Core self-evaluations, worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being: an investigation in the Asian context

Neerpal Rathi
Organizational Behavior Area,
Indian Institute of Management Nagpur,
Nagpur, 440010, India
Email: neerpal@iimnagpur.ac.in

Kidong Lee*
College of Business Administration,
Incheon National University,
119 Academy-ro, Songdo-dong,
Yeonsu-Gu Incheon – 406-772, South Korea
Email: kdlee@inu.ac.kr
*Corresponding author

Abstract: The concept of core self-evaluations has been extensively investigated in Western and European countries, nonetheless its implications in Asian countries remains relatively unexplored. To void this gap, the current study investigated the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being among South Korean youths. To test the research hypotheses, data were collected from 228 undergraduate students of a South Korean university. Existing, established scales were used to measure the research constructs. The results of this study indicate that core self-evaluations were negatively related to worry, while a positive relationship was observed between core self-evaluations and life satisfaction and psychological well-being. The findings of this study suggest that a higher level of core self-evaluations may enhance individuals’ well-being. The findings of this study may be helpful for educators and mental health professionals in designing the educational curriculum and training programs that focus on enhancing one’s sense of self-worth.

Keywords: core self-evaluations; worry; life satisfaction; psychological well-being; educational change; East Asia.


Biographical notes: Neerpal Rathi is Assistant Professor in Organisational Behaviour Area at Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Nagpur. He received his PhD from the Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India, and did Postdoctoral work at Incheon National University, South Korea. Prior to joining IIM Nagpur, he had worked with Xavier University, Bhubaneswar; Amrita University, Coimbatore; Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and Banasthali University. His research interests include emotions at the...
workplace, quality of work life, personality, and employee health and well-being. He has published several papers in various national and international journals.

Kidong Lee is a Professor in Business Administration, specialised in Information Systems, at the College of Business Administration, Incheon National University, South Korea. He received his PhD in Management Information System from the Kent State University, Ohio, and an MBA from the University of Maine, Maine, USA. Before joining the Incheon National University, he had experienced as a credit rating officer in Korea Investors Service Co. (changed name Moody’s Investors Service). Presently, he is working as a Vice President of Korea Electric Commerce Research Association. His research interests include human-computer interaction at the workplace, social network and its impact on work life, electronic commerce and organisational effectiveness.


1 Introduction

The views that individuals held about themselves may have significant implications for their personal and professional life. An individual’s view of him or herself may influence his or her attitude to, and perception of, the external world. It has been argued that individuals who held positive views about themselves are able to deal with life more effectively than individuals who held negative views (Chang et al., 2012; Judge et al., 2005; Kong et al., 2014). The fundamental assessment that an individual has of his or her worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person is called core self-evaluations (Judge et al., 2003).

Core self-evaluations have been found to have significant implications for individuals as they influence a diverse range of work and non-work attitudes and behaviours. The extant research literature indicates that core self-evaluations are related to job and life satisfaction (Judge et al., 2005; Kong et al., 2014; Piccolo et al., 2005), job performance (Judge and Bono, 2001; Judge et al., 2003; Judge, 2009), motivation (Chang et al., 2012; Erez and Judge, 2001), higher income (Judge and Hurst, 2007), subjective well-being (Liu et al., 2016; Stein and Grant, 2014; Sudha and Shahnawaz, 2013), and reduced work-family conflict (Boyar and Mosley, 2007). In addition, it has been observed that individuals with high core self-evaluations are more motivated to perform their work effectively than individuals with low core self-evaluations (Judge and Bono, 2001).

Although the concept of core self-evaluations has been extensively investigated in Western and European countries, its implications in Asian countries, especially in the East Asian context, remains relatively unexplored. In addition, the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being has not been investigated so far. To void these gaps in the research literature, the current study
investigated the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being among youths in South Korea.

South Korean youths are under a lot of pressure to perform well in school and university (Chandran, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Park et al., 2014). In South Korea school and university students experience tremendous family and social pressure to perform well in academics. Even more, university students are under a lot of stress as there are not enough job opportunities and the unemployment rate is increasing in the country (Chandran, 2014). It has been observed that South Korean students’ mental health is at risk and they are the least happy among their peers in developed countries (OECD, 2016).

