Mediating the effects of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism on goal pursuit

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A B S T R A C T

The current study utilized a prospective design to examine the associations of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism with goal progress. The results corroborated prior findings demonstrating a negative association between self-criticism and self-reported goal progress when self-oriented perfectionism was controlled, and a positive association between self-oriented perfectionism and goal progress when self-criticism was controlled. This study extended previous research by exploring the potential mediation of these effects through goal-related self-efficacy, implementation intentions, and goal-related flow. The results showed that the effects of self-criticism on goal progress were indeed mediated by self-efficacy, implementation planning, and goal-related flow, while the effects of self-oriented perfectionism were mediated by implementation planning and flow, but not self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mediating the effects of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism on goal pursuit

Prior research has shown that self-criticism is negatively associated with goal progress across a variety of domains, while self-oriented perfectionism appears to be positively related once the overlap with self-criticism is removed (Powers, Koestner, Zuroff, Milyavskaya, & Gorin, 2011). By what mechanism or mechanisms do these relatively stable personality variables exert their effects on goal progress? The current study set out to replicate the previous findings and to explore potential mediators of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism.

Self-criticism has been conceptualized as a maladaptive form of self-definition, characterized by negative cognitive appraisals of the self, guilt, and fear of loss of approval for failing to live up to standards (Blatt, 2004; Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Self-criticism as measured by the self-criticism scale of the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D’Affliti, & Quinlan, 1976) features self-denigration and hypersensitivity to perceived criticism, and has been associated with a variety of personal and interpersonal deficits, negative outcomes across a variety of domains, and various forms of psychopathology (Blatt, 2004; Powers, Zuroff, & Topciu, 2004; Zuroff, Koestner, & Powers, 1994). Specifically in the area of goal pursuit, studies have repeatedly shown that self-criticism is associated with diminished goal progress (Powers, Koestner, Lacaille, Kwan, & Zuroff, 2009; Powers, Koestner, & Zuroff, 2007; Powers et al., 2011).

Perfectionism involves a striving to be perfect and to avoid mistakes. Stoebber and Otto (2006) provide a comprehensive review of the perfectionism literature to date, and they maintain that researchers have consistently found two different forms of perfectionism, one that involves positive strivings and another that includes perfectionistic concerns. They argue that to understand the potential positive effects of perfectionistic striving one must remove variance associated with perfectionistic concerns. In essence, they suggest that perfectionism can have positive effects, when the perfectionist is not overly concerned with mistakes and negative evaluation. Powers et al. (2011) maintain that the essence of this concern about mistakes and evaluation is best captured by the construct of self-criticism.

Multiple measures of perfectionism have been developed, and one of the most widely used and extensively researched is the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This scale distinguishes self-oriented (SOP) and socially prescribed (SP) forms of perfectionism. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991), self-oriented perfectionism involves setting high standards and stringently evaluating oneself, while socially prescribed perfectionism entails the need to attain standards or expectations prescribed by significant others. Various other measures of perfectionism have been developed, and when these measures have been entered into factor analyses together, two clear factors
implementation intentions (i.e., precise specification of when goal
ment of specific action plans for goal attainment (Koestner et al.,
effects of these variables on goal progress.
with diminished self-efficacy, while "perfectionistic striving" was
highly significant overall positive effect emerged for goal self-effi-
vided a meta-analysis of eight studies that examined the relation
progress. Likewise, the proactive striving of the self-oriented
improving goal progress. 
ences that perfectionistic strivings facilitate implementation planning, in turn
dimensionality of perfectionism and self-criticism to goal progress may be the way
The present investigation explored the associations among
self-criticism, self-oriented perfectionism, and goal progress.
-Self-efficacy, implementation planning, and goal-related flow were
were included to examine the possible mediation of the effects of self-
self-orientated perfectionism on goal progress. Based
on previous research, we planned to control for the overlap be-
tween self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism when examin-
their relation to goal progress (Powers et al., 2011; Stoeb &
Self-criticism was expected to be negatively associated
relations between self-criticism and goal progress emerged. However, self-oriented perfectionism was associ-
ated with better goal progress when the overlap with self-criti-
cism was controlled.

