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# The role of intergenerational similarity and parenting in adolescent self-criticism: An actor–partner interdependence model

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## ABSTRACT

Research investigating the development of adolescent self-criticism has typically focused on the role of either parental self-criticism or parenting. This study used an actor–partner interdependence model to examine an integrated theoretical model in which achievement-oriented psychological control has an intervening role in the relation between parental and adolescent self-criticism. Additionally, the relative contribution of both parents and the moderating role of adolescent gender were examined. Participants were 284 adolescents ( $M = 14$  years, range = 12–16 years) and their parents ( $M = 46$  years, range = 32–63 years). Results showed that only maternal self-criticism was directly related to adolescent self-criticism. However, both parents' achievement-oriented psychological control had an intervening role in the relation between parent and adolescent self-criticism in both boys and girls. Moreover, one parent's achievement-oriented psychological control was not predicted by the self-criticism of the other parent.

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## Introduction

Self-criticism, or self-critical perfectionism, is a personality dimension characterized by high levels of negative self-evaluation and harsh self-scrutiny (Blatt, 1995; Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). Self-criticism has been shown to be a vulnerability factor for a wide range of disorders and for depression in particular (Blatt, 2004; Luyten & Blatt, 2013; Nietzel & Harris, 1990). The association between self-criticism and psychopathology has been demonstrated in both clinical and nonclinical samples and in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Blatt, 2004; Blatt & Luyten, 2009), even while controlling for broad personality dimensions such as neuroticism (Enns & Cox, 1999; Sherry, Gautreau, Mushquash, Sherry, & Allen, 2014a).

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Given that self-criticism is a robust predictor of psychopathology, it should come as no surprise that researchers from different theoretical perspectives have sought to unravel its developmental origins (Blatt & Luyten, 2009; Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014). Although there is some evidence for the involvement of heritability in self-criticism, behavioral and molecular genetic research on self-criticism is still in its infancy (Bachner-Melman et al., 2007; Wade & Bulik, 2007). In contrast, there is now solid evidence suggesting that socialization experiences, including parenting, may play an important role in the developmental origins of self-criticism (Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014). Adolescence is considered a key period for the development of self-criticism because adolescents are highly sensitive to social evaluation (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002).

Research on the socialization of self-criticism has taken one of two directions (Blatt & Homann, 1992; Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014). First, research suggests that parents' own self-criticism may influence the development of self-criticism in their children through observational learning, conditioning, and identification processes (Frost, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991). Through these processes, children tend to become similarly self-critical as their parents. Research has indeed documented an association between self-criticism in parents and in their children, although it should be noted that the size of this association is relatively modest (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2010; Besser & Priel, 2005; Frost et al., 1991).

Second, it has been suggested that parenting styles may play a role in the development of self-criticism (Blatt, 1995; Blatt & Homann, 1992). A number of studies have addressed the role of parental psychological control (Barber, 1996, 2001; Schaefer, 1965), a parenting style involving intrusive and coercive strategies (e.g., love withdrawal, guilt induction, shaming). These strategies are experienced as intrusive by the child because the child feels forced to meet high parental expectations, which may contribute to a tendency to be self-critical (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). Consistent with these assumptions, research has shown systematic and substantial associations between psychologically controlling parenting and adolescent self-criticism in cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies (Ahmad & Soenens, 2010; Amitay, Mongrain, & Faza, 2008; Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2005; Koestner, Zuroff, & Powers, 1991; Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014; Soenens et al., 2005, 2008). Importantly, studies suggest that achievement-oriented psychological control in particular, that is, the use of psychological control to promote achievement and performance on the part of the child, is related to adolescents' self-criticism (Soenens, Park, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2012; Soenens et al., 2010).

Although these studies offer important insights into the developmental pathways involved in self-criticism, there are still some important gaps in our knowledge in this area. First, only a few studies have simultaneously investigated the role of parenting and parental self-criticism in predicting child self-criticism (Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014). Yet, psychologically controlling parenting may be an intervening variable in the intergenerational similarity of self-criticism between parents and their offspring (e.g., Soenens et al., 2005). Indeed, because of their unrealistic personal standards and fear of failure, parents with high levels of self-criticism may be particularly prone to demand high levels of performance not only from themselves but also from their children. Poor performance by their children may be experienced by these parents as a threat to their own self-worth. Psychological control can then be the mechanism through which parents convey these demands toward their children and this, in turn, may contribute to high levels of self-criticism in their offspring (Flett et al., 2002; Soenens et al., 2010). To date, only a few studies have investigated the intervening role of parental psychological control between self-criticism in parents and in their offspring (Ahmad & Soenens, 2010; Amitay et al., 2008; Soenens et al., 2005). Ahmad and Soenens (2010) showed, in a sample of mothers and adolescents, that maternal psychological control as reported by the adolescent mediated the relation between mothers' and adolescents' self-criticism. Amitay et al. (2008) found, in a sample of mothers, fathers, and daughters, that both mothers' and fathers' self-criticism predicted cold and controlling parental behavior as reported by mothers and fathers together, which in turn predicted daughters' self-criticism. Soenens et al. (2005), in a study of mothers, fathers, and their daughters, reported that only mothers' self-criticism was related to daughters' self-criticism. However, psychological control (as indexed by both parents' and daughters' reports) played an intervening role in associations of both mothers' and fathers' self-criticism with daughters' self-criticism. Overall, research is beginning to show that controlling parenting plays an intervening role in associations between parents' and children's self-criticism. However, because few studies have addressed this intervening role, more research is clearly needed.

Second, studies investigating the relation between psychologically controlling parenting and self-criticism have not systematically addressed the role of parental gender. Studies have typically focused on one parent only (usually the mother, e.g., Campos, Besser, & Blatt, 2010), assessed parenting referring to parents in general (e.g., by phrasing questions in the form "my parents ..."; Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2013), computed a combined score for both parents (e.g., Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002), or performed separate analyses for mothers and fathers (e.g., Soenens et al., 2005). Hence, it remains unclear whether fathers' and mothers' psychological control are each independently related to child self-criticism. This is unfortunate because studies suggest that mothers and fathers may contribute in different ways to child development across different phases of development (Collins & Russell, 1991; Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Denham et al., 2000; McKinney & Renk, 2008). In Western countries, for instance, fathers may have a comparatively greater influence on the development of self-criticism compared with mothers, because of the relatively greater sociocultural emphasis on autonomy and achievement in men (Luyten & Blatt, 2013; Soenens et al., 2010).

Similarly, there has been a lack of attention to the question of whether children are differentially susceptible to developmental experiences depending on their gender (Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014). Vieth and Trull (1999), for instance, mentioned the possibility of gender congruency, meaning that the relations between parental achievement-oriented psychological control and adolescents' self-criticism may be particularly pronounced in same-sex dyads. Yet, very few studies have empirically investigated this possibility.

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