsen, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that individuals who are successful at regulating their own affective states are more likely to be high on self-esteem (e.g., Wood et al., 2003). That is, findings indicate that the tendency to emphasise or 'savour' positive affective states (Campbell, Chew, & Scratchley, 1991; Wood et al., 2003) and the motivational propensity to reduce negative affect (Smith & Petty, 1995) are both associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Thus, the ability to facilitate positive affect and alleviate negative affective states appears to be related to higher levels of trait self-esteem. In other words, individuals with strong feelings of self-worth may feel this way due to an emotional state characterised by increased positive affect and decreased negative affect.

However, evidence also indicates that certain individual difference variables are associated with a predisposition to experiencing positive and negative affect (e.g., personality, Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). Thus, more stable personality characteristics may be important in influencing the use of positive and negative affect which in turn regulates feelings of self-esteem. Interestingly, research investigating the individual personality attributes associated with self-esteem has recently focused on trait anxiety (negative influence) and trait resilience (positive influence; Bonanno, 2004) and these specific traits have been linked with negative and positive affect, respectively (Carle & Chassin, 2004; Gray, 1987; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

For example, trait anxiety has been consistently associated with a tendency to report increased negative affect possibly due to an underlying sensitivity to threat (Carver & White,

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