Given this consistent pattern of results one is left to wonder
about the potential mechanisms through which self-criticism and
self-oriented perfectionism might exert their contrasting effects
on goal progress. Across the goal literature several important fac-
tors have been shown to impact goal progress. Among these
important factors is goal-related self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers
to a sense of confidence in one's ability to perform actions leading
to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Koestner et al. (2006) pro-
vided a meta-analysis of eight studies that examined the relation
between self-efficacy and progress for self-initiated goals, and a
highly significant overall positive effect emerged for goal self-effic-
cacy. Recent research indicated that self-criticism was associated
with diminished self-efficacy, while "perfectionistic striving" was
associated with higher self-efficacy (Stoeb, Hutchfield, & Wood,
2008). These differences in self-efficacy may in turn mediate the
effects of these variables on goal progress.

Another important factor affecting goal pursuit is the develop-
ment of specific action plans for goal attainment (Koestner et al.,
2006). Previous research suggested that furnishing goals with
implementation intentions (i.e., precise specification of when goal
pursuit will be initiated and how an individual will ensure persist-
ence in the face of distractions and obstacles) enhanced successful
goal progress (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). A meta-analysis of 85
studies confirmed that people who supplemented their goals with
implementation intentions had significantly better success (Gollwitz-
er & Sheeran, 2006). It is certainly possible that the self-critics'
preoccupation with failure and potential criticism could impede effective implementation planning, which could in turn diminish
goal progress. Likewise, the proactive striving of the self-oriented
perfectionist might facilitate implementation planning, in turn
good progress.

Finally, an additional factor that may mediate the relations of
self-criticism and perfectionism to goal progress may be the way
in which people subjectively experience the pursuit of their goals.
Flow refers to a subjective experience of volitional engagement in
the pursuit of an activity, and is thought to be associated with
absorption and loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi &
Rathunde, 1993). Research has shown that flow leads to improved
performance on tasks, as well as greater reports of alertness, 
concentration, happiness, satisfaction, and creativity
(Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Carli, 1987). It is an open question
whether self-critics and striving perfectionists differ in their ex-
perience of flow, and whether or not that experience will mediate
the relation to goal progress. However, one can imagine that the self-
critic who is consumed with fear of failure and potential criticism
would be unlikely to experience a sense of flow in his/her goal pur-
suits and may thus be less likely to experience success. By contrast,
a positive association of perfectionistic strivings with flow might be
hypothesized based on previous research relating perfectionis-
tic strivings to autonomous motivation, a concept which, like flow,
focuses on intrinsic motivation (VanSteenkist et al., 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 193 undergraduate students, recruited
through online classified advertisements for McGill and Concordia
Universities, as well as from a paid participant pool at McGill
University, to participate in a study about goal setting. The study
began shortly after New Years and consisted of an initial lab visit
as well as three online follow-ups. During the lab session, which
took up to 1.5 h, participants completed a questionnaire about
their goals as well as various measures of personality. Follow-up
questionnaires assessing goal progress, self-efficacy, implementa-
tion plans, and flow were then sent out every 4 weeks. At each fol-
low-up, participants were sent an email, which included a link to
the survey as well as a reminder of the goals that they had listed
in the initial questionnaire. Participants always responded in
relation to their original goals. One hundred and seventy-six par-
ticipants (120 female, 36 male, 20 did not report gender) ages
18–35 (M = 20.16, SD = 2.44) completed at least one of the three
follow-ups. A previous article based on the same large data set
reported the relation of inspiration to goal progress but did not
consider perfectionism or the mediators included in this study
(Milyavskaya, Ianakieva, Foxen-Craft, Colantuoni, & Koestner,
2011).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-criticism scale

This scale was created by using 12 items from the Depressive
Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D’Afflitt, & Quinlan, 1976).
These items were those that loaded highest on the self-criticism
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