

**The Impact of Negative Work Events on State Self-Esteem: Unpacking the Role of
Neuroticism as a Moderator**

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Abstract

The primary objective of this investigation was to elucidate the factors that impact the state self-esteem of employees within the context of the workplace. This paper examines the impact of negative work events on the state self-esteem of employees. Investigations were conducted to examine whether employees experiencing negative work events are associated with low state self-esteem. In addition to this relationship, neuroticism was researched to investigate if it is a moderator of the relationship between state self-esteem and negative work events. The expected impact of neuroticism was that employees high in neuroticism are associated with low state self-esteem in the relation between negative work events and state self-esteem. For people low in neuroticism the opposite was expected. The following theories served as the basis for the hypotheses: ‘Stress as Offense to Self’ (Semmer et al., 2019) and ‘Failing is Derailing’ (Pindek, 2020). The variables were measured through one baseline survey and daily surveys after working days, where the participants had to answer questions regarding neuroticism, negative work events and state self-esteem. The results for both hypotheses were not statistically significant. Overall, this study advances our understanding of influencing factors on state self-esteem and has practical implications and implications for future research.

Keywords: state self-esteem, negative work events, neuroticism, work environment

The Impact of Negative Work Events on State Self-Esteem: Unpacking the Role of Neuroticism as a Moderator

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in research into the influence of work events on well-being, largely as a result of the publication of the Affective Events theory of Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), which has led to a proliferation of studies about organizational behaviour (OB) over the last few years (Liu et al., 2023). This applies particularly to the aspect of OB that is called “event-orientated”. Self-esteem plays an important role in people’s overall well-being (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Self-esteem influences people’s subjective perceptions. Research on work-related stress and occupational health aims to comprehend the impact of negative work-related events on employees, with the ultimate objective of mitigating these negative events and improving well-being (Bono et al., 2013). As a result, most research has focused on the effects of employee’s well-being (e.g. Kundi et al., 2020).

What is less known is whether such events may have consequences for employees’ self-evaluations in terms of self-esteem. That is why it is important to research what factors influence self-esteem, such as the impact of negative evaluations. Such threats to employee self-esteem can be considerable triggers of stress (Semmer et al., 2019). Conversely, it has been observed that individuals exhibiting high levels of self-esteem typically report heightened life satisfaction, decreased anxiety levels, and fewer symptoms of depression (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Therefore, research could usefully focus on factors raising self-esteem. This would potentially not only benefit the employee; it can also benefit the organization where the employee works at, because the employee will have a higher productivity when one has a high self-esteem and will deliver more for the organization (Pindek, 2020). Thus, understanding how to keep the self-esteem high of employees is valuable for multiple parties.

In the present study, negative events are investigated as a key explanatory variable. Koopmann et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive examination of both positive and negative work events, hypothesizing that positive events might significantly contribute to an overall sense of well-being. Despite their findings revealing no discernible association between negative work events and well-being, they suggested that this outcome could be attributed to the relatively limited occurrence of negative events within the sample population they analyzed. Moreover, additional research by Schmitt and Weigelt (2023) has established a connection between negative work events and diminished levels of self-efficacy. It is worth noting that individuals' self-perceptions, encompassing both self-esteem and self-efficacy, serve as fundamental determinants in shaping their motivation, behavior, and overall adaptability across the lifespan, as underscored by Liu et al. (2023). Furthermore, the diminished self-esteem can disrupt the equilibrium and vitality of individuals, subsequently exerting a detrimental influence on their self-efficacy, as evidenced by Uchenwoke et al. (2021). Thus, it is plausible to suggest that negative events may exert an influence on self-esteem as well, given their potential to disrupt the balance of individual well-being.

Negative events such as tasks conflicting with one's professional identity are often seen as undermining self-worth, resulting in stress, while engaging in core activities congruent with one's professional identity typically bolsters self-image positively (Pindek, 2020). Self-image constitutes a component of one's self-esteem. A negative self-image correlates with low self-esteem (Kenealey et al. 1991). This suggests that negative events could have a notable influence on individuals' self-esteem. Supervisors must carefully consider the social implications of task assignments (Semmer & Beehr, 2014).