By investigating the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, this research advances our understanding about the significant role of core self-evaluations in augmenting life satisfaction and well-being among South Korean youths. We believe that an understanding of the significant role of core self-evaluations in enhancing individual well-being may be helpful for educators, counsellors, and mental health professionals in designing the educational curriculum and training programs that focus on enhancing one’s sense of self-worth.

2 Literature review

The concept of core self-evaluations was originally proposed by Judge et al. (1997) as an explanatory variable of job and life satisfaction. Core self-evaluations refer to the fundamental appraisals that people make about themselves and their worthiness, competence, and capabilities (Judge et al., 2005; Judge, 2009). Judge et al. (2003) defined core self-evaluations as “a basic, fundamental appraisal of one’s worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person” (p.304). Researchers argue that the concept of core self-evaluations is a higher-order concept comprised of four more specific lower-order traits. Four lower-order factors that constitute core self-evaluations are: self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, the locus of control, and neuroticism (Judge et al., 2003).

Self-esteem refers to the basic appraisal people make about themselves and the overall value that one places on himself or herself as a person (Harter, 1990). Generalised self-efficacy has been defined as an estimate of one’s fundamental ability to cope with life’s exigencies, to perform, and to be successful (Locke et al., 1996). Locus of control is concerned with the degree to which individuals believe that they have control over events that influence their lives (Rotter, 1966). When people believe that the outcomes in their life are contingent on their own behaviour, they have an internal locus of control. In contrast, when people attribute to the life’s outcomes to external factors, they have an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Finally, neuroticism is the tendency to exhibit poor emotional adjustment and to focus on negative aspects of the self (Watson, 2000). Researchers maintain that individuals high in neuroticism are very sensitive to their external environment and are likely to focus on negative aspects of a situation, whereas individuals low in neuroticism have higher sensitivity to their own internal resource levels (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Swider and Zimmerman, 2010).

Worry, another major construct investigated in the current study, is considered a cognitive component of anxiety that involves biased attentional awareness and distorted information processing (Barlow, 2002; Craske, 1999). Researchers maintain that worry is generally experienced at non-clinical levels. It has been argued that a moderate level of worry is beneficial for individuals as it facilitates cognitive planning and problem-solving
In contrast, individuals with a high level of worry are likely to pay more attention to the threatening information (Craske, 1999). Life satisfaction is concerned with how people evaluate their life as a whole. Life satisfaction is a cognitive, judgemental process (Diener et al., 1985). According to Shin and Johnson (1978), life satisfaction is a “global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his chosen criteria” (p.478). Finally, psychological well-being refers to the positive psychological functioning of an individual. According to Ryff and Keyes (1995), psychological well-being can be defined as the existential challenges that an individual face in his or her life and how and to what extent he or she overcomes those existential challenges.

To our knowledge, the association of core self-evaluations with worry has not been investigated so far. It has been argued that an individual’s assessment of him or herself may influence his or her perception of the external world. Researchers maintain that evaluative traits, especially the fundamental beliefs that people held about themselves, have a direct influence on individuals’ perception of the self and the external environment (Judge et al., 1997; Piccolo et al., 2005). Judge et al. (1997) argue that core self-evaluations influence all other appraisals of an individual as they are a very fundamental aspect of an individual’s personality. It has been observed that higher core self-evaluations or positive self-regard make individuals more confident about their capability to deal effectively with challenging life situations (Judge et al., 2002). Thus, individuals with high core self-evaluations may experience less strain and negative emotions when confronted with stressful situations as they may believe that they can overcome the challenges they face (Judge et al., 2002).

