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Perfectionism in Sport and Dance:
A Double-Edged Sword

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Abstract

The author provides comments on the contributions to this special issue on perfectionism in sport and dance focusing on how they provide further support for the view that perfectionism is a “double-edged sword.” In addition, the author gives his personal view on using the tripartite model versus the 2×2 model of perfectionism as an analytic framework and, in conclusion, outlines future research on perfectionism in sport and dance that he thinks is needed to further advance our knowledge.

Keywords: perfectionistic strivings; perfectionistic concerns; personal standards perfectionism; evaluative concerns perfectionism; sport; dance; exercise

Introduction

Almost 10 years ago, Flett and Hewitt (2005) published their seminal article warning about the perils of perfectionism in sport and exercise which inspired numerous studies examining the correlates, causes, and effects of perfectionism in sport. As a consequence of these studies, we now know much more about perfectionism in sport and exercise than we did 10 years ago.

One thing we have learned is that—when examining perfectionism in sport—it is important to differentiate perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The reason is that the perils of perfectionism in sport are mainly restricted to perfectionistic concerns. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings are often associated with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes, particularly when the overlap between perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns is controlled for (Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012; Stoeber, 2011, 2012c). Hence I see perfectionism as a “double-edged sword” that may have benefits (perfectionistic strivings) but may also carry significant costs and risks (perfectionistic concerns) for athletes and dancers, as is demonstrated by the contributions to this special issue.

Reading the contributions and being invited to write a commentary has been a great opportunity, and I would like to thank the editors for this opportunity (and for the kind words they had for me and my research in their editorial). In response to this invitation, I took the liberty to add some personal views going beyond commenting on the contributions to the special issue. Hence, my commentary comprises three sections. First, I provide comments on the contributions with a focus on what I found noteworthy based on my personal perspective on perfectionism. Second, because two contributions used the tripartite model of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto,

2006) as an analytic framework whereas two other contributions used the 2×2 model (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), I added a brief note on where I see myself in relation to these two competing models. Finally, again briefly, I added some personal views on questions that future research on perfectionism in sport and dance need to address if the field wants to make further progress.

Comments

Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere

Providing a fine example of insights only qualitative research can provide, Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere followed the tripartite model of perfectionism examining how healthy perfectionist athletes (high perfectionistic strivings, low perfectionistic concerns) and unhealthy perfectionist athletes (high perfectionistic strivings, high perfectionistic concerns) responded to success and failure (“good” versus “bad” game, race, or competition). Regarding personal expectations, I found noteworthy that unhealthy perfectionist athletes perceived their standards as unrealistic and were outcome-oriented focusing on winning (“Did I win?”). In contrast, healthy perfectionist athletes perceived their personal standards as reasonable and were process-oriented focusing on effort (“Did I work hard?”). With this, healthy perfectionist athletes appeared to show what I (admittedly knowing little about Zen) sometimes refer to as “the Zen approach” to striving for perfection. By this, I mean a striving for perfection that, like an archer aiming for the bull’s eye, fully focuses its efforts on the aim (the bull’s eye = perfection) but can stay detached from the outcome of this effort (hitting the bull’s eye or not).

Furthermore, healthy perfectionist athletes emphasized maintaining a positive outlook in the face of failure (seeing the positives *and* negatives of the experience) and reported getting over failures relatively quickly. In contrast, unhealthy perfectionist athletes reacted with self-criticism, dwelled on the negatives, and became depressed and frustrated which points to the key role that negative reactions to imperfection play in unhealthy perfectionism in athletes (Stoeber, Otto, Pescheck, Becker, & Stoll, 2007). Finally, healthy perfectionist athletes saw others (coaches, teammates) as a positive resource providing support and motivation. In contrast, unhealthy perfectionist athletes saw others as both a positive resource and a negative source of pressure to be perfect which confirms the importance of taking into account perceived coach pressure and pressure from teammates when examining unhealthy aspects of perfectionism in sport (e.g., Dunn, Gotwals, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2006; Stoeber, Otto, & Stoll, 2006).

Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, Gamache, and Holt

Like the previous study, Dunn and colleagues' study—the first to investigate perfectionism in athletes and coping with performance slumps—followed a person-centered approach using the tripartite model as an analytic framework, but used quantitative methods and additionally included non-perfectionist athletes (low perfectionistic strivings) in their comparisons. There were a number of findings I found noteworthy. In line with expectations, healthy perfectionist athletes reported more active coping than unhealthy perfectionist and non-perfectionist athletes. Moreover, they reported more increased effort which dovetails with Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere's finding of healthy perfectionist athletes' focusing on effort. In contrast, unhealthy perfectionist athletes reported more behavioral disengagement than healthy perfectionist athletes which clearly is a maladaptive response to performance slumps. In addition, unhealthy perfectionist athletes reported more wishful thinking than non-perfectionist athletes, all of which is in line with previous findings that perfectionistic concerns in athletes are associated with avoidant and disengagement-oriented coping (e.g., Gaudreau & Antl, 2008).

Dunn and colleagues, however, also found that both healthy perfectionist athletes and unhealthy perfectionist athletes reported more planning than non-perfectionist athletes, which I would not have expected. Whereas the finding that healthy perfectionist athletes reported more planning than non-perfectionist athletes is in line with previous research, the unexpected finding that unhealthy perfectionist athletes reported more planning than non-perfectionist athletes may be explained by the fact that—like healthy perfectionist athletes—unhealthy perfectionist athletes had elevated levels of perfectionistic strivings which have been associated with coping by planning (e.g., Stoeber & Janssen, 2011).

Crocker, Gaudreau, Mosewich, and Kljajic

Unlike the previous two studies, Crocker and colleagues'—examining key processes and outcomes associated with psychological stress in athletic competition—used a variable-centered approach and followed the 2×2 model of perfectionism differentiating four within-person combinations of high versus low perfectionistic strivings (termed “personal standards perfectionism” [PSP]) and perfectionistic concerns (termed “evaluative concerns perfectionism” [ECP]): pure PSP (high PSP, low ECP), pure ECP (low PSP, high ECP), mixed perfectionism (high PSP, high ECP), and non-perfectionism (low PSP, low ECP). Note that the 2×2 model differentiates between individuals who are low in perfectionistic strivings and high in

perfectionistic concerns (pure ECP) and individuals who are low in perfectionistic strivings and low in perfectionistic concerns (non-perfectionism) whereas the tripartite model does not differentiate between these individuals, but considers both “non-perfectionists” (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).

In line with previous research suggesting that perfectionism is a double-edged sword, perfectionistic strivings showed positive correlations with control and challenge appraisals, perceived goal progress, and positive affect. In contrast, perfectionistic concerns showed negative correlations with control and challenge appraisals and positive correlations with threat appraisals, avoidance coping, and negative affect. In addition, when regression analyses controlled for the overlap between strivings and concerns, perfectionistic concerns showed a negative relationship with perceived goal progress. The latter finding is noteworthy because it demonstrates that—whereas the overlap between strivings and concerns usually suppresses perfectionistic strivings’ positive associations—it can also suppress perfectionistic concerns’ negative associations (R. W. Hill, Huelsman, & Araujo, 2010). Moreover, I found noteworthy that perceived goal progress moderated the differences between pure ECP and non-perfectionism regarding control appraisals and avoidance coping. When perceived goal progress was high, pure ECP and non-perfectionism did not differ in control appraisals and avoidance coping. When perceived goal progress was low, pure ECP showed significantly lower control appraisals and significantly higher avoidance coping than non-perfectionism which attests to the negative effects of perfectionistic concerns and the importance to differentiate “non-perfectionists” with high perfectionistic concerns (pure ECP) from “non-perfectionists” with low perfectionistic concerns (non-perfectionism).

