Dependency, self-criticism, social context and distress: comparing moderating and mediating models

Beatriz Priel*, Golan Shahar

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, PO Box 653, 84105, Beer-Sheva, Israel

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Abstract

Moderating and mediating models of dependency and self-criticism as vulnerabilities to emotional distress are compared. According to the moderating model, stressful events and social support moderate the vulnerability of self-critical and dependent individuals. In contrast, mediating models relate to stress and support as mediators assuming that individuals generate stress and lack of support over time. One hundred and eighty-two young adults were assessed longitudinally, and hierarchical multiple regression and structural equation modeling were performed. The moderating model was found valid for describing the vulnerability of dependent individuals, who reported increased distress only after experiencing interpersonal stress. The mediating model appropriately described the vulnerability of self-critical individuals, who reported increased stress and decreased support over time, which partly accounted for their increased distress. These findings are discussed in relation to the formulation of causal models of personality and distress. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent research suggests that dependent and self-critical individuals are vulnerable to depressive symptoms and emotional distress (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Dependent individuals tend to seek close and protecting relations at the expense of developing a self-concept. Self-critical individuals are disposed to neglect interpersonal relations in their pursuit of achievement and self-esteem. Thus, while the ability to negotiate interpersonal relatedness and self-definition is
considered an indication of maturity and health, the over-reliance on either of these dimensions is seen as a marker of vulnerability (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992; Helgeson, 1994; Robins, 1995).

1.1. The moderating model approach

Social context variables such as stressful events and social support are treated as moderators of the vulnerability of dependent and self-critical individuals. For instance, the ‘congruency hypothesis’ (Coyne & Whiffen, 1995; Robins, 1995) suggests that self-critical individuals will report increased distress as a result of experiencing achievement stress (e.g. an exam failure); increased distress will also be reported by dependent individuals experiencing interpersonal stress (e.g. a romantic breakup). To date, the empirical status of the congruency hypothesis is unclear. Support for this hypothesis has been reported mainly for dependency, but not for self-criticism (Coyne & Whiffen, 1995; Robins, 1995).

Building on the well-known stress-buffering effect of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), researchers have suggested that the stress-buffering effect may be especially strong among dependent individuals (Blatt, Cornell & Eshkol, 1993; Bornstein, 1995). However, evidence in favor of that higher order interaction is both scarce and mixed (Barnett & Gotlib, 1990; Bornstein, 1995, Keinan & Hobfoll, 1989).

1.2. The mediating model approach

Underlying the congruency hypothesis is the assumption that dependent and self-critical individuals are passive in relation to their social context. These individuals are expected to react to stressful events and lack of support, but not to affect their occurrences. In such a model, contextual factors act as moderators, specifying the conditions under which dependent and self-critical individuals would be distressed. In contrast, a mediating model assumes that individuals, constrained by dependent or self-critical tendencies, influence stressful events and social support. Changes in levels of stress and support might, in turn, affect individuals’ distress levels. In this model, contextual factors operate as mediators, rather than moderators: they do not specify the conditions under which personality and distress are linked, but outline the processes through which personality affects distress (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Vulnerabilities of both dependent and self-critical individuals could be described using the mediating model. Highly self-critical individuals, in their attempts to accomplish their goals, may actively become overloaded, consequently increasing their chances of failure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Furthermore, these individuals usually emphasize achievement at the expense of interpersonal relationships, which may lead to interpersonal stress and lack of social support (Helgeson, 1994). Similarly, the over-involvement of dependent individuals in interpersonal relations may deplete significant others, and also hinder attempts of achieving important personal goals. This would increase achievement and interpersonal stress, and decrease social support (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992; Helgeson, 1994). At the same time, dependency may lead to an increase in social support (Mongrain, 1993, 1998).
1.3. The present study

