
PART I. (Jenna Lee)

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Depression is a highly prevalent mental illness that is characterized by a lowered mood, sadness, diminished interest in nearly all activities, loss of pleasure in life, and fewer daily and social activities during a typical 2-week period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is alarming that previous studies have reported that Koreans have recently experienced a massive increase in depression. As South Korea has undergone unprecedented economic growth and changes, mental health problems have become a serious national issue (Koo, 2018). One epidemiological survey conducted every 5 years reported a gradual increase in the prevalence of depression (4.0% in 2001; 5.6% in 2006; 6.7% in 2011 (Cho and Lee, 2005; Cho et al., 2015). In a more recent study, the prevalence of depression in the Korean adult population was 6.1% (Hong et al., 2020). In 2019, more than 5,000,000 people ages 15-54 years were found to be living with major depression in South Korea, and depression was contributing to a considerable loss of productivity and working time (Zomer et al., 2021).

Living with depression can be very difficult both for Koreans living with it and their families. Not only are they deprived of the typical interests and pleasures of everyday life, but they also suffer from a loss of productivity that keeps them from attending a college successfully or staying at a job. Individuals who are living with depression show lower rates of full-time employment, completing a university education, being married/living with a partner, and even personal exercise. They tend to show higher rates of having a low income, being a current smoker, and using alcohol daily (Chow et al., 2019). Family caregivers also experience a more

complex health and economic burden such as a lower health status, work and activity impairment, and financial impacts (Balkaran et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is critical to understand the etiological pathways to depression among Koreans and explore effective psychological interventions to address it successfully. Depression is a complex disease that involves environmental conditions, various kinds of stresses, deficiency in some nutrients, childhood abuse and can have genetic, and epigenetic factors (Alshaya, 2022). Among the risks factors, researchers have recently paid attention to the fact that self-criticism is positively associated with many psychopathological symptoms (Werner et al., 2019) and internal self-criticism predicts depression (Aruta et al., 2020). In a longitudinal study, self-critical perfectionism was a vulnerability factor for having depressive symptoms (Sherry et al., 2014), and people with self-critical perfectionism were associated with increased depressive symptoms (McGrath et al., 2012; Sherry et al., 2013; Levine et al., 2019).

Despite the fact that Koreans' desire for perfection is often seen as the norm due to the country's fixation on achievement (Rice et. Al., 2019), few studies have explored the relationship between self-critical perfectionism and depression risks. The study will examine potential etiological connections between Koreans and self-critical criticism because it is critical to understand the contributing factors to depression and develop effective solutions to prevent or ameliorate widespread depression among Koreans. It will be beneficial for social workers and other mental health professionals who work with Koreans suffering from depression to know the results of this study. Mental health practitioners would be able to understand self-critical perfectionism's negative effects on depression and explore culturally sensitive interventions to help Koreans with depression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Critical Perfectionism

The drive to be perfect is not a new social phenomenon. There is an age-old saying that declares that “perfect is the enemy of good.” It is credited to the 18th century philosopher Voltaire and clearly captures the idea behind the nature of perfectionism in today’s research. In her book on perfectionism, Joachim Stoeber (2018) describes perfectionism as “a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one’s behavior” (p.3). However, perfectionism is indeed a complex construct, and there are numerous different definitions and dimensions of it.

The research on perfectionism has yielded many different lenses through which to view this multidimensional personality trait. The most prominent view in the late 1990’s was that of Hewitt and Flett (1990, 1991 as cited in Stoeber, 2018) who categorized perfectionism into three different types: self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism most closely aligns with the “positive” view of the concept in that it describes someone who has self-imposed, high standards and intense self-criticism in a personal effort to be “flawless” (Blatt, 1995). Socially prescribed perfectionists are those who perceive that others expect them to be without flaws, while other-oriented perfectionists expect those around them to meet often completely unrealistic standards of perfection (Stoeber, 2018). Studies have further found that self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism indirectly predict depressive symptoms through rumination (Smith et al, 2020) and can play an important role in suicide ideation (Smith, et al., 2017).

