



Sensitivity to Social Put-Down: it's relationship to perceptions of social rank, shame, social anxiety, depression, anger and self-other blame

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Abstract

This study set out to explore how people feel (anxious vs angry) and attribute blame for criticism with the development of a new scale called the *sensitivity to put-down scale*. It was found that self-blame, but not blaming others for criticism, was associated with a number of psychopathology variables such as social anxiety, depression and shame. Blaming self (but not blaming others) was also associated with increased anger proneness and hostile attitudes. This study also found that those who see themselves as relatively down rank tend to blame themselves for criticism, while those who feel relatively superior, tend to blame others. This research was contextualised in social rank theory [Gilbert, P. (1989). *Human nature and suffering*. Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.; Gilbert, P. (1992). *Depression: the evolution of powerlessness*. Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Ltd. and New York: Guilford] which argues that personal perceptions of one's social rank affects a range of social behaviours and affects. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me' —or so the old saying goes. Unfortunately, this playground taunt is not only untrue but certain kinds of words can lead to violence, anxiety and depression. Verbal attacks on a person's sense of identity, their

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attractiveness, competency or parentage seek to devalue the person in their own eyes and the eyes of others. Perceptions of and reactions to, criticism and put-down have been explored in disparate literatures including those on shame (Tangney, 1996), expressed emotion in families (Jenkins & Karno, 1992), social anxiety (Watson & Friend, 1969) and anger–aggression (Cohen, Vandello & Rantilla, 1998; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Moreover, perceiving and coping with social conflicts, criticisms, disapproval and rejections is often at the heart of various psychological therapies. This study therefore set out to develop a measure of emotional reactions to and attributions for, social criticism and explore their relation to anger, shame, depression and social anxiety.

2. Social status and standing

Price (1972) was the first to link gains and losses in social conflicts and social rank to mood states. Social signals indicating conflict and threat between conspecifics operate in all social species. In nonhuman primate groups status and social rank are gained and maintained as much via *ritualised* threat and submissive displays as actual violence (Sapolsky, 1990a,b) and social conflict and threat are commonly indicated by a potential for physical attack/harm (e.g., angry grimace or short chase behaviour). Social ranks emerge from how animals send and respond to such communications (Bernstein, 1980; Harper, 1985; Price, Sloman, Gardner, Gilbert & Rhode, 1994). Although animals (Archer, 1988) and humans are highly sensitive and responsive to rank related social threat signals (Kalma, 1991) aversive human social communications are further ritualised in two ways. First, while critical social communications often involve nonverbal components (e.g., anger, contempt, disgust face, or ridiculing laugh; Lewis, 1992) they are commonly accompanied by verbal statements that indicate a loss of attractiveness or actual unattractiveness (e.g. ‘you’re stupid, incompetent’). These statements serve to indicate how the criticiser views the criticised. Hence, the second component of ritualised threat in humans arises because social rank and social acceptance are gained and maintained via eliciting signals (both verbal and nonverbal) of personal attractiveness and approval from others, while signals of disapproval, criticism and ridicule are perceived as attacks on status, personal attractiveness and acceptability (Barkow, 1989; Gilbert, 1992, 1997).

A key research concern is on how people perceive and react to social signals of social put-down; signals that indicate losses of social rank and/or social acceptance (attractiveness) in the eyes of others. To date there have been few studies that have explored this directly, although there are many indirect approaches that suggest that emotional sensitivity to criticism and put-down may be involved with a number of psychological difficulties and disorders (Gilbert, 1992; Allan & Gilbert, 1997).