We compared the moderating and mediating models by assessing young adults twice during a 9-week interval. Participants’ self-criticism and dependency were measured at Time 1, and their levels of recent stress, perceived support, and depressed mood were assessed on both occasions. Congruent with a moderating model, increased distress was expected to be reported by dependent participants experiencing interpersonal stress and lack of support, and by self-critical participants experiencing achievement stress. Congruent with a mediating model, both dependent and self-critical participants were hypothesized to generate non-specific stress and produce a decrease of social support, which was in turn hypothesized to increase distress.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 182 young adults (117 women, 65 men, age range 18–48, mean = 23), recruited from three institutions: Ben-Gurion University, Sapir College and a Military Academy. Participants either received course credit for participating (68%) or volunteered (32%). Neither motivation to participate nor age or institution affiliation affected the results obtained. We therefore treated the sample as a unified whole.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Depressive experiences questionnaire (DEQ)

The DEQ is a 66-item scale containing statements about experiences of the self and interpersonal relations. Participants are asked to agree or disagree on a 7-point scale. Three factors were identified by a Principal Components Analysis. Dependency reflects preoccupation with abandonment and separation, and fear of loss. Self-criticism, reflects concerns with failure and being unable to meet high self-standards. Scores on the third factor, Efficacy—reflecting feelings of self-confidence—were not used in the present study. Participants’ scores on dependency and self-criticism were derived using Blatt’s standardization system (Blatt, D’Afflitti & Quinlan, 1976), which sets the means of the variables on 0 and their standard deviation on 1.

2.2.2. Interpersonal support evaluation list (ISEL)

The ISEL (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) is a multifaceted instrument constructed especially for higher education environments. The ISEL consists of 48 statements concerning the perceived availability of various modes of social support. The adequate internal reliability that was previously reported for the ISEL (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$, Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was confirmed in the present study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$).

2.2.3. College Students Life Events Scale (CSLES)

The CSLES (Levine & Perkins, 1980) contains 137 items that reflect minor and major stressful events common to the life in college (e.g. lack of access to adequate transportation,
death of a family member). Eighteen culture-specific events were added, that tap unique stress characteristics of lives of young Israeli adults (e.g. army reserve service, ethnic conflicts, cf. Breznitz & Eshel, 1983). In the present study, respondents were asked if the specific event happened within the past nine weeks.

Four indices were created from the CSLES: the total number of events experienced by the participant; the number of interpersonal stressful events (e.g. romantic breakup); the number of achievement-related events (e.g. being laid-off), and the number of other events, that do not belong to either interpersonal or achievement stress (e.g. reserve army duties). Classification of events was performed by two clinical psychology students. The judges classified 35 events as ‘interpersonal stressors’, 13 events as ‘failure-related stressors’, and 107 events as ‘other stressors’. The judges agreed on 90% of the items, and disagreements were solved through discussion.

2.2.4. Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D)

The CES-D is a measure of distress centered on depressed mood (Radloff, 1977). It consists of 20 items assessing dysphoria, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, hopelessness, and disturbances in eating and sleeping (Radloff, 1977). Respondents were asked to report the frequency of the symptoms that occurred in the past two weeks on a 4-point scale. The CES-D has demonstrated good internal reliability, as well as concurrent and construct validity (Radloff, 1977). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for CES-D scores in the present study was high (0.92).

2.3. Procedure

Participants were approached at their educational settings and were given a booklet with the following questionnaires: the DEQ, the ISEL, the CSLES and the CES-D. The order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced. Participants filled in the questionnaires at home and brought them back the next day. Upon returning, they were assigned a code number, and were approached nine weeks later. They were then identified by their code number and were given a booklet with the ISEL, the CSLES and the CES-D, in a counterbalanced order. Participants filled in the questionnaires at home and brought them back the next day.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive data and intercorrelations