Quested, Cumming, and Duda

Quested and colleagues’ study—the only study in this special issue focusing on dancers—revisited a previously published study (Cumming & Duda, 2012) examining unpublished data on intrinsic motivation, fear of failure, and self-esteem. Using a person-centered approach and quantitative analyses, the study identified four clusters of perfectionist dancers similar to the within-person combinations of the 2×2 model of perfectionism. When the clusters were compared, a number of noteworthy differences emerged. Pure PSP dancers reported higher intrinsic motivation than pure ECP dancers and non-perfectionist dancers (low PSP, low ECP) which dovetails with findings from research with athletes that perfectionistic strivings (PSP) are positively associated with intrinsic motivation (e.g., McArdle & Duda, 2004). In contrast, pure

ECP dancers reported higher fear of failure and lower self-esteem than pure PSP dancers and non-perfectionist dancers. Also mixed perfectionist dancers (high PSP, high ECP) reported higher fear of failure and lower self-esteem than pure PSP dancers, which concurs with findings from research on athletes that perfectionistic concerns (ECP) are associated with fear of failure and low self-esteem (e.g., Gotwals, Dunn, & Wayment, 2003; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

Whereas Quested and colleagues' findings provide support for the idea that perfectionism is a double-edged sword (perfectionistic strivings being positive and perfectionistic concerns negative), they only provided partial support for the hypotheses of the 2×2 model. However, note that, whereas the clusters Cumming and Duda (2012) labeled pure PSP dancers and pure ECP dancers showed the expected differences in personal standards (a defining aspect of perfectionistic strivings/PSP) and doubts about actions (an aspect of perfectionism closely related to perfectionistic concerns/ECP), both also showed moderate levels of concern over mistakes which is a defining component of perfectionistic concerns/ECP (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; see also Crocker et al., this issue). In addition, mixed perfectionistic dancers showed higher levels of concern over mistakes than pure ECP dancers. Consequently, the four clusters that Quested and colleagues examined did not fully correspond to the four within-person combinations of the 2×2 model, which may have contributed to their finding only partial support for the model's hypotheses.

Curran, Hill, Jowett, and Mallinson

Curran and colleagues' study investigated how perfectionism relates to harmonious and obsessive passion athletes have for their sport. To this end, the study examined self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, two forms of perfectionism that are defining components of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, respectively (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Harmonious passion represents an adaptive form of motivation and personal investment where the passion for the activity is in harmony with people's lives and contributes to people's well-being. In contrast, obsessive passion represents a maladaptive form of motivation and personal investment where the passion for the activity has detrimental effects on people's lives and well-being (Vallerand, 2010).

Interestingly, Curran and colleagues found self-oriented perfectionism to show positive correlations with both harmonious passion and obsessive passion whereas socially prescribed perfectionism showed a positive correlation only with obsessive passion. Moreover, the pattern

was the same when the overlap between the two forms of perfectionism was controlled for. The finding illustrates that—even when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled for—perfectionistic strivings sometimes show negative associations (Gotwals et al., 2012). Whereas perfectionistic concerns in sport were only associated with obsessive passion, perfectionistic strivings were associated with passion for sport that was perceived partly in harmony with one's life and partly as obsessive. This suggests that even athletes who are striving for perfection and are not overly concerned about others' evaluations of their performance have mixed feelings about the passion they have for their sport. If so, this would correspond to previous findings on perfectionism and motivation suggesting that perfectionistic strivings in athletes—while mostly positive—may sometimes be associated with mixed positive-negative motivational patterns (e.g., task orientation combined with ego orientation) and a tendency for “overstriving” that has been associated with negative outcomes (Hall, Kerr, Kozub, & Finnie, 2007).

Tripartite or 2 × 2?

Readers of this special issue will note that the first two contributions used the tripartite model of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006) as an analytic framework whereas the following two contributions used the 2 × 2 model (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). Because the tripartite model is usually linked to the 2006 review paper I first-authored (Stoeber & Otto, 2006)¹ and I recently published some critical comments on the 2 × 2 model (Stoeber, 2012a), this may give the wrong impression that I endorse the tripartite model and object to the 2 × 2 model.

