Decision Making in Stressful Work Situations

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DECISION MAKING UNDER STRESS IN STRESSFUL WORK SITUATIONS

Abstract

In various occupations, experts are often faced with novel scenarios where decisions need to be made under time pressure. These decisions can often lead to unsuccessful outcomes for the organization at hand and, in extreme cases, life or death for some individuals who were involved. It is incidents such as these and the demand for preventative measures against them that calls for research on decision making within real-life settings as opposed to laboratory settings with a controlled environment and choices. The present study aims to see how individuals’ perceptions of their ability to make decisions under stress changes with experience. Participants will be given an in-basket assessment that simulates a situation where they would need to answer emails, reply to memos, voicemails etc., “on the job”. This will need to be done in a thorough manner, with accurate information, but in a short time frame. Participants will report their perceptions of their ability to make decisions under stress before the first stressful task, before the second stressful task, and a third time as if they were going to complete a different version of the same task again. Their self-reported reactions (positive/negative) to their performance will be captured each time performance feedback is given in order to see if these reactions influence their perceived decision making under stress abilities. Additionally, we are aiming to see if the expression of the individual difference neuroticism changes with task specific experience. We will also be observing if perceptions of ability to make decisions while under stress acts as a mediator between neuroticism and decision making under stress performance. This study could provide insight on the importance of training with inexperienced employees before assigning him or her a project or task that could lead to harmful outcomes. It could also suggest that individual differences need to be studied in the decision making under stress realm.
The phenomenon of naturalistic decision making (NDM) explains scenarios, usually relevant to work-life, where individuals must make decisions in a dynamic and unstable environment that is characterized by novelty and time pressure. Compared to earlier decision making theories, NDM encompasses a more thorough and complex understanding of situations. Decision making in settings with these characteristics calls for real-life scenarios rather than a controlled laboratory environment with few options to decide from. For this purpose, we will be capturing these characteristics by creating a setting that is very close to a real-life scenario where individuals will be asked to respond to emails, voice memos, etc. “on the job”. This can be a stressful task for many individuals considering it requires displaying accurate knowledge, skills, and abilities of their future projected profession in a short time frame.

Neuroticism, an individual difference, has been repeatedly found to have a negative relationship with performance (e.g. Byrne, Silasi-Mansat, & Worthy, 2015; Denburg et al., 2009). It has been proposed that an issue with studying personality traits like neuroticism, and their effects on decision making in naturalistic settings, is that training and experience can discount the effects that personality traits might have (Svensson, Lindoff, Castor & Sutton, 2010). In other words, it would be more difficult to observe how neuroticism interferes with the decision-making process if the individuals involved were trained for or had prior experience with the situation at hand. With an experiment, such as the one in the present study, we are hoping to see if neuroticism is related to performance and observe whether or not this relationship decreases after exposure to the task. Though neuroticism levels may be partly responsible for the success/non-success factor of an individual’s decision making, perhaps the individual’s view of the situation as a threatening or not could be a key factor. Schneider (2004) found that higher levels of neuroticism led to higher threat appraisals. Overall, neuroticism was found to predict poor task performance in participants; however, these effects were more intensified based on the extent that the situation was viewed as a threat (Schneider, 2004). Schneider (2004) suggested that high levels of neuroticism lead to a vulnerability to stress only when the situation was perceived as threatening. These findings and other related findings brought us to another research question regarding whether participants’ reported ability to make decisions under stress mediates the relationship between neuroticism and decision making under stress performance.

In a study conducted by Shea and Howell (2000), participants were presented with four task trials, and each were followed with a self-efficacy measure and feedback manipulation about the task (Shea & Howell, 2000). Shea and Howell (2000) suggested that over time, self-efficacy had a strong relationship with performance. Their results also revealed that self-corrections were made over time, indicating that the relationship between self-efficacy and performance does not always demonstrate a monotonic, deviation-amplifying spiral (Shea & Howell, 2000). In the present study, we are aiming to see if individuals’ perceptions of their ability to make decisions under stress changes with experience. We will be collecting measures of participants’ perceptions (positive or negative) of their performance on a task that is given two times. We will be obtaining self-reports of their perceived ability to make decisions under stress at three different times (before test one, before test two, and after test two). We suspect that participants’ perceptions of their ability to make decisions under stress will change based on their view (positive/negative) of their test performance. For example, if a participant has an initial positive view of their ability to make decisions under stress and they are dissatisfied with their performance on the first task, their view of their ability to make decisions under stress will lower at time 2.