Personality and Individual Differences 95 (2016) 196–199

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Perfectionism explains variance in self-defeating behaviors beyond self-criticism: Evidence from a cross-national sample

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 November 2015
Received in revised form 20 February 2016
Accepted 22 February 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Perfectionism
Self-criticism
Binge eating
Procrastination
Interpersonal conflict

ABSTRACT

Does perfectionism predict maladjustment beyond self-criticism? Attention to this key question is needed as some studies suggest perfectionism may not explain variance in maladjustment beyond self-criticism. Using a large cross-national sample of 524 undergraduates (229 Canadian, 295 British), this study examined whether evaluative concerns perfectionism (socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions) explained variance in self-defeating behaviors (binge eating, procrastination, interpersonal conflict) after controlling for self-criticism. Results showed that—after controlling for self-criticism—concern over mistakes predicted binge eating, doubts about actions predicted procrastination, and socially prescribed perfectionism and concern over mistakes predicted interpersonal conflict. Self-criticism also uniquely predicted self-defeating behaviors beyond evaluative concerns perfectionism. The relationships that evaluative concerns perfectionism shows with self-defeating behaviors appear neither redundant with nor fully captured by self-criticism. Results dovetail with theoretical accounts suggesting evaluative concerns perfectionism is a uniquely important part of the personality of people prone to self-defeating behaviors.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is an important personality characteristic that explains individual differences in maladjustment beyond neuroticism, personality disorders, and low self-esteem (Dunkley, Sanislow, Grilo & McGlashan, 2006). A few studies, however, have suggested perfectionism's close relations with self-criticism explain why perfectionism predicts maladjustment, and assertions have been made that perfectionism may not explain variance in maladjustment beyond self-criticism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Masheb & Grilo, 2006; Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2006). The present research tests these assertions by examining whether evaluative concerns perfectionism explains variance in self-defeating behaviors beyond self-criticism.

1.1. Evaluative concerns perfectionism versus self-criticism

Evaluative concerns perfectionism involves a habitual pattern of perceived pressure from others to be perfect (socially prescribed perfectionism), negative reactions to perceived failures (concern over mistakes), and misgivings about performance abilities (doubts about actions; Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000). Self-criticism involves a habitual pattern of self-rebuke, a sense of falling short of one's own standards (or others' standards), and an extreme focus on achievement (Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that evaluative concerns perfectionism and self-criticism positively correlate with one other, and with various forms of maladjustment (Sherry & Hall, 2009).

Some researchers, however, have questioned if evaluative concerns perfectionism adds to our understanding of maladjustment beyond self-criticism. Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein (2006) found aspects of evaluative concerns perfectionism (socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, and doubts about actions) did not explain variance in daily hassles, avoidant coping, perceived social support, negative affect, or positive affect beyond self-criticism. In contrast, self-criticism explained variance in these outcomes beyond evaluative concerns perfectionism (see Dunkley, Blankstein, Masheb & Grilo, 2006 for similar findings).

The studies by Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein (2006) and Dunkley, Blankstein, et al. (2006) represent important contributions, but they have unique features that potentially influenced their results. For example, Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein (2006) involved 163 participants. However, for an effect size in the small to medium range ($f^2 = .042$; see Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2006), with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80, analyses with five predictors would require an estimated 312 participants (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). This suggests Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein's (2006) analyses may have had insufficient statistical power to find significant effects of evaluative concerns perfectionism after controlling for self-criticism.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.02.059
0191-8869/

Moreover, Dunkley, Blankstein et al. (2006; Study 2), measured self-criticism with the 66-item Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt et al., 1976) whereas they measured evaluative concerns perfectionism with the 3-item subscale from the Eating Disorder Inventory capturing socially prescribed perfectionism (EDI-SPP; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). Dunkley, Blankstein, et al. (2006) did not report Cronbach's alphas, but research indicates Cronbach's alphas for the DEQ are around .80, whereas Cronbach's alphas for the EDI-SPP are around .60 (Klein, 1989; Sherry & Hall, 2009). In Dunkley, Blankstein, et al. (2006; Study 2), self-criticism may therefore have had an advantage over evaluative concerns perfectionism in predicting maladjustment as longer scales are usually broader and more reliable—and thus explain more variance in criterion variables—than shorter scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

1.2. The present study

Against this background, we reinvestigated the question of whether evaluative concerns perfectionism predicts maladjustment beyond self-criticism. Regarding maladjustment, we examined individual differences in three self-defeating behaviors: binge eating, procrastination, and interpersonal conflict. We focused on these behaviors because research suggests they are associated with evaluative concerns perfectionism and self-criticism (Mushquash & Sherry, 2012). Based on extensive research suggesting perfectionism predicts maladjustment beyond neuroticism, personality disorders, low self-esteem, and other constructs (Dunkley, Sanislow, et al., 2006; Sherry & Hall, 2009), we expected evaluative concerns perfectionism would predict self-defeating behaviors beyond self-criticism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

