How Daily Negative Work Events Predict Employee Self-Esteem: The Moderating Role of Neuroticism

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Abstract

This study investigated how negative work events affect self-esteem with neuroticism as a moderator. While a substantial and growing body of literature explores the influence of stress on work performance, there is relatively less insight into the impact of negative work events on self-esteem. Specifically, this study hypothesized that more negative work events would result in lower scores on self-esteem. In addition, this study also examined whether neuroticism plays a role in the strength in the relationship between negative work experiences and self-esteem, given that negative experiences may be perceived as more intense by employees high in neuroticism. To test these hypotheses, 141 participants were recruited who met the requirements and completed a baseline study followed by a diary study of ten days. Predictions were based on the conservation of resources (COR) theory and the underperformance as a stressor model. The study found that negative events showed no significant change in self-esteem and neuroticism had no significant role in this either. Possible reasons for these results could be due to limitations, such as sample size, the reporting of events or the lack of within-person measurements. Future research could build on these limitations.

Keywords: negative work events, self-esteem, neuroticism, resources, underperformance

Influence of Negative Work Events on Employee Self-Esteem: Neuroticism as a Moderator

A significant part of our lives is spent working. In the Netherlands, for example, 73.1% of the population works, according to CBS (2023). Workdays are often filled with unexpected and sometimes challenging events (Morgeson et al., 2015; Ohly & Schmitt, 2015). For numerous people, a large part of their identity is tied to their work, given the fact much time is spent on the job (Ashforth et al., 2008). Work therefore has a major impact on our daily life and wellbeing. Individuals create beliefs about their ability and skills, referred to as self-evaluations (Brown et al., 2001). The workplace is an important context in which these self-evaluations take place. These evaluations and beliefs impact the state self-esteem of the individuals. This raises the question of how events and experiences at work impact the employees' self-esteem.

Self-esteem holds a significant importance and plays a crucial role in the experience of daily life (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Those who have higher self-esteem typically experience more positive emotions, report greater life satisfaction, experience less anxiety, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In fact, self-esteem is even a better indicator of life satisfaction in the United States than several other psychological variables, as well as other demographic and objective criteria (Diener, 1984).

In occupational psychology, there are numerous studies devoted to topics such as job performance and job stress, nevertheless the impact of work-related events on employee self-esteem is often overlooked (Pindek et al., 2017). Most of the literature conceptualize job stress as an antecedent of performance and look at what kind of impact job stress has on the performance, in accordance with the stress-performance model by Jex (1998). However, it does not investigate what happens to the self-esteem of employees once underperformance is experienced. *Underperformance* is defined as specific situations where an employee fails to

meet expectations or performs below expectations on a particular task or assignment, for instance the failure to achieve set goals and expectations (Latham & Locke, 2007; Zacher et al., 2016). When employees experience a negative event and feel like they are not meeting expected standards or not performing at their best, this can become a significant source of stress for them, according to Pindek (2020). Therefore, it is relevant to explore what these events do to their self-evaluations and self-esteem. Much of the existing research primarily focuses on these underperformance scenarios where expectations, either from others or oneself, are not met. Simultaneously, there are also social processes and features at work that might influence the self-esteem, for example poor teamwork (Schmitt et al., 2022). This research takes social negative events in consideration as well.

Examining the influence of everyday negative events, such as underperformance scenarios, social events at work or a combination of both (e.g. receiving negative feedback from a colleague), on the employees' self-esteem contributes to a better understanding of emotional reactions and psychological processes in the workplace. Therefore, the research question is: How do daily negative work events, such as underperformance, impact employees' self-esteem in the workplace?

The impact of an event on an individual’s self-esteem is primarily determined by how they interpret the event in relation to their own self-worth, rather than the event's objective nature (McFar-land & Ross, 1982). Neuroticism is closely linked to the experience of negative emotions. Individuals who score high on neuroticism, are more likely to experience increased negative emotions and to evaluate themselves more critically (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Furthermore, I expect that neuroticism has an influence on how self-esteem is affected by work-related events. Neuroticism will act as a moderator in this relationship.

Specifically, individuals higher in neuroticism may be more vulnerable to experiencing a greater negative impact on self-esteem in response to negative events at work, compared to individuals lower in neuroticism.