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the variables used in the analyses are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, dependency and self-criticism were modestly correlated ($r = 0.16$, $P < 0.05$). Both personality dimensions were correlated with distress, but the correlations involving self-criticism and distress were stronger than those involving dependency ($r = 0.22$ and $r = 0.63$ at Time 1, and $r = 0.18$ and $r = 0.61$ at Time 2 for dependency and self-criticism, respectively). Self-criticism was negatively related to social support ($r = -0.48$ and $r = -0.47$, at Times 1 and 2, respectively), and positively related to the total number of stressful life events ($r = 0.32$ and $r = 0.36$, at Times 1 and 2, respectively). In contrast, dependency was not related to social support ($r = 0.06$ and $r = 0.09$, at Times 1 and
2), and was only modestly related to the total number of life events \((r = 0.12 \text{ and } r = 0.12)\, \text{at Times } 1 \text{ and } 2\).

### 3.2. Hierarchical regression analyses

We examined the moderating model using hierarchical multiple regression with interaction terms (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). In this analysis, participants’ distress scores at Time 2 served as the dependent variable. The regression model included five blocks. The first block included covariates assessing the participants’ base-line levels of the study variables (distress 1, social support 1, and interpersonal, achievement and other stress at Time 1). To control for the effect of sex, this variable was also entered in block 1. Block 2 included dependency and self-criticism, and was aimed at examining their effects on distress 2, controlling for the previous covariates. Block 3 included the Time 2 scores of social support and the three types of stress. Block 4 was aimed at examining the two way interactions, controlling the variables entered in previous blocks. Eleven interaction effects were entered: three multiplicative terms involving social support and the three types of stress; three multiplicative terms involving dependency and the three types of stress; three multiplicative terms involving self-criticism and the three types of stress; and two multiplicative terms involving dependency and social support and self-criticism and social support. Finally, block 5 was aimed at examining six higher order interactions: three multiplicative terms involving dependency, social support and the three types of stress; and three other multiplicative terms involving self-criticism, social support, and the three types of stress. Our main focus in this analysis was in three theoretically relevant interactions: (1) self-criticism \(\times\) achievement stress; (2) dependency \(\times\) interpersonal stress; and

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<td>6.96</td>
<td>2.78</td>
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<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>11.39</td>
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\(n = 182\). Correlations higher than \(|0.16|\) are significant \((P < 0.05)\).
Table 2
Summary of the hierarchical regression analysis of distress 2. To simplify the presentation, we present only significant effects in each block.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>Overall $F$</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>31.18***</td>
<td>6,174</td>
<td>31.18***</td>
<td>0.61***</td>
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<td>Distress 1</td>
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<td>Block 2</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>26.86***</td>
<td>8,172</td>
<td>7.21**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
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<td>Block 3</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>21.68***</td>
<td>12,168</td>
<td>5.58**</td>
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<td>-0.26***</td>
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<td>Block 4</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>12.02***</td>
<td>23,157</td>
<td>1.18*</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
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<td>Interpersonal stress × dependency</td>
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<td>Block 5</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>29,151</td>
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* $P < 0.05$, **$P < 0.01$, ***$P < 0.001$.

(3) dependency × interpersonal stress × social support. Notice, that in this ‘omnibus regression’ all the possible interaction terms are entered simultaneously in order to decrease the number of statistical tests performed, subsequently limiting type I error (Gunster, Fusilier & Mayes, 1986).

Table 2 summarizes the results of the regression analysis, presenting the explained variance in each block, and the effects that were found significant. As shown in Table 2, the first block explained 51% of the variance of distress 2 ($R^2 = 0.51$, $F(6,174) = 31.18$, $P < 0.000$). In this block, only distress 1 predicted distress 2 ($\beta = 0.61$, $P < 0.000$). Block 2 contributed significant 4% to the explanation of the variance of distress 2 ($F$ change $= 7.21$, $P < 0.001$). In this block, self-criticism significantly predicted distress 2 ($\beta = 0.25$, $P < 0.000$), while dependency did not. Block 3 contributed significant 5% to the explained variance of distress 2 ($F$ change $= 5.58$, $P < 0.001$). In this block, social support 2 significantly predicted distress 2 ($\beta = -0.26$, $P < 0.000$). Block 4 contributed significant 3% to the explained variance ($F$ change $= 1.18$, $P < 0.05$). Importantly, the only significant interaction was that between dependency and interpersonal stress ($\beta = 0.15$, $P < 0.05$). Plotting that interaction according to the recommendations of Cohen and Cohen (1983, p. 323 and p. 419) revealed that participants scoring high on dependency tended to report high distress under high—but not low—interpersonal stress. Finally, block 5 added a non-significant 1% to the explanation of the variance of distress 2, and none of the six interaction terms were significant.