The belief that they can overcome the challenges and problems they face in life make people with high core self-evaluations less stressful and worried about their life. In contrast, individuals with low core self-evaluations or negative self-regard feel that they have less control over their life circumstances, which makes them more stressful and worried about their life (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). Thus, it may be argued that individuals with high core self-evaluations may feel confident about their capability to deal effectively with challenging life situations and they may not overly worry about the problems they face in life. Based upon this, the following is hypothesised:

**Hypothesis 1: Core self-evaluations will be negatively related with worry.**

Several researchers have investigated the association of core self-evaluations with individual well-being. Research indicates that higher core self-evaluations lead to enhanced life satisfaction and well-being (Judge et al., 2005; Kong et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Piccolo et al., 2005; Stein and Grant, 2014; Sudha and Shahnawaz, 2013). In their research, Judge et al. (2002) found that core self-evaluations were positively related to life satisfaction and negatively related to stress, strain, and depression. The findings from some other recent studies indicate that dispositional trait of core self-evaluations predict well-being above and beyond the core personality traits (Montasem et al., 2013). In addition, the findings of the research conducted by Piccolo et al. (2005) indicate that core self-evaluations are positively related with individuals’ life satisfaction and happiness. Piccolo et al. (2005) argue that a positive self-concept contributes to forming a positive attitude about oneself and the circumstances of life.

The research conducted by Stein and Grant (2014), that used data collected from students of an Australian University, shows that core self-evaluations are positively related to subjective well-being. In another research, Judge et al. (2005) found a positive
association between core self-evaluations and life satisfaction. Kong et al. (2014) argue that core self-evaluations not only define how an individual views him or herself, but also influence how people perceive and assess the situations of life. Further, researchers argue that individuals with high core self-evaluations view themselves positively across situations; such individuals see themselves as capable, worthy, and in control of their lives (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009).

Individuals who held positive views about themselves also believe that they have control over their lives, and thus they are less likely to be worried about life’s situations. Such individuals are likely to have higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). It can be argued that higher core self-evaluations may lead to enhanced life satisfaction and well-being as thinking positively about oneself and believing that he or she has control over life’s situations may make a person happy. The above discussed conceptual and empirical evidence suggests that core self-evaluations will be positively related to an individual’s life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Based upon this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** Core self-evaluations will be positively related to life satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 3:** Core self-evaluations will be positively related to psychological well-being.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Sample

For the present study, data were collected from the undergraduate students of a South Korean university. The students were enrolled in different programs at various schools of the university, including school of business administration, school of engineering, school of natural sciences, and school of social sciences. The respondents were approached after the class hours. Questionnaires with a cover letter were hand-delivered to the respondents. The cover letter explained the purpose of the research, and the significance of the participants’ responses. Participants were informed that the basic purpose of the research is to understand various aspects of peoples’ thinking, feeling, and behaviour in the Asian context. Participants were told that the participation in the research is voluntary and they have a choice to withdraw from the research at any point in time. They were also informed that the findings of the study would be shared with others only in aggregate form, without revealing the identity of the individual respondents.

The participants were 228 undergraduate students. From a total of 228, 125 (55%) respondents were male, while 103 (45%) were female. Respondents’ age varied from 18 to 31 years ($M = 21.8$ years, $SD = 1.71$).

#### 3.2 Measures

**Core self-evaluations:** Core self-evaluations of the respondents were assessed using the 12-item core self-evaluations scale (CSES; Judge et al., 2003). The CSES measures a single factor that is the intersection of four specific lower-order core traits of self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, the locus of control, and neuroticism. Sample items included statements such as “I am confident I get the success in life I deserved”. Each item is
answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 for ‘strongly agree’. In the current study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.67.

**Penn state worry questionnaire (PSWQ):** To assess the respondents’ general trait of worry, 16-item Penn state worry questionnaire (PSWQ; Meyer et al., 1990) was used. Sample items included statements such as “I know I should not worry about things, but I cannot help it”. Each of the items is answered on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 for “not at all typical of me” to 5 for “very typical of me”. Due to low item-total correlation, one item was deleted from the scale (0.09; i.e., I find it easy to dismiss worrisome thoughts). In the current study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.84.

**Life satisfaction:** The satisfaction with life scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was administered to assess the life satisfaction of the participants. The SWLS consists of five items. It includes items such as, “The conditions of my life are excellent”. Respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 for ‘strongly agree’. In the current study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.71.

