Effect of Negative Work Events on State Self-Esteem

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Abstract

With self-esteem being connected to mental health and negative work events frequently happening in the day-to-day, it is important to understand the relationship between these two factors. The goal of the present study is to examine the influence of negative work events on a person's state self esteem. Furthermore, the influence of sensory processing sensitivity on this relationship will be explored. This study aims at scrutinizing these relations using a 10-day diary study design and a subsequent multiple linear regression analysis. While there was no support for a significant relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem, SPS was found to be a significant moderator. This means that the impact of negative work events on state self-esteem was found to depend on the level of SPS of a person, with the negative effect being stronger for employees high in SPS.

Keywords: State self-esteem; Negative work events; Sensory processing sensitivity

Effect of Negative Events in the Workplace on State Self-Esteem

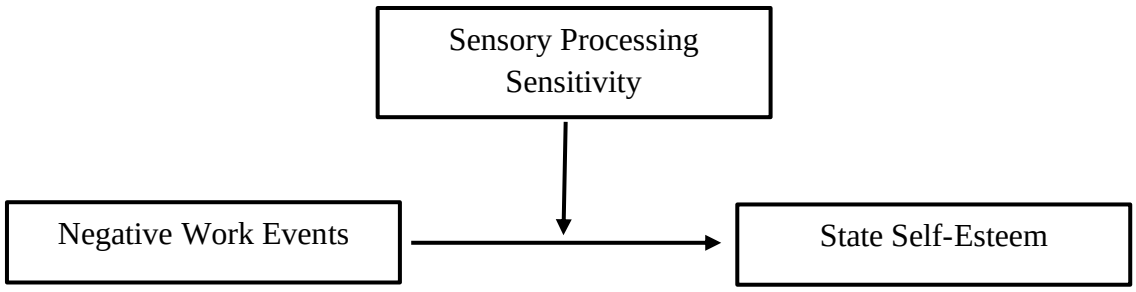
There is a growing body of research regarding the detrimental consequences of negative work events on a person's psychological state, including the potential impact on self-esteem. The workplace takes over a major part in most people's lives in which frequent stressful events can take place, such as conflicts experienced at work, negative feedback from one's supervisor, or unpleasant social interactions with colleagues or customers. The importance of such stressors and their impact has been widely acknowledged (Volmer & Fritsche, 2016). Self-esteem is a universally known concept, suggested to influence both the attitude towards oneself as well as the view on others, with low self-esteem being considered a risk factor for various mental health issues (Guo et al., 2022).

The focus of this research is on state self-esteem, which refers to the self-evaluation of a person following work events that can either be of positive or negative nature. The severity of the impact that events have on an individual's self-esteem is dependent on the domain in which the event takes place, such as one's private life or the workplace. It further depends on whether self-worth has been staked in the specific area (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), meaning in our case if the workplace holds importance for the employees regarding their personal worth. I scrutinize the impact that negative work events can have on state self-esteem as the main effect of this study. Additionally, I examine whether the factor of sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) influences the relationship between negative events and state self-esteem (see Figure 1). It is hypothesized that SPS takes a moderating role in the relationship, as it may amplify the effect of negative work events on state self-esteem. This can be assumed based on the characteristics of SPS, such as a heightened susceptibility towards overstimulation and emotional reactivity of SPS, which are due to a greater sensitivity regarding external and internal stimuli (Golonka & Gulla, 2021).

Since negative events at work are difficult to prevent, it is of importance to be aware of the possible impact on the self-esteem of employees. Even as the employer puts in effort to create a positive environment for their staff, the potential for a task-related (e.g., making a mistake in a work task) or social (e.g., disrespectful treatment by clients or colleagues) negative work event to take place is still present, posing a risk factor for the employee's state self-esteem. Considering that SPS is a fairly new concept, examining the potential role it has in this relationship could also direct future research on the possible influence on other established relationships.

The study aims to contribute to the literature by providing information on how the relationship between negative events and state self-esteem holds in the specific life domain of the workplace. Understanding the mechanisms at play at the workplace could then be used in the field of work and organizational psychology. The insights gained from this research can also lead to further exploration, investigating which other existing relationships may be influenced by SPS. The findings of this study could also lead to additional research on the fairly new concept of SPS in relation to not just existing relationships but also mental health issues and the role that SPS may play in symptoms.

Figure 1. Proposed relationship among the variables.



