College Confidence: Self-esteem Mediates the Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Life Satisfaction

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BACKGROUND

- Most college students report moderate to severe levels of stress (Pierceall & Keim, 2007) which are increasing over time (Robotham & Julian, 2006).

- Stress in college students is related to a variety of negative outcomes including lower life satisfaction (Weinstein & Laverghetta, 2009).

- Life satisfaction is longitudinally related to mortality (Boehm et al., 2015) and related to depression, negative affect, poor health, and worse sleep in college students (Pilcher, 1998).

- Although stress is associated with lower life satisfaction, self-esteem may act as a buffer for stress (Rector & Roger, 1997).

- Cross-cultural research suggests that self-esteem and life satisfaction are distinct constructs with a moderate, positive correlation (Diener et al., 1995).

- Hypothesis of the current study: The correlation between perceived stress and life satisfaction will be mediated by self-esteem.

METHODS

- PARTICIPANTS: 171 undergraduate students
  - 72 men, 99 women
  - Ages 17-27 (M = 18.73, SD = 1.35)
  - 59.6% white

- MEASURES & PROCEDURE: Individuals completed self-reports.
  - **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen & Williamson, 1988)**
    - 10 questions about subjective stress over past month
    - 5-point Likert scale of frequency
    - Scores range from 10-50 with higher scored reflecting greater perceived stress
  - **Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965)**
    - 10 statements on general feelings about oneself
    - 4-point Likert scale of agreement
    - Scores range from 1-4 with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem
  - **Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL; Diener et al., 1985)**
    - 5 statements on which participant compare their current life circumstances to their own standards for satisfaction
    - 7-point Likert scale of agreement
   - Scores range from 5-35 with higher scores reflecting higher life satisfaction

RESULTS

- DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
  - **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen & Williamson, 1988)**
    - α = 0.86
    - Range = 15.00-41.00
    - M = 28.26, SD = 6.06 - Suggests these students reported sometimes feeling stress over the past month
  - **Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965)**
    - α = 0.89
    - Range = 1.70-4.00
    - M = 3.12, SD = 0.50 - Suggests moderately high, normative self-esteem among the students
  - **Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL; Diener et al., 1985)**
    - α = 0.83
    - Range = 8.00-35.00
    - M = 24.64, SD = 5.71 - Suggests the students were slightly satisfied with their lives, yet saw some areas in need of improvement

CORRELATIONS

- Correlation Matrix (all p < . 01)

|	SWL	PSS	RSE
SWL	*		
PSS	-0.52	*	
RSE	0.53	-0.54	*

MEDIATION
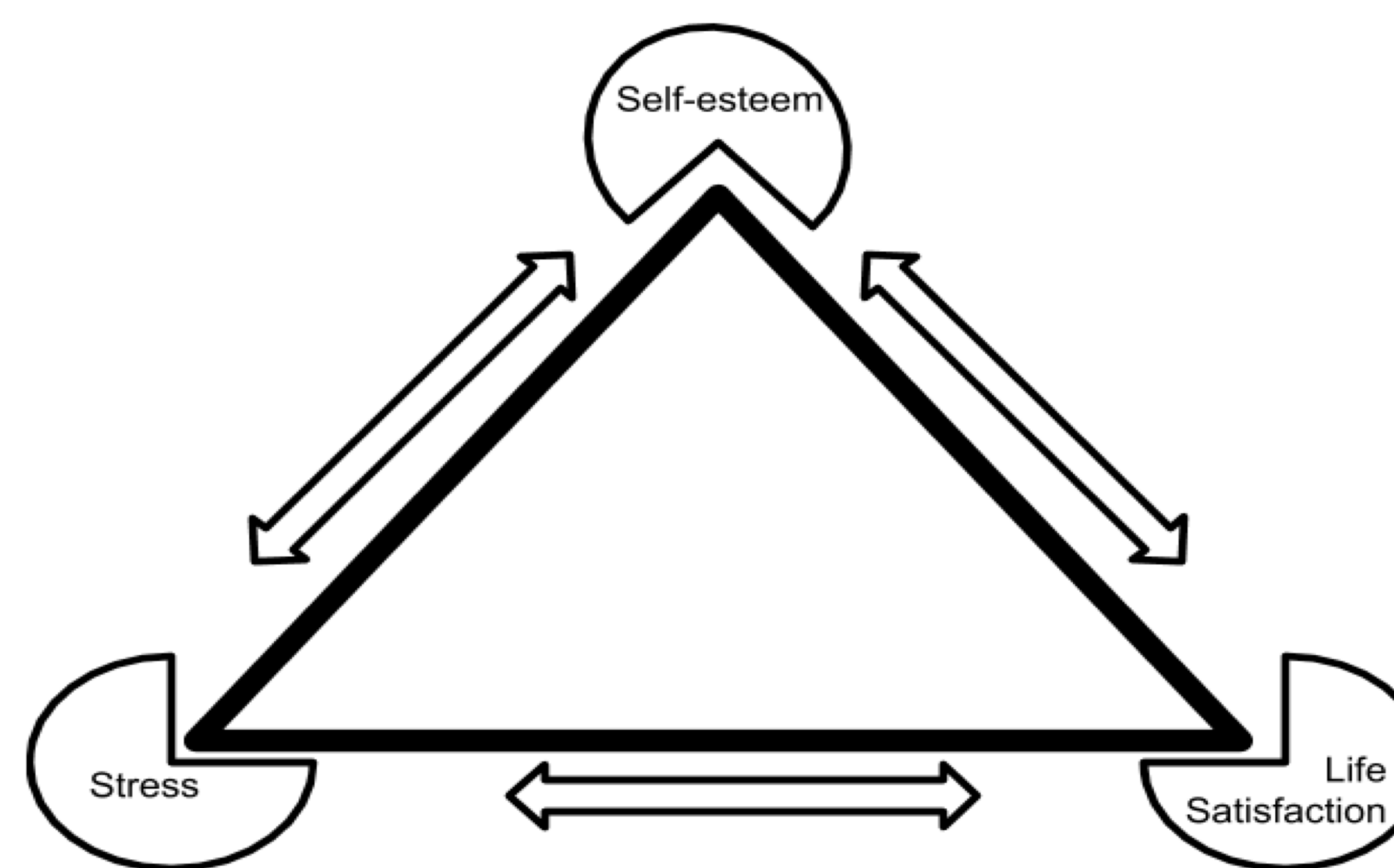
  - A test of mediation using PROCESS v3.4 by Andrew F. Hayes (2013) with 1000 bootstrap samples was conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.
  - The results suggested overall that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between stress and life satisfaction. There was a significant indirect effect of stress on life satisfaction through self-esteem, **b = -0.19, 95% BCa CI [-.32, -.08].**

