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When are Positive Views of Myself Harmful? An Experimental Test of Interactive Effects of Self-Enhancement, Stress Severity, and Context Controllability on Mental Health

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Self-Enhancement & Mental Health

People tend to perceive themselves in a positively biased manner, known as self-enhancement.

Studies find that self-enhancement is found to promote mental health (e.g., Bonnano et al., 2002), but other findings suggest otherwise (e.g., Robins & Beer, 2001).

Context controllability and stress severity also influence the impact of self-enhancement on mental health (O'Mara et al., 2011).

Self-Enhancement & Motivation

Self-enhancement may predict one's motivation to engage in a task which, in turn, would predict mental health outcomes (O'Mara et al., 2011).

The Present Study

Experimentally examine effects of self-enhancement, context controllability, and stress severity on mental health.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Mental health varies based on self-enhancement, context controllability, and stress severity.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Interactive effects of self-enhancement and stress in a controllable context predicting mental health will be mediated by motivation.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Physiological reactivity varies based on self-enhancement, context controllability, and stress severity.

Method

Participants:

83 undergraduate college students; 52% female; ages 18-22; $M = 19.14$ years

Measures:

Self-Enhancement: How I See Myself Questionnaire (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995)

Motivation: Asked to indicate how many minutes they want to prepare for speech (1-10)

Mental Health: Satisfaction with Life (Pavot & Diener, 1993), Well-being (Sevastos et al., 1992), Perceived Stress (Cohen et al., 1983), Depressive symptoms (Radloff, 1977), Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and Anxiety (Zigmond & Snaith, 1982).

Physiological Reactivity: Heart rate and blood pressure

Stress: Rate on a scale from 0 (low) to 10 (high)

Procedure:

Complete measure of self-enhancement and baseline measures of physiological reactivity, and stress.

Participants told (via random assignment):

- he or she will give a speech about views on marriage equality in front of a panel of judges who are kind (low stress) or critical (high stress)
- judges will evaluate performance and evaluate based on performance (high control) or based on their personal views (low control).

Method (continued)

Participants asked how many minutes (up to 10) he or she wanted for speech preparation.

Completed mental health measures.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Self-enhancement, context controllability, and stress severity did not interact to predict mental health.

Hypothesis 2: The interactive effects of self-enhancement and stress in a controllable context on mental health was not mediated by motivation.

Hypothesis 3: Self-enhancement, context controllability, and stress severity did not interact to predict changes in physiological reactivity.

Conclusions

The present study did not support the proposed hypotheses.

Limitations:

- Small sample size
- Many participants were deterred from the study due to the topic of public speaking, which could have led to those who are not distressed by the task to participate.
- It may be that these particular processes are not expressed in the short-term, but manifest over extended periods of time.