The Relationship Between Negative Work Events and Self-Esteem

The overall self-esteem of a person refers to their self-evaluation regarding the dimensions of worth and competence (Kapadia & Patki, 2023). For this research, state self-

esteem is of importance, which can be defined as emotional reactions regarding the evaluation of the self in response to experiences that are either threatening or enhancing for the self-esteem (Semmer et al., 2019). These emotional reactions have been hypothesized to depend on whether a person's self-esteem is contingent on the domain in which the event took place (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Such events can relate to a person's own competencies as well as the perceived positive and negative social feedback received from others (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

The threat proposed to self-esteem by negative work events plays a part in the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR theory posits that stress occurs as a response to one of three scenarios. The scenarios include a threat or an actual loss of resource and to fail at gaining a resource despite putting considerable effort in the obtainment (Hobfoll et al., 2018). One resource that is considered universally valued as important among people is self-esteem, which includes personal resources such as key skills and self-efficacy. Hence, negative work events propose a threat to the key resource of self-esteem by potentially leading to decreased perceived self-efficacy (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This is supported by Crocker and Wolfe (2001), who state that failing at a task could lead to a decrease in self-esteem if the underperformance took place in a domain where a person has placed self-worth.

Furthermore, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) suggest that self-esteem functions in a bottom-up manner, meaning that it is acquired through the evaluation of different aspects regarding the self, especially those viewed as key characteristics. This would support the notion of an existing relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem, as two major contingencies, namely competencies and social approval, can be found in daily work life. Research done by DeHart and Pelham (2007) further supports this assumption, stating

that state self-esteem shows fluctuations as a reaction to external influences such as negative events.

Within the COR theory, the primacy of loss principle proposes that a negative event at work can be perceived as a loss of resource and is disproportionally more important to a person as compared to a gain in resource (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This increased importance placed on the negative event could explain the stress experienced by a person as well as the subsequent negative impact on a person's state self-esteem. In their Stress as Offense to Self (SOS) theory, Semmer et al. (2019) distinguish between two kinds of stress induced by negative events. For one, stress emerges when a person does not meet the criteria for good performance, resulting in a feeling of insufficiency (i.e., Stress through Insufficiency), which is in correspondence to task-related negative work events. The second form of stress can be related to negative work events of social nature. Stress as Disrespect is described by Semmer et al. (2019) as the extent of perceived appreciation, acceptance, and feeling of value by others, as opposed to being treated in an unfair manner or feeling excluded or attacked. Both forms of stress are included in this research and taken together as negative work events.

When analyzing negative work events and their impact on a person, the Event System Theory (EST) as introduced by Liu et al. (2023) provides a systematic perspective. The EST proposes three core elements to an event: event strength, event space, and event time. It is stated that not all negative events are of damaging nature or have identical impact on each person (Liu et al., 2023), supporting the notion of variability regarding the impact a negative work event can have on an individual. Additionally, it should be taken into consideration that the interpretation of ambiguous events can have an influence on the effect that the event will have. DeHart and Pelham (2007) found that participants of their study, who were low in state self-esteem, reported to experience more negative events. This finding indicates that a

reduction in state self-esteem could lead to a negative bias regarding a person's perception on ambiguous events.

The above presented literature suggests that there is an existing relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem, while also implying that there are factors such as the individual perception of those events that can play a key role. The relationship is also hypothesized to be dependent on the placement of self-worth in the domain of the workplace.

Hypothesis 1: Negative work events are negatively related to state self-esteem.

The Moderating Role of Sensory Processing Sensitivity

When introducing their SOS theory, Semmer et al. (2019) propose that implications in one's surroundings regarding the self display a relatively low threshold to being noticed. This enhanced perception implies that a cue can be expected to be appraised as offensive, even if it is only subtly negative. The authors further suggest that oftentimes high self-esteem is attached to a person's professional role, which can become part of their identity (Semmer et al., 2019). This placement of self-esteem, combined with the vigilance towards implications regarding the self, are factors explaining the severity of the impact that work events can have on a person's state self-esteem. With the threshold for noticing such subtle cues already being low, it can be assumed that people with high SPS display an increased vulnerability towards negative work events affecting their state self-esteem. This assumption is based on the proposed characteristics of a person who is high in SPS, including high emotional reactivity, a greater sensitivity leading to susceptibility to overstimulation, as well as generally being able to notice subtleties (Golonka & Gulla, 2021).