**The general health questionnaire 12 (GHQ 12):** The general health questionnaire 12 (GHQ 12) of Goldberg and Williams (1988) was used to assess the psychological well-being of the respondents. The GHQ 12 is comprised of 12 items, and is a shortened version of the GHQ 60. The respondents were asked to answer the questions referring to their psychological well-being behaviour over the past few weeks. Responses were made on a four-point scale indicating the frequency with which the respondent has experienced the symptoms. The respondents indicated their answers on the scale by choosing one of four answer alternatives: ‘better than usual’, ‘same as usual’, ‘less than usual’, and ‘much less than usual’. Due to low item-total correlation, one item was deleted from the scale (0.06; i.e., Have you recently felt constantly under strain?). In the current study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.83.

### 4 Results

Means and standard deviations of the study variables as well as correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. An analysis of the results presented in Table 1 indicates a preliminary support to the study hypotheses. A positive association was observed between core-self evaluations and life satisfaction and well-being, while a negative association was observed between core self-valuations and worry.

Initially, the measures were subjected to a series of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether the measures assess distinct constructs, namely core self-evaluations, worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. Various model fit indices obtained from the CFA indicated that the four-factor model was relatively fit to the study data ($\chi^2 = 1571.6$, $df = 846$, $p < 0.000$; CFI = 0.91; GFI = 0.92; NFI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.06).

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesised relationships among the study variables. Standardised parameter estimates for the structural model are presented in Figure 1. For ease of presentation, we show the structural model rather than
the full measurement model. The results of the path analysis indicate that the research model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 12.43$, df = 3, $p < 0.006$; CFI = 0.94; GFI = 0.98; NFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.04). The results reported in Figure 1 indicate that core self-evaluations were negatively related to worry ($\beta = -0.44$; $p < 0.001$), whereas a positive relationship was observed between core self-evaluations and life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported by the findings of the study. Finally, the results of the study indicate a positive association between core self-evaluations and psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.46$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, hypothesis 3 was also supported by the findings of the study.

Table 1  Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Worry</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-0.45**</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Life satisfaction</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Psychological</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Age</td>
<td>21.80</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gender</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; SD = Standard deviation.

Figure 1  Structural model of the relationships among core self-evaluations, worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being

All coefficients are standardised. **$p < 0.001$.

5 Discussion

The major objective of the current study was to investigate the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being among South
Korean youths. To our knowledge, no previous research has investigated the association of core self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being in the Asian context, especially in an East Asian country. By investigating the above-mentioned associations, this study advances our understanding of the significant role of core self-evaluations in enhancing individuals’ well-being.

The findings of this study indicate that a higher level of core self-evaluations enhances life satisfaction and psychological well-being, while reduces the level of worry. These results indicate that individuals who see themselves as worthy, efficacious, and in control of their lives (i.e., individuals with high core self-evaluations), they are less likely to be worried about the circumstances of their life. Researchers argue that individuals with high core self-evaluations or positive self-regard think that they have the capacity and psychological resources to overcome the challenges and problems they face in life, which make them less stressful and worried about their life (Judge et al., 2002; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009).

In addition, the findings of the current study indicate that individuals with high core-self-evaluations are more likely to be satisfied with their lives and have higher psychological well-being than individuals with low core self-evaluations. The results of some previous studies also indicate that individuals’ positive core self-evaluations lead to enhanced life satisfaction and well-being (Judge et al., 2005; Kong et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Piccolo et al., 2005; Stein and Grant, 2014; Sudha and Shahnawaz, 2013). Researchers maintain that people with high core self-evaluations appraise themselves in a consistently positive manner across situations and see themselves in control of their lives (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). It can be argued that thinking positively about oneself and believing that one has control over the circumstances of life may make one happy and satisfied with his or her life. Thus, individuals with high core self-evaluations or positive self-regard may have higher levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Overall, this study reveals that developing a positive self-regard or sense of self-worth and efficacy among individuals are important to reduce the level of worry and enhance satisfaction with life and well-being. A few studies conducted in the Asian context show that satisfaction with the self is an important predictor of students’ global life satisfaction (Park, 2005). Park (2005) argued that even for youths from a collectivistic culture satisfaction with the self plays a significant role in enhancing global well-being. Piccolo et al. (2005) also found that positive self-regard is a valuable predictor of satisfaction and happiness in individualistic as well as collectivistic cultures.