State Self-Esteem and Negative Work Events

Self-esteem is a fundamental aspect of subjective self-image and is related to self-acceptance and self-respect (Rosenberg, 1965). This complex concept includes both enduring characteristics and temporary fluctuation in response to outside influences. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) distinguish self-esteem into two dimensions: *state self-esteem* and *trait self-esteem*. Trait self-esteem, also known as baseline self-esteem, is a personal characteristic that is defined by its consistency and longevity throughout time. It is a consistent self-evaluation of someone's self-worth and how someone perceives themselves. In contrast, state self-esteem fluctuates briefly due to the influence of external factors. It refers to the momentary, situational evaluations of self-esteem that can change based on circumstances or specific events. It reflects the self-esteem someone experiences at a particular moment in time. Furthermore, it is possible to conceptualize self-esteem as both a trait that is consistent throughout time and a condition that varies depending on the specific circumstances. Self-esteem is closely related to self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their own ability to perform specific tasks or achieve goals (Bandura, 1986). The workplace is an important context in which these self-evaluations take place during occurrences of affective events.

Affective events are "things that happen to people in work environments that cause emotional reactions and change people's experiences" (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). A negative work event results in a variation of emotions and may have an influence on the state self-esteem. These work-related events vary in nature and can include a variety of changes in circumstances. The events have a clear beginning and end in time and often lack routine (Morgeson et al., 2015).

The Underperformance as a Stressor Model

The underperformance as a stressor Model by Pindek (2020), states that employees may experience stress when they underperform. As previously stated, the concept of underperformance in this model is defined as performing a task in a way that does not meet performance standards or leads to results that are significantly worse than they could have been when used a different strategy. Failures can challenge an individual's sense of competence (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). People strive for competence in their profession, and competency is acknowledged as a basic need (Reis et al. 2000). Long-term underperformance can undermine this need, which can lead to emotions of failure and self-doubt about someone's ability.

Negative work events range from acute underperformance, such as making a mistake, to a series of sequential events, such as failing to meet project deadlines or repeatedly missing deadlines. The underperformance as a stressor model distinguishes between two types of underperformances: acute underperformance and episodic or chronic underperformance. This research focuses specifically on acute underperformance due to a limited time span (Gilboa et al., 2008; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). The consequences of underperformance can be categorized into proximal (direct) and distal (indirect) outcomes. Distal outcomes are for example job insecurity or medical errors. Acute underperformance can trigger emotional reactions (such as guilt or sadness) and cognitive processes, like worrying. These reactions are considered proximal outcomes. This paper will concentrate on proximal outcomes, as its primary focus is to examine direct changes in state self-esteem.

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory

The conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers insights into why work events may affect self-esteem as well. This theory states that individuals strive to maintain their resources, acquire new ones, and minimize losses. Resources are defined as

things, traits, conditions, or energies that are valuable to the individual or that provide a way to obtain these things, traits, conditions, or energies. Resources include things like money or self-worth. According to the principles of the COR theory, resource loss is considered more damaging than resource gain. The stress resulting from resource loss can potentially lead to changes in self-esteem. Negative events, for example a project that fails, are seen as potential threats to the loss of resources. On the other hand, positive events, such as promotions, are viewed as resource gains and are stored in the resource reservoir. Individuals are motivated to protect and expand these resources. An assumption drawn from this existing literature is that self-esteem may be a result of acquired resources, but it can also be a resource itself. For example, self-esteem can be seen as a variable influenced by negative work events and as a factor that helps individuals cope with stressors.

The link between self-efficacy and performance is well known: if a person is confident in his or her ability to achieve goals, they will put in more effort and are more likely to achieve these goals (Lindsley et al, 1995). In the context of COR theory, this can be linked to the principle of the negative spiral, where negative events lead to a decrease in self-efficacy. This decline in self-efficacy can then contribute to changes in self-esteem, which can cause a downward spiral. Confidence and performance decrease, which in turn negatively affects self-esteem.

The Influence of Negative Work Events on Self-Esteem

Both the COR theory and the underperformance as a stressor model provide perspectives on how work events impact the self-esteem of individuals in the workplace. The underperformance as a stressor model explores how underperformance affects self-esteem, whereas the COR theory highlights the significance of resource acquisition, maintenance, and self-esteem loss. In sum, I therefore posit the following:

Hypothesis 1. Negative work events are negatively associated with employees'

self-esteem.

Neuroticism as a Moderator

Personality traits, such as neuroticism, potentially play a role in how strong the relationship is between negative work events and self-esteem. Neuroticism, a personality trait, is characterized by a predisposition to experience negative affect, such as anger, anxiety, self-consciousness, irritability, emotional instability and depression (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017).

Within the framework of the COR theory developed by Hobfol et al. (2018), personality traits can also function as resources. Individuals with higher levels of neuroticism tend to react faster and more intensely to stressful events, which can exhaust their resources and potentially result in a greater impact on their self-esteem (Eysenck, 1947; Suls & Martin, 2005). According to the "desperation principle" of COR theory, when people experience resource loss, their heightened reactivity may cause them to act defensively and perhaps irrationally to defend what resources they still have. Individuals with high neuroticism scores also generally show lower scores on self-efficacy, meaning they believe less in their ability to face challenges effectively (Barańczuk, 2021). As a result, neuroticism might influence the strength of the relationship between negative events at work and self-esteem.

