The relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness: The moderating effect of core self-evaluation

La relación entre la supresión de pensamientos y la soledad en el lugar de trabajo: El efecto moderador de la autoevaluación central

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ABSTRACT

In the bustling and competitive workplace environment, individuals often experience a common emotion known as workplace loneliness. This study explores the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness, as well as the moderating role of core self-evaluation in the process of suppressing loneliness. A survey of 272 Chinese corporate employees was conducted using the White Bear Suppression Inventory, Core Self-Evaluation Scale, and Workplace Loneliness Scale. Results indicated significant correlations among thought suppression, core self-evaluation, and workplace loneliness ($ps < 0.001$). Thought suppression positively predicted workplace loneliness ($\beta = 0.303$, $t = 6.602$, $p < 0.001$), with core self-evaluation moderating this relationship ($\beta = -0.198$, $t = -7.314$, $p < 0.001$). Core self-evaluation was found to mitigate the negative impact of thought suppression on workplace loneliness, suggesting interventions to enhance core self-evaluation to alleviate workplace loneliness.

Keywords: thought suppression; core self-evaluation; workplace loneliness.

RESUMEN

En el dinámico y competitivo entorno laboral, las personas suelen experimentar una emoción común conocida como soledad en el lugar de trabajo. Este estudio explora la relación entre la supresión de pensamientos y la soledad en el trabajo, así como el papel moderador de la autoevaluación central en el proceso de supresión de la soledad. Se realizó una encuesta a 272 empleados corporativos chinos utilizando el White Bear Suppression Inventory, la Core Self-Evaluation Scale y la Workplace Loneliness Scale. Los resultados indicaron correlaciones significativas entre la supresión de pensamientos, la autoevaluación central y la soledad en el lugar de trabajo ($ps < 0.001$). La supresión de pensamientos predijo positivamente la soledad laboral ($\beta = 0.303$, $t = 6.602$, $p < 0.001$), y la autoevaluación central moderó esta relación ($\beta = -0.198$, $t = -7.314$, $p < 0.001$). Se observó que la autoevaluación central mitiga el impacto negativo de la supresión de pensamientos sobre la soledad en el trabajo, lo que sugiere que intervenciones orientadas a fortalecer la autoevaluación central podrían ayudar a reducir la soledad laboral.

Palabras clave: supresión de pensamientos; autoevaluación central; soledad en el lugar de trabajo.

Introduction

Feelings of loneliness, as one of the most common psychological issues in contemporary society, have negative impacts on individuals' cognition, behavior, and mental health. At the 2017 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Julianne Holt-Lunstad proposed that loneliness and social isolation constitute a public health crisis (Holt-Lunstad, 2017). However, loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation; individuals with numerous social contacts may still report feelings of loneliness, just as those who are alone may not feel lonely (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). In today's noisy and competitive environment, workplace loneliness is a phenomenon widely faced by employees in organizations and has been found to have certain adverse effects on employees' psychology (Basit & Nauman, 2023), subsequently influencing their work behavior (Tian et al., 2021), such as lower job performance (Lam & Lau, 2012) and higher willingness to resign (Wright et al., 2006), and decreased creativity (Peng et al., 2017). Therefore, in order to enhance employee well-being, reduce job burnout, and improve work performance, addressing workplace loneliness can be a starting point.

Loneliness is understood as a negative emotional state that can be maintained through thought suppression. The Experiential Avoidance Theory (Hayes et al., 1996, 1999), foundational to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), posits that when work stress exceeds coping abilities, thought suppression may temporarily inhibit negative emotions (Hennings et al., 2021). However, some studies argue that thought suppression may not be an effective regulatory strategy. While thought suppression can temporarily alleviate negative emotions, it does not necessarily indicate successful regulation (Wegner et al., 1987). This strategy may result in rebound and immediate enhancement effects, leading to more frequent occurrences of negative emotions and events (Abramowitz et al., 2001; Li et al., 2022).

Although research on workplace loneliness has been thriving, there is still a lack of studies exploring the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness. However, there are signs of association between them. Studies on emotional regulation and loneliness have shown a positive correlation between emotional regulation and loneliness in adolescent samples aged 14-18 years (Verzeletti et al., 2016); in adult samples, severity of emotional regulation correlates with severity of loneliness (Smith et al., 2019). Pollastri et al. (2018) found that higher levels of emotional expression are linked to lower levels of loneliness, contradicting evidence supporting a connection between suppression and loneliness. Although existing evidence suggests that suppression may be a risk factor for loneliness, direct evidence linking thought suppression to workplace loneliness is lacking. Studies on thought suppression and negative emotions and experiences have also shown controversy. Therefore, thought suppression might be an effective means to alleviate

workplace loneliness or could pose as a risk factor for workplace loneliness. These outcomes primarily depend on the success or failure of thought suppression.

