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# What is DAS self-critical perfectionism really measuring? Relations with the five-factor model of personality and depressive symptoms

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## Abstract

This study sought to gain a better understanding of what self-critical (SC) perfectionism, assessed by the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS; Weissman & Beck, 1978), is measuring in a non-depressed sample of community adults ( $N = 223$ ). DAS SC perfectionism measures, along with personal standards (i.e., self-oriented perfectionism) and other SC (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, self-criticism) measures of perfectionism, were related to the five domains and 30 facets of the revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa et al., 1992) and current depressive symptoms. Results indicated that DAS SC perfectionism was similar to socially prescribed perfectionism and self-criticism primarily in terms of moderate to large correlations with depressive symptoms and the neuroticism domain and facets, and negative correlations with the warmth, positive emotions, and trust facets. DAS SC/defensive separation perfectionism (i.e., DAS SC perfectionism with shared variance related to DAS need for approval removed) exhibited negative correlations with warmth and trust but was not related to neuroticism. In contrast to self-oriented perfectionism, the DAS SC perfectionism measures were unrelated or negatively related to the conscientiousness facets. These results suggest that DAS SC perfectionism more closely reflects self-critical than personal standards dimensions of perfectionism.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, self-critical (SC) perfectionism, assessed by the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS; Weissman & Beck, 1978), has emerged as an important cognitive-personality factor that has a negative impact on the treatment of depression (see Blatt & Zuroff, 2005) and predicts depressive symptoms over time (Dunkley, Sanislow, Grilo, & McGlashan, 2006). An obstacle to interpreting these findings, however, is that it is unclear what exactly is being measured by this variable (see Dunkley, Sanislow, Grilo, & McGlashan, 2004). Although DAS SC perfectionism has been widely assumed to reflect the setting of high personal standards (see Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, & Harvey, 2003), several investigators have independently suggested the importance of distinguishing between personal standards (PS) and SC dimensions of perfectionism (see Dunkley, Blankstein, Masheb, & Grilo, 2006; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). PS perfectionism involves active striving for high standards and goals that one sets for one self, which is integral to the perfectionism concept that has been typically described in the literature (see Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). On the other hand, SC perfectionism involves constant and harsh self-scrutiny and self-evaluation, chronic concerns about others' criticism, and the tendency to engage in defensive interpersonal strategies (e.g., suspiciousness, sacrificing intimacy, social distancing) that perpetuate a vulnerable sense of self (Dunkley, Blankstein, Zuroff, Lecce, & Hui, 2006).

Contrary to prevailing assumption, empirical findings suggest that DAS SC perfectionism is actually more closely related to the SC than the PS dimension of perfectionism. Specifically, factor analytic studies of scales from the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976), and the DAS have identified two higher-order latent factors that correspond to PS and SC dimensions of perfectionism (see Dunkley et al., 2006; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The PS perfectionism latent factor is indicated by MPS self-oriented perfectionism. On the other hand, the SC perfectionism latent factor is indicated by DAS SC perfectionism, MPS socially prescribed perfectionism, and DEQ self-criticism (e.g., Powers, Zuroff, & Topciu, 2004). In addition, although DAS SC perfectionism has exhibited significant zero-order correlations with self-oriented perfectionism, partial correlations showed that DAS SC perfectionism was unrelated to self-oriented perfectionism after controlling for socially prescribed perfectionism (Sherry et al., 2003). This suggests that the relation between DAS SC perfectionism and higher personal standards is bound up with perceptions that others hold unrealistic expectations for one self. Finally, whereas PS perfectionism indicators often have weak or negligible correlations with depressive symptoms, SC perfectionism indicators (e.g., DAS SC perfectionism) consistently demonstrate moderate to large correlations with depressive symptoms (e.g., Powers et al., 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Although some previous research has related the DAS SC perfectionism scale to other measures of perfectionism, it is important to note that many studies have used a “purified” version

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen's (1992) criteria for weak ( $r = 0.10$ ), moderate ( $r = 0.30$ ), and strong ( $r = 0.50$ ) effect sizes are used to describe the strength of zero-order correlations.

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