The authors Golonka and Gulla (2021) propose that SPS consists of three main characteristics, namely Ease of Excitation (EOE), Aesthetic Sensitivity (AES), and Low Sensory Threshold (LST). The assumed relevance of the factors is based on findings by Grimen and Diseth (2016), stating that the factors LST and EOE showed a positive

relationship with both work stress and work displeasure, suggesting that highly sensitive people are more susceptible to negative work events. EOE concerns the feeling of overwhelm as a reaction to internal as well as external stimuli, and LST refers to an unpleasant sensory arousal. This heightened reactivity could then lead to an amplified negative effect on state self-esteem for people high in SPS.

With the current state of the art regarding SPS as described above, a moderating role can be assumed regarding the relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem. This hypothesized enhanced reactivity is based on factors such as heightened sensitivity towards external and internal stimuli, as well as the more intense emotional reaction to such stimuli. These characteristics of SPS, in combination with the literature previously presented regarding the impact negative work events are anticipated to have on state self-esteem, build the theoretical framework of my research.

Hypothesis 2: The negative relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem is amplified for people high in SPS.

Method

Study Design

A daily diary study was conducted, which was programmed using Qualtrics and employed a diary methodology as it offers a means of identifying both between- and within-subjects effects, allowing for a better understanding of inter- and intra-individual differences (Esposito et al., 2005). Therefore, the present study consisted of two parts, a baseline survey and a diary part extending throughout 10 working days from Monday to Friday (excluding weekends). As the thesis was part of a bigger project, the existing data was collected at different points in time across a period starting in April 2022 and lasting until November 2023. Before conducting the study, the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen was given.

The baseline survey of the study assessed demographics, general work characteristics, and trait measures such as SPS. The daily diary questionnaires measured affective (negative) work events and day-specific self-esteem. At the end of the baseline survey, participants were asked to provide their e-mail so they would receive a link to the daily questionnaire at the end of each workday. The inclusion and exclusion criteria regarding participation were based on working 20 or more hours per week and possessing sufficient English skills to answer the survey questions. A flyer was created for the recruitment of participants through the personal network, social media of Bachelor and Master students, and by word-of-mouth. Accordingly, such snowball and convenience sampling resulted in a heterogeneous sample. As an incentive, participants who completed both the baseline survey and at least one daily diary survey received an overall study-feedback report after the data analysis was conducted. They also had the choice of participating in a raffle for one of three 50 Euro vouchers. Out of 249 participants who completed the baseline survey, 18 were removed as they failed the attention check, 4 due to missing data, and the remaining 83 removed participants did not complete at least one daily survey.

Participants and Data Collection

The final sample consisted of 144 working adults from various professional backgrounds, with the most prevalent branches being health and social welfare, industry/production, and ICT or legal consulting. Based on a conducted t-test, there were no significant mean differences in the study variables across the participants of 2022 and 2023 (self-esteem: $t = 1.58$, $p = 0.8$, negative work events: $t = .7$, $p = .66$, SPS: $t = .6$, $p = .15$). The sample consisted of 66 males, 77 females, and one person who preferred not to state their gender. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 62 years with a mean age of 37.61 years (SD = 13.26). Furthermore, the sample included participants from different origins worldwide, with most participants being from the Netherlands (43.1%) and Germany (14.6%). In terms of

educational background, 19 (13.2%) of the participants have a high school degree, 23 (16.0%) have a technical secondary school degree, 94 (65.3%) have a university diploma, and 8 (5.6%) have achieved a doctorate degree.

Measures

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (Baseline Survey)

SPS was assessed utilizing the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSP-12) as proposed by Pluess et al. (2023). The scale consists of 12 items in total and measures the three individual factors EOE, LST, and AES. An example item is “Are you bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes?”. The items are ranked on a 7-point Likert scale indicating applicability for the participant and ranging from “not at all” to “extremely”. Cronbach’s alpha for the HSP-12 in this study was $\alpha = .822$.

Negative Work Events (Daily Online Questionnaire)

Negative work events were measured using the cross-cultural taxonomy on the frequency and impact of affective work events as proposed by Schmitt and Scheibe (2022). The taxonomy lists 32 work events out of which participants were asked to identify the occurrence and impact of each event. Participants first indicated whether the event was experienced or not, with the latter being rated as having no impact. Whereas, if the event took place, participants were asked to indicate its valance and level of impact ranging from having little impact to being very significantly impactful. Out of a total of 32 items on the scale, 18 items referred to negative work events, one of which was for example “You received negative feedback about your own or your team’s or organization’s work”.

