

The Mechanisms of Core Self-Evaluation and Thriving at Work on Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

To explore the mechanisms of core self-evaluation and thriving at work on mental health, this research constructed a model based on Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to analysis survey data of 250 participants in China. The results showed that: (1) Both core self-evaluation and thriving at work had significant positive effects on mental health, and coping style acted as partial mediator between them; (2) Core self-evaluation had significant negative effect on negative coping, while thriving at work had significant positive effect on both positive coping and negative coping; (3) Positive coping had significant positive effect on mental health, and negative coping had significant negative effect on mental health; (4) Core self-evaluation had significant positive effect on thriving at work; (5) Core self-evaluation affected mental health by three paths, namely, direct impact, and through negative coping and thriving at work; (6) Thriving at work affected mental health by three paths, namely direct impact, and through positive coping and negative coping.

Keywords: *Core Self-evaluation, Thriving at Work, Positive Coping, Negative Coping, Mental Health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As social competition intensifies and working pace accelerates, employees suffer increasingly more stress. More than 600,000 employees die from overwork in China each year, in which knowledge employees account for a large part. Employees' mental health exerts impact on organizational stable operation as well as social development. Personality traits are important factors influencing individual mental health. Considerable researches have explored the relationship between personality traits and mental health. The majority of relative studies in China mainly focus on respective effects of personality dimensions on mental health adopting the Big Five Personality Inventory or the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire.

For the last decade, core self-evaluations has attached more attention. Core self-evaluation refers to the fundamental evaluations on ones' own abilities and values, which is evaluative, fundamental and broad in scope (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) [1]. It contains four dimensions, namely generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control and neuroticism. While sharing similarities with the Big Five Personality, it also supplies new contents which can better predict

individual's attitudes and behaviours (Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoresen, 2003) [2]. Researches showed that core self-evaluation is highly related to depression, subjective well-being and life satisfaction, and plays mediate roles between employment commitment and satisfaction, as well as between financial difficulty and mental health in the unemployed (Creed, Lehmann & Hood, 2009) [3]. At the same time, studies have shown that core self-evaluation was negatively correlated with job insecurity, and also mediated the relationship between work-family conflict and job insecurity (Dong, X., 2020) [4]. However, few studies focus on the mechanisms of core self-evaluation on mental health in China.

Coping is behavioural responses when people are in face of stress situations. Its results will affect oneself's attitude, physical and mental health, as well as social function (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) [5]. Lazarus pointed out that individual's coping style has moderate cross-situational consistency, which implied personality traits may have effect on ones' coping styles (Lazarus, 1993) [6]. Therefore, this study claims that coping style acts as an important mediator between core self-evaluations and mental health.

In addition, Lazarus also pointed out that one's specific response behaviour changes with situations. Accordingly, this study argues that individuals' psychological state can affect their coping style and their mental health when facing negative situations. Thus the research will analyze the effects of psychological state on individual coping style and mental health.

In previous studies, variables related to psychological states mainly include peak experience, flow, subjective well-being, and so on. In recent years, thriving at work has been put forward as a new psychological state variable based on development perspective. It refers to a joint sense of vitality and learning at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005) [7]. Vitality refers to the feeling of being energized and motivated by work, while learning refers to a sense that individuals gain confidence from acquiring knowledge and skills. Individuals with high thriving at work feel more energized and develop continuously, also have better job performance and mental health and lower job burnout (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012) [8].

Socially embedded model of thriving at work assumed that department contexts and job resources affect ones' thriving at work by improving initiatives, and then promote ones' mental health and individual development (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) [7]. Although the model pointed out that thriving at work contributed to positive mental health and individual's development, it didn't mention the effect mechanism of thriving at work on mental health. Therefore, this research plans to investigate the internal mechanism of thriving at work on ones' mental health.

Finally, socially embedded model of thriving at work explains the mechanism of department contexts and job resources on thriving at work, but ignored personality traits' influence (Marouf et al., 2019) [9]. Personality traits may be important antecedent variables of thriving at work. This research also plans to investigate the effect of core self-evaluations on ones' thriving at work.