The process of thought suppression tends to deplete an individual's self-control resources to some extent (Yam, 2018). According to the Self-Control Depletion Theory proposed by Baumeister et al. (2007), individual psychological resources are limited; after engaging in activities requiring self-control resources, these reserves become depleted leading to reduced available resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Tan et al., 2012). Moreover, thought suppression activities are typically not singular instances; repeated repression depleting psychological resources may lead subsequent repression efforts to fail due to resource depletion. Therefore, an individual's level of psychological resources likely plays a crucial role in suppressing feelings of loneliness. Self-evaluation serves as a significant representation of an individual's level of psychological resources (Rusinova et al., 2024). Based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), as applied by Alarcon et al. (2011), core self-evaluation as a positive psychological trait may buffer the adverse effects of risk factors on negative emotions; specifically speaking individuals with high core self-evaluation are better at coping with unfavorable emotions (Dou et al., 2016). Thus, high core self-evaluation accompanied by more psychological resources enables individuals to better handle challenges and capitalize on resource advantages. From this perspective, we hypothesize that the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness is influenced by levels of core self-evaluation. Existing research offers correlational evidence supporting this hypothesis. The study by Zeng et al. (2023) confirmed that emotional regulation (including cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) influences core self-evaluation. Similarly, Ning et al.'s study (2024) found that expressive suppression can alleviate the detrimental effects of sleep problems on core self-evaluation. Core self-evaluation has demonstrated strong predictive and moderating effects on work academic performance and mental health outcomes (Okorie et al., 2023; Atibuni et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023).

Based on these premises, we predict a positive correlation between thought suppression and loneliness (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we anticipate that the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness will be moderated by core self-evaluation level (Hypothesis 2).

Methods

Research Participants

This study recruited employees from certain companies in China as participants, with a total of 272 voluntary participants who completed the questionnaire anonymously online

after reading the informed consent form. The average age of the participants was 31.97 ± 6.50 years. Among them, there were 132 males (48.50%) and 140 females (51.50%); 60 only children (22.10%) and 212 non-only children (77.90%); 58 rural hukou holders (21.30%) and 214 urban hukou holders (78.70%); 5 individuals with primary school education or below (1.80%), 2 with junior high school education (0.70%), 47 with high school education (17.30%), 166 with college education (61.00%), and 52 with postgraduate education or above (19.10%); 147 unmarried individuals (54.00%), 114 married individuals (41.90%), and 11 divorced individuals (4.00%); 21 individuals with a monthly income of 3000 yuan or below (7.70%), 48 with an income between 3001-6000 yuan (17.60%), 87 with an income between 6001-10000 yuan (32.00%), and 116 with an income of 10001 yuan or above (42.60%); among the participants, there were 49 individuals engaged in education and training work (18.00%), 46 in management work (16.90%), 44 in sales work (16.20%), 47 in production and research work (17.30%), and 86 in other types of work (31.60%); there were also 78 individuals who had worked for less than or equal to one year (28.70%), 97 for 1-5 years (35.70%), 56 for 5-10 years (20.60%), and 41 for more than 10 years (15.10%).

Research Tools

General Demographic Survey Questionnaire

A self-developed questionnaire regarding basic demographic information such as age, gender, place of origin, and educational level.

White Bear Suppression Inventory

Originally developed by Wegner and Zanakos (1994), the WBSI was translated into Chinese by Zhou et al. (2012) to assess its applicability in China. The questionnaire consists of 15 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale to measure the intensity of thought suppression tendencies; higher scores indicate greater inclination towards thought suppression. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient was found to be 0.965.

Core Self-Evaluation Scale

The Core Self-Evaluation Scale used in this study was developed by Judge et al. and translated, revised, and validated for Chinese individuals by scholars including Du et al. (2012). This scale measures core self-evaluation using a 5-point Likert scale with 10 items assessing a single dimension. In this research, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was found to be 0.944.

Workplace Loneliness Scale

The Workplace Loneliness Scale utilized in this study was adapted from Wright (2005) and is widely accepted in academic circles as one of the most recognized scales for measuring

workplace loneliness. The scale includes measurements of two dimensions: emotional deprivation and lack of organizational member identity, comprising a total of 16 items rated on a 5-point scale. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this scale was calculated as 0.955.

Statistical Methods

Data analysis in this study was conducted using SPSS 26.0. An independent sample t-test was used to analyze the differences in the place of origin and family formation of the research variables; Pearson correlation analysis was used to analyze the correlation of the research variables; Regression analysis was used to examine the moderating effect of core self-evaluation on the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness.

