

## Attributions and Race Are Critical: Perceived Criticism in a Sample of African American and White Community Participants

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The current investigation had two principal goals: (a) to examine whether attributions regarding the intentions underlying criticism from one's relative predict perceived criticism from that relative and (b) to explore differences between African Americans and Whites in attributions and perceived criticism. A new measure, the Attributions of Criticism Scale, was employed in the present study to assess attributions of perceived criticism. Results showed that the attributions scale demonstrated good psychometric properties in a sample of African American ( $n = 78$ ) and White ( $n = 165$ ) community participants. As hypothesized, attributions were correlated with perceptions of criticism. When racial differences in attributions and perceived criticism were explored, results showed that African Americans made more positive attributions but also perceived more destructive criticism than Whites. No racial differences were observed on overall and constructive criticism, but there was some evidence to suggest that African Americans made more negative attributions than Whites. However, these results were inconsistent across recruitment method. Taken together, these findings suggest that positive and negative attributions are important factors in the perception of criticism and that mean levels of attributions and perceived criticism may differ by race. Possible explanations for effects as well as clinical implications and directions for future research are considered.

**Keywords:** attributions; perceived criticism; African American; racial/cultural differences

CRITICISM FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS has been found to be a robust predictor of poor clinical outcomes for patients with a number of psychiatric disorders (see meta-analysis by Butzlaff & Hooley, 1998). Typically, relatives' criticism as well as their hostility and emotional overinvolvement are assessed by the Camberwell Family Interview (CFI), a semistructured interview about relatives' attitudes toward their mentally ill family members (Vaughn & Leff, 1976). However, Hooley and Teasdale (1989) proposed that *perceived criticism* may be a more significant predictor of clinical outcomes than a criticism measure gleaned from an interview conducted in the patient's absence because it reflects the amount of criticism that is registered by the recipient. To test this hypothesis, they developed the Perceived Criticism Measure (PCM). A single item from this measure ("How critical is your relative of you?") has become the standard measure of perceived criticism. Research has shown perceived criticism to predict important clinical outcomes, including symptom severity, relapse, and treatment response (reviewed by Renshaw, 2008). To our knowledge, only two studies have compared the relative strengths of the PCM and the CFI, and in both the one-item PCM predicted clinical outcomes better than the factors assessed by the CFI (Chambless & Steketee, 1999; Hooley & Teasdale). These findings underscore the importance of studying perceived criticism as well as its antecedents in greater depth.

Research to date indicates that, in part, perceived criticism simply reflects relatives' criticism. Chambless and colleagues (Chambless et al., 1999; Chambless & Blake, 2009) have found medium to large correlations between relatives' and patients' reports of the relatives' criticism ( $r = .33$ ), in community spouses' agreement concerning one another's criticism ( $rs = .39-.43$ ), and

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between perceived criticism and observers' ratings of relatives' destructive criticism of patients during a problem-solving interaction ( $r = .47$ ). However, even once such correlations are disattenuated to correct for measurement unreliability, this leaves at least 54% of the variance in perceived criticism unexplained. Smith and Peterson (2008) pioneered research in *criticality bias*, the deviation between the criticism perceived by the recipient and that intended by the relative or that observed by coders of an interaction. What accounts for criticality bias? A body of research suggests the importance of the attributions drawn by the recipient of the (possible) criticism.

Whereas PCM ratings are designed to capture respondents' perception that they have been criticized by another, attribution measures are intended to tap the perceivers' thoughts about the motivations of the critical person (see Weiner, 1986). Thus, a woman who reports her mother criticized her by saying that her hairdo is unflattering is reporting perceived criticism. When she goes on to say that her mother is always trying to make her into someone she is not (i.e., a woman who fusses over her appearance), she is drawing a negative attribution about the reason for her mother's criticism. Peterson, Smith, and Windle (2009) found a questionnaire measure of negative attributions about one's spouse was moderately associated with criticality bias as determined during review of a social support interaction, and Chambless, Blake, and Simmons (2010) found community spouses' negative attributions about one another's negative behavior rated during review of a problem-solving interaction correlated with perceived criticism during that interaction. In a second study using negative attributions coders extracted from patients' speech during interactions with their relatives, Chambless et al. (2010) found these attributions predicted anxious patients' PCM scores, thus showing a relationship between attributions during laboratory interactions and perceived criticism experienced outside the laboratory. Moreover, attributions contributed significantly to the variance in explaining perceived criticism even once observed criticism had been controlled, speaking to their contribution to criticality bias. That these results have held across a variety of methods for assessing attributions, different methods of tapping perceived criticism and criticality bias, and different samples (happily married couples from the community, depressed individuals, patients with anxiety disorders) boosts confidence in their solidity and suggests attributions as a potential target for clinical interventions designed to reduce perceived criticism.

A limitation in research on attributions and perceived criticism to date is that investigators have

yet to assess attributions about criticism specifically. Rather, investigators have inferred that negative attributions made about relatives more generally reflect attributions about criticism, and this limits the guidance this research provides for interventions to reduce perceived criticism. The primary purpose of the present investigation was to test the relationship between perceived criticism from an important other and attributions specifically about that person's criticism. Moreover, the literature to date has focused exclusively on negative attributions and their relationship to perceived criticism as assessed by the PCM. However, Renshaw, Blais, and Caska (2010) have shown that perceived criticism can be usefully broken down into *constructive criticism* and *destructive criticism*. What leads respondents to rate criticism as constructive rather than destructive?

In the present investigation, we pursued not only measurement of negative attributions about criticism, which we predicted would be strongly related to ratings of destructive perceived criticism, but also ratings of positive attributions about criticism, which we predicted would be strongly related to ratings of constructive criticism. To return to our example of the respondent whose mother dislikes her new haircut, the respondent might perceive her mother's criticism to be destructive ("Mom makes me feel awful because she doesn't accept me as I am") or constructive ("Mom gives me good feedback about how to look better"). Although we predicted that destructive criticism would be more common when attributions were negative than when positive, the valence of the attributions is not isomorphic with destructive vs. constructive criticism. Our respondent might find her mother's criticism to be destructive, yet make a positive attribution about the reasons for her mother's behavior ("Mom just worries that I won't get ahead at work if I don't pay more attention to my appearance. I know she means well, but it does make me feel bad.") Our preliminary research with an undergraduate sample, who largely rated criticism from their parents, supported the hypothesized relationships between destructive and constructive criticism with negative and positive attributions, respectively (Allred & Chambless, 2013). Here we sought to confirm these results with an older and more diverse community sample, who in the main rated criticism from a spouse or romantic partner.

#### Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Relationship Between Relatives' Criticism and Clinical Outcomes

Although progress is being made in identifying contributors to perceived criticism, the contributions of this body of literature are limited by the lack of

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