Additional studies have shown that other-oriented perfectionism is often associated with narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy and is considered to be the “negative” form of perfectionism (Marcus and Zeigler-Hall, 2014 as cited in Stoeber, 2018).

The key aspect of maladaptive perfectionism then seems to derive from the idea of shame and eventually, actual self-criticism. Self-criticism is the intense focus on self-definition and having a fixation on self-worth related only to achievement. These individuals tend to be particularly vulnerable to feelings of shame, failure, and guilt (Löw et al., 2020). There is indeed a clear overlap between the aspects of perfectionism and self-criticism for personal fear of disapproval, criticism, and rejection. Hence, the field has identified SCP as consisting of four distinct parts often mentioned in any discussion regarding perfectionism: Self-criticism, socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, and self-doubt (Sherry et. al., 2014). One of the core features of SCP is the self-determined discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self (Stoeber, 2018). This discrepancy, whether it is socially prescribed or internally so, often leads to many problems for how a self-critical perfectionist views the self. Another study examined the mediating role of rumination between maladaptive SCP and depressive symptoms. This study determined that rumination mediated the relationships by indicating that the self-critical perfectionist’s ruminative thoughts may lead that individual to develop depressive symptoms (Harris et al., 2008.). Another aspect of self-critical perfectionism is how the self-critical perfectionist views others. Self-critical perfectionists often engage in social comparison and presume that others have expectations of them that they are consistently failing to meet. This thinking leads the self-critical perfectionist to develop interpersonal problems, as they see others as being overly harsh, and the self-critical perfectionist already has personal low self-esteem (Stoeber, 2018).

Self-critical perfectionists have been found to see themselves as being incapable of achieving the lofty goals they set (Stoeber et. al., 2008 as cited in Stoeber, 2018), have fragile self-worth and low self-esteem (Dunkley et al., 2012 as cited in Stoeber, 2018), and a fragile sense of self (Kernis et al., 2000 as cited in Stoeber, 2018). It is no surprise then that these characteristics lead to negative mental health outcomes. State anger, trait anger, anger rumination (Besharat and Shahidi, 2010 as cited in Stoeber, 2018), social anxiety symptoms, prevalence of social anxiety disorder (Frost et. al., 2010 as cited in Stoeber, 2018) and increased depressive symptoms (Sherry et. al., 2014) have all been found to be closely related SCP.

The pathway from SCP to negative outcomes has been explored by many researchers over the past 30 years. Gilbert and Irons (2008) in their chapter on shame, self-criticism, and self-compassion in adolescence purported that it is a “chronic dysphoria” wherein individuals cannot meet their own standards and are thus concerned that others are judging them for their shortcomings that such self-critical perfectionists face that then cause the psychopathology in self-critical perfectionists.

Self-Critical Perfectionism and Depression

A recent meta-analysis found that perfectionism has a positive relationship with many depressive symptoms (Smith et al., 2016). It is also important to note that perfectionism may be an important risk factor, given the evidence that this state has consistently increased since the 1980s (Curran and Hill, 2019). Perfectionism is a multi-dimensional and multi-level personality style that consists of other-oriented, self-oriented, and socially prescribed dimensions (Rnic et al., 2021). It is important to understand, however, that not all perfectionistic styles lead to

increased depression. In one meta-analysis (Smith et al., 2016), “socially prescribed perfectionism, concern about mistakes, doubts about actions, self-criticism, and perfectionistic attitudes add incrementally to understanding changes in depressive symptoms” (p. 209) and self-oriented perfectionism did not protect against depressive symptoms. In a recent longitudinal study, all perfectionism dimensions were seen as resulting in greater depression severity (Rnic et al., 2021). On the other hand, other findings indicated that perfectionist strivings were viewed as resiliency factors that could protect against increases in depressive symptoms (Enns et al., 2005) and self-oriented perfectionism predicted depressive symptoms over time only when it interacted with achievement stress (Hewitt et al., 1996). There are thus two types of perfectionism, namely, the adaptive and the maladaptive. In particular, those with maladaptive perfectionism will experience much higher levels of self-criticism that may lead to actual depression (Grzegorek et al., 2004). As these study findings are rather incongruent with each other, it becomes important to examine more directly the possible roles of the moderating factors that increase one’s vulnerability to depression.