3. Criticism, expressed emotions and self-blame

The detrimental effects of criticism on mental health are well known (Falloon, 1988; Jenkins & Karno, 1992). For example, the concept of high expressed emotion (EE) refers to patterns of aversive interactions of intrusiveness and criticism. In families with a person suffering from

schizophrenia, those with high EE tend to have higher levels of disturbance and greater risk of relapse compared to lower EE families (Koenigsberg & Handley, 1986; Vaughn & Leff, 1985). For depressive disorders, fears of disapproval and rejection have long been associated with depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979). Those living with a critical spouse tend to have higher rates of relapse and more chronic conditions compared to depressed people with a less critical and more supportive spouse (Belsher & Costello, 1988; Hooley & Teasdale, 1989). A critical spouse is associated with more maladaptive coping and negative self-evaluations, indicating that depressed people may blame themselves for the criticism or rejection (Beach, Sandeen & O'Leary, 1990). Andrews and Brewin (1990) found that in relationships where there was violence against a woman, whilst she lived with the abuser, women often blamed themselves for provoking the violence. Vinokur and van Ryn (1993) found that social undermining (defined as social hindrance, negative social support and social conflict) had a stronger, though more volatile, impact on mental health than social support over two time periods. There is also evidence that people prone to depression make internal, stable attributions (self-blame) for personal failure and criticism by others (Bowlby, 1980; Driscoll, 1988; Miller & Moretti 1988; Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993).

One of the factors influencing self-blame might be the perceived relative rank of the person; that is those who feel inferior or powerless are more likely to self-blame and avoid counter-attacking a potentially powerful other (Gilbert, 1992). Thus, it can be predicted that self-blame for criticisms and put-downs would be associated with unfavourable judgements of one's relative rank; that is with negative social comparisons.

4. Shame and social anxiety

Experiences of criticism, put-down, perceived social rank and styles of blame play a major role in shame and social anxiety. Shame experiences, which can recruit emotions of anxiety, anger and disgust are typically associated with perceptions of being criticised, devalued and disapproved of by others for actions or attributes of self that others find undesirable or unattractive (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney, 1996). Shame is associated with self-perceptions of unfavourable social comparison (e.g. inferior and less attractive than others; Gilbert, Allan & Goss, 1996; Goss, Gilbert & Allan, 1994) and subordinate and submissive behaviours (Gilbert, 1989; Gilbert & McGuire, 1998). Self-report scales of shame and submissive behaviour have been found to be highly correlated (Gilbert et al., 1996). Keltner (1995) found that a shame display was also an appeasement display (see Keltner & Harker, 1998 for a review). Criticism and social put-down can lead to feelings of shame especially if the criticised person believes that the criticism is valid and indicates that an undesirable/unattractive aspect of self has been observed by others (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney, 1995). As noted above it is not inevitable that the criticised person will blame the criticiser but may blame themselves. However, self-blame and other-blame are not mutually exclusive and people may feel personal shame, yet also feel angry and blame the person(s) who criticises them (Tangney et al., 1996). To date there has been no study exploring the attributions of blame to criticism and social put-down from others and shame.

Similar arguments have been made for social anxiety. For example, Beck, Emery and

Greenberg (1985), Leary and Kowalski (1995) and Clark and Wells (1995) argue that fear of negative evaluation, exposure and social avoidance (hiding) are the hallmarks of social anxiety. Indeed, fear of negative evaluation (FNE) has often been taken as a measure of social anxiety (Leary, 1983; Watson & Friend, 1969). In most work on social anxiety there is an implicit view that people may blame themselves for criticism and rejections, especially if they see such aversive social outcomes as due to their own inadequacy or inferiority (Clark & Wells, 1995).

5. Anger, aggression and hostility

Anger is a common experience of feeling shamed and criticised (Tangney et al., 1996). Being the recipient of criticism and social put-down can lead to feelings of ‘grievance anger’ and may result in the recipient counter-attacking or even becoming violent (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Daly and Wilson (1988) found that a common eliciting event in homicide was some (usually verbal) attack or slight on the self where violence involved a form of face saving. Cohen et al. (1998) reviewed the increasing body of evidence that ‘insults’ can often ignite anger and that attitudinal and cultural factors influence the degree to which individuals feel they have a right to counter-attack (sometimes violently) in defence of their honour.

Anger is usually taken to be an ‘affect’ or subjective emotional state, while aggression focuses on the behaviour. Hostility is seen as a more ‘attitudinal’ variable that captures general negative views towards others (Buss & Perry, 1992). Currently it is unknown how sensitivity to put-down and criticism may relate to these different aspects. Current theory and research might suggest that tendencies towards anger, aggression and hostility are likely to be associated with an external (blame others) attributional style for being criticised or put-down (Eckhardt, Barbour & Stuart, 1997; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994).

