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

Theodore A. Powers [a,*], Marina Milyavskaya [b], Richard Koestner [b]

[a] University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, North Dartmouth, MA, USA
[b] McGill University, Montreal, PQ, CA, Canada

ABSTRACT

The current study utilized a prospective design to examine the associations of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism with goal progress. The results corroborated previous 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.

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. Stoeber 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 (SPP) 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

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 285 Old Westport Rd., North Dartmouth, MA 02747-2300, USA. Tel.: +1 508 910 6906; fax: +1 508 999 9169.
E-mail address: tpowers@umassd.edu (T.A. Powers).

consistently emerge (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; Powers et al., 2004). Stoeber and Otto (2006) refer to these two factors as perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. Socially prescribed perfectionism and self-criticism load significantly on the perfectionistic concerns factor that appears to include hypersensitivity to perceived excessive external standards and potential criticism, but self-oriented perfectionism loads on the perfectionistic strivings factor that does not appear to involve the internalized harshly critical evaluation of the self or the hypersensitivity to external scrutiny. Evidence to date indicates that perfectionistic concern has been consistently associated with various negative outcomes and forms of pathological functioning, whereas perfectionistic striving has been associated with higher functioning, higher satisfaction and well-being, and lower levels of maladaptive coping and psychopathology (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). However the findings for positive striving primarily hold only when the overlap between concern and striving is controlled. Stoeber and Otto (2006) maintain that perfectionism does not have to be negative, and they suggest that perfectionistic strivings are essentially positive, so long as they are not combined with perfectionistic concerns.

A recent series of studies appears to provide support for the idea that self-criticism is associated with diminished goal progress, but also the idea that perfectionistic striving can be positively related to goal progress, when the overlap with self-criticism is controlled (Powers et al., 2011). Five separate prospective studies examined the associations of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism with goal pursuit across a variety of domains (academic goals, weight loss goals, musical performance goals), and a consistent pattern of negative associations between self-criticism and goal progress emerged. However, self-oriented perfectionism was associated with better goal progress when the overlap with self-criticism 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 factors 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) provided 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-efficacy. Recent research indicated that self-criticism was associated with diminished self-efficacy, while "perfectionistic striving" was associated with higher self-efficacy (Stoeber, 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 development 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 persistence 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 (Gollwitzer & 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 improving goal 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, activeness, concentration, happiness, satisfaction, and creativity (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Carli, 1987). It is an open question whether self-critics and striving perfectionists differ in their experience 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 pursuits 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 perfectionistic strivings to autonomous motivation, a concept which, like flow, focuses on intrinsic motivation (VanSteenkiste et al., 2010).

The present investigation explored the associations among self-criticism, self-oriented perfectionism and goal progress. Self-efficacy, implementation planning, and goal-related flow were included to examine the possible mediation of the effects of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism on goal progress. Based on previous research, we planned to control for the overlap between self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism when examining their relation to goal progress (Powers et al., 2011; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Self-criticism was expected to be negatively associated with goal progress when controlling for self-oriented perfectionism, self-oriented perfectionism was expected to be positively related to goal progress when self-criticism was controlled, and these relations were expected to be mediated by goal-related self-efficacy, implementation planning, and goal-related flow.

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, implementation plans, and flow were then sent out every 4 weeks. At each follow-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 participants (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'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976). These items were those that loaded highest on the self-criticism