Due to one option on the scale indicating that no negative event took place, the values for the impact of negative work events were re-coded from a 5-point Likert scale to a 4-point Likert scale in the statistical analysis. This means that the value indicating no negative event taking place was removed and the remaining values only related to the reported strength of the

event. Accordingly, a higher mean score indicated a greater impact of experienced negative work events, and a lower mean score indicated a lesser impact of adverse events.

Cronbach's alpha for the scale measuring negative work events for this sample was $\alpha = .908$.

State Self-Esteem (Daily Online Questionnaire)

State self-esteem was measured with three items from a modified version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1989). Participants rated altered items such as "At the moment, I feel I have a number of good qualities" on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (i.e., "not at all") to 5 (i.e., "extremely"). For the modified Rosenberg self-esteem scale, Cronbach's alpha was computed to be $\alpha = .874$.

Control Variables

Based on previous research, I decided to control for the variables of age and gender in the present study. Evidence has been reported that older employees experience greater negative affect in response to adverse work events than younger employees (Scheibe, 2021), and men show lower justice sensitivity as compared to women (Schmitt et al., 2010).

Statistical Analysis

It is crucial to note that the analysis utilized aggregated data per individual, representing combined scores from the daily measurements across the study for the key variables of state self-esteem and the impact of negative work events.

Initially, a new variable was computed by obtaining the mean score across items for each relevant concept (state self-esteem, impact of daily negative work events, and SPS). Furthermore, to enhance the robustness of the analysis, z-score standardization was applied to the mean scores of negative events and SPS. Subsequently, to test the moderation effect, an interaction term was created by multiplying the standardized negative events and SPS scores.

The first step in the main statistical analysis consisted of organizing and summarizing the data using descriptive statistics and frequencies to gain insights into central tendencies and dispersions within the key and demographic variables. Then, a correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships among the variables. The analysis included the relevant variables self-esteem, negative events, and SPS as well as demographic factors, such as age and gender, to identify potential control variables based on the literature. Finally, inferential statistics were employed to formally test the hypotheses and make population-level estimates.

Multiple linear regression was chosen as the primary method for examining the relationships between the continuous variables. Simultaneously with the regression analysis, I also performed assumption checks (homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, normality of residuals) to ensure that the correct conclusions were drawn. In order to test the main effect hypothesis, a linear regression model was constructed with state self-esteem as the dependent variable and standardized negative work events as the independent variable. In the pursuit of investigating the moderation effect, a second block was introduced into the regression model. This block included the new interaction variable representing the interplay between negative work events and SPS. The moderation effect analysis employed a stepwise linear regression method approach to systematically assess the contribution of each variable to the overall research model in terms of variance explained (R^2).

Results

Descriptive analysis

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for the between-person and the mean SPS and daily variables, state self-esteem and negative work events respectively, as well as the control variables of age and gender. The correlational analysis did not indicate any significant correlations for negative events and self-esteem or SPS with state self-esteem (see Table 1). The same holds for the control variables, which were not

significantly correlated with the dependent variable and were therefore excluded from the subsequent main regression analysis.

Table 1. Correlations

	M	SD	Self-esteem	Negative work events	SPS	Age	Gender
Self-esteem	3.25	.62	-				
Negative work events	1.65	.5	-.046	-			
SPS	4.1	.93	-.128	-.006	-		
Age	37.61	13.26	.086	-.089	-.043	-	
Gender	.55	.513	-.053	.089	.338**	-.104	-

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
Note. N = 141-144. Gender was measured as a binary variable, with 0 indicating *male*, 1 indicating *female*, and 2 indicating *other*.

Hypotheses testing

In line with the assumption of collinearity, the data was examined to show no multicollinearity between variables in either model ($VIF < 4$). It should be noted that two participants did not indicate experiencing any negative events throughout the diary study and were therefore not included in the regression analysis.

As an initial step, the first hypothesis was tested suggesting a negative relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem. In the first block of the hierarchical regression analysis, the predictor of negative work events did not show a significant relation with state self-esteem (B = -.029, SE = .052, p = .582) (see Table 2). The present p-value was above the significance level of $\alpha \leq .05$. Furthermore, as indicated by R^2 = .024, this theoretical model only explains about 2.4% of the observed variability, which further supports the notion of a small and non-significant effect. Accordingly, the first, main model is not in line with my first hypothesis.