Results

Table 1. Statistics of basic demography variables and comparison of differences between main variables (N=272)

		N	Thought Suppression	Core Self-evaluation	Workplace loneliness
			$M\pm SD$	$M\pm SD$	$M\pm SD$
Place of origin	Countryside	58	49.069±16.986	28.069±11.250	49.655±15.695
	City	214	39.542±16.117	34.874±9.828	40.140±15.175
	t		3.830***	-4.193***	4.124***
Family formation	Only-child	60	52.000±14.768	28.150±9.928	50.450±15.631
	Non-only child	212	38.623±16.098	34.915±10.198	39.826±15.008
	t		6.070***	-4.632***	4.689***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

As shown in Table 1, the results of the independent sample t-test show that there were significant differences in thought suppression, core self-evaluation, and workplace loneliness based on participants' place of origin and family structure ($ps < 0.001$). Rural participants scored higher on thought suppression and workplace loneliness compared to urban participants, while scoring lower on core self-evaluation. Only children had higher scores in thought suppression and workplace loneliness compared to non-only children, while having lower scores in core self-evaluation.

Table 2. Correlation analysis of main variables (*N*=272)

	1	2	3
1. Thought Suppression	1		
2. Core Self-evaluation	-0.908***	1	
3. Workplace loneliness	0.892***	-0.935***	1

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

According to Pearson correlation analysis, there is a significant correlation between mental repression, core self-evaluation, and workplace loneliness (see Table 2). Core self-evaluation was significantly negatively correlated with thought suppression (t = -0.908, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher core self-evaluation was associated with lower levels of thought suppression; similarly, core self-evaluation showed a significant negative correlation with workplace loneliness (t = -0.935, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher core self-evaluation was linked to lower levels of workplace loneliness; on the other hand, thought suppression exhibited a significant positive correlation with workplace loneliness (t = 0.892, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of thought suppression were associated with higher levels of workplace loneliness. Notably, the high correlations reported among the main variables (e.g., r = .892 and r = .935) raise concerns about potential common method variance due to the exclusive use of self-report measures collected at a single time point.
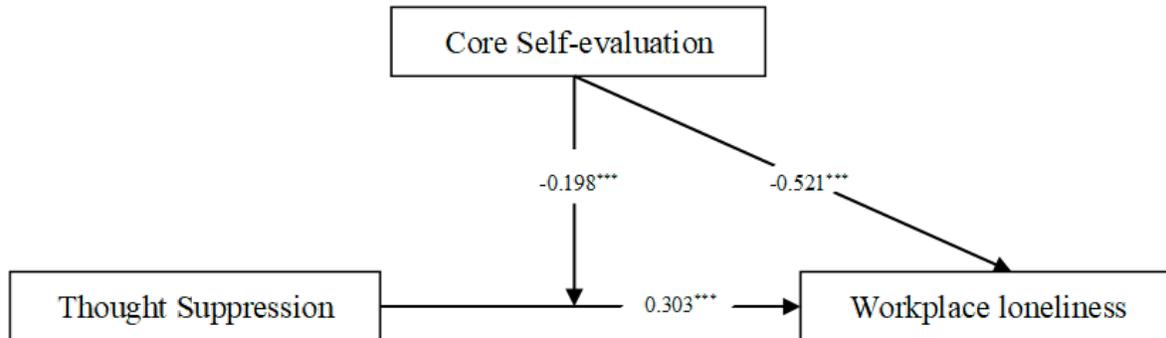
Table 3. The impact of thought suppression on workplace loneliness: the moderating effect of core self-evaluation (*N*=272)

Models and Variables	Workplace loneliness					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
1. Thought Suppression	0.892	32.354***	0.246	4.980***	0.303	6.602***
2. Core Self-evaluation			-0.711	-14.388***	-0.521	-9.975***
3. Thought Suppression × Core Self-evaluation					-0.198	-7.314***
ΔR^2	0.794		0.883		0.902	
R^2	0.795		0.884		0.903	
F	1046.785***		1026.253***		835.501***	

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

Testing the moderation effect of core self-evaluation through regression analysis (see Table 3), it can be observed that Model 1 included the independent variable thought suppression, Model 2 added Core self-evaluation as a moderating variable on top of Model 1, and finally, Model 3 included the interaction term of thought suppression (independent variable) and Core self-evaluation (moderating variable). The results indicated that thought suppression could predict Workplace loneliness (β = 0.303, t = 6.602, $p < 0.001$), and Core self-evaluation played a significant moderating role in the relationship between thought

suppression and Workplace loneliness (β = -0.198, t = -7.314, p < 0.001). Enhancing Core self-evaluation could mitigate the negative impact of thought suppression on Workplace loneliness, confirming the hypotheses.