6. Social Put-Down

The above suggests that sensitivity to disapproval, negative evaluations by others and criticism impact on various negative emotions and mood states. The exact pattern of emotions, are to some degree, likely to be associated with the attributional style for the criticisms (Peterson et al., 1993). This study set out to explore these issues by developing a self-report measure of social criticism and put-down. The concept of social put-down seeks to be more inclusive than concern with criticism of specific behaviours and takes in situations and ‘attacks’ on the person which offer information about the relative (poor) social standing, acceptance and attractiveness of the recipient in relation to the person putting them down. Hence, it would include ‘being criticised’ ‘being told one is inadequate’ and ‘being talked about negatively behind one’s back’.

To date there have been few direct studies exploring typical scenarios of interpersonal criticisms and social put-down, people’s attributions for them and their emotional responses. This study therefore set out to explore how people experience and attribute blame for being the recipient of social put-down and criticism by others.

7. Method

155 psychology students (123 females and 32 males, mean age 24.5 yr, S.D. 7.8) were used in this study. Each student completed a series self-report questionnaires designed to measure feelings and attitudes to social put-down and criticism. In addition questionnaires measuring shame, guilt, social comparison, social anxiety and proneness to anger experiences were completed.

8. Measures

8.1. Sensitivity to Put-Down

The literature was scanned for typical situations that are associated with criticism and social put-down. Clinicians were also asked to note typical situations that patients often felt were hurtful, upsetting or caused a sense of grievance. As a first step in this research the idea was not to obtain an exhaustive list but a representative sample of situations that were typical of common social criticisms and social put-down experiences. From these, twenty were chosen during a research meeting to act as the core questions. Items include: being criticised and being told you are ‘not good enough’ The full scale with instructions as given to participants is given in Appendix A.

The design of the scale used a format suggested by Arrindell et al. (1990). They studied the level of distress (felt emotions) and frequency of certain behaviours in various assertive situations, by using two columns for responding (one for distress and one for behaviours) on either side of the questions. Hence, in this study the first part of the scale is scored by participants rating on a Likert scale on the left-hand side the degree of anxiety/upset (*distress*) they would feel to each situation. They then went through the questions again and rated them (on the right hand side) for how *angry/irritated* they would feel. The totals of each are taken as levels of distress and anger/irritability respectively.

Following this participants were given an identical scale but this time asked to answer it in regard to how much they *blamed themselves* for the criticism or social put-down (left hand column). Following this they were asked to read through the items again scoring them for *how much they blamed others* (right hand column). This gives a total blame-self score and a total blame-other score. The alpha reliability coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) are given in Table 1. All are above 0.9 and for each of the four subscales, suggesting good internal reliability of this scale.

8.2. Social comparison scale

In order to measure a person’s rating of their relative social rank, a social comparison scale using a semantic differential methodology (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957) developed previously (Allan & Gilbert, 1995) was used in this study. Subjects make a global social comparison of themselves in relation to others with a series of bipolar constructs rated 1–10. For example, the scale asks “in relation to others I generally feel”:

Inferior 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Superior

There are eleven items measuring constructs of inferior–superior, attractiveness and insider–outsider. This scale has now been used in a number of studies (Allan & Gilbert 1997; Gilbert & Allan, 1998). The value of coefficient alpha is given in Table 1.

8.3. Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D)

Depression was measured by use of the CES-D, developed to measure depressive symptomatology in non-psychiatric populations (Radloff, 1977). It is a 20 item scale which measures a range of symptoms (such as depressed mood, feelings of guilt, sleep disturbance) and respondents indicate on a 4 point scale (0–3) how often they have had the symptom in the past week. Scores range from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms. Radloff (1977) found internal consistency coefficients of greater than 0.84. In this study it was 0.93. This scale has been recommended for use in a general population (Gotlib & Hammen, 1992).