Based on this theory, it seems likely that individuals with lower neuroticism scores have a weaker relationship between negative events and self-esteem. Lower levels of emotional reaction and stress sensitivity in individuals with low neuroticism scores may possibly act as a protective factor against the impact of negative events on their self-esteem.

These individuals might be better able to cope with the negative events without experiencing the same level of resource depletion in those with higher levels of neuroticism.

Considering the theoretical factors mentioned above, I expect that:

Hypothesis 2. Higher neuroticism scores are associated with a stronger influence of negative work events on self-esteem compared to individuals with a lower score in neuroticism.

Method

Research Design and Procedure

This study is part of a larger project examining different variables in the workplace that can predict employees' self-esteem. In this particular study, the focus will be limited on the measures relevant to the question on how negative work events influence employees' 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, with weekends 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. The data was 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% of the participants were in possession of 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 (*1 = not at all, 5 = extremely*) with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.871.

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 was

comprised of 32 events (of which 19 were negative). 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 *1 =little impact* to *4 = 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 (*1 = very inaccurate, 5 = very accurate*). An example item is “I have frequent mood swings". Cronbach’s alpha for the scale items was .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. The 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, including the standardized scores of neuroticism, negative events and the interaction term.

Results

The demographic variables were investigated as potential control variables through correlation analysis. There was a significant negative correlation (r = -. 216, $\alpha < .05$). between neuroticism and self-esteem as seen in Table 1. A significant correlation was found between gender and neuroticism ($r = .179$, $p < .05$). Therefore, we take gender as a control variable in our model.

The assumptions for the stepwise linear regression were checked, and all criteria were met. A scatterplot was used to check for outliers and assess linearity. The P-P plot confirmed a normal distribution of residuals, and there were no concerns regarding the independence of observations. Multicollinearity was examined, with VIF values below 4, indicating an absence of multicollinearity.

Following the stepwise linear regression, the model suggests that the interaction term has a t-value of -1.655, with a two-sided p-value of .100, as shown in Table 2. 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).

Discussion

The current study sought to examine the relationship between negative work events and self-esteem, with neuroticism as a potential moderator. The study did not find any significant effects for either the main effect of negative work events on self-esteem or the moderating role of neuroticism. This discussion aims to explore possible explanations for the lack of significance, acknowledge limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

A possible reason for the non-significant result concerning the impact of negative work events on self-esteem may be attributed to the complexity of the self-esteem construct. There is an ongoing debate in research regarding the stability of self-esteem and whether it should be considered as a characteristic or a psychological state (Baumeister, 1998). According to De Ruiter et al. (2017), external specific events indirectly affect self-esteem, but these influences may be less direct and noticeable compared to the impact of more stable traits of self-esteem. This could potentially explain why the diary study did not capture noticeable changes in self-esteem resulting from negative work events.

Although self-esteem is a complex concept, other studies did find a relationship between daily events and self-esteem, therefore it is necessary to examine the methodological issues.

Limitations

The diary study aimed to minimize the risk of underreporting events. This resulted in an improved representation of actual events by being better remembered (Kahneman & Riis, 2005). However, participants were constrained to a predefined list of diary events, which may have resulted in not capturing all relevant events that may have affected self-esteem. Not all questions were equally relevant to the participants due to the different sectors and variation in jobs. This discrepancy in relevance highlights a potential limitation in capturing the complexity of work events. As emphasized by Liu et al. (2023), events unfold dynamically and show mutual interactions. Events follow each other in a chain, influencing one another.

This study may be a static representation of a dynamic process and provides less context about how these events genuinely interact with self-esteem.

The focus in this analysis was solely on negative work events, potentially limiting the variability in self-esteem measurements. and this may have reduced the variability in self-esteem. In contrast, Nezlek and Plesko's (2001) study included both positive and negative events, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding by capturing a wider spectrum of events. This broader perspective resulted in a potential wider variability in self-esteem and significant results.

The sample was quite diverse with people from different countries and jobs, which increases the external validity of the study and can be generalized to a broad population. Nevertheless, the use of convenience sampling may not be fully representative, which limits the generalizability. In addition, there is also a reasonable dropout rate. 228 people filled in the baseline study, while 144 people filled in the diary study as well. This means that 84 did not finish the study. The reason for this is probably the effort the participants had to put into the study (Ohly et al., 2010). This could potentially have let in a lower statistical power. In contrast, in a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of Krauss & Orth (2022), there was a significant result for work events on self-esteem. The analyses were based on 30 independent samples, including data from 53,112 participants.

