

Core Self-Evaluations and Work Success

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ABSTRACT—*Core self-evaluations (CSE) is a broad, integrative trait indicated by self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy, and (low) neuroticism (high emotional stability). While only a decade old, research on CSE suggests that it explains much of the overlap among these trait measures, while also predicting many work and other applied outcomes better than the individual traits. Individuals with high levels of CSE perform better on their jobs, are more successful in their careers, are more satisfied with their jobs and lives, report lower levels of stress and conflict, cope more effectively with setbacks, and better capitalize on advantages and opportunities. Though research on individual self-concept traits such as self-esteem and locus of control should continue, researchers interested in these traits should consider the advantages of CSE in its relation to success in work and in life.*

KEYWORDS—*core self-evaluations; self-esteem; locus of control; personality; organizational behavior*

From the very beginnings of scientific psychology, few issues have preoccupied psychologists more than self-concept has. Although self-concept research is diverse, perhaps the most prominent stream has focused on one's approval of oneself—what James (and Milton, centuries before him) termed self-esteem. Self-esteem is one of the most widely studied concepts in psychology, with nearly 30,000 PsycINFO entries (at the current rate, roughly three articles are published on self-esteem *each day*). Although the causes and consequences of self-esteem continue to be debated (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007), self-esteem continues to be a widely studied trait in industrial-organizational psychology, as in many other areas of psychology.

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In this article, I review research on a concept that is intimately tied to, but broader than, self-esteem: *core self-evaluations* (CSE). To date, research on CSE has largely been within industrial-organizational psychology. Thus, most of the evidence I review will concern the applicability of CSE to work situations. However, many of the principles and findings generalize to other areas of psychology, including counseling psychology, educational psychology, health psychology, clinical psychology, and, of course, personality and social psychology.

Before defining and reviewing evidence on CSE, it is worth answering a logical question: Why introduce a new concept that is closely related to one of the most durable concepts in psychology? There are two answers. First, breadth matters to the predictable validity of psychological concepts. Aggregation—across responses, situations, or time—substantially improves the predictive validities of personality variables (Buss, 1989). Due to its breadth, compared to self-esteem, CSE may better or more consistently predict outcomes. Second, and relatedly, although personality researchers continue to introduce new “pet” concepts and measures, CSE is less a new concept than an integration of existing concepts. As has been shown in other literatures (e.g., intelligence), there can be tremendous value in integration of measures into a common core. Although there is no single right answer as to the proper breadth of personality variables, researchers should explore the relative merits of broad and narrow concepts, and this is what CSE does.

Core self-evaluations are fundamental, bottom-line evaluations that people make of themselves. Like self-esteem, CSE is an appraisal of one's self-worth. However, CSE is broader than self-esteem in that it also reflects beliefs in one's capabilities (to control one's life) and one's competence (to perform, cope, persevere, and succeed) and a general sense that life will turn out well for oneself. CSE is viewed as a broad latent concept, indicated by at least four traits: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and (low) neuroticism (or high emotional stability).

I divide the rest of this review into two sections: issues that have been largely resolved in CSE research and issues that remain unresolved or are in need of future research. (Of course,

whether an issue is resolved is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder.)

RESOLVED ISSUES

Core Traits Indicate Common Factor

The most obvious question is whether the aforementioned traits are related to one another. Studies including two or more of the core traits indeed show that the correlations among the traits are substantial. Indeed, summarizing across studies, Judge, Erez, Bono, and Thoresen (2002) reported that the average correlation among the four core traits is .59—a correlation that could be described as “moderately strong.” Are the correlations sufficient to justify a general factor?

Confirmatory factor analyses have consistently shown that the four core traits load on a common factor (e.g., Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). Factor loadings represent the degree of correlation between the measures and the underlying concept; for example, a .80 factor loading of self-esteem on CSE means that there is a .80 correlation between the measure of self-esteem and the latent CSE factor. The factor loadings for the four core traits generally range from .55 to .85, suggesting that they indicate a common concept. This does not mean that there is no meaningful variance attributable to the individual traits. Many survey items that measure self-esteem (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”), for example, are not necessarily interchangeable with items that measure locus of control (“My life is determined by my own actions”). There is some uniqueness to measures of the core traits such as self-esteem and locus of control. However, these measures have something important in common that explains why these measures are correlated, and that is what we call core self-evaluations.

