Let's play the blame game: The distinct effects of personal standards and self-critical perfectionism on attributions of success and failure during goal pursuit

Shelby L. Levine *, Kaitlyn M. Werner, Jonathan S. Capaldi, Marina Milyavskaya

Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

In the present study, we examined whether personal standards and self-critical perfectionism differentially related to how people attributed their success and failures in pursuing their personal goals. In two studies (Ns = 185 and 240), participants set three week-long (Study 1) and semester-long (Study 2) goals, and at the end of the week or semester answered questions about goal status, internal and external attributions, and likelihood to reset the goal. Mulitlevel analyses showed that self-critical perfectionism was related to attributing goal attainment to external sources; this was not the case for failure or abandonment. Conversely, personal standards perfectionism was related to attributing failure more to external sources. Overall, these results highlight differences in how perfectionism influences the use of the self-serving bias.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Most people set goals and strive for success in all of their endeavors, but it is not possible to always be successful. Despite our best efforts, we sometimes fail. Whatever the outcome, we often then try to understand the reasons for that failure or success. Sometimes, people may arbitrarily assign blame or take credit for the outcome of an event to rationalize why that outcome has occurred. One of the more common strategies for handling ambiguous situations is the tendency to attribute success to one's self and to blame failure on other sources. This allows us to feel pride and worthiness in our accomplishments, while at the same time buffering against the negative consequences associated with failure (e.g., feelings of shame, disappointment). While there is certainly variability in the way that success and failure can be understood, could it be the case that some people use this self-serving bias less than others? In particular, when people set very high standards for themselves, would this then influence their use of the self-serving bias? At its core, perfectionism encompasses this tendency to set very high standards, and so the purpose of the present research was to examine the relation between perfectionistic tendencies and individuals' attributions of success or failure for personally important goals.

1.1. Self-serving attributions and their utility

People have a tendency to view themselves in a positive manner, especially when they find themselves in ambiguous situations (Heider, 1958). The self-serving bias is composed of three components: stability, globality, and internality (Heider, 1958). Internality describes whether the event is attributed to an internal cause (the self) or to an external one (e.g., other people) (Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996). Stability refers to beliefs about whether an event will continue to happen in the future or if the event was an isolated incident. Finally, globality is the perception that an outcome is domain-specific, or translates across life domains (Heider, 1958). People have a tendency to attribute successes as reoccurring (stable), happening in multiple domains (global), and due to the self (internal), while failures are often thought of as non-recurrent, limited to one domain, and due to others. Although all three aspects of the self-serving bias are important, whether attributions are internal or external appears to be the focus of the self-serving bias literature, and have been termed the self-serving *attributional* bias (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004).

The self-serving attributional bias is a tendency to attribute positive events to oneself while attributing negative events to some other, external cause (Heider, 1958; Miller & Ross, 1975). For example, a student may believe that getting an A on a test was due to their aptitude and effort (internal), whereas if they received a C, they would blame the failure on the difficulty of the

---

* Corresponding author.
   E-mail address: shelbylevine@cmail.carleton.ca (S.L. Levine).

course or on the instructor (external). Some previous research has treated internality as a continuum, or as a composite score contrasting internal and external attributions (Stoeber & Becker, 2008; Thompson, Kaslow, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Other researchers, however, keep these dimensions separate, examining both attribution to the self and to others as two separate constructs (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980; Rizley, 1978). For example, Rizley (1978) examined attributions through participants' ratings of effort and ability (internal) or luck and task difficulty (external), and found that depressed individuals attributed their failures, but not their successes, to internal causes. Another study asked participants to only rate effort and ability as possible reasons for their success or failure (internal causes). This study found that socially anxious individuals took more credit for success than for failure in non-social situations, but took significantly less credit for their success when there was more social pressure (Arkin et al., 1980). In the present research, we will similarly consider internal attributions as separate from external attributions to better understand the direction of the self-serving attributional bias. For example, do some people attribute success to external factors while minimizing their own contribution, or can they believe that this success is due to both external factors and to themselves?

Generally, using the self-serving attributional bias leads people to believe that they are the cause of their success, and that they are not to blame for their failures. Even though a diffusion of responsibility for negative events may not be desirable, the ability to disentangle oneself from bad outcomes leads people to be optimistic that they can succeed in the future (Taylor & Brown, 1988). The primary utility of the self-serving attributional bias is thus in protecting individuals from the psychological harm that can arise from a negative event (Taylor & Brown, 1988). This is adaptive, as individuals with more self-serving attributions tend to be more positive and happier, and to have increased well-being (McFarland & Ross, 1982; Rizley, 1978; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). Importantly, a meta-analysis conducted by Mezulis et al. (2004) found that the tendency to use the self-serving bias was attenuated for individuals with various forms of psychopathology. Note, however, that there was no evidence of a reversal of the bias. Although people exhibiting pathological symptoms (as compared to general community samples) are less likely to attribute their success to themselves and failures to external factors, it is not the case that they attribute their success to others and failures to themselves (Mezulis et al., 2004).