This research will investigate the influences of core self-evaluations and thriving at work on mental health, and put forward coping style as mediator based on cognitive appraisal theory of stress.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Relationship between Core Self-Evaluation, Coping and Mental Health

According to cognitive appraisal theory of stress, individuals facing stress will exercise primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and tertiary appraisal successively (Bukhari Shafiq Bin Asnain, 2018) [10]. In the

secondary appraisal, individuals decide their coping style by appraising their abilities and resources to solve the problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) [11]. If the result of appraising is favourable, individuals will choose positive coping strategy and deal with challenges actively, and positive emotions such as satisfaction, excitement and happiness will be generated. When the result suggests inadequate ability and resources to solve the problems, one will choose avoidance coping strategy and cope with problems in negative ways, thus they will experience negative emotions such as indignation, anxiety and fear (Lazarus, 1991).

Previous researches showed that personality traits are closely correlated with coping styles. Individuals with different personality traits prefer different coping styles (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995) [12]. Individuals with positive self-concepts are more likely to have approach or successful motivations while individuals with negative self-concepts are more likely to have avoidance or protection motivations (Judge & Larsen, 2001) [13].

Individuals with high core self-evaluation more psychological resources and possess positive self-concepts. Thus it is easier for them to perceive themselves as highly competent in coping with external challenges. Accordingly, they are more likely to choose successful coping strategy rather than avoidance coping strategy, and experience more positive emotions including excitement and confidence, and less negative emotions including anxiety and depression.

Researches showed that individuals with high core self-evaluations perceived themselves as highly competent in controlling external situations, and tended to solve problems with positive coping strategy rather than negative coping (Steel & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2009) [14]. Meanwhile, core self-evaluation can improve one's life satisfaction (Judge et al., 1998; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005) [15].

Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Core self-evaluation has positive effect on mental health, namely higher core self-evaluation leads to better mental health.

Hypothesis 2a: Core self-evaluation has positive effect on positive coping, namely higher core self-evaluation leads to higher level of positive coping.

Hypothesis 2b: Core self-evaluations has negative effect on negative coping, namely higher core self-evaluation leads to lower level of negative coping.

Hypothesis 3a: Positive coping has positive effect on mental health, namely higher positive coping leads to better mental health.

Hypothesis 3b: Negative coping has negative effect

on mental health, namely higher negative coping leads to worse mental health.

2.2. Relationship between Thriving at Work, Mental Health and Coping Styles

According to socially embedded model of thriving at work, results of thriving at work mainly includes individual development and physical and mental health (Spreitzer et al., 2005) [7].

First, according to cognitive appraisal theory of stress, individuals with high thriving at work display a preference for approach coping strategy. Being thriving at work, individuals feel more energized and acquire more knowledge and skills, which contribute to higher psychological availability (Prashant M. Dolia, 2013) [16]. Psychological availability refers to a sense that individuals feel of having the physical, emotional or psychological resources at a particular moment (Kahn, 1990) [17]. Psychological availability can improve individual approach orientation (Lammers et al., 2010) [18]. Therefore, due to cognitive perception of physical, emotional or psychological resources, individuals thriving at work perceive themselves good at solving problems and achieving goals in their secondary appraisals, and thus are more likely to adopt positive coping styles in challenges.

Besides, thriving at work is a subjective experience, and is a positive physical and emotional state (Niessen, Sonnentag & Sach, 2012; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012) [19,20]. Researches showed that thriving at work is positively related to life satisfaction (Zhai Q., Wang S., & Weadon, H., 2020) [21]. Positive emotions can improve individual cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility refers to individuals' ability to adopt cognitive processing strategies in adapting to new environment. Individuals with high cognitive flexibility perform better in adapting to environment through changing perspectives and adopting new strategies in problem solving (Dreisbach & Goschke, 2004) [22]. Thriving at work was proved to be positively related to adaptive behaviors such as career development initiative (Porath et al., 2012) [20]. The researches demonstrated that individuals with higher level of thriving at work are more likely to take initiatives in solving problems and adapting to work.