524 undergraduates participated. 229 Canadian undergraduates (177 women, 45 men, 7 unreported) were recruited from XXX University. These participants averaged 20.07 years of age ($SD = 2.22$) and 2.15 years of university education ($SD = 1.23$); 73.4% were European in ethnicity, 10.0% Asian, 7.0% Arab, 7.4% belonged to other groups, and 2.2% did not indicate their ethnicity. 295 British undergraduates (248 women, 44 men, 3 unreported) were recruited from YYY University. These participants averaged 20.10 years of age ($SD = 4.63$) and 1.29 years of university education ($SD = 0.55$); 75.0% were European in ethnicity, 10.2% Asian, 9.8% Black, 4.7% belonged to other groups, and 0.3% did not indicate their ethnicity.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Evaluative concerns perfectionism

We measured evaluative concerns perfectionism using the 5-item short form of the socially prescribed perfectionism subscale from Hewitt and Flett's (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS; Hewitt, Habke, Lee-Baggley, Sherry, & Flett, 2008), the 5-item short form of the concern over mistakes subscale and the 4-item doubts about actions subscale from Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate's (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002). All three subscales have evidenced reliability and validity (McGrath et al., 2012). HF-MPS items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and FMPS items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.2. Self-criticism

We measured self-criticism using the 5-item short form of the self-criticism subscale from Blatt et al.'s (1976) DEQ (see Bagby, Parker, Joffe, & Buis, 1994; McGrath et al., 2012). The subscale has demonstrated reliability and validity (Gautreau, Sherry, Mushquash, & Stewart, 2015). DEQ items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Self-defeating behaviors

We measured binge eating using the 4-item binge eating subscale from Garner et al.'s (1983) EDI-BE (see Sherry & Hall, 2009). We measured procrastination using the 5-item short form of Tuckman's (1991) Procrastination Scale (TPS; see Mushquash & Sherry, 2012). We measured interpersonal conflict using the 5-item conflictual behaviors towards others subscale from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin's (1996) Interpersonal Qualities Scale (IQS; see Mushquash & Sherry, 2012). Subscales have demonstrated reliability and validity (Mushquash & Sherry, 2012). EDI-BE and TPS items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and IQS items on a scale from 1 (*not characteristic*) to 9 (*completely characteristic*).

2.2.4. Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant ethics boards of XXX University and YYY University. Participants received extra course credit.

2.2.5. Data-analytic plan

To examine whether evaluative concerns perfectionism explained variance in self-defeating behaviors beyond self-criticism, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses. Assumptions underlying hierarchical regression analyses (e.g., linearity) were checked and satisfied. Because sample (coded −1 for XXX University and +1 for YYY University) showed significant bivariate correlations with two of the self-defeating behaviors (binge eating, procrastination; see Table 1), we controlled for sample main effects in Step 1 and sample × predictor interactions in Step 4 of all regressions. In the same way, we examined whether self-criticism explained variance in self-defeating behaviors beyond evaluative concerns perfectionism (see Tables 2 and 3).

Assuming an effect size in the small to medium range ($f^2 = .042$) based on past research (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2006), with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80, analyses with eight predictors would require an estimated 366 participants (Faul et al., 2007). This suggests our hierarchical regression analyses had sufficient statistical power.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Means of the measures appear in Table 1. Cronbach's alphas for the measures were adequate (≥.78) and resembled those of prior studies (e.g., Mushquash & Sherry, 2012).

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, and bivariate correlations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Evaluative concerns perfectionism							
1. Socially prescribed perfectionism	–	.51***	.35***	.40***	.16***	.19***	.34***
2. Concern over mistakes		–	.54***	.53***	.27***	.24***	.36***
3. Doubts about actions			–	.59***	.28***	.34***	.31***
4. Self-criticism				–	.34***	.37***	.38***
Self-defeating behaviors							
5. Binge eating					–	.29***	.31***
6. Procrastination						–	.29***
7. Interpersonal conflict							–
8. Sample	.07	.03	.15***	.14**	.13**	−.11*	.01
M	19.70	12.05	10.84	19.89	10.95	22.96	19.48
SD	5.89	4.59	3.80	7.18	6.55	8.10	8.60
Cronbach's alpha	.78	.83	.79	.87	.87	.92	.79

Note. $N = 524$. Sample was coded −1 for University XXX and +1 for University YYY.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.
*** $p < .001$.