3.3. Structural equation modeling

The mediating model was examined via structural equation modeling (SEM) using the Amos program (version 3.61: Arbuckle, 1994). In this analysis, distress 2 was predicted by sex, distress 1, self-criticism, dependency, total stress 1\(^1\), total stress 2, social support 1 and support

\(^1\) We used total stress scores, rather than achievement, interpersonal and other stress scores, because under the mediating model, dependent and self-critical participants were assumed to generate non-specific stress.
2. Total stress 2 was predicted by total stress 1, distress 1, sex, self-criticism and dependency. Support 2 was predicted by support 1, distress 1, sex, self-criticism and dependency. Stress 1 and support 1 were each predicted by distress 1, sex, self-criticism and dependency. Finally, distress 1, sex, self-criticism and dependency were correlated. Notice, that the effect of dependency and self-criticism on stress and support at Time 1 were examined while controlling for sex and distress 1. The effect of personality on stress, support and distress at Time 2 was examined while controlling Time 1 measures of these variables, in addition to sex.

Fig. 1 presents the results of SEM analysis, using maximum likelihood estimations. The model demonstrated an adequate fit ($\chi^2 = 1.00$, df = 4, $P = 0.90$, NFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.00). Consistent with the mediating model, self-criticism predicted lower support at Times 1 and 2, and higher stress at Time 2. Stress and support at Time 2 subsequently predicted higher levels of distress 2. Furthermore, controlling for all these indirect effects, self-criticism had a significant direct effect on distress 2. However, dependency did not predict total stress at Times 1 and 2, neither did it predict social support at Time 2. In contrast, dependency had a positive, rather than a negative, effect on social support at Time 1: the more dependent the subject, the higher the support reported. This finding is very interesting in light of the non-significant bi-

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Notes: To simplify the presentation, non-significant effects were omitted. Effects of personality on stress and support were highlighted.

Fig. 1. AMOS results of structural equation modeling.
variate relationship between dependency and social support at Time 2 (see Table 1). Apparently, this ‘positive’ effect of dependency on social support reflects a suppressor role of distress. This finding indicates that the part of the variance of dependency that is distress free is support-generating (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991).

4. Discussion

In the present study we compared moderating and mediating models of the vulnerability of self-critical and dependent individuals. Our results bear relevance to previous conceptualizations of dependency and self-criticism, and to the formulation of causal models of personality and distress.

4.1. Conceptualizations of dependency and self-criticism

Theoretically, both self-criticism and dependency are similarly considered as vulnerability factors for emotional distress. However, empirical findings show that self-criticals are more emotionally distressed than dependents (Nietzel & Harris, 1990; Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Several researchers have attributed this inconsistency to a redundancy of scales of self-criticism and dysphoria (Blaney & Kutcher, 1991). Others point to a possible association between dependency and physical, rather than emotional distress (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). The present study suggests yet another alternative: self-critical individuals may also be more emotionally distressed because they experience more stressful events and less social support than their dependent counterparts.