Finally, individuals experiencing vitality and aliveness are less likely to have negative emotions including depression and anxiety, and have better mental health (Keyes, 2002) [23]. Moreover, sense of achievement and competence brought by learning also contributes to individual mental health. Researches demonstrated that employees with more learning opportunities have better health and higher subjective well-being (Ettner & Grzywacz, 2001) [24]. Employees with high thriving at work are less likely to suffer from

psychological and physical illness, absence or doctor-visiting (Porath et al., 2012) [20]. They also have better job performance and individual development (Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014) [25].

Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: Thriving at work has positive effect on mental health, namely higher level of thriving at work leads to better mental health.

Hypothesis 5a: Thriving at work has positive effect on positive coping, namely higher level of thriving at work leads to higher level of positive coping.

Hypothesis 5b: Thriving at work has negative effect on negative coping, namely higher level of thriving at work lead to lower level of negative coping.

2.3. Relationship between Core Self-evaluation and Thriving at Work

According to self-validation theory, individuals will initiatively choose information consistent with their self-concepts and experience emotions identifying themselves, and act accordingly. Individuals with positive self-concepts are inclined to pay attention to positive information and explain information positively, while individuals with negative self-concepts are more likely to pay attention to negative information and explain information negatively (Swann, Chang-schneider & McClarty, 2007) [26]. Researches showed that psychological capital (Paterson et al., 2014) [25] and proactive personality (Zhou, 2016) [27] have significant positive effects on thriving at work. Thus positive self-concept or personality traits are important antecedent variables of thriving at work.

Individuals with high core self-evaluations is cross-situational consistent in their positive evaluations of themselves, and tend to see themselves as worthy and competent (Judge, Van Vianen & De Pater, 2004) [28]. Therefore, they are more likely to perceive challenges in work as opportunities to inspire their spirits and improve their abilities. Researches demonstrated that thriving at work and core self-evaluations are positively related (Porath et al., 2012) [20]. Accordingly, hypothesis 6 is proposed: Core self-evaluation has positive effect on thriving at work, that is, higher core self-evaluations leads to higher level of thriving at work.

Based on the hypotheses above, the research model is summarized in Figure 1.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

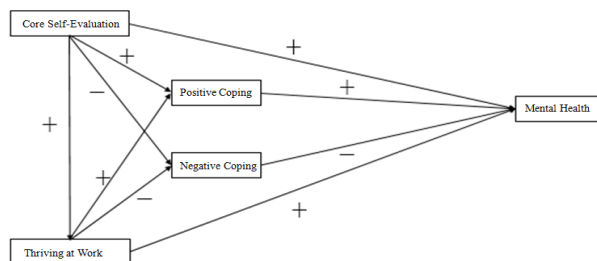


Figure 1 Research Model

Survey data were collected from 10 high technology enterprises in Beijing. Most of the questionnaires were completed in paper form and others were completed by E-mail. 292 questionnaires were collected, 250 of which were valid. 60% of the participants were male and 40% female, and 41.2% aged at 26-30, 24% aged at 31-35, 16% aged at 36-40. Education was distributed as follows: Advanced Diploma 18%, Bachelor 57.2% and Master 22.4%. They also belonged to various job tenure groups: 36.0% in 1-5 years, 30.4% in 6-10 years, and 17.2% in 11-15 years.

3.2. Measures

Core self-evaluation: Chinese edition of Core self-evaluation scale was used to measure Core self-evaluation (Jian, Xiang & Yan, 2012) [29]. The scale contains ten items. e.g., "I count in this organization" $\alpha=0.82$ in this study.

Thriving at work was measured with the scale developed by Porath et al(2012) [20]. It consists of two dimensions, vitality and learning. e.g., "I count in this organization" $\alpha=0.80$ in this study.