Figure 1. Model diagram of the moderating effect of core self-evaluation on the relationship between thought suppression and workplace loneliness

Discussion

This study investigated the influence of thought suppression on workplace loneliness and the moderating role of Core self-evaluation in the process of suppressing loneliness. The impact of thought suppression on negative emotions has always been a subject of controversy. When individuals employ thought suppression strategies, they aim to reduce their own distress by stopping thoughts or shifting attention away from unwanted or avoided emotions or events (Ferreira et al., 2015). However, many studies and phenomena have found that the desired outcomes of this strategy often backfire (Wegner et al., 1987; Abramowitz et al., 2001). The results of this study also support this claim, as thought suppression positively predicts workplace loneliness. Individuals who engage in more thought suppression tend to experience higher levels of workplace loneliness. This phenomenon may be explained by Wegner's ironic process theory, which suggests the presence of two interacting systems: the intentional operating process pursuing desired emotional states while guiding attention away from unwanted thoughts, and the ironic monitoring system searching for signs of failure and striving to achieve the intended state (Wegner, 1992).

In terms of the impact of thought suppression on workplace loneliness, Core self-evaluation exhibited a strong moderating effect. Regression analysis shows that Core self-evaluation weakened the impact of thought suppression on workplace loneliness. Previous research has shown that thought suppression can deplete an individual's psychological resources (Szczepanowski et al., 2021). When individuals expend substantial psychological resources on thought suppression, their cognitive and emotional regulation abilities decrease, leading to a shift from "control operations" to a "critical monitoring" mode involving cyclic

thinking about negative experiences and their causes and consequences, exacerbating negative emotional experiences and emotional exhaustion (Zhang et al., 2022). As part of an individual's psychological resources, thought suppression may diminish one's Core self-evaluation; conversely, individuals with higher Core self-evaluation experience fewer negative impacts when suppressing workplace loneliness. Additionally, research indicates that prolonged repeated failures in thought suppression may trigger more unpleasant emotions (Clark, 2004), highlighting the importance of not overlooking the role of Core self-evaluation.

In the results of independent sample t-test, the study found that there were no differences in thought suppression, Core self-evaluation, and Workplace loneliness based on gender, but significant differences existed based on participants' place of origin and whether they were only children. Participants from rural areas exhibited higher levels of thought suppression and Workplace loneliness, along with lower levels of Core self-evaluation. Only children showed higher levels of thought suppression and Workplace loneliness, as well as lower levels of Core self-evaluation. According to the cognitive-contextual theory, heightened perception of negative events tends to lead to more negative emotions (Wang et al., 2014). Individuals from rural areas and only children may be considered disadvantaged groups within the workforce (accounting for a significantly small proportion in this random questionnaire survey study), making them more sensitive to negative events and more likely to choose thought suppression as a temporary means to suppress their negative emotions. It is important for organizations to pay closer attention to emotional issues in the workplace among employees from rural areas and only children, as they are more likely to experience feelings of helplessness or work burnout. Company leaders should conduct regular group counseling sessions aimed at enhancing psychological resources among employees (such as improving self-evaluation) to alleviate Workplace loneliness, prevent work burnout, and reduce performance-related issues.

This study utilized a questionnaire survey to explore the relationship between thought suppression, Core self-evaluation, and Workplace loneliness. Although it revealed some level of correlation, there are still some limitations. Firstly, due to the small sample size, the distribution of population is relatively small in some demographic factors; The participants are mainly middle-aged and young people, which makes it difficult to represent the situation of all age groups; Not taking into account the possible impact of the company type where the participants are located. On the other hand, the high correlations among thought suppression, core self-evaluation, and workplace loneliness (ranging from 0.892 to 0.935) warrant consideration of potential common method variance. As all variables were measured via self-report at a single time point, shared method bias may inflate observed relationships (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future studies could mitigate this limitation through multi-method designs, such as incorporating peer ratings of loneliness, behavioral measures of suppression, or longitudinal assessments to establish temporal precedence. In addition, our analysis

revealed significant correlations, the reliance on the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI) primarily captures self-reported tendencies to suppress unwanted thoughts in hypothetical scenarios. This methodological approach raises questions about the generalizability of these tendencies to actual suppression behaviors in naturalistic workplace settings. The ecological validity of the findings warrants critical examination. Future research should employ ecologically valid methods, such as experience sampling (e.g., daily diaries tracking suppression attempts and loneliness) or observational studies in naturalistic settings to examine how suppression manifests in workplace interactions and influences objective outcomes (e.g., team performance, turnover rates). These need further exploration by future research and other scholars.

Conclusion

(1) There is a significant positive correlation between thought suppression and workplace loneliness; higher levels of thought suppression may lead to increased levels of workplace loneliness.

(2) Core self-evaluation can attenuate the impact of thought suppression on workplace loneliness. Enhancing individuals' levels of core self-evaluation can alleviate feelings of workplace loneliness.

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