8.4. Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

Social anxiety has often been measured by fear of negative evaluation. Hence in this study we used the brief version of the fear of negative evaluation scale (FNE) derived from the longer 30 item version of Watson and Friend (1969). This 12 item version was developed by

Table 1
Means, standard deviations and values of coefficient alpha^a

	Mean	S.D.	Alpha
SPDD	59.84	14.54	0.922
SPDA	63.01	14.30	0.916
SPDBM	47.01	13.77	0.917
SPDBO	68.14	12.87	0.906
PA	18.69	7.05	0.839
VA	12.43	4.08	0.750
ANGER	16.39	5.21	0.739
HOST	18.66	6.42	0.812
CES	37.09	12.44	0.933
GUILT	9.35	3.84	0.800
SHAME	15.92	6.00	0.885
FNE	38.31	9.65	0.910
SCR	60.77	13.46	0.890
OAS	39.49	12.67	0.944

^a SPDD = Sensitivity to Put-Down Distress/Anxiety; SPDA = Sensitivity to Put-Down Anger/Irritated; SPDBM = Sensitivity to Put-Down Blame 'Me'(self); SPDBO = Sensitivity to Put-Down Blame Others. PA = Physical Aggression; VA = Verbal Aggression; ANGER = Anger Scale; HOST = Hostility Scale. CES = Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale; SCR = Social Comparison Rating; FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; OAS = Other as Shamer.

Leary (1983) and has a high correlation ($r = 0.9$) with the original scale. The short scale uses a Likert scoring of a (5 point) scale in preference to the true/false scoring. This scale has been used in many studies of social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

8.5. *Other as Shamer Scale (OAS)*

This scale was developed from Cook's (1993) Internalised Shame Scale (ISS) by Goss et al. (1994) and Allan et al. (1994). It looks at global judgements of how people think others see them (i.e., I think other people see me as inadequate). The scale consists of 18 descriptions of feelings or experiences. Subjects respond on a 5 point scale indicating how often they feel this way (ranging from 0 = never, to 4 = almost always). The value of alpha for this scale was 0.92 (Goss et al., 1994). This scale is designed to measure external shame, that is how one thinks one appears to others rather than internal self-judgements (Gilbert, 1998).

8.6. *Shame and guilt: the Personal Feelings Questionnaire 2*

The personal feeling questionnaire (PFQ2; Harder & Zalma, 1990) is a 22 item scale measuring shame and guilt feelings. People are asked to rate on a 0–4 point scale the extent to which they experience feelings of shame (such as feeling self-conscious, laughable) and guilt (such as guilt, regret and remorse). This scale has good internal reliability and factor structure and has been used in a number of studies comparing this scale with other shame scales and psychopathology measures (as reviewed by Harder, 1995).

8.7. *The aggression questionnaire*

The experience of criticism is believed to invoke both anxiety and anger, particularly aggressive feelings (Tangney, 1995; Tangney et al., 1996). However, it is unknown the degree to which these are situation specific on whether proneness to feeling angry over criticism might relate to angry and aggressive traits. It was therefore decided to explore the trait-like domains of anger and aggressiveness. These were measured by Buss and Perry's (1992) Aggression Questionnaire, which was derived from the original Buss and Durkee (1957) scale. This scale has four subscales: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger and Hostility. Physical aggression involves: striking another person, hitting, breaking things. Verbal aggression involves: disagreeing with people, being argumentative. Anger focuses on subjective experiences and feelings such as: flaring up, irritated, being hot-headed. Hostility is focused on various domains of: feeling cheated and hard done by and mild paranoia such as wondering why people are nice to one. These factors have good internal consistency and stability over time. The values of alpha for the scales in this study are given in Table 1.

9. Results

Means and Standard Deviations for all variables are given in Table 1. The values of coefficient alpha displayed in Table 1 suggest high reliability coefficients for all measures.

The Pearson correlation matrix of all measures is shown in Table 2.