Coping Style was measured with the brief version of cope scale developed by Carve (Carver, 1997) [30],

consisting of two dimensions, positive coping and negative coping. It contains 14 items. e.g., "I count in this organization". The Cronbach's alpha of positive coping and negative coping in this study were 0.68 and 0.85 respectively.

Mental health was measured with GHQ-12 (Goldberg, 1972) [31]. e.g., "I count in this organization" $\alpha=0.78$ in this study.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Test for Common Method Bias

Harman's single factor test is adopted to test common method bias. Exploratory factor analyses without rotation of all the items contained in the questionnaire were conducted using SPSS17.0. The first factor explained 24.1% of the variance, which accounted for less than half of the total variance of 67.34%, demonstrating that no serious common method bias existed.

4.2. Correlations Analysis

According to table 1, demographic variables, such as gender, age, educational level were related to core self-evaluations, thriving at work, positive coping and mental health. So gender, age, educational level and job tenure were analyzed as control variables in the research.

Besides, core self-evaluation was positively related to mental health ($r=0.76$, $p<0.01$) and positive coping ($r=0.26$, $p<0.01$), and negatively related to negative coping ($r=-0.51$, $p<0.01$). Thriving at work was positively related to mental health ($r=0.60$, $p<0.01$) and positive coping ($r=0.34$, $p<0.01$), while negatively related to negative coping ($r=-0.21$, $p<0.01$). Positive coping was positively related to mental health ($r=0.25$,

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlation Coefficients and Internal Reliability of Each Variable

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Gender	1.61	0.48									
Age	2.84	1.24	0.03								
Educational Level	3.06	0.71	0.06	0.28**							
Job Tenure	1.95	1.21	0.05	0.69**	0.12						
Core Self-Evaluation	3.77	0.59	0.02	-0.01	0.13*	-0.14*	(0.82)				
Thriving at Work	5.29	0.83	0.10	0.09	0.22**	-0.01	0.630**	(0.80)			
Positive Coping	5.51	0.69	0.14*	-0.04	0.10	-0.08	0.26**	0.34**	(0.68)		
Negative Coping	3.50	1.21	0.05	-0.11	-0.05	0.08	-0.51**	-0.21**	0.13*	(0.85)	
Mental Health	3.66	0.50	0.04	0.08	0.19**	-0.09	0.76**	0.60**	0.25**	-0.49**	(0.78)

Note. N=250., * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

$p < 0.01$) while negative coping was negatively related to mental health ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.01$); Core self-evaluation was positively related to thriving at work ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$).

4.3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical Regression Analysis was conducted to test every hypothesis in the research and results were shown in Table 2.

First, according to M3, when demographic variables including gender, age, educational level and job tenure were controlled, core self-evaluation and thriving at work both had significant positive effects on mental health ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$, and $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$ respectively). Hypothesis 1 and 4 are supported.

Then, according to M7 and M10, when demographic variables including gender, age, educational level and job tenure were controlled, and core self-evaluation and thriving at work were added to the model at the same time, core self-evaluation had no significant effect on positive coping ($\beta = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$), but it had significant negative effect on negative coping ($\beta = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 2a thus was unproved, while hypothesis 2b was supported. Meanwhile, thriving at work had significant positive effects on both positive coping and negative coping ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$, and $\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Hypothesis 5a is verified, while hypothesis 5b is not supported by data.

According to M9, before core self-evaluation was added to the equation, thriving at work had significant negative effect on negative coping. After core self-evaluation was added, thriving at work had significant positive effect on negative coping. The research helded that it was caused by the effect of core self-evaluation on thriving at work. According to Model

1 in Table 2, after demographic variables were controlled, core self-evaluation had significant positive effect on thriving at work ($\beta = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 6 is verified.

In addition, according to M4, positive coping and negative coping had significant positive effect and negative effect on mental health respectively ($\beta = 0.3$, $p < 0.001$, and $\beta = -0.515$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 3a and 3b were verified.

