

## Research Note

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### A Verbal Analysis of Forms of Self-Criticism

One of the most puzzling of human behaviors is the tendency many people have to victimize, attack, and even destroy themselves. An everyday way people seem to turn on themselves is self-criticism. Although virtually universal, self-criticism is on the face of it an immensely variable phenomenon, which ranges from mild scolding to derisive and annihilating contempt. Educators and counselors alike have long recognized that self-criticism can have serious negative consequences. It has been associated, for example, with depression (Clark & Beck, 1999), impaired school behavior and performance in some educational settings (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001), and diminished athletic performance (Lazarus, 2000). Furthermore, adolescent difficulties of immense concern to parents, teachers, and counselors such as eating disorders (Steiger, Leung, Puentes-Neuman, & Gottheil, 1992) and suicide (Donaldson, Spirito, & Farnett, 2000) have been associated with self-criticism.

Nevertheless, little direct research on the process of self-criticism has been done, in part because it is such a difficult phenomenon to observe and measure. This article provides preliminary results from a study addressing a question that has received almost no empirical attention: whether self-criticism is necessarily a bad thing. If self-criticism is a universal phenomenon, it is possible that it performs some adaptive function, perhaps aiding in the process of self-regulation. How might these more benign and even functional uses of the self-critical process be differentiated in practice from destructive self-criticism? A verbal comparison of the actual self-criticism of individuals who have or do not have a self-critical vulnerability to depression may offer some initial indications.

#### *Depression and Self-Criticism*

The most intensively researched aspect of self-criticism has been its powerful association with depression. Compelling evidence that self-criticism is an important pathway to depression, as well as being a common symptom of depression, has been demonstrated in the growing literature on depressive

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vulnerability (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992; Clark & Beck, 1999; Ingram, Miranda, & Segal, 1998). Blatt and his colleagues, for example, have identified two personality configurations that confer vulnerability to depression, the Self-Critical personality and the Dependent personality (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992; Zuroff & Mongrain, 1987). Differences in the self-criticism of individuals who are high or low on the personality trait of Self-Criticism is a major focus of our research.

### *Study Goals*

When asked to criticize themselves in their ordinary manner, people produce many different types of verbal behavior. The ultimate goal of this study is to document these various types of self-criticism in order to compare the content and form of the self-criticism of individuals with or without trait vulnerabilities to depression. The project has been organized into two parts. The first part of the research is qualitative and is using phenomenological analysis to develop a category system of types of self-criticism. The second part will be a quantitative content analysis in which these categories will be used to count and compare the frequency of types of self-criticism in transcripts of the self-criticism of persons with and without vulnerability to depression. The qualitative portion has been started, and some preliminary results are presented in this research note.

### *Participants*

In a previous study, 60 research participants were asked to criticize themselves aloud for five minutes while being videotaped and then to respond as the self to the criticism for five minutes (Whelton, 2001). These participants, mostly senior undergraduates, had been selected according to their scores on the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976), a measure of Self-Critical and Dependent vulnerability to depression. Thirty were high in Self-Criticism and low in Dependency, 15 were high in Dependency and low in Self-Criticism, and 15 were low in both. Their mean age was 23.3 ( $SD=4.4$ ) and 21.9% of the sample were men. In the current study 22 of these participants were selected to be part of the qualitative analysis, and their self-criticism and response were transcribed. The 22 were selected because they were broadly representative of the larger sample (their mean age was 23.8,  $SD=3.9$ , with 22.7% men). Half were Self-Critics, and of the other half, six were Dependents and five were low in both vulnerabilities.

### *Procedure*

A phenomenological method of qualitative analysis was chosen for the first part of the study in order to ground the development of the category system empirically (Colaizzi, 1978). The transcripts were read closely and phrases or sentences that revealed an aspect of the participant's experience of being self-critical were extracted and used to formulate first-order themes. These themes were intended to capture the meaning of each excerpt rather than simply restating the content. Although remaining true to the meanings given in the original text, the themes move slightly beyond the concrete detail of the passage under analysis. The themes from all 22 transcripts were then grouped into more abstract themes according to the goodness of fit of the verbal structures and meanings of each statement. Twenty-eight overall themes were obtained from the compilation of themes from the 22 transcripts. The first-order themes

were grouped into eight second-order clusters. Further work is underway to refine and organize these clusters and to create a functional instrument of categorical measurement from them.

### Results

Eight categorical clusters appeared in a phenomenological analysis of the self-criticism transcripts. These categories were: demands and orders; exhorting and preaching; explanations and excuses; inducing fear and anxiety; concern, protection, and support; description; explore/puzzle/existential; and self-attack and condemnation. The names of the categories are still tentative. Even a cursory glance at these categories emphasizes the wide range of intrapsychic activities implied in the umbrella term *self-criticism*. These forms of verbal self-critical behavior appear to mirror many of the interpersonal behaviors in which people often engage: cajoling, prodding, exhorting, preaching, and giving orders and putdowns. Self-criticism can even express a concern for the self and a desire to be protective.

### Conclusion

Important distinctions need to be made between negative and positive self-critical processes. Using a phenomenological analysis of self-critical behavior, this study demonstrates a broad variation in forms of verbal self-critical behavior and provides an initial categorization of these forms. The final portion of this study will compare the frequency of each of the finalized categories in transcripts of the self-criticism of individuals with or without a self-critical vulnerability to depression. To flag some forms of self-criticism as more closely associated with harm may be useful information for counselors, educators, coaches, and parents who wish to discourage destructive self-criticism while still encouraging healthy and adaptive self-regulation.

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