High standards and self-criticism in university environment – gender, age and learning context differences

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Abstract

This study, based on literature on individual differences in education and in professional development (Skelton et al., 2006), aims to identify the differences in university student’s tendencies to adopt high standards and self-criticism, according to their gender, age and learning context. Participants were 250 university students, 100 male and 150 female, aged 19 to 29 years (M = 20.23, SD = 1.26), 116 from public and 134 from private universities, 109 from technical and 141 from psychology faculties in Bucharest, Romania. The results contribute to the development of an empirical database for the development of career guidance and counselling programs.

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Keywords: high-standards, self-criticism, study profile, higher education;

1. Introduction

Researchers have indicated that the tendency to set high standards and self-criticism are individual differences related to various educational and professional outcomes (Elliott, et al., 2001; Henning et al., 1998). Within the research topic area of relationship between professional choices and accomplishments and individuals’ tendency to adopt high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards, there are issues of gender, age and learning/training context differences.

Literature on academic and professional development admits that setting and striving for reasonably high standards in life can motivate a person to strive for excellence and for a high quality work (Skelton et al., 2006). Setting and striving to meet high standards and self-criticism were defined as dispositional
traits embedded in the perfectionism construct (Hamachek, 1978; Burns, 1980) or as cognitive tendencies predisposing to depression (Carver and Ganellen, 1983).

The difference between positive and negative perfectionism is often made on the basis of flexibility vs. rigidity in setting and striving to meet high standards and on the basis of the associated self-criticism regarding the attainment of such standards. The flexibility in dealing with high standards was found to be associated with high academic and interpersonal adjustment while the rigidity and self-criticism are associated with interpersonal adjustment (Gilman & Ashby, 2003; Rice & Dellwo, 2002; Parker, 2002).

Self-criticism is the tendency to respond self-critically to a perceived discrepancy between the actual and the desired outcomes and is associated with a relative intolerance to one's failure to attain the standard she/he set (Carver et al., 1985, 1988, Carver, 1998) and with maladaptive perfectionism (Grzegorek, et al., 2004). Research identified gender, age and situational differences in these dispositional traits or cognitive tendencies (Carver and Ganellen, 1983) but new empirical studies are needed because of the new features of the learning context specific to the current university environment. In terms of the context-specific tendency to set high standards and to be self-critical, a big question is still in debate: do the environments characterized by high standards attract students with perfectionist traits or do these environments encouraging perfectionist behaviors lead to the increase of individuals’ tendency to set high standards and to be self-critical (Warrington et al., 2006). This issue is more important when the environment in question is the university environment. More than in the past, universities emphasize academic excellence and encourage a competitive behavior creating the so called “high-standard environments” (Henning et al., 1998; Parker, 2002). Learning and training contexts created by the universities attracting or promoting personalities prone toward setting high standards for their work can also be contexts in which such personalities’ tendency to be self-critical may increase.

Specific goals of the study were to 1) determine the levels of students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards among a sample of undergraduate students differentiated by individual factors (gender, age) and by contextual factors (type of university they attend, namely public or private and technical or humanistic); 2) examine the relationship between self-criticism and contextual factors in differentiating university students to adopt high standards. It was predicted that gender, age, type of faculty and study domain are factors upon which students differentiate themselves in terms of their level of tendency to set high standards and their level of self-criticism. It was also predicted that students’ level of self-criticism would interact with gender, age, type of faculty and study domain in order to differentiate students’ level of tendency to set high standards.

2. Method

Participants in this study were 250 university students, 1st and 2nd year of study, 100 male and 150 female, aged 19 to 29 years (M = 20.23, SD = 1.26), 116 from two public and 134 from two private universities, 109 from two technical and 141 from two psychology faculties in Bucharest, Romania.

3. Measures

In order to measure students’ tendency to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards, two sub-scales from the Attitudes toward Self Scale (Carver & Ganellen, 1983) were used: High Standards scale (3 items, e.g., “Compared to other people, I expect a lot from myself”) and Self-Criticism scale, respectively (3 items, e.g., “I get angry with myself if my efforts don’t lead to the results I wanted). The criterion data were collected via a Demographic Questionnaire. This questionnaire also included a question with Yes/No answer, on the existence of depression relapses that
required counseling and / or psychological intervention. Internal consistency of the two subscales was very good (α - Cronbach coefficients of .71 to .90).

4. Procedure

Information was collected in the academic years 2010 and 2011. Participants to whom the research objectives were described participated voluntarily and without any extra credit and filled in the questionnaires outside their classroom, while the operators provided additional explanations if needed.

The questionnaires were first examined in terms of the existence of depressive history that required psychological counseling. None of the participants specified such a situation so that all questionnaires collected were taken into account. In order to investigate the differences among students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards, scores with respect to the criterion variables (gender, age, year of study, type of university they attend, namely private vs. public and study domain, namely technical vs. psychological), the Independent T-test, the One Way Anova and the factorial analysis of variances, were used.