The current study used the data collected from students of a South Korean university. South Korean youths face a variety of problems in their life that make them highly susceptible to depression and stress. Several factors, such as high academic pressure, negative parent-child relationship, lack of peer support, internet addiction and low life satisfaction lead to high levels of depression and stress, and even suicidal tendency, among adolescents and youths in South Korea (Chandran, 2014; Kim and Kim, 2008; Lee et al., 2010; Park et al., 2014). It has been observed that South Korean students’ mental health is at risk and they are the least happy among their peers in developed countries (OECD, 2016). Moreover, suicide has been found to be the lead cause of death for people aged 10–39 years in South Korea (Min-sik, 2015). The current study reveals that steps taken to foster a positive self-concept (high core self-evaluations) among individuals in South Korea may contribute to reducing the level of worry and enhancing their satisfaction with life and psychological well-being.
6 Implications of the study

The findings of this research may have certain implications that may be useful for educationists and counsellors in bringing appropriate changes in the educational curriculum and developing training programs for the students. It may be suggested that teachers, counsellors, or trainers can take steps to foster positive self-concept among individuals, especially among school and university students who are highly stressed and under a lot of pressure. Although core self-evaluations have been conceptualised as a dispositional trait (Judge et al., 1997, 2003), research shows that positive self-evaluations can be enhanced through counselling or training (DuBois and Flay, 2004; Haney and Durlak, 1998). In a meta-analytic study, Haney and Durlak (1998) found that self-esteem (the central component of core self-evaluations) enhancement programs not only enhanced participants’ self-esteem, but also improved their behaviour, personality, emotional functioning, and academic performance.

Thus, it may be suggested that educational institutions can focus on designing and integrating interventions into the educational curriculum that encourage and reinforce efforts of youths to acquire and sustain feelings of self-worth that help them in adapting to the environmental norms and demands. There should be a focus on designing and implementing training programs that can promote the development of positive self-evaluations among students. In sum, though several factors, such as high academic pressure, decreasing employment opportunities, a negative parent-child relationship, and drastic changes in social values (Kim and Kim, 2008; Min-sik, 2015; Lee et al., 2010) contribute to higher stress and depression among South Korean youths, a focus on enhancing their sense of self-worth (i.e., core self-evaluations) may help in reducing the level of worry and augmenting life satisfaction and psychological well-being.

7 Limitations of the study and directions for future research

The current study has certain limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of the study. The first limitation of the study is that the data for the study was collected using self-report measures. Although the measures were selected because they have shown good reliability and validity, self-report measures are vulnerable to social desirability bias. Future research could focus on using multiple methods for evaluation that may lower the impact of subjectivity. Second, the current study used a sample of the students from a university based in north-western part of the country. Thus, findings of this study may not be generalisable across different populations based in different parts of the country. Further research with additional Korean sample and samples drawn from other Asian countries is needed in order to verify the current findings. In addition, future research could focus on developing interventions for enhancing positive self-regard among individuals. Also, pre and post intervention impact of core self-evaluations enhancement programs on various individual outcomes, such as well-being, mental health, and academic performance could be investigated.
8 Conclusion

The concept of core self-evaluations has been extensively investigated in Western and European countries, however, its implications in Asian countries, especially in the East Asian context, remains relatively unexplored. To void this gap in the research literature, the current study investigated the association of core-self-evaluations with worry, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being among South Korean youths. The findings of this study indicate that a higher level of core self-evaluations reduces worry and enhances life satisfaction and psychological well-being. This study thus advances our understanding of the significant role of core self-evaluations in enhancing individual well-being. This knowledge may be helpful for educators, counsellors, and mental health professionals in designing the educational curriculum and training programs that focus on enhancing one’s sense of self-worth.

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References

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