CSE Is Best Assessed With Direct Measures

Because CSE was conceptualized as a latent trait indicated by four more specific traits, early research measured CSE by measuring each of the four traits and then combining them to form an overall measure. However, because that process is somewhat cumbersome, we developed a 12-item measure, termed the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES). Sample CSES items include, “I am confident I get the success I deserve in life” and “Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless” (reverse scored). (The full measure, along with reprints of my CSE research, can be found at <http://www.ufstudies.net/tim/VITA/index.htm>.) The CSES has the advantage of brevity and predictive validity (some evidence indicates it predicts better than a composite for the four individual core traits; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Another comparable measure also has been developed (see the Appendix of Judge and Hurst, 2007a).

CSE Predicts Work and Other Applied Criteria

Considerable research has focused on the predictive validity of CSE. Past research has shown that high scores on core self-

evaluations, reflecting a positive self-concept, are related to a broad array of work and nonwork criteria, including increased levels of job and life satisfaction, better job performance, higher work motivation, and higher income (see Judge & Hurst, 2007b). More recently, high scores on CSE have been linked to reduced stress and burnout (Best, Stapleton, & Downey, 2005), more constructive reactions to feedback (Bono & Colbert, 2005), more effective customer service (Salvaggio et al., 2007), heightened job-search persistence after unemployment (Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005), better adjustment to foreign assignments (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Klein, 2003), and reduced work–family conflict (Boyar & Mosley, 2007). The correlations in these studies are “moderate” in magnitude—mostly in the .20 to .40 range—and none of these studies argue that CSE is the only factor (or even the only trait) underlying these behaviors. Still, CSE appears to predict an impressive and diverse array of work and nonwork attitudes and behaviors. Though some of the criteria to which CSE has been related are, like CSE, self-reported (e.g., job and life satisfaction), many other studies have successfully related CSE to “external” criteria, such as supervisory and archival measures of job performance and extrinsic measures of career success such as earnings and income.

One means of illustrating concretely the predictive validity of core self-evaluations is to compute average job performance levels for each score on core self-evaluations. Based on a sample of 277 employees of a Midwestern food services company, for each observed score on the CSES (there were 31 separate CSES scores in this sample), I computed the average job performance for that group.¹ Figure 1 shows that the average levels of job performance are higher as employees’ scores on core self-evaluations are higher. Indeed, there are few cases where a high score on the CSES is accompanied by a below-average level of performance and similarly few cases where a low score on the CSES is accompanied by an above-average level of performance. (Similar results are found for job satisfaction but, to conserve space, are not reported here.) The results illustrate that CSE provides a very good basis for predicting typical levels of job performance, as is the case with other criteria.

CSE Adds Beyond Individual Core Traits

One question fundamental to the value added by CSE is whether it better predicts criteria than any one of the core traits. After all, if CSE does not better predict criteria than an individual core trait, then there is nothing new or unique to the concept. Our research has shown that, in most cases, a broad CSE factor (a single factor that is extracted from the overlap among the

¹In this sample, core self-evaluations were self-reported by employees, using the aforementioned 12-item Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES). Job performance was measured using supervisory ratings; each employee’s supervisor rated the employee’s job performance using a 16-item scale that included items such as “Employee takes initiative to a work problem” and “Employee goes above and beyond the call of duty when serving customers.”

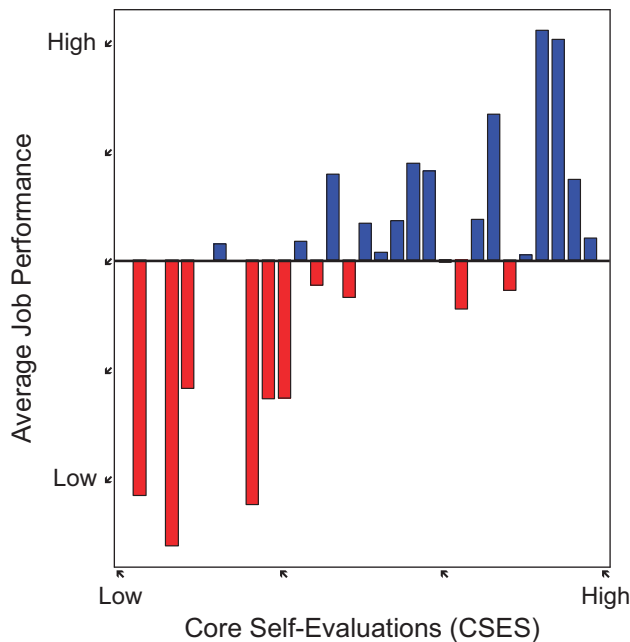


Fig. 1. Average level of job performance based on employees' scores on the Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES). Each bar represents the average job performance rating for those employees who had the corresponding score on core self-evaluations. Red bars denote below-average levels of job performance; blue bars denote above-average levels of job performance. A missing bar means that no employee had that particular score on the CSES across the range of observed scores.