5. Results

The mean scores describe a moderate to great extent of students’ tendencies to set high standards (M =3.83, SD= 0.76) and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards (M=3.41, SD= 0.84). Small to medium statistically significant Pearson’s correlation coefficient among students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards were found (r = .27, p<0.001). The higher the students’ standards are, the greater their self-criticism is.

The t-test for independent samples identified that females (N= 150) showed a lower tendency to meet high standards (M= 3.74 SD= 0.63) compared with the males (N=100)  (M=3.87 SD= 0.67) d = .38) [t (248) = 3.61, p< .001, d = .47] and statistically significantly [t (248) = 3.61, p< .001, d = .47] higher scores on self-criticism (M= 3.57 , SD= 0.82) compared with the males (M= 3.18 , SD= 0.83). The students from the psychology faculties (N =141) had higher scores on high standards (M= 3.78, SD= 0.53) compared with the students from the technical faculties (N = 109) (M= 3.53, SD= 0.57) [t (248) = 2.12, p< .03, d = .23]. Students from the private universities (N = 134) (M= 3.83, SD= 0.65) had lower scores on high standards compared with the students from the public universities (N = 116) (M= 3.75, SD= 0.61) [t (248) = 2.26, p< .02, d = .20]. No differences in terms of students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards depending on their age and year of study were found. By the One-way analysis of variance it was found that the students with high levels of self-criticism have a statistically significantly [F(2, 247) = 11.00, p< .001) high level of high standards (M = 4.13, SD = 0.72) compared with the students with low levels of self-criticism (M = 3.63 , SD= 0.75). A 2 (gender) * 2 (year of study) * 2 (type of faculty / public vs. private) * 2 (study domain – technical vs. psychological) * 3 (levels of self-criticism – low, medium, high) factorial analysis of variance (factorial MANOVA) showed that when self-criticism was introduced among the factors that are differentiating students’ tendencies to set high standards, the level of self-criticism had a statistically significant main effect [F (1, 249) = 4.93 p < .008, partial η2 = .06] and an effect of interaction with the students’ gender, type of faculty and study domain [F (1, 249) = 3.14, p= .01 , partial η2 = 0.08].

The highest scores in the tendency to set high standards (M = 4.67, SD = 0.47), are displayed by young (age category 1) male students with high levels of self-criticism from the public psychology faculties, 1st year of study. The lowest scores in the tendency to set high standards (M = 1.83, SD = 1.17) are displayed by older (age category 3) female students with low levels of self-criticism, from the private technical faculties, 1st year of study.
6. Discussion

The mean scores describe an average level of participant students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards. These results were expected because the population investigated belongs to the category of students who had no depression history (they answered “No” at the question on the existence of depression relapses that required counseling and / or psychological intervention). Small to medium statistically significant Pearson’s correlation coefficients among participant students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards were found. The higher the students’ high standards are, the greater their self-criticism. The results on the gender differences, namely the fact that the females displayed lower tendency to meet high standards and higher tendency to be self-critical compared with the males converge with data reported by certain studies (Parker and Mills, 1996, Bagana, et al., 2011) and differ from those reported by other (Michelson and Burns, 1998; Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Rice and Ashby, 2007).

The students from the psychology faculties displayed higher scores on high standards compared with the students from the technical faculties while the students from the private universities displayed lower scores on high standards compared with the students from the public universities. The study identified main differences in both students’ tendencies to set high standards and to respond self-critically to the deviations from such standards, as differences produced by the interaction between students’ gender and type of faculty they attend and age, year of study and study domain.

Participants’ tendencies to set high standards, as a sole dependent variable, were statistically significant differentiated by their tendencies to be self-critical and by the interaction between this tendency and the students’ age and study domain. Self-criticism adds to the influence of the other factors while increasing the difference among the tendencies to have high standards, identified when analyzing the difference in relation to a sole variable. These results converge with those reported in other slightly different but comparable studies (Taranis, Meyer, 2010; Stoeber and Otto, 2006).

The results of this study should be considered in the light of some limitations as the small geographic area (4 universities from Bucharest) from which participants were recruited, choosing only two areas of study (technical and psychological) that may not be representative of the concept of "study domain") and the fact that the analysis did not include more factors correlated with the two tendencies. The latter limit can be overcome in subsequent reports because research implied measuring a larger number of variables that, given the dimensions of this study, could not be included in this article.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify the differences in university students’ tendencies to set high standards and to be self-critical depending on their gender, age and learning context (the year of study, sector of higher education and study domain the students attend).

The results can serve to a better understanding of students’ behavior in university environment and to the establishment of an inclusive learning environment assisting personal development without any discrimination (Campbell, 2000). The main practical implications of these results are that they can serve as empirical database in the design of career guidance and counselling programs starting from the students’ individual tendencies to assume high standards and be self-critical (eg. an older female candidate, with low tendencies to assume high standards and high levels of self-criticism will be advised of the risk of not matching the specific profile of the students at the faculty of psychology).
References


