



Psychosocial work stressors and well-being: self-esteem and optimism as moderators in a one-year longitudinal sample

Anne Mäkikangas*, Ulla Kinnunen

Family Research Unit, University of Jyväskylä, PO Box 35 (Agora), FIN-40351, Jyväskylä, Finland

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Abstract

The purpose of the present follow-up study was to investigate the roles of self-esteem and optimism in the relationship between psychosocial work stressors and well-being for a sample of Finnish employees ($n=457$). The data were obtained by means of questionnaires which were completed twice, in 1999 and 2000. The results of the moderated hierarchical regression analyses revealed that low levels of self-esteem and optimism had a direct negative effect on emotional exhaustion and mental distress among men employees. Furthermore, self-esteem moderated the relationships between poor organizational climate and emotional exhaustion and mental distress among male employees. Among female employees optimism moderated the relationships between time pressures at work, job insecurity and poor organizational climate on mental distress. Altogether, our present study suggests that self-esteem and optimism are important resources which both have main effects as well as moderator effects on well-being, although these effects are gender specific.

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In the last two decades working life in many countries has experienced far-reaching changes which have increased the level of work stressors and decreased the level of employees' well-being. This is indeed the case in Finland, where many employees nowadays work under increasing time pressure and mental strain. For example, time demands and the amount of overtime work have increased (Lehto & Sutela, 1998; Ylöstalo, 2001) and job insecurity has become common (Nätti, Kinnunen, Happonen, Mauno, & Sallinen, 2001). In consideration of all the facts about the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358-14-2604554; fax: +358-14-2602811.

E-mail address: makanne@psyka.jyu.fi (A. Mäkikangas).

quality of present-day working life, it is important to find individual stress resistance resources which modify stress-health relationships.

In recent stress research, it has become clear that the tendency to perceive job circumstances as stressful depends in part upon the characteristics of the individual. Individuals exposed to the same environmental conditions may express remarkably different psychological, physical, and behavioral reactions on account of different personality characteristics (see Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). In particular, self-esteem has been the most extensively investigated personal resource in the work context (Brockner, 1988; Locke, McClear, & Knight, 1996; Tharenou, 1979).

The present study contributes to the stress-buffering literature by analysing whether self-esteem and optimism modify the impact of harmful psychosocial work stressors on well-being. Specifically, the aim was to explore the main and interactive effects of psychosocial work stressors (i.e. time pressures at work, lack of control, job insecurity, and poor organizational climate), self-esteem and optimism on employee well-being (i.e. job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, mental distress and physical symptoms) for a sample of Finnish male and female employees in a 1-year follow-up study.

In stress literature, personality has been considered to affect the stress process in five different ways (Cox & Ferguson, 1991; Kivimäki, 1996). First, personality may influence stress reactions by modifying the appraisal of stressors. For example, a person with high self-esteem and optimism is more likely to view a stressful work situation as challenging rather than threatening. Optimism, which is defined as a generalized expectation of positive experiences and outcomes throughout one's life (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001), makes a person appraise a stress situation in a more positive light. Optimists make more extensive use of a variety of coping strategies and have better physical and psychological health than pessimists (Carver & Scheier, 1999; Chang & Farrehi, 2001; Scheier & Carver, 1992; Scheier et al., 2001). By contrast, individuals lacking in optimism and self-esteem have been shown to experience greater negative stress and to use more withdrawal and passive forms of coping to manage stressful events (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Harju & Bolen, 1998; Scheier et al., 2001; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986).

Second, personality factors may effect stress reactions independently of stressors. Studies have found that self-esteem, which refers to an individual's general sense of his or her value or worth (Rosenberg, 1979; Locke et al., 1996), is negatively associated with all three burnout dimensions (e.g. exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment), but especially with emotional exhaustion (Carmel, 1997; Fothergill, Edwards, Hannigan, Burnard, & Coyle, 2000; Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 1999; Kinnunen, Mauno, Nätti, & Happonen, 1999; Rosse, Boss, Johnson, & Crown, 1991). Furthermore, self-esteem is shown to be associated negatively with depressive symptoms (Schonfeld, 2000) and positively with job satisfaction (Abraham, 1999; Carmel, 1997; Frone, 2000; Saks & Ashforth, 1997).

Third, work stressors and stress reactions may modify personal factors. For example, it has been found that psychosocial work stressors and burnout reduce self-esteem (Golembiewski & Aldinger, 1994; Kivimäki & Kalimo, 1996). Fourth, work stressors may cause differences in personality factors, which may mediate the quantity and the quality of stress reactions. Self-esteem has been found to mediate the effects between unemployment and psychological health (Kokko & Pulkkinen, 1997; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) and between stress and expectancy of success (Abel, 1996).

Fifth, personality factors may influence stress reactions by moderating the relationship between stressors and stress reactions. Conceptually, a moderator is a variable which alters the direction

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