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Examining the Role of Self-esteem in the Association between Emotional Vulnerability and Psychological Well-being

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Honors Thesis

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Department: Psychology

Advisor: Erin O'Mara, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The purpose of the proposed study was to examine the association between emotional vulnerability and psychological well-being, and test whether the association varies based on level of self-esteem. Researchers define psychological well-being as an appraisal of one's life where a person gives conscious evaluative judgments about one's satisfaction with life as a whole (Grossi et al., 2013). Emotional vulnerability is defined as the degree to which a person renders himself or herself exposed to the emotional pain of rejection. Experiencing social rejection has a negative effect on self-esteem, however, having high self-esteem may buffer the self against the pain of rejection. Previous research suggests that vulnerability is an important trait essential to satisfying the human need to create and

maintain close relationships. Taken together, the present research examined whether self-esteem influences whether emotional vulnerability is associated with positive or negative psychological well-being. Participants first completed a measure of self-esteem and were then randomly assigned to an experimental group where they wrote about a time they felt emotionally vulnerable, or a control group. Participants then completed a measure of psychological well-being. Results showed that self-esteem did not interact with assigned condition to predict well-being. It was found that individuals in the control group reported higher levels of well-being. Participants with higher self-esteem scored higher on all subscales of well-being. The findings from the present study have important implications for understanding the role that self-esteem plays in how emotional vulnerability influences psychological well-being.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this thesis are those of the student and do not necessarily express the views of the University of Dayton.

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Introduction

Emotional vulnerability is a state where one is open to having one's feelings hurt or to experiencing rejection. When people express their feelings to others they have an increased chance of being hurt, rejected, or ignored. Emotional vulnerability may be particularly important within the context of romantic relationships because people want to maintain the relationship, have their needs met, and avoid being hurt by their partners. Expressing emotional vulnerability involves freely communicating emotions in a way that allows people to be open, honest, and genuine in their closest relationships.

A previous study identifies the fears that would cause someone to hold back from expressing emotional vulnerability. Researchers found that when people believe they have expressed vulnerabilities to a romantic partner or friend, they believe they are viewed as especially vulnerable, which in turn predicts their suspicion regarding the authenticity of other's expressions of positive regard and acceptance. This was found to be independent of expectations for rejection reflected in low self-esteem and attachment-related anxiety (Clark & Lemay 2008). Understanding that there is a fundamental human motivation to form and maintain close relationships, studies of emotional vulnerability can contribute to the understanding of how interdependence varies among individuals. Many studies have shown that qualitative interdependence is related to higher subjective well-being (Baumeister, & Leary 1995) providing such benefits of increased sense of belonging and purpose, positive affect, reduced stress, and higher levels of self-confidence and self worth.

Self-esteem is the overall sense of self-worth we use to appraise our traits and abilities. People desire trait self-esteem, which they are motivated to enhance. People

with low self-esteem are less likely to report a positive well-being given evidence that low self-esteem individuals are more likely to feel anxious, depressed, hostile, lonely, embarrassed, jealous, ashamed, guilty, hurt, shy, and generally upset compared to people with high-self-esteem (Leary 2005). When considering behaviors associated with self-esteem, it is important to consider self-esteem as a gauge of relational value where self-esteem is associated with interpersonal emotions in accordance with their shared connection with real, potential, or imagined rejection. Someone who feels unaccepted by others would be prone to experiencing negative emotions and a lowering in self-esteem (Leary, 2005).

Embracing vulnerability in an intimate relationship requires engaging in behaviors that risk rejection such as expressing affection and asking for support. A number of theories suggest that self-esteem influences a person's willingness to take the risks necessary to increase interdependence. One study found that a romantic relationship is an important source of self-esteem in which individuals need a high level of self-esteem to both sustain their relationship and experience love and relief during their relationship. In this study, a multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether the variables of self-esteem, masculinity, and femininity had statistically significant effects on starting romantic intimacy. The study identified self-esteem as the second most significant positive relationship in starting romantic intimacy (Eryilmazi & Atak 2011).

Currently, there are two opposing theories predicting the effect of self-esteem on the formation of interdependent relationships. Two models are the risk-regulation model and the sociometer theory. These models are important for the study of vulnerability in that they attempt to explain a person's motivation to risk rejection to connect with people

on a personal level as function of self-esteem. According to the risk-regulation model, whether people engage in or avoid behaviors that can increase interdependence depends on their appraisal of the likelihood that those behaviors will result in rejection; people protect themselves from the emotional pain of rejection by engaging in behaviors that increase interdependence when rejection appears relatively unlikely and avoiding such behaviors when rejection seems likely. (Murray et. al, 2006) The risk-regulation model predicts that people with low self-esteem are more likely to expect rejection and would be more motivated than people with high self-esteem to seek self-protection over social connection by avoiding behaviors that risk rejection to increase interdependence. (Murray et. al, 2006). The sociometer theory differs from the risk-regulation model by stating that given individuals' basic need for connection and desire to avoid emotions that result from anticipating rejection, people with low self-esteem are motivated to engage in behaviors that enhance one's relational value and level of interdependence.