Moreover, it is theorized that self-esteem is the result of the interplay between fundamental traits, like neuroticism, and external environmental factors (Mu et al., 2019). The personality characteristic known as neuroticism is linked to a propensity to experience

unpleasant emotions like despair, anxiety, irritability, rage, and self-consciousness (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Individuals high in neuroticism tend to have difficulty coping with environmental stress, perceive everyday situations as menacing, and may find minor annoyances overwhelmingly burdensome. They also worry about certain threats even in the absence of these threats (Costa & McCrae, 1990). In earlier studies about organizational behaviour, negative consequences of neuroticism have already been examined (Rusbadrol et al., 2015; Smillie & Yeo, 2006). One example of this is the study by Smillie and Yeo (2006), which examined what possible effect neuroticism can have on job performance. Findings from longitudinal research show that people high in neuroticism lead lives that are more likely to be associated with a variety of unfavourable outcomes, like losing their job. (Lahey, 2009). People with neuroticism also maintain more negative information about past events (Norris et al., 2018). This way neuroticism could influence self-esteem by the impact of these negative events.

Hence, it is of interest to examine the potential influence of neuroticism on the association between negative events and self-esteem. The research question that follows from this is: To what extent is self-esteem related to task-related negative work events and is this relation moderated by neuroticism? This study contributes to the practice of management by examining how to prevent a drop in self-esteem.

Relationship between Negative Events and State Self-Esteem

To explain the relationship between negative work events and self-esteem, one may consider employing the ‘Stress as Offense to Self’ theory, as proposed by Semmer et al. (2019), as a theoretical framework. This theory assumes that ensuring a positive self-perception is a fundamental requirement for people’s well-being and it is essential to maintain it. When people’s self-esteem is threatened, it can result in stress, which includes adverse

psychological, physical, and behavioural responses. Conversely, when people experience a boost in their self-esteem, it contributes to the overall well-being.

In the domain of self-esteem research, a temporal distinction arises wherein two components are apparent: *trait* self-esteem, characterized by enduring stability across the lifespan, and *state* self-esteem, subject to temporal fluctuations (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In this study, I focus on just the one aspect of state self-esteem. This is because we want to see what the impact is of short-term events at the workplace on self-esteem.

Employees experience daily failures (Semmer et al., 2019). Daily failures undermine one's sense of competence, and consequently, impact one's self-esteem. An example of such daily failure for an employee could be: not finishing your work in time for the deadline. These failures should be considered a distinct form of stressor with consequences that go beyond those of typical daily stressors. These investigations in the study of Semmer et al. (2019) lend support to the idea that failure and success represent unique stressors and resources due to their close association with one's self-perception.

The theory by Pindek on the implications of underperformance of employees (Pindek, 2020), 'Failing is Derailing', explains that there is a difference between acute and chronic underperformance. Acute underperformance is performing a task in a manner that falls far short of performance standards or leads to results that are noticeably poorer than they could have been if an alternative approach to completing the task had been chosen. Chronic underperformance is when someone continuously fails to meet the standards for their job. In this study acute underperformance is discussed, because we measure through diary studies for a shorter amount of time than you would do with a longitudinal study. Even so, these two kinds can interplay in the sense that when someone is a chronic underperformer, they also have an increased rate of acute underperformance.

Based on Semmer's theory 'Stress as Offense to Self' (2019) and Pindek's theory 'Failing is Derailing' (2020), I expect that negative events are related to state self-esteem of an employee. Negative events, such as the managers imposing illegitimate tasks on the employee or acute underperformance by the employee, are expected to be negatively related to state self-esteem

Hypothesis 1: Employees experiencing negative work events tend to have low state self-esteem.

Moderating Effect of the Relationship between Neuroticism and State Self-Esteem

In Pindek's (2000) study, the role of various personality traits in the relationship between negative events and self-confidence is theorized. One moderating effect was negative affectivity, which refers to a person's inherent tendency to view the world through a more negative lens and to experience negative emotions more frequently. Negative affectivity is a personal trait that tends to exacerbate the effects of underperforming as a stressor. The individual's self-esteem may be affected by underperformance. The inability to meet performance standards poses a threat to oneself because competence within a domain linked to the individual's identity is fundamental; it forms the basis for self-esteem concerning professional identities.