9.1. *Inter-relationships of sensitivity to put-down measure*

Feeling anxious/distressed about put-down was highly correlated with feeling anger/irritated. This may suggest general negative affectivity for people who are prone to be emotionally aroused to criticism and put-down such that they experience complex patterns of negative affects. This fits with Watson et al. (1995a,b) findings that negative affects are often highly correlated. In regard to the direction of blame, self-blame was correlated with both anxiety/distress and anger/irritated. Blaming others showed a small though significant correlation with anxiety/distress and a more moderate one with anger/irritated. There was no association between blaming others and blaming self suggesting these are relatively independent judgements.

9.2. *Relation of sensitivity to put-down variables with anger/aggression*

Although feeling distressed by criticism was mildly associated with verbal aggression, anger and to a larger extent, hostility, feeling anger at being criticised was only moderately correlated with traits of anger and hostility.

Feelings of hostility were particularly associated with self-blame. Although it was anticipated that blaming others was likely to be associated with anger and aggression, this was not the case and in fact blaming others was significantly inversely related to hostility.

9.3. *Relationships of sensitivity to put-down measure with psychopathology measures*

Feeling distressed and upset about criticism was associated with depression, guilt, shame, unfavourable social comparison and fear of negative evaluation. Feeling anger to criticism was associated with depression, shame and fear of negative evaluation. Guilt and social comparison were not significantly associated with anger at criticism. Looking at the domain of self-other blame, self-blame was associated with all of the psychopathology variables. Self-blame was particularly highly correlated with fear of negative evaluation and shame. Interestingly, blaming others was *inversely* correlated with shame, guilt and social comparison.

Of note is that although the correlations are small there was a significant correlation of self-blame with feeling relatively inferior to others, but blaming others was associated with feeling relatively superior to others. In other words, those who see themselves as relatively down rank do blame themselves more for criticism and being socially put-down while those who see themselves as relative up rank tend to blame others for criticism and put-down.

9.4. *Principal components analysis*

To explore the relationships amongst these measures, a principal components analysis was carried out, followed by a promax rotation. The eigenvalues and percentage of variance explained by the components is shown in Table 3 and a scree plot of the eigenvalues is shown in Fig. 1.

Table 2
Correlation matrix^a

	SPDD	SPDA	SPDBM	SPDBO	PA	VA	ANGER	HOST	CES	GUILT	SHAME	FNE	SCR	OAS
SPDD	1.000													
SPDA	0.629	1.000												
SPDBM	0.576	0.461	1.000											
SPDBO	0.090	0.375	-0.157	1.000										
PA	0.088	0.190	0.200	0.071	1.000									
VA	-0.085	0.038	-0.045	0.098	0.530	1.000								
ANGER	0.193	0.237	0.248	-0.042	0.523	0.549	1.000							
HOST	0.355	0.267	0.452	-0.178	0.269	0.187	0.414	1.000						
CES	0.382	0.273	0.428	-0.061	0.081	-0.038	0.235	0.482	1.000					
GUILT	0.206	0.106	0.404	-0.130	0.155	0.080	0.379	0.480	0.470	1.000				
SHAME	0.451	0.287	0.554	-0.201	0.145	0.010	0.273	0.548	0.565	0.654	1.000			
FNE	0.454	0.319	0.496	-0.062	0.081	-0.070	0.224	0.587	0.468	0.499	0.637	1.000		
SCR	-0.119	0.014	-0.268	0.253	0.128	0.172	-0.046	-0.379	-0.468	-0.346	-0.456	-0.498	1.000	
OAS	0.403	0.308	0.431	-0.129	0.166	0.078	0.308	0.572	0.596	0.532	0.676	0.477	-0.417	1.000

^a $r > 0.155$, $p < 0.05$; $r > 0.202$, $p < 0.01$ (2 tailed). SPDD = Sensitivity to Put-Down Distress/Anxiety; SPDA = Sensitivity to Put-Down Anger/Irritated; SPDBM = Sensitivity to Put-Down Blame 'Me'(self); SPDBO = Sensitivity to Put-Down Blame Others. PA = Physical Aggression; VA = Verbal Aggression; ANGER = Anger Scale, HOST = Hostility Scale. CES = Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale; SCR = Social Comparison Rating; FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; OAS = Other as Shamer.