Given these multidimensional perspectives of perfectionism and the links to related personality constructs, it is clearly legitimate to explore additional constructs that potentially moderate the relationships between perfectionism and depressive symptoms. In recent years, self-critical perfectionism and its relationship to pathological symptoms has received increased attention (Werner et al., 2019). The relationship between depression and self-critical perfectionism is one that is still being explored currently. In his seminal paper on the destructiveness of perfectionism, Blatt (1995, p.1009) describes self-critical depression as being characterized by “self-criticism and feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, failure, and guilt”. He

states that in these self-critical perfectionists, depression is most likely a result of a perceived failure, rather than an actual failure, as well as the inability to control one's environment.

Previous studies have found that self-criticism is positively associated with internal self-criticism that predicts depression (Aruta et al., 2020). Further still, in one longitudinal study, self-critical perfectionism was a vulnerability factor for depressive symptoms ((Sherry et al., 2014), and people with self-critical perfectionism were associated with having increased depressive symptoms (McGrath et al., 2012; Sherry et al., 2013; Levine et al., 2019). Another study that differentiated between positive striving perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism indicated that self-critical perfectionism was negatively correlated with self-efficacy while perfectionistic striving was correlated with self-efficacy and aspirational level (Stoeber et al., 2008). Therefore, it appears that self-criticism plays an important role in predicting negative psychological outcomes that may derive for perfectionism and depression.

Self-Critical Perfectionism Among Koreans

Not surprisingly, many South Koreans have experienced this self-critical perfectionism. South Korea like many other East Asian countries has a collectivist culture where the needs of the whole outweigh the needs of the individual. One study substantiated that self-critical perfectionism actually increases in collectivist societies more often than in individualistic societies (Castro and Rice, 2003 as cited in Kim and Kim, 2022). Koreans have also been found to frequently engage in social comparison to ensure that they are “fitting in” and not straying from what is accepted to be the norm in their society (Bae, 2016 as cited in Ko et. al., 2019). Perfectionism, specifically maladaptive perfectionism, has a social component that is heavily influenced by what is perceived to be the expectations of others for the individual (Stoeber, 2018). The Korean school system and all the systems of education surrounding that school

system are examples of this same achievement-focused culture. In Korea, the entirety of a child's education is focused on the ultimate end goal of scoring well on the nationwide college entrance exam that is administered in the middle of a student's final year of high school. Korean students are constantly being compared to their peers both in school and outside of school in any afterschool education programs. South Koreans, living in such an achievement-driven culture, are more vulnerable to the failures or mistakes they make that fail to meet their ideal goals or the expectations set by themselves, their family members, or the very collectivistic society.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

If depression is associated with self-critical perfectionism, it is important to examine whether this conceptual framework applies to Koreans. Despite this, few if any studies have examined the association between self-critical perfectionism and depression in Koreans. The purpose of this proposed study is to examine whether self-critical perfectionism increases depression risk among Koreans. It is hypothesized that Koreans with a higher level of self-critical perfectionism are more likely to suffer from depression. This cross-sectional study will measure Koreans' self-critical perfectionism and depression using evidence-based scales. As part of this study, community samples will be recruited, and survey questionnaires will be distributed to collect sociodemographic information and levels of self-critical perfectionism and depression. Findings from the study will be disseminated to mental health organizations serving Koreans and published in major journals devoted to mental health issues among ethnic minorities.

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