Finally, after demographic variables were controlled, core self-evaluation, thriving at work, positive coping and negative coping were added to the equation at the same time. As M5 showed, positive coping had positive effect on mental health, but the effect was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.068$, $p < 0.1$). Considering that the hypothesis was single-way, but a stricter double-way test was conducted in the research. Therefore, positive coping as a mediator variable still had significant positive effect on mental health. Negative coping had significant negative effect on mental health ($\beta = -0.183$, $p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, core self-evaluation still had positive effect on mental health, but the effect weakened ($\beta = 0.517$, $p < 0.001$). Thriving at work still had significant positive effect on mental health ($\beta = -0.196$, $p < 0.001$). However, the mediating effect of negative coping and the direct effect of thriving at work on mental health were opposite. Thus when negative coping was added, the direct effect of thriving at work on mental health was greater than the total effect.

According to the results of hypothesis 2a, 2b, 3a and 3b, positive coping had no mediating effect between core self-evaluation and mental health, while negative coping had partial mediating effect between core self-evaluations and mental health. According to the results of hypothesis 3a, 3b, 5a and 5b, both positive

coping and negative coping had partial mediating effects on thriving at work and mental health.

Table 2. Statistical Results of Hierarchical Regression

	Thriving at Work		Mental Health				Positive Coping		Negative Coping		
	<i>M0</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M3</i>	<i>M4</i>	<i>M5</i>	<i>M6</i>	<i>M7</i>	<i>M8</i>	<i>M9</i>	<i>M10</i>
Control Variables											
Gender	0.088	0.075	0.037	0.008	.016	0.007	0.136*	0.110†	0.04	0.057	0.036
Age	0.109	0.038	0.206*	0.113*	.043	0.066	-0.012	-0.051	-0.325***	-0.304***	-0.275***
Educational Level	0.198**	0.125*	0.160*	0.048	.128*	0.052	0.101	0.037	-0.003	0.036	0.033
Job Tenure	-0.114	0.028	-0.254***	-0.087	-.070	-0.050	-0.087	-0.038	0.307***	0.285***	0.188
Independent Variables											
Core Self-Evaluation		0.616***		0.633***		0.517***		0.071			-0.610***
Thriving at Work				0.181***		0.196***		0.28***		-0.194**	0.188..
Positive Coping					0.300***	0.068†					
Negative Coping					-0.515***	-0.183***					
R²	0.063	0.425	0.070	0.618	0.364	0.640	.035	0.137	0.064	0.100	0.318
F	4.101**	36.053***	4.622**	65.543***	23.160***	53.452***	4.222**	18.879***	4.222**	5.414***	18.879***
ΔR²	0.063	0.362	0.070	0.548	0.294	0.021	0.035	0.102	0.064	0.035	0.218

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Conclusion

Conclusions of this research were as follows: (1) Both core self-evaluation and thriving at work had significant positive effects on mental health, and coping style acted as partial mediator between them; (2) Core self-evaluation had significant negative effect on negative coping, while thriving at work had significant positive effect on both positive coping and negative coping; (3) Positive coping had significant positive effect on mental health, and negative coping had significant negative effect on mental health; (4) Core self-evaluation had significant positive effect on thriving at work; (5) Core self-evaluation affected mental health by three paths, namely, direct impact, and through negative coping and thriving at work; (6) Thriving at work affected mental health by three paths, namely direct impact, and through positive coping and negative coping.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research has theoretical implications in four aspects as follows. First, previous researches proved that core self-evaluation has important effects on both mental health and subjective well-being. The research, based on cognitive appraisal theory of stress, put forward that coping style acts as a mediator between core self-evaluation and mental health, and it was supported by survey data. Besides, the research found that core self-evaluation's positive effects of on positive coping are not significant and the mediating effects of

coping style are mainly exerted through negative coping. This result was inconsistent with results of researches in other countries. It probably embodies the influence of the dialectical thoughts of “the Golden Mean” and “the Middle Way” in China. Even with high core self-evaluation, Chinese see two sides of a thing dialectically rather than take account of abundant coping resources one-sidedly and stick to positive coping.