Table 3
Eigenvalues and variance explained by components

Component	Total	Variance (%)	Cumulative (%)
1	5.230	37.354	37.354
2	2.131	15.222	52.576
3	1.683	12.023	64.599
4	0.878	6.269	70.867
5	0.632	4.511	75.379
6	0.600	4.287	79.666
7	0.504	3.598	83.263
8	0.470	3.361	86.624
9	0.417	2.975	89.599
10	0.366	2.612	92.211
11	0.356	2.543	94.754
12	0.275	1.966	96.721
13	0.248	1.773	98.494
14	0.211	1.506	100.000

Three components were extracted and rotated using the Promax algorithm. The component pattern matrix, after rotation, is shown in Table 4 and the correlations between the rotated components are shown in Table 5.

Factor 1: This factor seems to represent a general negative affectivity or neurotic factor with

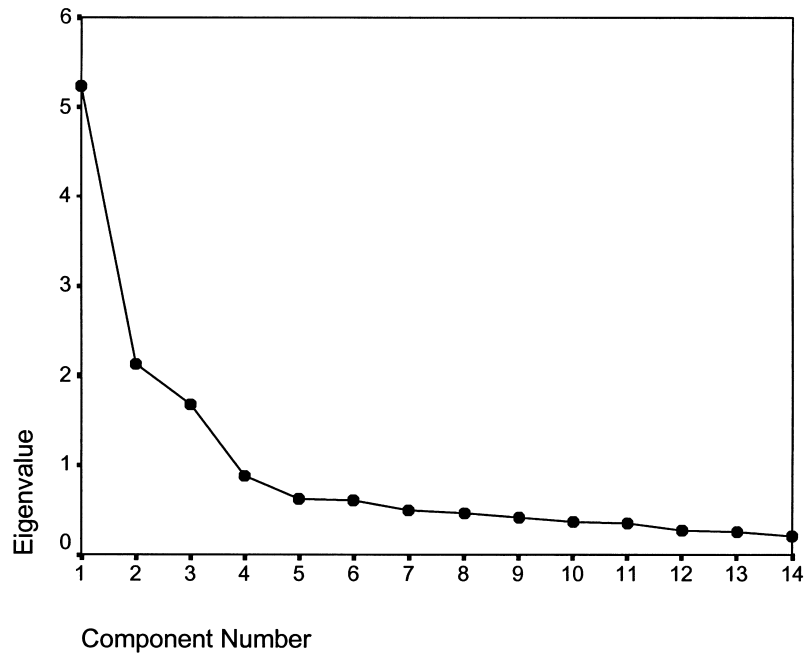


Fig. 1. Scree plot of eigenvalues.

Table 4
Pattern matrix^a

	1	2	3
SHAME	0.853		
OAS	0.763		
SCR	−0.755	0.270	0.315
FNE	0.754		0.132
GUILT	0.738	0.177	−0.176
CES	0.728		
HOST	0.716	0.259	
SPDBM	0.596		0.341
VA	−0.125	0.878	
PA		0.793	
ANGER	0.264	0.764	
SPDA	0.118		0.861
SPDD	0.381	−0.127	0.683
SPDBO	−0.445		0.673

^a Loadings <0.1 have been deleted.

all the psychopathology variables loading highly on it, with shame having the highest loading. Interestingly hostility, but not the other anger variables, loaded highly on this factor. Of the sensitivity to put-down variables, self-blame loaded on this factor but blaming others was inversely loaded.

Factor 2: This factor is formed primarily from the three anger variables of physical aggression, verbal aggression and anger. It is possible that these variables represent a more externalizing way of coping in contrast to the more internalized and negative self aspects of factor 1 (shame, inferiority, social anxiety and depression).

Factor 3: This factor is made up of primarily the three sensitivity to put-down measures — feeling distressed, angry about put-down and criticism and blaming others for put-down and criticism. Self-blame loads only weakly on this factor. We had not anticipated that these variables would come out as a single factor but this might imply that how people feel about and attribute blame for, put-down and criticism is a separable domain of functioning not simply to be subsumed under a general neurotic or negative affectivity factor.