To test the second hypothesis, stating a proposed amplified negative effect of negative work events on state self-esteem for employees who score high on SPS, I examined the significance of the interaction term. As illustrated in Table 2, SPS did significantly contribute to the prediction of state self-esteem as a moderator at the significance level of $\alpha \leq .05$

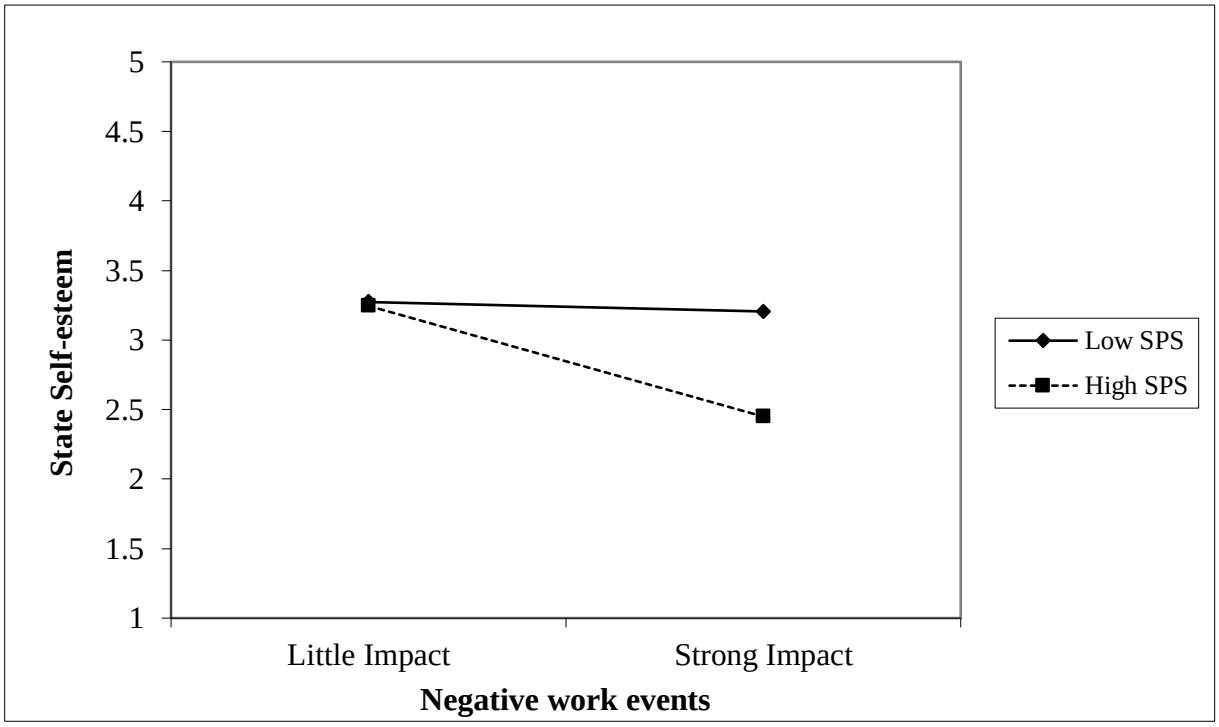
(B = -.091, SE = .046, p = .048). The R^2 value for the second model including the interaction effect is approximately R^2 = .051, with the model thus accounting for 5.1% of the variance. This finding indicates that the relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem is influenced by SPS as the moderator (See Figure 2). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported by the data.

Table 2. Regression coefficients.

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	95% CI	R^2
1	(Constant)	3.24	.052		3.137, 3.342	
	Negative work events	-.029	.052	-.046	-.131, .074	.024
	SPS	-.093	.053	-.147	-.198, .012	
2	(Constant)	3.236	.051		3.138, 3.34	
	Negative work events	-.034	.051	-.055	-.135, .068	
	SPS	-.098	.053	-.156	-.202, .006	
	interaction	-.091*	.046	-.166	-.182, -.001	.051*

Note. CI = confidence interval.
* p < .05

Figure 2. Interaction effect.



Note. A visualization of the lower scores reported for state self-esteem in employees with high SPS who indicated having experienced a strongly impactful negative event at work as compared to those employees with low SPS.

Discussion

The current study sought to examine two effects. The main effect was a proposed relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem, inspecting whether there was a reportedly lower state self-esteem when one or more negative events were experienced at work. As a second aim, this study scrutinized if this relationship would be amplified for people who are high in SPS as compared to those low in SPS. The outcomes clearly suggest that state self-esteem can be negatively influenced by an experienced negative work event when an employee reports high SPS, whereas the impact is not prominent if they display low scores of SPS (see Figure 2).