measures) predicts outcomes—work motivation, job performance, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and stress—better than any individual core trait does.² Moreover, when we have conducted a “usefulness analysis” in which an individual core trait (say, self-esteem) is used to predict an outcome along with the CSES, the latter almost always predicts the outcome better than the core trait. Indeed, in most cases, the validity of the CSES is more than twice as large as the validity of self-esteem or any other individual core trait, and it often even predicts an outcome when all individual core traits are included (Judge et al., 2003). There are cases in which the individual traits appear to matter when controlling for CSE: Self-esteem predicts life satisfaction and neuroticism predicts stress. However, in both of these cases, CSE matters too.

CSE × Situation Interactions

Beyond the main effects of CSE on outcomes, emerging evidence suggests that CSE may also help individuals capitalize on fortuitous circumstances. Judge and Hurst (2007a) considered two aspects of early advantage: the educational and occupational attainment of one's parents, and one's success in secondary

²It has been suggested that the CSES may better predict outcomes because it is more reliable than measures of the individual core traits. However, this generally is not the case (i.e., measures of self-esteem are as reliable as the CSES), and, in any event, similar results are observed when measures are corrected for unreliability.

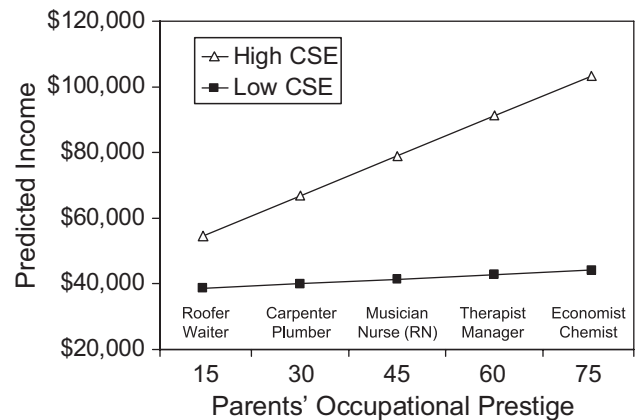


Fig. 2. Predicted income as a function of parent's occupational prestige for those with high and low core self-evaluations (CSE). Job titles listed on the x-axis are those that correspond to the numbers provided in Duncan's (1961) 0–100 occupational prestige measure (e.g., “roofer” has occupational prestige score of 15; “economist” has occupational prestige score of 74).

school (high school grades, SAT scores). Judge and Hurst (2007a) considered whether parental and personal advantage might better translate into economic success for those having a positive self-concept (high CSE) than for those with a negative self-concept (low CSE). Participants in the Judge and Hurst (2007a) study were individuals enrolled in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally representative sample of 12,686 young men and women who were 14 to 22 years old when they were first surveyed in 1979 and who continued to participate in the study 25 years later. Parental and personal advantages were assessed at or near the onset of the study (when individuals were, on average, 18 years old); CSE was measured when individuals were, on average, 23 years old; and income was measured when individuals were, on average, 37 years old.

Figures 2 and 3 provide graphical illustrations of the joint effect of CSE and two advantages—one parental and one personal—on income. The parental advantage is the occupational prestige of participants' parents (when both parents worked, the score was computed by averaging across both parents), using Duncan's (1961) measure that scores occupations from low to high prestige on a 0 to 100 scale. As shown in Figure 2, parents' occupational prestige “pays off” more (produces much greater income) for those with high CSE (those who score 1 standard deviation above the mean on the CSE measure) than for those with low CSE (those who score 1 standard deviation below the mean on the CSE measure). Similar results were found for parents' education level and income levels. The personal advantage is participants' high school grade point average, which was taken from high school transcripts. As shown in Figure 3, grades in high school pay off to a much greater degree for high-CSE individuals than they do for low-CSE individuals. Similar results were found for participants' education level (years of education) and standardized test (SAT) scores. Cumulatively, the results suggest that the highest levels of success are produced by both