Table 5
Component correlation matrix

	1	2	3
1	1.000		
2	0.141	1.000	
3	0.247	0.140	1.000

10. Conclusion

Experiences of criticism and put-down are common social experiences known to be associated with mental health (e.g. Jenkins & Karno, 1992). More research is needed on how people experience and attribute the reasons for criticism. This study sought to explore the relationship between two types of emotion (feeling anxiety/distress and anger/irritated) and attributional styles of self-blame and blaming others for criticism and put-down. The development of the sensitivity to put-down scale, designed to measure these four domains, was found to have good internal reliability.

The inter-correlations of this scale found that feeling anxious/distressed to criticism was highly correlated with feeling angry. In other words, being criticised invokes complex patterns of negative affects (Watson et al., 1995a,b). However, self-blame seems particularly related to feeling anxious/distressed but only minimally (although significantly) to blaming others. Blaming others however was correlated with feeling angry. In regard to whether people may blame themselves and others at the same time, it was found that these attributional styles were inversely correlated. In other words a tendency for an internal attributional style is negatively correlated with external attributional style.

How do emotional reactions and attributional styles to criticism impact on mood shame and social anxiety? Firstly, as expected feeling anxious/distressed by criticism/put-down was associated with all the psychopathology variables. In other words, a proneness to feeling anxious/distressed by criticism/put-down is associated with elevated depression, social anxiety and shame scores. The same is true for feeling angry/irritated but to a lesser extent. The instructions of the questionnaire did not ask the person to state to *whom* they felt angry and so it possible that some of their anger is self-directed. Indeed, Table 2 shows that anger at criticism is correlated with self-blame.

Table 2 also suggests that self-blame and other-blame are related to these variables in the opposite way. While self-blame had high positive correlations with depression, shame and social anxiety, blaming others has either no association or a negative association. In this population then, blaming others seemed to offer some limited protection to aversive self-conscious affects. The shame literature has long stressed the role of self-blame and sense of personal responsibility for failure in shame (Lewis, 1992; Tangney, 1995) and certainly this study suggests that shame is indeed related to self-blame for criticism/put-down.

In regard to whether attributional style is related to general perceptions of people's relative social standing and rank compared to others, the data on social comparison is illuminating. Seeing oneself as relatively inferior and less attractive than others is associated with increased self-blame. In contrast seeing oneself as relatively superior and more attractive (or less inferior) is associated with blaming others. As noted elsewhere therefore (Gilbert, 1992) attributional style in aversive social situations may relate to the relative social position one sees oneself to be in. We did not ask people whether the imagined 'critic' was of higher or lower rank than they were and this may be important. Self-blame may be increased in situations where the criticiser is seen as superior, or where the person has some dependency on them. It would certainly seem probable that self-blame is not a simple dispositional factor but would be affected by various social context factors such as the relative rank difference between people (being criticised by one's boss or one's subordinate), the levels of perceived competency to offer criticism, the type

of relationship (friend, stranger, enemy) between criticiser and criticised and the implications of the criticism/put-down.

The findings of the relationship of sensitivity to put-down to anger/aggression variables are somewhat unexpected. First, looking at the two expressive domains of Buss and Perry's (1992) aggression questionnaire (physical and verbal aggression), physical aggression was not associated with feeling anxious, anger or blaming others over social put-down, but had a weak association with self-blame. Interestingly, in regard to attributional style there was no association between attributional style and anger expression. This was unexpected in that the literature (e.g. Cohen et al., 1998; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Tennen & Affleck, 1990) might indicate that blaming others would be associated with more outward expression. There are two possible reasons for this. First, that anger and blaming others over a specific domain (being criticised and socially put-down) can be activated in certain situations but need not point to a *generalised tendency* for externalising — which is what the Buss and Perry's (1992) aggression questionnaire measures. Second, things may be different in populations (e.g., of aggressive males) where blaming others might more likely be associated with externalising anger.