The current study was interested in understanding whether or not describing an experience of emotional vulnerability is associated with psychological well-being, and whether that association varies based on level of state self-esteem. It was hypothesized that self-esteem is important in determining whether describing an emotional vulnerability is associated with positive or negative psychological well-being. It was also hypothesized that people with higher self-esteem who think about an emotional vulnerability will report better psychological well-being.

Method

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students from the University of Dayton who completed the study as a part of a course requirement for their Intro to Psychology class. There were 68 participants, 25% male and 75% female. The participants' ages ranged from 18-21 ($M = 19.21$). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (72.2%), 4.2% of the participants were African-American, 6.9% were Hispanic, 11.1% were Asian, and 5.6% did not identify.

Procedure

Before beginning the study, participants were asked to sign an informed consent in which they were given information about the nature of the study. They were told the study was interested in social interactions. All participants filled out the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (Aron & Smollan, 1992), Self-compassion Scale (Neff & Van Gucht, 2011), and Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Downy & Feldman, 1996). Participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental or a control group. They were given a "choice" of four different social interactions; however, each choice brought the participant to the same prompt depending on the assigned condition. The control group prompt read, "Please describe your average Tuesday schedule including activities and people you come into contact with." The experimental group prompt offered a brief definition of emotional vulnerability and asked the participant to describe a time when he/she felt emotionally vulnerable.

Following the completion of the experimental task, all participants completed a measure of psychological well-being. Following this task, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study.

Measures

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. State self-esteem was measured by asking the participants to respond to a valid, widely used measure of global self-esteem. The scale included 10 items and responses were measured on a 4 point Likert scale (1=*strongly agree* to 4=*strongly disagree*). Such statements included in the scale were “I am able to do things as well as most other people,” and “I wish I could have more respect for myself.” Consistent with previous research, the scale had internal consistency of $\alpha = .85$.

Inclusion of Other in Self. This scale is a single item, pictorial measure of how the participant views himself or herself in relation to others. Inclusion was represented by the overlapping of circles where one circle was “self” and the other circle was “other.” The first choice showed two circles side by side. Choices 2-6 depicted increasing degrees of overlap between the circles. To represent the highest degree of inclusion, choice 7 showed the circles almost completely overlain.

Self-compassion Scale. Self-compassion was measured by using the Short Form Self-compassion Scale (Neff, 2011) The Self-compassion scale is a 12-item self-report measurement consisting of six sub-scales: self-kindness, self-judgement, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over identification. Participants responded to items such as, “I try to see my failings as part of the human condition,” and “When I see aspects of myself that I don’t like, I get down on myself.” Each item was scored on a 5-

point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*). The scale had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .75$.

Rejection Sensitivity Scale. The Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Downy & Feldman, 1996) was used to measure sensitivity to actual or perceived rejection. The short form of the scale contained 8 items and had a good reliability, $\alpha = .87$. The participant was given a situation (ex. “You ask your parents for help in deciding what programs to apply to.”) and asked to respond to two questions. The first question asked, “How concerned or anxious would you be about how the other person would respond?” The response was recorded with a Likert measure (1=*very unconcerned* to 6=*very concerned*). The second asked, “How do you think the other person would be likely to respond?” (ex. “I would expect that they would want to help me.”) The response was recorded with a Likert measure (1=*very unlikely* to 5=*very likely*). A score of rejection sensitivity was calculated for each item by multiplying the level of rejection concern for that situation by the level of acceptance expectancy.

Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-being. To measure the participants’ level of well-being, the medium form of the Ryff Scale (Ryff, 1989) was used. This 54 item scale was designed to redirect the study of well-being from previous assessments of positive psychological functioning, (positive/negative affect and life satisfaction) often criticized for limitation in theoretical grounding. This scale aims to integrate many aspects of psychological well-being using theory-guided psychometric properties. This measure assessed well-being across six dimensions: a positive attitude toward oneself and one’s past life (self-acceptance), meaningful, satisfying relationships with others (positive relations with others), a sense of self-determination, independence, and ability to resist

social pressures to conform (autonomy), having life goals and a belief that one's life is meaningful (purpose in life), a sense of competence in managing external activities and a sense of control over creating an environment suitable to personal desires (environmental mastery), and feelings of continued development and a progression towards reaching full one's potential (personal growth). Participants responded to questions using a six-point scale, (1= *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). Responses to negatively scored items are reversed in the final scoring procedures so that high scores indicate high self-ratings on the dimension assessed. Internal consistency for the medium form has been high in previous research. Internal consistency coefficients for each dimension in this study include: autonomy, $\alpha = .88$; environmental mastery, $\alpha = .81$; personal growth, $\alpha = .81$; positive relations with others, $\alpha = .83$; purpose in life, $\alpha = .82$; and self-acceptance, $\alpha = .85$.

Results

It was predicted that self-esteem would interact with condition to predict well-being. A multiple regression analysis was run regressing well-being onto condition, self-esteem, and the condition x self-esteem interaction. This analysis was conducted separately for each of the six well-being subscales. Self-esteem was mean-centered, condition was dummy coded and all reported betas are unstandardized.

Consistent across each analysis, the condition by self-esteem interaction was not significant (all p 's $>.25$). Self-esteem, however, was significantly and positively associated with well-being for all six subscales: autonomy ($\beta = .66$, $SE = .24$) $t(64) = 2.72$, $p = .0084$, environmental mastery ($\beta = 1.03$, $SE = .21$), $t(64) = 5.01$, $p < .0001$,

personal growth ($\beta = .79$, $SE = .19$), $t(64) = 4.14$, $p < .001$, positive relations with others ($\beta = .46$, $SE = .23$), $t(64) = 2.01$, $p = .048$, purpose in life ($\beta = .67$, $SE = .21$), $t(64) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, and self-acceptance ($\beta = 1.45$, $SE = .18$), $t(64) = 8.25$, $p < .0001$. In general, participants with higher self-esteem scored higher on all subscales of well-being.

Additionally, condition was associated with psychological well-being for two subscales, environmental mastery and positive relations with others. The pattern of effects was consistent for both subscales such that participants in the control condition (those asked to describe their average Tuesday schedule) had higher levels of environmental mastery ($B = -.33$, $SE = .14$), $t(64) = -2.43$, $p = .02$, and marginally higher levels of positive relations with others ($B = -.29$, $SE = .15$), $t(64) = -1.94$, $p = .056$, than participants in the experimental condition (those who were asked to describe a time they felt emotionally vulnerable).

Discussion

The hypothesis was that self-esteem would moderate whether describing an emotional vulnerability is associated with either a positive or a negative well-being. We found that participants who reflected on a time they felt emotionally vulnerable did report a score of well-being that differed from the participants in the control group. Multiple regression analysis revealed that participants who did not reflect on a time of emotional vulnerability had higher levels of well-being in the dimensions of environmental mastery and positive relations with others. According to Ryff, higher scores of positive relations with others is associated with being capable of empathy, affection, and intimacy. Lower

scores are associated with a difficulty expressing warmth and opening up to others and possession of few close relationships. Higher scores of environmental mastery are seen in individuals who have a sense control in managing their environment, effectively engage in surrounding opportunities, and are able to choose or create an environment that caters to his or her personal needs and values. Lower scores are associated with a difficulty managing everyday affairs and feelings of being unable to improve his or her environment. In light of these definitions, the results suggest that feeling emotionally vulnerable does not contribute to a higher level of well-being. Possible explanations are that emotional vulnerability negatively impacts one's view of control over his or her surroundings and perceived ability to create meaningful, interpersonal relationships. However, further analysis is needed to determine whether the feeling emotionally vulnerable has any influence on long-term well-being.

Correlation analysis of self-esteem and well-being shows that participants who expressed a higher level of state self-esteem in the beginning of the study expressed a higher level of well-being. These results were not surprising considering the results from previous studies of the implications for self-esteem. The findings were consistent with previous research from Leary, where it was reported that individuals with low self-esteem were less likely to report a positive well-being. The results of this study can be used to enhance researchers understanding of the importance of self-esteem as a reliable predictor of overall well-being.

There are a few limitations to this study. The findings in this study cannot be broadly applied to a whole population considering the participants were all college students, mostly female. The study relied on self-report measures which could be

susceptible to the effects of social desirability and interpretive biases. In order to manipulate emotional vulnerability, a more descriptive prompt may have produced a better result. Instead of briefly defining vulnerability and asking for a description of a time when the participant felt vulnerable, it may be more effective to give the participant an example of an instance of vulnerability and allowing them to reflect on a similar experience in their life.

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