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Developmental Origins of Self-Criticism: Exploring Its Impact on the Psychological Functioning and Well-Being of South African Young Adults

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Abstract

Self-criticism, the enduring tendency to engage in harsh self-evaluation and punitive internal dialogue, represents a core cognitive vulnerability underpinning various forms of psychological distress. While quantitative research links self-criticism to adverse mental health outcomes, less is known about how early relational experiences qualitatively shape its development and clinical manifestations in emerging adulthood, particularly within non-WEIRD, socio-culturally complex contexts like South Africa. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study explored the lived experiences of six South African young adults (ages 18–30) regarding the developmental origins, cognitive internalization, and functional impact of self-criticism. Individual semi-structured video interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a four-stage IPA framework. Three master themes emerged: (1) *Developmental Onset and Relational Origins*, highlighting an early window of vulnerability (ages 4–8) driven by caregiver reprimand cycles, parental control, peer rejection, and racialized institutional pressures; (2) *The Internalization Process and Cognitive Vulnerability*, illustrating how external criticism shifts into hostile internal dialogue, imposter phenomenon, and evaluative defensiveness; and (3) *Adult Manifestations and Psychological Distress*, detailing acute affective crises (panic and depression) and functional impairments (perfectionistic task paralysis and burnout). The findings underscore the importance of developmental formulation in clinical practice and advocate for integrating Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to target hostile self-evaluations in South African mental health settings.

Keywords: Self-criticism, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Young adults, South Africa, Psychological well-being