Defensive pessimism: a hypothetical explanatory model

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Abstract

Introduction: Defensive Pessimism (DP) is a cognitive coping strategy that increases the feeling of control in anxious and perfectionist subjects, decreasing their anxiety previously to a task. It involves the setting of low expectations – Pessimism (Pess-DP) – and reflection on the possible negative/positive task outcomes – Reflectivity (Ref-DP). Perfectionism is associated with anxiety, and both traits are associated with poor mental health and vulnerability to psychopathology. DP effectively lowers anxiety leading to more successful performances, however it is associated with negative affect. Anxious subjects who use DP show significant increases in self-esteem over time, suggesting that, when used over time, DP constitutes a self-improvement strategy.

Objectives: To study a) if DP, anxiety and perfectionism are predictors of psychological health; b) if DP is a mediator between anxiety/perfectionism and psychological health; c) to present an hypothetical explanatory model of DP.

Methods: The Portuguese versions of the Revised Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire, State Trait Anxiety Inventory, two Multidimensional Perfectionism Scales (Hewitt & Flett, Frost et al) and one item to measure perceived psychological health were administered to 192 university students (78.1% girls), aged 19.7±2.10 years. Correlation, regression and mediation analyses were performed.

Results: Anxiety (Beta=-.191), negative perfectionism (Beta=-.214), DP (Beta=-.171) and Pess-DP (Beta=-.245) (all p<.05) were independent negative predictors of psychological health. Ref-DP (Beta=.189/.201; p<.05) was a predictor of good psychological health only when both Pess-DP and anxiety/negative perfectionism were also included in regression model. Pess-DP was a full mediator between anxiety (95%CI=-.024;-.002) /negative perfectionism (-.006;-.001) and poor psychological health.

Discussion and Conclusions: Ref-PD/Pess-PD are associated with good/bad psychological health. Ref-PD may be the nuclear component and key for self-improvement (through self-awareness and emotional regulation), although Pess-PD remains a necessary condition, as it may be self-protective (“protective expectations”) despite its adverse outcomes.