Second, socially embedded model of thriving at work showed that thriving at work can promote individual mental health, but it made no mention of its internal mechanism. Based on cognitive appraisal theory of stress, the research proposed and verified that coping style plays mediating role between thriving at work and mental health. The result not only verified the impact of socially embedded model of thriving at work on mental health, but also pointed out its mechanism at the same time.

Third, socially embedded model of thriving at work pointed out the effects of department contexts and job resources on thriving at work, but left the influence of personality traits out of account. This research proposed and verified the positive effects of core self-evaluation on thriving at work based on self-verification theory, and proved that personality traits are important antecedent variables of thriving at work, expanding the scope of antecedent variables of socially embedded model.

Finally, the research investigated the effect mechanism of personality traits and psychological state on employees' mental health at the same time. It found that after core self-evaluation was added, the impact of thriving at work on negative coping transformed from

negative to positive. This result showed that the negative impact of thriving at work on negative coping is influenced by core self-evaluation, namely, high core self-evaluation individuals are more likely to thrive at work, and less likely to employ negative coping style. However, when core self-evaluation is controlled, while improving positive coping, individuals who thrive at work are more likely to employ negative coping at the same time. The possible explanation can be that coping has two main functions-problem solving and emotion regulation. Individuals all have preference for positive emotion and mental health. High core self-evaluation individuals appraise themselves of fine coping abilities. Meanwhile, core self-evaluation is a kind of stable trait, so facing external challenges directly will not affect individuals' evaluation on themselves. These two both make individuals with high core self-evaluation less likely to adopt avoidance coping. However, thriving at work is a changing state. When core self-evaluation is controlled, individuals who thrive at work will employ both positive coping strategies in problem solving. But they may also employ negative coping strategies to maintain existing positive emotions when external challenges directly affect their existing positive emotions.

5.3. Practical Implications

The result of this research has important practical implications for human resource management in organizations.

First of all, organizations should pay attention to employees' core self-evaluation in recruitment. First, core self-evaluation has greater effects on individual mental health than thriving at work. Second, individuals with high core self-evaluation are less likely to employ negative coping. Third, individuals with high core self-evaluation are more likely to be thriving and prefer positive coping through the mediating effects of thriving at work. Therefore, high core self-evaluation employees are preferred in recruitment when other qualities being equal.

Besides, when the main aim of management is to improve employees' positive coping, thriving at work rather than core self-evaluation should be improved. This strategy is more effective and efficient. Because core self-evaluation affects positive coping indirectly while thriving at work has direct effect, and core self-evaluation is more difficult to be changed in a short term.

In addition, employees' core self-evaluation should be attached importance to in a long-term perspective. Because individuals with high core self-evaluation are more likely to thrive at work. Besides, thriving at work cannot be sustained without stable personality traits being the basis. Finally, mere thriving at work not only

improves positive coping but also improves negative coping at the same time.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limited by conditions, this research has the following limitations: first, samples mainly come from high technology enterprises in Beijing. It can control the influence of factors such as regional culture effectively and improve internal validity of the research, but it reduces external validity to some extent. Follow-up researches should collect samples from more regions to examine conclusions of this research. Besides, the research data all collected from one single source. Although no serious common method biases were found in statistical tests, multiple data sources should be adopted in follow-up researches. For example, variables such as coping style could be assessed by important others. In addition, the data of the research were collected at the same time, so it cannot strictly prove causal relationship between variables. Follow-up researches should collect data at different times and verify the casual relationship with time delay model.

Finally, follow-up researches should validate the conclusion "core self-evaluation has no significant effect on positive coping in Chinese organizations" and explain the reason. Follow-up researches also could validate the conclusion that "thriving at work has a significant positive effect on negative coping" and investigate its internal mechanism.

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