According to Widiger and Oltmanns (2017), neuroticism serves as a fundamental component of general personality, integrated within both the five-factor model, commonly known as the Big Five, and the dimensional trait model outlined in Section III of the DSM-5, particularly for emerging assessments and models. The term 'negative affectivity' has been proposed as an alternative to neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1990). Moreover, Robert et al. (2001) established a correlation between neuroticism and heightened sensitivity to stressful life events, suggesting that individuals with high neuroticism tend to exhibit increased susceptibility to such events. This could be attributed to the prolonged recovery period

experienced by individuals high in neuroticism following stressful situations (Bolger & Schilling, 1991).

Building upon the premise that negative affectivity amplifies the impact of underperformance as a stressor, and considering the detrimental effect of underperformance on state self-esteem, it is reasonable to infer a potential relationship between neuroticism, state self-esteem, and negative work events (Pindek, 2000). Consequently, as a second hypothesis, I anticipate a moderating influence of neuroticism on the relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2: For employees high in neuroticism, the relationship between negative events and state self-esteem is stronger than for employees low in neuroticism.

Method

Study Design

This study is part of a larger project examining different variables in the workplace that can predict employee self-esteem. In this particular study, the focus will be limited on the measures relevant to the question on how negative work events influence employee self-esteem and how neuroticism moderates this relationship. The research was conducted by Bachelor's and Master's Psychology students at the University of Groningen. This research is based on a diary study design. The participants first had to complete a baseline survey which took approximately 12 minutes to complete. Before the baseline survey, participants were informed about how their personal data would be handled, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. After the baseline survey, participants were required to fill in daily surveys for ten workdays, which took about 9 minutes each day to carry out. They received daily emails at the end of the working day, inviting them to access the online diaries. Weekends were excluded. Endorsement Contingent Payment approval was given by providing the participants feedback reports about their scores, offering them insight into their self-

reflection. Additionally, the participants had a chance to win 50 euros, as an incentive to increase motivation for participation.

Participants

The recruitment of the participants went through snowball sampling, a form of non-probability sampling. The students involved in recruitment asked people in their personal network to participate in the study by distributing a flyer through online platforms, such as WhatsApp, with information about the study. In addition, data from participants recruited by other undergraduate Psychology students in 2022 were used. We also requested participants to share the flyer with others, including colleagues. Data were gathered across multiple waves at different time points, beginning in June 2022. The last data collection took place in October and November 2023. Participants were selected on the criteria of their commitment to work a minimum of 20 hours per week and their command of the English language. The baseline survey was completed by 228 subjects while the diary part was completed by 144 subjects. Three participants were excluded, because they did not report any negative events. The group of participants consists of employees between 19 and 62 years old. The average age of the participants is 37.54 ($SD = 13.22$). Distribution of gender was 45.4% ($N = 64$) male and 53.9% ($N = 76$) female. The nationality of the participants was 42.6% Dutch, 13.5% German, 12.1% Indian and 31.8% had another nationality. The distribution of educational levels showed that 72.4% hold a university degree. The participant pool encompasses a wide range of industries, with the top sectors being Industry (production), ICT, consultancy, and legal consulting, as well as health and social welfare.

Measures

State Self-Esteem

State self-esteem was assessed daily by three modified items from the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1989). The items were “I took a positive attitude toward myself”, “I

felt that I have a number of good qualities”, and “On the whole I was satisfied with myself”. Participants responded using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) with $\alpha = .871$.

Negative Work Events

Negative work events were measured as part of the daily survey using a comprehensive taxonomy developed by Schmitt and Scheibe (2022). The survey comprised 32 events (of which 19 were negative) and participants were asked to rate the events on the impact it had on them. The scale was transformed from a 5-point to a 4-point scale by excluding the option 'Did not experience this situation; no impact' as it was deemed irrelevant for the purposes of this research. The 4-point scale was ranging from 'little impact' to 'very significant impact'. An illustration of a negative work event item is: “Hindered to work on important tasks because someone interrupts or distracts” and “Witness counterproductive behavior of coworkers or poor teamwork”

Neuroticism

Neuroticism was measured as part of the baseline survey using the Mini-IPIP scales (Donnellan et al., 2006), a 20-Item short form of the 50-Item International Personality Item Pool. Four of those 20 items were used to assess neuroticism. Participants answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate). An example item is “I have frequent mood swings”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale items was $\alpha = .531$.