DISCUSSION

- This study suggests that stress is negatively correlated with self-esteem and with life satisfaction in college students. The pathway may be one in which stress predicts lower self-esteem, which in turn, predicts lower life satisfaction.
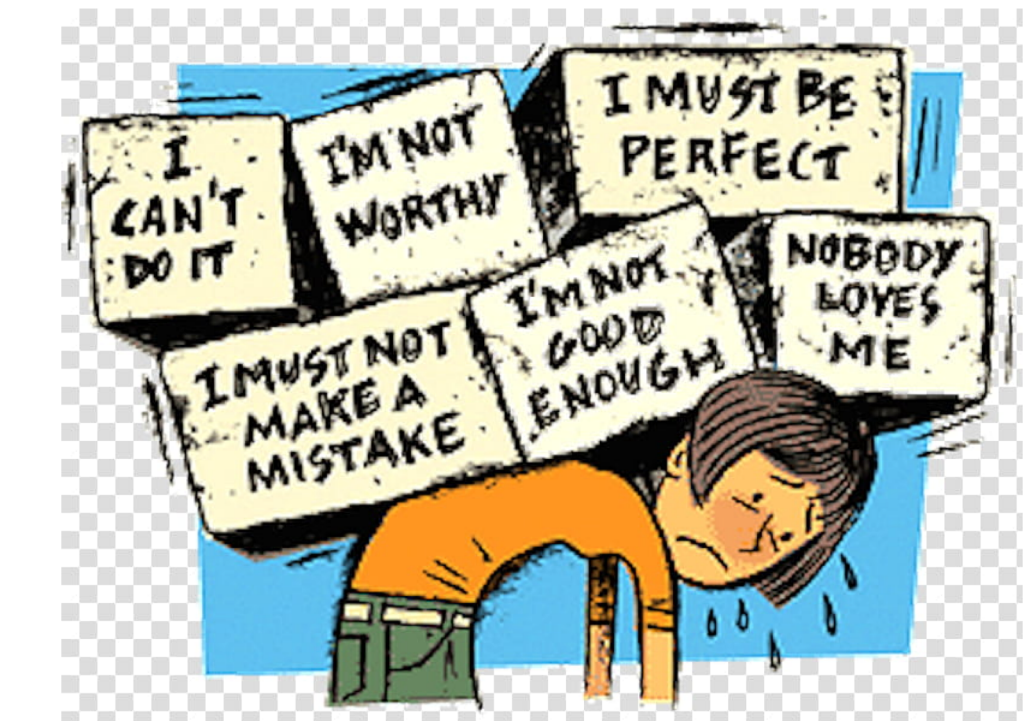
- Limitations of this study:
  - Lack of causal evidence due to cross-sectional design
  - Lack of generalizability due to college study sample
  - Potential for dishonest responses due to use of self-report measures

- Additional research is needed to:
  - Test the causal nature of this relationship through experimental methods
  - Explore additional mechanisms that might explain the relationship between stress and life satisfaction
  - Identify potential variations in those of different age groups and educational backgrounds

- Overall, this study suggests that when college students experience high levels of stress, their self-esteem may be negatively impacted. This may then result in a drop in their satisfaction with life.

- It may be beneficial to explore ways by which 1) college students can better reduce stress and 2) stressed college students can promote positive self-construals and confidence in their ability to face life's challenges.

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