This finding supports and extends previous literature on the influence that external stimuli can have on highly sensitive people. The outcomes are in line with two characteristics of SPS, namely EOE and LST, as the heightened reactivity and sensitivity towards stimuli showed to be influential factors regarding the impact on state self-esteem. The negative effect was increased in highly sensitive people in this study as well as the study conducted by Golonka and Gulla (2021) on SPS and burnout syndrome. The findings also further support and extend the SOS theory as proposed by Semmer et al. (2019), since the stress that is hypothesized to be higher in people with high SPS did lead to a threat to the self and accordingly to low reported state self-esteem.

Concerning the main effect between negative work events and state self-esteem, this study was unable to provide data supporting a significant relationship. This finding is not in line with previous research by Crocker and Wolfe (2001), proposing a decrease in self-esteem following underperformance in an important domain such as the workplace. There are a few possible reasonings behind this inconsistent finding, one of them being the chosen statistical analysis. By using aggregated data and multiple linear regression, there is no consideration of possible within-person differences. This means the impact of a negative event on state self-

esteem on a certain day was not taken into consideration. Rather, it was examined whether the aggregated data of negative work events showed a significant relationship with the aggregated data of state self-esteem. That is, if people who indicated one or more impactful negative work events also indicated generally lower state self-esteem over the span of the diary study. This disregard of individual scores may be one possible reason behind the insignificance of the findings. A recommendation for future research would be to conduct multilevel regression analysis. This type of analysis could lead to greater and more significant insights as it examines the individual level and can account for individual differences on distinct days.

Limitations and Future Directions

Sample size

The sample size could have contributed to insignificant findings due to a smaller sample size having lower statistical power. The statistical power of a test should be high since it indicates the likelihood of correctly detecting a significant deviation from the null hypothesis. When the sample size increases, so does the statistical power and therefore it would be interesting to conduct this study again with a larger sample size, as the current study may have had a too small sample size to detect the main effect between negative work events and state self-esteem. The increased statistical power could then lead to the detection of an existing significant relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem.

Study setting

Another explanation behind the findings not being consistent with previous research may be the setting in which the relationship was tested. While literature suggests that self-esteem can be influenced by negative events in domains of importance (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018), this study did not examine whether the workplace held such contingencies of self-worth for the participants. The assumption that it does was based on previous literature, however since it is not clear that it was applicable to this sample it may be

a reason that negative events at work did not significantly impact state self-esteem for people with low scores of SPS in the current study.

Survey method

The lack of situational context may have contributed to the insignificant findings for the first hypothesis. The conducted online surveys may not have captured influential aspects of the negative events that took place, such as setting (e.g., was negative feedback given in private or in front of colleagues?) or origin (e.g., what behavior or previous incident led to the negative event?). Such characteristics could be taken into account in future studies by conducting in-person interviews. While interviews can be very costly considering resources such as time and money, they reveal more detailed information which can lead to more comprehensive and relevant results.

Sampling method

Another limitation of the conducted study was the sampling method. As can be seen by the demographics of the sample with a majority of the participants (86.9%) having completed a technical secondary degree or higher education, convenience and snowball sampling does not lead to a representative sample. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the population of working individuals and how negative work events can influence their state self-esteem. Therefore, future research should make use of a random sample of the population. This random subset of participants will lead to the study results being more representative of, and applicable to, the general population.

SPS

It may be of interest for future research to investigate the potential moderating effect of SPS in other relationships. This could include the impact that positive as well as negative stimuli can have on overall well-being and whether the relationship depends on the influential SPS factors of EOS and LST. Since SPS in general is a fairly new concept, it may also be

interesting to investigate its potential comorbidity with, and influence on, the symptoms of mental disorders such as anxiety disorders or mood disorders. Furthermore, and in line with the distinction between Stress through Insufficiency and Stress as Disrespect (Semmer et al., 2019), future research could focus on this differentiation of the root cause of stress and examine which form of stress proposes a greater risk to state self-esteem.

Practical Implications

The findings presented in this paper provide further evidence that negative events at work show a greater influence on employees who are high in SPS. This implies a necessity for increased sensitivity to be considered in the field of work and organizational psychology as a factor partially explaining why some people are affected more strongly by for example negative feedback compared to others. This variability between people's responses to negative events is also most probably not exclusively the case for work events but should be considered in a multiple of settings.

Conclusion

While there was a lack of evidence for the relationship between negative work events and state self-esteem, a significant interaction was found when SPS was added to the model. This means that the level of SPS in a person can influence and enhance the impact of a negative event on their state self-esteem. This finding contributes to a better understanding of the concept of SPS and gives incentive to further investigate this fairly new concept.

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