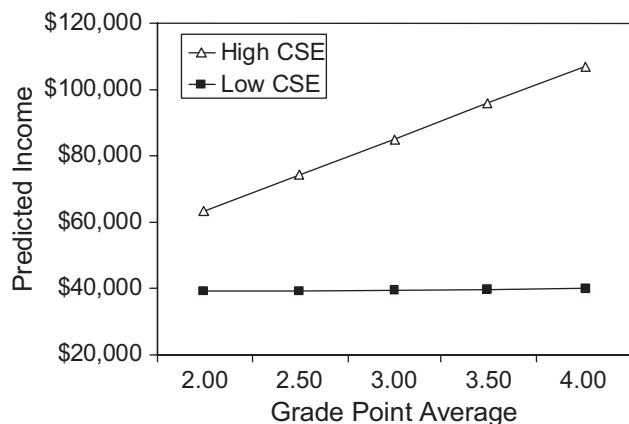


Fig. 3. Predicted income as a function of high school grade point average for those with high and low core self-evaluations (CSE).

favorable circumstances and the “right” temperament—in the form of CSE—to exploit those early advantages.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

CSE research is only a decade old, and as is often the case with nascent research streams, there is much yet to be learned. In this section, I note three areas in need of future research attention.

Should Locus of Control Be Excluded? Should Other Traits Be Included?

Most research suggests that locus of control fits into the CSE typology less well than do the other traits. Some of this relative misfit appears to be due to problems in measuring locus of control (see Bono & Judge, 2003). Whether locus of control belongs in the CSE framework is a question both of factor analysis (does locus load on the CSE factor?) and of incremental validity (does locus add beyond CSE?). With the use of direct measures, however, the latter question becomes more important than the former. Specifically, now that direct measures of CSE have been developed and validated (e.g., Judge et al., 2003; Judge & Hurst, 2007a), how well locus of control, or any other individual trait measure, assesses the broad CSE concept is a less critical, though not wholly irrelevant, issue. It may be relevant to ask whether measures of specific traits—whether locus of control or related traits such as dispositional optimism—add beyond CSE in predicting criteria.

Does CSE Change and Why?

Most broad traits have a genetic origin and show significant stability, but traits also show evidence of mean-level and rank-order change (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). And traits differ in their changeability and stability. Although self-esteem shows significant heritability and long-term stability, it also shows

evidence of short-term within-individual variation. Because evaluations of our self-concept are intimately tied to our environment, it stands to reason to expect that CSE will show both short-term and long-term variability. Does CSE vary significantly within individuals, and, beyond genes, what factors might cause individual differences in levels of CSE?

Can CSE Be Too High?

Are some people more generally competent and effective than others? One might argue that this question is unanswerable, as it would require that an objective standard of worth be applied across a nearly infinite number of life domains. However, the question of whether some people are more worthy (or at least competent) than others suggests another question closer to the topic at hand: Is the accuracy of CSE worth considering? Is it possible to be too self-positive? While some researchers have argued in favor of “positive illusions”—positive self-perceptions even when they are belied by one’s true standing—others argue that positive self-views may be harmful, especially when they are extremely positive. Yet there is a difference between self-esteem and narcissistic self-regard. The correlations between measures of narcissism and self-esteem are only moderate in magnitude (correlations vary by measure, but average .26; Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004). The distinction between narcissism and CSE notwithstanding, that does not mean that high CSE is always desirable. Hiller and Hambrick (2005) argued that high levels of CSE may be related to suboptimal decision making. High levels of CSE may cause individuals to ignore negative information, take unwarranted risks, or overestimate their abilities.

CONCLUSION

CSE is an important emergent concept. It is an integrative trait that may bring together disconnected streams of research. It is related to a host of outcomes that are important to individuals and organizations. Future research should focus on some of the unresolved issues noted in this review. There are other criteria to which CSE might be linked as well. For example, no published research has linked CSE to creativity, social networks and other aspects of interpersonal relationships, accuracy of judgment and decision making, or willingness to take risks. In a real sense, CSE research is still in its infancy, and I look forward to its continued progression.

Recommended Readings

- Bono, J.E., & Judge, T.A. (2003). (See References). A relatively comprehensive review for readers who wish to expand their knowledge on CSE.
- Judge, T.A., Erez, A., Bono, J.E., & Thoresen, C.J. (2002). (See References). Discusses the relationships among the individual core traits and why they indicate a useful, higher-order CSE factor.

Judge, T.A., Erez, A., Bono, J.E., & Thoresen, C.J. (2003). (See References). Describes the development of a direct measure of CSE.

Judge, T.A., & Hurst, C. (2007b). (See References). A recent review of the positive and possible negative consequences of CSE.

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