Statistical Analysis

In this study, a multilevel design was used. For every individual, there were several days of observation. Aggregated data was used, so analyzing the variations within individuals over different days was not possible. Prior to this, we looked at descriptive statistics to understand the distribution of the data and potential outliers. Control variables were identified through correlation analyses. The geographical variable "gender" demonstrated a significant

correlation with one of the study variables. Hence, it was included as a control variable. For the second hypothesis, we introduced an interaction term by multiplying the standardized neuroticism with the standardized negative work events scores. Lastly, a stepwise linear regression analysis with potential control variables was conducted, the standardized scores of neuroticism and negative events and the interaction term.

Results

Demographic variables were investigated as potential control variables through correlation analysis. Through careful examination of table 1, there was a significant negative correlation ($r = -.216, \alpha < .05$). between neuroticism and self-esteem. A significant correlation was found between gender and neuroticism ($r = .179, p < .05$). Therefore, we take gender as a control variable in our model.

Table 1

Correlation independent variables, dependent variable and control variable

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Negative Work Events	1.65	0.50			
2. Neuroticism	2.78	0.67	.18*		
3. Self Esteem	3.24	0.62	-.05	-.22*	
4. Gender	.55	0.51	.09	.18*	-.05

Note. N=141

The assumptions for the stepwise linear regression were checked and met the requirements. A scatterplot was used to check for outliers and linearity, a P-P plot indicated that the residuals had a normal distribution and independence of observations is not an issue.

Multicollinearity was analyzed with VIF values below 4. This indicates that there was no multicollinearity.

Following the stepwise linear regression of table 2, the model suggests that the interaction term has a t-value of -1.655, with a two-sided p-value of .100. Therefore, the interaction effect is not significant for $p < .001$. This suggests insufficient evidence to support the initial hypothesis, which stated that employees experiencing negative work events would be associated with lower self-esteem. The statistical findings or observed patterns in the data do not match the expected relationship proposed in the initial hypothesis. The main effect explains a small amount of variance (4.7%), but this additional variance explained is not statistically significant. Therefore, based on the analysis, we cannot confirm the hypothesis that negative work events are associated with lower self-esteem among employees. The second hypothesis of this study proposed that the association between negative work events and self-esteem would be stronger in employees high in neuroticism than people low in neuroticism. The interaction effect explains a small amount of variance (6,5%). However, Hypothesis 2 could not be supported by the data either, as the interaction effect was not significant. ($B = -.074$, $SE = .045$, $p = .100$).

Table 2*Regression: Coefficients predicting self-esteem*

Model		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1	Constant	3.273	.077	42.678	<.001
	Gender	-.061	.102	-.601	.549
2	(Constant)	3.248	.076	42.579	<.001
	Gender	-.015	.102	-.146	.884
	Neuroticism	-.131	.053	-2.467	.015
	Negative Work events	-.003	.052	-.064	.949
3	(Constant)	3.252	.076	42.879	<.001
	Gender	.002	.102	.024	.981
	Neuroticism	-.131	.053	-2.482	.014
	Negative Work Events	.001	.052	.020	.984
	Interaction	-.074	.045	-1.655	.100

Note. N=141

*Gender is coded as 1 = male and 0 = female.

Discussion

This research paper aimed to investigate how negative events, state self-esteem, and neuroticism interrelate within the work environment. We aimed to specifically examine the influence of the factors negative work events and neuroticism on state self-esteem. Previous research had already investigated self-esteem as an explanatory variable, such as in the study by Pindek (2020), where it was suggested that self-esteem likely buffers the negative effects of underperformance on well-being. In this study, self-esteem was utilized as the dependent variable, specifically focusing on state self-esteem, which fluctuates from day to day. The main question guiding this inquiry was: To what extent is an individual's self-esteem affected by negative work events, and does this association vary depending on their level of neuroticism?

Initially, we expected that employees facing negative work events would experience a decrease in self-esteem. Following this, we delved into exploring whether neuroticism plays a

role in shaping this relationship. Our focus was on understanding how neuroticism influences the link between negative work events and an individual's state self-esteem. We proposed that individuals high in neuroticism might have a stronger connection between negative events and self-esteem compared to those low in neuroticism. To ensure accuracy, we controlled for gender differences during hypothesis testing.

However, negative work events did not significantly correlate with state self-esteem. Similarly, neuroticism explained only a small amount of variance, which was also non-significant.