The opposite is true. I am very supportive of the 2 × 2 model of perfectionism, particularly now that the main issues I had with the model have been clarified (Gaudreau, 2013). The reason is that I see the 2 × 2 model as an extension of the two-factor model we proposed in our review (Stoeber & Otto, 2006) providing an advanced analytic framework for teasing apart the unique, joint, and interactive effects of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. Moreover, most studies following a variable-centered approach using the procedures recommended by Gaudreau (2012) corroborate the main message of our 2006 review, namely that perfectionistic

¹Note that Stoeber and Otto (2006) were not the first putting forward the idea of a tripartite model, but this idea has many authors (see *ibid.*, Table 3). To my knowledge, Parker (1997) was the first suggesting a tripartite model differentiating healthy, unhealthy, and non-perfectionists.

strivings are often positive when the negative influence of perfectionistic concerns is controlled for. In addition, plotting the effects resulting from the 2×2 analyses following Gaudreau (2012) produces graphical representations that help understand the joint effects of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (see, e.g., Crocker et al., this issue, Figure 1).

As concerns the tripartite model, I agree with the 2×2 model that it is important to examine potential differences between individuals who show low perfectionistic strivings and low perfectionistic concerns (non-perfectionism) and individuals who show low perfectionistic strivings, but high perfectionistic concerns (pure ECP). (If I would call the latter “perfectionists” is a different question; cf. Dunn et al., this issue.) One reason why I think this is important is that we may underestimate the negativity of perfectionistic concerns if we examine what the tripartite model considers “unhealthy perfectionists” (high PSP, high ECP) without considering pure ECP (low PSP, high ECP). The reason is that perfectionistic strivings (PSP) are often positive and thus may obscure the full negativity of perfectionistic concerns (ECP) if we only examine the effects of high ECP in combination with high PSP. Moreover, only if we examine potential differences between pure ECP (low PSP, high ECP) and non-perfectionism (low PSP, low ECP) can we find out which model our data support: If pure ECP and non-perfectionism differ, the data support the 2×2 model. If not, the data support the tripartite model.²

Future Research

Seeing the excellent contributions to this special issue, I have no doubt that research on perfectionism in sport and dance has a bright future and will continue to produce further important insights. Nevertheless, there are four questions that I would like to draw attention to in the hope to inspire future research in these directions. The first is the question of whether there are differences between perfectionism in sport and perfectionism in exercise. Whereas my impression is that perfectionism in dance has comparable effects to those of perfectionism in sport, perfectionism in exercise may be different. For example, whereas “pure perfectionistic strivings” (i.e., strivings without concerns) may be useful to aspiring athletes and dancers, they may not be useful to “normal people” who exercise for health or fitness reasons (cf. Hall et al., 2007). Second, we now know a lot about how perfectionism affects athletes’ and dancers’ subjectively, that is, how they think and feel, how they are motivated, and how they see

²With the caveat that, strictly speaking, null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) does not provide support for null hypotheses, only alternative hypotheses (cf. Stoeber, 2012a).

themselves and others. In contrast, we still know very little about how perfectionism affects athletes' objective performance (cf. Stoeber, 2012c), and we know nothing about how it affects dancers' performance. Whereas I appreciate the difficulties of measuring objective performance³ in dance and some sports, I think more studies are needed examining how perfectionistic strivings and concerns affect performance.

The third is the question of how perfectionism affects athletic teams (or dance troupes). Whereas we now have a good understanding of how perfectionism affects individual athletes, we know almost nothing about how individual athletes' perfectionism affects others in their team (cf. A. P. Hill, Stoeber, Brown, & Appleton, 2014). In addition, future research may profit from examining how perfectionism affects athlete–coach relationships and how the findings compare to previous findings on dyadic perfectionism (e.g., Stoeber, 2012b). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need more longitudinal studies on perfectionism in sport and dance to answer questions on the temporal, and perhaps causal, links of the relationships suggested in cross-sectional research. Moreover, such studies are needed to answer important questions about the longitudinal effects of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. Whereas I can see perfectionistic strivings to have short-term positive effects (e.g., Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009), I understand that some colleagues are concerned that perfectionistic strivings may have detrimental effects on athletes' and dancers' long-term development (e.g., Hall, 2006; Hall & Hill, 2012). If future research addresses these questions, I am sure we will see further significant progress in the understanding of perfectionism in sport, dance, and exercise in the next 10 years.

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³This includes observer ratings with satisfactory inter-rater reliability.

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