While previous research has focused on the attenuation of the self-serving bias for individuals with anxiety, depression, and ADHD (see Mezulis et al., 2004), here we wondered if perfectionism, a non-pathological trait characteristic, could be related to the self-serving attributional bias. A perfectionist's self-concept is inherently tied to whether or not they succeed, and so it may be the case that different types of perfectionistic tendencies influence the extent to which an individual uses this self-serving bias.

1.2. Perfectionism and attribution of success and failure

Perfectionism is a multifaceted trait, composed of both positive and negative aspects (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Although previous research has used multiple terms to denote both the maladaptive (i.e. self-critical, concerns over mistakes, socially prescribed perfectionism) and adaptive (personal standards, perfectionist striving) aspects, for the purpose of this research we distinguish between personal standards and self-critical perfectionism (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003). Personal standards perfectionism involves striving to achieve the high standards and goals an individual has set for themselves (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002; Frost et al., 1990). Self-critical perfectionism is composed of high personal striving, as well as harsh self-

evaluation, fear of failure and concerns over mistakes (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000). Self-critical perfectionists have increased levels of negative affect, anxiety, and depression, compared to personal standards perfectionists and non-perfectionists (Harvey et al., 2015; Milyavskaya et al., 2014; Sherry, Richards, Sherry, & Stewart, 2014). Self-critical perfectionists are also more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidant coping and self-blame, which leads to less daily satisfaction and more daily stress (Stoeber & Janssen, 2011). Conversely, personal standards perfectionists use more adaptive coping strategies, such as problem solving or seeking social support (Mofield, Peters, & Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2016). Overall, personal standards perfectionism appears to be more adaptive, while self-critical perfectionism is more maladaptive and consistently linked to poor mental health.

Perfectionism at its core is a trait related to the setting of high standards and lofty goals (Hanchon, 2010). If perfectionism is so highly entangled in positive achievement, then it can be reasoned that perfectionists take success and failure more seriously. For example, both personal standards and self-critical facets of perfectionism are related to increased negative affect and shame after failure (Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2004; Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). Self-critical perfectionists also report significantly more psychological distress when recalling past failure (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). This increased negative affectivity may provide evidence that perfectionists take even past failures more personally, or that perhaps an inability to diffuse responsibility leads self-critical perfectionists to associate this failure as part of their identity (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). Although it can be expected that one would be upset after failure, it appears that perfectionists are hypervigilant to negative performance feedback. Additionally, although self-critical perfectionists feel that they will only be accepted if they succeed, they do not feel pride even when they do succeed (Stoeber et al., 2008). The inability to feel accomplished suggests that self-critical perfectionists may feel that they are not the reason for their success – that is, they may not demonstrate a self-serving attributional bias.

Compared to self-critical perfectionists, those high on personal standards perfectionism react to success and failure more adaptively (Besser et al., 2004). Those high in personal standards perfectionism experience more pride after success, whereas self-critical perfectionists do not (Stoeber et al., 2008). This illustrates that personal standards perfectionists can appreciate what they have accomplished, and perhaps their role in achieving that accomplishment. For example, it was found that students who exhibited greater tendencies for personal standards perfectionism experienced greater satisfaction with their GPA, even though their GPA was no better than that of self-critical perfectionists. This shows that personal standards perfectionists might be able to appreciate and realize their accomplishments more than self-critical perfectionists (Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004). However, even personal standards perfectionists experience more psychological distress when they fail to achieve the exacting standards that they have placed upon themselves (Accordino, Accordino, & Slaney, 2000). It is important to consider if personal standards perfectionists are more adaptive when dealing with success and failure, and if that is partially due to how they utilize the self-serving bias.

Stoeber and Becker (2008) provide preliminary evidence that self-critical perfectionists have an abnormal self-serving attributional bias. In a study on student athletes, when self-critical perfectionists were asked to think about a game that they had won or lost, they attributed success to external sources and failure to the self, whereas personal standards perfectionists were able to use the self-serving bias (Stoeber & Becker, 2008). This lack of a self-serving bias among self-critical perfectionists may create a sense of ambivalence toward success and a hyperawareness of failure, which would subsequently impact well-being. However, in that