It would seem that feeling both anxious/distress and angry over put-down were weakly associated with generalised tendencies for angry feelings. However, it is self-blame and not blame of others that is associated with generalised anger. This may imply that people who blame themselves have a raised tendency for more generalised angry feelings. The findings are even more marked for hostility. Here hostile dispositions increase the tendency to feel anxious/distressed and angry over put-down. Moreover, it is self-blame that is positively associated with hostility but blaming others was associated with *less* hostile attitudes. This is somewhat surprising and perhaps counter-intuitive. However, it may imply that people who are self-blamers and have generally negative views of themselves, expect others to see and treat them negatively. Indeed, Goss et al. (1994) found that there was a high correlation between how people judge themselves (e.g. "I see myself as inadequate") and how they think others see them (e.g. "I think others see me as inadequate"). Perhaps people who have a relatively robust sense of themselves, are able to defend themselves and tend to dismiss criticism and social put-down as problems in the criticiser, (rather than themselves) are less defensive and less needing to hold hostile attitudes. On this more research is needed and again these relationships may vary in different populations.

The principal components analysis suggests that reactions to criticism/put-down are complex. While self-blame loaded on the factor captured by measures of shame and inferiority, the other domains of the sensitivity to put-down scale, emerged as a separate, but correlated factor.

A number of cautions should be exercised in the interpretation of these data. First we did not measure specifically if people felt angry with themselves or others, but generally angry/irritated about criticism. A second concern is that these measures are all self-report measures which may not accurately reflect what people *actually* feel, think or do in real life situations and may demonstrate more how people would like to see themselves (Andrews, 1998). Third, the literature tends to suggest that blaming others is associated with angry feelings especially 'grievance anger' (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). However, this has rarely been studied directly. Although blaming others was correlated with feeling angry/irritated over criticism/put-down, blaming others was not associated with trait anger/aggression as measured by the Buss and Perry (1992) Aggression Questionnaire. It is possible that there are differences here between

feeling angry/irritated about specific situations and specific criticisms and trait anger. Blaming others in particular situations need not be associated with trait anger/aggression. For example, a person may tend to blame others as a way of diminishing or minimising the importance of the criticism but need not be vulnerable to trait anger and aggression. Also the dimension of anger/irritability on the sensitivity to put-down scale, may suggest a milder response than the kinds of more extreme feelings as measured by the aggression questionnaire. Finally, this study did not measure the degree to which people felt a criticism was justified, nor the relative relationship people had in mind when they thought of being criticised. These could impinge on self-other blame and feeling states.

Appendix A. SPD Scale (1)

INSTRUCTIONS : In certain social situations people can exhibit different emotions. For example, being late for a meeting may cause some people to feel anxious or irritated. Below you will find a list of situations which may cause you to feel either anxious or distressed, or angry/irritated or some degree of both. On the left-hand side of the questions we would like you to indicate the degree of anxiety/level of distress you would feel for each situation. After you have worked through the items once , we would like you to go through them again, this time indicating in the right hand column how angry, irritated and annoyed you would feel. Please use the following scale.

1 = NOT AT ALL 2 = SOMEWHAT 3 = RATHER 4 = VERY 5 = EXTREMELY

How anxious / distressed						How angry/ irritated				
1	2	3	4	5	1. Being criticised	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	2. Being shown up in public	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	3. Being called a derogatory name e.g. stupid/ugly	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	4. Being treated like a child	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	5. Someone pointing out your unattractive qualities	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	6. Being looked at with contempt	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	7. Someone getting the better of you	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	8. Having your opinion dismissed as irrelevant	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	9. People reacting critically to what you say	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	10. Being seen as inferior	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	11. Being told you are 'not good enough'	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	12. People running you down behind your back	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	13. Someone trying to make you look weak or stupid	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	14. People having a joke at your expense	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	15. Not being treated with respect	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	16. Someone picking on your faults	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	17. Being seen as a nuisance	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	18. Being told your performance is inadequate	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	19. Someone making fun of you in public	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	20. Someone making negative comments about your physical appearance	1	2	3	4	5

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