Interestingly, our findings contrast with those of Crocker and Wolfe (2001), who suggested that negative events indeed influence self-esteem. However, they highlighted that negative events in everyday life could be ambiguous, potentially leading to discrepancies in how participants interpret them. This suggests that the negative events reported in our study may not have been universally recognized as relevant by all participants, which could have influenced our results.

In this study, I used the 'Stress as Offense to Self theory' which states that daily failures could jeopardize an individuals' self-esteem (Semmer et al., 2019). It also suggests that failure and success represent unique stressors and resources due to their close association with one's self-perception. In addition, Koopman et al. (2016) found a significant result in the relationship between self-esteem and positive work events. However, in this paper the influence of success on the state self-esteem, in other words, positive work events were not taken into account. Therefore, there is a possibility that in some of the cases in some cases the positive events cancel out the negative ones. In a future study should the role of positive events be put in the model as a moderator.

Despite hypothesizing that negative work events would be associated with lower self-esteem among employees, this study did not find significant support for this assumption. This

finding might be interpreted in light of Pindek's theory (2020), which distinguishes between acute and chronic underperformance. Acute underperformance, such as experiencing negative work events, may not necessarily lead to a significant decline in self-esteem, especially in the short term. The temporal duration of the ten-day measurement period may have been insufficient to yield statistically significant findings.

Unlike findings in previous studies (e.g., Alessandri et al., 2016) that demonstrated significant associations between negative events and state self-esteem, this study diverged in its approach by not considering between-individual differences. Employing aggregated data, the analysis did not capture the nuanced fluctuations in state self-esteem experienced by individuals on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, the absence of detail regarding the daily experiences of participants may have obscured potentially significant relationships between negative events and state self-esteem. Acknowledging the importance of within-person variations, it is plausible that accounting for these fluctuations could have enhanced the likelihood of observing statistically significant results in the analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study I made use of snowball sampling. I asked people in my surroundings to participate in the study, what could potentially cause a bias, limit generatability or cause ethical concerns. Future research could use random sampling as a better alternative, although this could be difficult in practice.

Another likely limitation could be that the statistical power could be too low to see a significant effect. Future research should make use of a larger participant pool.

Additional to the limitations are the baseline and daily surveys being held online. Through the online surveys one gets limited context about the impact of the participants on their lives and state self-esteem. A potential adaption to achieve more context for the future could be that the information would be acquired in the form of doing interviews. Additionally,

delving further into the contextual aspects of the job during these interviews could provide valuable insights. If one were to differentiate between different job categories and tailor events to those specific occupations, it is conceivable that this approach would result in diverse outcomes.

Moreover, considerable methodological diligence is necessary, as being described in the study of Liu et al. (2023) to investigate how temporal aspects (e.g., event timing, frequency, and duration) and spatial factors (such as the origin and scope of events in both horizontal and vertical dimensions) within different event contexts can impact events and alter individuals' responses to them. To obtain insights into the complex nature of events and their impacts, scholars might conduct extensive data collection initiatives that combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Gender could have an effect on state self-esteem. I observed a significant positive relationship correlation between gender and self-esteem. As males are coded 1 and females are coded 0, a positive relationship between the two variables means that male employees have higher rated state self-esteem in comparison to female employees. The influence of gender should be further explored in future research.

Future research should focus on implementing another sampling method and to include more participants in the pool. Moreover, future studies could enhance methodological approaches by incorporating interviews tailored to specific job industries, enabling a deeper understanding of contextual factors. This interdisciplinary approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, along with extensive data collection initiatives, would offer a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. Ultimately in future research it could be beneficial to explore the relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem of employees by taking moderating roles of gender and positive work events into account.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this study reveal a lack of significant impact of negative work events on the state self-esteem of employees. Furthermore, the results indicate no moderating influence of neuroticism on the relationship between negative work events and employee state self-esteem. Despite these non-significant results, this research adds meaningful insights to the field of organizational psychology. The study underscores the significance of exploring the determinants of employee state self-esteem. In delving into these factors, it becomes imperative to examine their potential implications for employee productivity. This broader perspective is crucial for organizations seeking to enhance employee well-being and performance.

While existing literature often prioritizes the well-being of employees, as demonstrated by studies such as that of Bono et al. (2013), limited attention has been given to state self-esteem as an explanatory variable. Therefore, this study fills a notable gap in the literature and lays the groundwork for future research.

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