In the present study, the self-criticism dimension was strongly correlated with higher levels of distress on both measurement occasions (Table 1). Moreover, self-criticism predicted distress at Time 2, controlling for baseline distress levels. In contrast, dependency predicted distress only under high interpersonal stress. Furthermore, self-criticism predicted increased stress and decreased support over time, which in part explained their increased distress. Dependency, on the other hand, was associated with the generation of more support. Hence, one may infer that self-criticals contribute to the creation of a negative environment: they generate risk factors (i.e. stressful events), while refraining from protective factors (i.e. social support). Dependents, on the other hand, seem to strive at maintaining a positive social context. They tend to generate social support, and they react with increased distress only when their main concern (i.e. interpersonal relatedness) is threatened.

This pattern is consistent with recent findings, most notably those of Mongrain (1998). In her study, Mongrain documented a cross-sectional negative association between self-criticism and social support, and a positive association between dependency and support. Our study both corroborates these results in a longitudinal context, and explores the influence of

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2 We also explored gender differences in the results obtained. No such differences were found in the regression analysis. In the SEM analysis, the effects obtained were stronger among women. However, since the present study included a relatively small sample of men (n = 65), gender differences should be interpreted with great caution. Current efforts are being made to examine gender differences using a large sample size of both women and men.
dependency and self-criticism on both social support and stressful events. Other studies support the conclusion about the differential relation of dependency and self-criticism to social context variables. For instance, in a previous study, Mongrain (1993) found that self-criticism correlated positively with neuroticism. In contrast, dependency correlated positively with interpersonal warmth and agreeableness. Fichman, Koestner and Zuroff (1994) found that dependent adolescents report less interpersonal problems than their self-critical counterparts, while also manifesting an important ability for intimacy (Fichman et al., 1994). In another study, self-critical individuals reported more problems in social acuity compared to dependent individuals (Aube & Whiffen, 1996). Finally, Blatt and colleagues (Blatt, Zohar, Quinlan & Zuroff, 1995; Blatt, Zohar, Quinlan, Luthar & Hart, 1996) have shown that several items of this factor reflect healthy relatedness (i.e. a mature ability of forming stable interpersonal relatedness), rather than the excessive dependence tapped by other items.

In general, these studies indicate that self-criticism assesses a set of tendencies, cognitions, and even temperamental characteristics (e.g. neuroticism) that are strongly related to emotional distress. Dependency, on the other hand, emerges as a more complex construct that includes aspects of both vulnerability and resilience. Possibly, the differences between self-criticism and dependency relate to methodological problems of assessment, suggesting a gap between theory and measurement. However, these differences may also be substantive, requiring a reconsideration of these two important personality configurations.

4.2. Causal models of personality and distress

Comparing mediating and moderating models, we were able to assess the relative contributions of both approaches. Our findings suggest that each of these models has a specific contribution to the description of the complex relationships between the personality constructs studied and distress.

While the dimension of dependency appears to be adequately described by a moderating model, self-criticism seems to be described more accurately by a mediating model. The interaction obtained here, between dependency and interpersonal stress, is consistent with the general pattern in the literature (cf. Robins, 1995). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in which the above interaction was found while controlling for Time 1 stress and distress, and in the context of an omnibus regression in which several interaction terms are entered simultaneously in the same equation.

The main contribution of the mediating model is that it allows an examination of the active influence of individuals on their environment. Our finding regarding the effects of self-criticism on stress and social support is congruent with previous research. Hammen (1991), and Lakey, Baltman and Bentley (1993) found that distressed individuals generate stressful events, that serve to maintain further distress. Depue and Monroe (1986) have shown that maladjusted individuals decrease the level of social support available for them. Sarason, Sarason and Shearin (1986) found that individuals reporting high levels of social support have more positive representations of their parents. Finally, Priel, Mitran and Shahar (1998) reported that securely attached adolescents have a greater availability of social support in their environment. This pattern of findings suggests the importance of social support as a coping strategy (Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1996).
By including both stress and support in the present study, we were able to evaluate the effect of personality on a widely defined social context. The validation of the mediator-approach to self-criticism and distress corroborated on empirical grounds the idea that individuals are not only context-dependent but that the context itself is, to some extent, dependent on individual differences.

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