The study used self-reported neuroticism as its research design. Self-reported neuroticism may not correspond to actual daily experiences. For example, neuroticism was only measured at the start of the study. It is common that people do not feel and behave exactly as they report about it (Augustine & Larsen, 2012; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009). Moreover, participants tend to portray themselves more positively than they actually feel, also known as 'social desirability' according to Edwards (1957). The results may not fully reflect

their actual daily experiences and character. Nevertheless, no better practical alternative to self-reporting has been found at present.

An additional constraint arises from the use of aggregated data rather than within-person differences during the data analysis. This approach results in the loss of valuable information. Exploring within-person differences could have provided deeper insights into variability and specific patterns within individuals. For instance, it would have been interesting to examine how self-esteem in an individual fluctuates in relation to negative work events. Furthermore, investigating intra-individual variances may be beneficial since it can help us better comprehend individual variability and point out certain patterns.

Another potential issue concerns the measurement of neuroticism in the questionnaire used. Four items were used, covering the level of mood swings, anger, relaxation and feeling blue. Compared to more comprehensive measures like the NEO-PI-R, which assesses six facets of neuroticism, including shame and vulnerability, the questionnaire may not appear to fully encompass all aspects of neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.531 in the study denotes a level of internal consistency that falls below the commonly accepted threshold for reliability. This indicates potential issues with the items not being strongly correlated. The reliability of the instrument measuring neuroticism is questionable. The weak consistency between the items highlights the importance of caution in interpreting the observed interaction effect.

Future Directions

In future investigations, it would be relevant to distinguish between certain categories of events. For example, a distinction could be made between task-related events, personal events, social-self and social-other events, as in the taxonomy created by Schmitt et al. (2022). These events could perhaps have a different kind of relationship with each other with self-esteem and neuroticism. It may be interesting to look at the difference in how interaction

with others is related to self-esteem and work performance. Building on this, future research could delve into the dynamics of events at different hierarchical levels, as recommended by Liu et al. (2023). By adopting a systems perspective in the development of event-oriented frameworks, exploration of contextual cues such as occupation, location, time, and motives becomes possible. This approach facilitates placing events in their proper context.

Future research should delve into various dimensions of self-esteem, including explicit and implicit aspects, as demonstrated by DeHart and Pelham's (2006).
Explicit self-esteem entails individuals consciously and intentionally evaluating their own worth. In contrast, implicit self-esteem operates at a subconscious level, revealing unconscious beliefs and attitudes without direct self-awareness. By examining both explicit and implicit self-esteem in the context of negative work events, researchers can gain a better understanding of how individuals assess their self-worth, consciously and subconsciously, in response to challenges in the workplace.

Additionally, future research could focus on the relationship between neuroticism and negative events. There is a potentional bidirectional relationship between negative work events and neuroticism (Wrzus et al., 2021). Neuroticism may play a more nuanced role in the dynamics between negative work events and self-esteem, beyond the role of a moderator. For instance, individuals that score higher on neuroticism generally experience more stressful situations in daily life (Suls & Martin, 2005; Suls et al., 1998). This could be attributed to their struggle in effective coping with challenges due to lower self-efficacy, a factor previously highlighted by Pindek (2020). This implies that the interplay among neuroticism, negative work events and self-esteem might be more complicated than portrayed in this study. It would be interesting to further explore the relationship between neuroticism, negative work events and self-esteem. Perhaps a qualitative study could provide more insight into this and a model on how the variables are related (Verhoef & Casebeer, 1997).

Conclusion

Traditionally, numerous studies are conducted in occupational psychology regarding the impact of job stress on performance. However, this research focuses on a different perspective, namely employee well-being, with this study focusing on self-esteem and the impact of negative work events on it. Based on the present result, there were no significant results for negative work events on self-esteem. In addition, this study also investigated whether personality played a role in the strength of this relationship. Contrary to expectations, no significant results for this relationship were found either. This may be attributed to the stability of self-esteem. Interestingly, this is not necessarily in line with previous research (e.g., Krauss & Orth, 2022). Possible reasons for the nonsignificant results could also be due to the limitations of the study, such as too small a sample or too few items to measure neuroticism. Future research could focus on a better understanding of what role personality has in the relationship of negative work events and self-esteem. Research could also be improved by taking a more dynamic approach with investigating work events and self-esteem.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	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

[a]Gender is coded as 1 = male and 0 = female.

Table 2

Regression: Coefficients predicting self-esteem

Model		*B*	*SE*	*t*	*Sig.*
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.