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Self-criticism, dependency, silencing the self, and loneliness: a test of a mediational model

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Abstract

The current study extended recent research on the relational aspects of self-criticism and dependency by examining their association with individual differences in silencing the self and loneliness. A sample of 167 respondents (including 78 in current romantic relationships) were administered the McGill version of the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ), the Silencing The Self Scale, and measures of loneliness and depression. The results indicated that self-criticism was associated with silencing the self, loneliness, and depression, while dependency was not associated significantly with loneliness. As expected, a mediational model confirmed that silencing the self mediated the link between self-criticism and loneliness, even after taking related individual differences in levels of depression into account. Our findings held generally for people in a current relationship or not in a current relationship, but certain findings highlighted the need to distinguish whether self-silencing is being evaluated within the context of a current relationship. Overall, our results point to self-silencing as a tendency that links depressive orientations and loneliness. The theoretical and practical implications of the associations among personality vulnerabilities, self-silencing, and loneliness are discussed.

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Recently, several findings have shown that personality factors associated with depression are also associated with significant interpersonal problems (Habke, Hewitt, & Flett, 1999; Lynch, Robins, & Morse, 2001; Whisman & Friedman, 1998). This research is consistent with previous observations about the need to examine personality vulnerability factors from a contextual per-

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spective that includes interpersonal factors and relational processes (see Coyne & Whiffen, 1995; Flett, Hewitt, Endler, & Bagby, 1995).

One influential model has been proposed by Blatt and his associates (see Blatt, 1974). This model was developed ostensibly to examine the role of self-criticism and dependency in depression, but research has been expanded to include an analysis of how individual differences in self-criticism and dependency relate to interpersonal processes. According to Blatt and Zuroff (1992, 2002), self-criticism reflects an introjective orientation that involves a focus on achieving personal goals and being highly competitive; self-critical people derive little satisfaction from their accomplishments and engage in a harsh self-scrutiny. People high in self-criticism are characterized by feelings of inferiority, guilt, and diminished self-worth that stem, in part, from their tendency to strive for absolute standards of perfection.

In contrast, dependency reflects an anaclitic orientation that involves a preoccupation with other people and a need to keep them in close proximity. Dependent individuals with unresolved needs may experience an anaclitic depression that involves feelings of helplessness and weakness, and abandonment fears. The dependent orientation reflects a need for relatedness and association with significant others, while self-criticism reflects a need for self-definition and personal identity (see Blatt & Blass, 1996). Both orientations reflect an insecure attachment style stemming from earlier problems between the child and caregivers.

Collectively, a number of findings in this area have confirmed that people high in dependency have a relatively positive response to other people, but people high in self-criticism have a negative interpersonal style that can lead to a variety of interpersonal problems (see Mongrain, Vettese, Shuster, & Kendal, 1998; Priel & Besser, 2000; Santor & Zuroff, 1997; Whiffen & Aube, 1999; Whiffen, Aube, Thompson, & Campbell, 2000; Zuroff & Duncan, 1999). Self-critical individuals appear to be less agreeable, introverted, and more controlling in terms of their interpersonal styles (Dunkley, Blankstein, & Flett, 1997; Fichman, Koestner, & Zuroff, 1994; Zuroff & Fitzpatrick, 1995). For instance, Whiffen and Aube (1999) examined self-criticism, dependency, depression, and interpersonal functioning in couples and found that both husbands and wives with high self-criticism had spouses who had more complaints about them, relative to husbands and wives with low self-criticism. These differences extend to perceived social support. Priel and Besser (2000) studied longitudinal differences in levels of social support reported by first-time mothers and found that controlling for initial levels of depression, self-criticism was associated with lower satisfaction with social support, which, in turn, increased their vulnerability to postpartum depression.

Although much has been learned about the interpersonal worlds of people high in self-criticism and dependency, several issues remain to be investigated. The first goal of the current study was to compare self-criticism and dependency in terms of their associations with loneliness. This focus is in keeping with previous research on personality and loneliness (e.g. Saklofske & Yackulic, 1989; Saklofske, Yackulic, & Kelly, 1986).

Loneliness has cognitive, affective, and behavioural components that reflect a desire to have closer contact with people (see Dill & Anderson, 1999; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). At a conceptual level, although there has not been a detailed analysis of loneliness in terms of the dimensions of depressive experience, Blatt (1974) has suggested that loneliness is linked with the anaclitic, dependent orientation (Blatt, 1974). Indeed, in his classic paper, Blatt (1974) described the case study of Mrs. H. It was indicated that:

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