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## Domains of Perfectionism:

Prevalence and Relationships with Perfectionism,

Gender, Age, and Satisfaction With Life

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## Abstract

Perfectionists have been described as people who want to be perfect in all domains of their lives. Few studies to date, however, have investigated what domains people are perfectionistic in. Using two samples (109 university students, 289 Internet users), the present study investigated how being perfectionistic in 22 domains of life was related to perfectionism, age, gender, and satisfaction with life. Across samples, work and studies were the domains that most participants reported being perfectionistic in, followed by bodily hygiene, spelling, and presentation of documents. Whereas age, gender, and satisfaction with life showed significant relationships with selected domains of life, perfectionism showed significant positive correlations with the overall score (number of domains affected by perfectionism) and with being perfectionistic in individual domains. Further analyses showed that self-oriented perfectionism, rather than socially prescribed perfectionism, was responsible for these correlations. The findings indicate that, in most domains, being perfectionistic is internally motivated and not externally motivated. Moreover, they show that, while some perfectionists may be perfectionistic across domains, most perfectionists are perfectionistic only in selected domains.

## Introduction

Perfectionism is characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting of excessively high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Moreover, perfectionists often put great importance on the evaluation by others and feel pressured to perform to the highest standards to avoid significant others' disappointment and disapproval (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Finally, extreme perfectionists have been described as "people who want to be perfect in all aspects of their lives" (Flett & Hewitt, 2002, p. 5). This, however, has never been systematically investigated. Moreover, little is known about what domains of life are most likely to be affected by perfectionism.

# Perfectionism

According to Hewitt and Flett's (1991) influential model of perfectionism, two main forms of perfectionism need to be differentiated: self-oriented perfectionism and socially-prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism comprises beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important and is characterized by setting excessively high standards and having a "perfectionist motivation" for oneself. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism comprises beliefs that others have high standards for oneself and that acceptance by others is conditional on fulfilling these standards (Enns & Cox, 2002; Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004). Thus, self-oriented perfectionism is an internally motivated form of perfectionism whereas socially prescribed perfectionism is an externally motivated form.

## Domains of Perfectionism

Whereas Hewitt and Flett (1991) see perfectionism as a general disposition affecting all domains, some studies suggest that levels of perfectionism show marked differences between domains. This was first demonstrated in a study with "career mothers," that is, women working at

least 25 hours a week who have a child under nine years (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998). Career mothers completed a perfectionism scale in two versions: one regarding their perfectionism at work and one their perfectionism at home. When mean levels of perfectionism between the two domains were compared, career mothers showed significantly higher perfectionism at work than at home. Further evidence comes from a study with intercollegiate varsity athletes (Dunn, Gotwals, & Dunn, 2005). Athletes completed a perfectionism scale in three versions: one regarding perfectionist tendencies in their sport, one perfectionist tendencies in their academic studies, and one perfectionist tendencies in general. When mean levels of perfectionism were compared between the three domains, athletes reported significantly higher perfectionism in their sport than in their studies, and significantly higher perfectionism in their studies than in general. In sum, the studies suggest that perfectionism can differ between domains, and that being perfectionistic in one domain of life does not necessarily imply being perfectionistic in other domains.

Unfortunately, very little is known about what domains of life are most frequently affected by perfectionism—even though the measures to find out have been available for some time. Fifteen years ago, Rhéaume and colleagues developed a multidimensional perfectionism questionnaire, the Perfectionism Questionnaire (PQ; English version: Rhéaume, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1994). The English version of the PQ comprises three scales: one measuring perfectionistic tendencies, one measuring negative consequences of perfectionism, and one measuring the degree to which 22 domains of life are affected by perfectionism. Unfortunately, all published studies using the PQ either focused on the first two scales (e.g., Rhéaume, Ladouceur, & Freeston, 2000) or reported only the overall score of the third scale summarizing how all 22 domains together were affected by perfectionism (e.g., Coles, Frost, Heimberg, & Rhéaume, 2003), but not how the 22 domains were affected individually.

So far, our knowledge is limited to the findings from one interview study with a group of 37 perfectionists (Slaney & Ashby, 1996). The study contained one question asking participants about the domains of their lives most affected by perfectionism. Except for one, all participants mentioned their professional or academic work (36 participants). Else participants mentioned their relationships (21 participants), housework/cleaning (14), parenting (9), hobbies, social lives, and recreational pursuits (8 each), personal appearance (5), self-esteem (3), and athletics and religious life (1 each). Moreover, five participants mentioned domains that were classified as "Other." The findings suggest that the majority of perfectionists see their work as the domain most affected by their perfectionism, but other domains can be affected as well, most notably relationships.

#### The Present Research

The findings of Slaney and Ashby's (1996) study are important, but have limitations. First, the sample was large for an interview study, but small for a quantitative study so the rank order of the domains affected by perfectionism may not be reliable. Second, the sample comprised only participants selected for high levels of perfectionism so we do not know what domains are affected by perfectionism in unselected samples. Finally, if we discount the category "Other," Slaney and Ashby's interview study found 11 domains, whereas Rhéaume et al.'s (1994) PQ comprises 22 domains that may be affected by perfectionism. Consequently, it is conceivable that the interview study may have missed some important domains affected by perfectionism.

Against this background, the present study was conducted to provide a more comprehensive picture of what domains are affected by perfectionism using the PQ's 22 domains and investigating two larger unselected samples (university students, Internet users). The research had three aims. The first aim was to investigate the frequency with which domains of life are affected by perfectionism in different samples. The second aim was to investigate Flett and

Hewitt's (2002) contention that people high in perfectionism have more domains affected by perfectionism than people low in perfectionism and to explore which form of perfectionism affects more domains: self-oriented perfectionism or socially prescribed perfectionism. The third and final aim was to explore whether the frequency with which individual domains are affected by perfectionism is related to gender, age, and psychological well-being. Regarding gender, some findings of Slaney and Ashby's (1996) interview study suggest that there are differences between men and women. For example, 10 of the 21 women interviewed mentioned housework/cleaning as a domain affected by perfectionism (48%), whereas only 4 of the 16 men did (25%). Regarding age, developmental research has found evidence for a decrease in perfectionism with age (Landa & Bybee, 2007). Finally, regarding satisfaction with life, research has shown that perfectionistic thinking is associated with lower satisfaction with life (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Research differentiating positive and negative forms of perfectionism, however, has found that only negative forms of perfectionism are associated with lower satisfaction with life whereas positive forms may be associated with higher satisfaction (e.g., Gilman, Ashby, Sverko, Florell, & Varjas, 2005; Mitchelson & Burns, 1998; see Stoeber & Otto, 2006, for review). Consequently, we included gender, age, and satisfaction with life in the present study to explore possible relationships of those variables with the 22 domains of perfectionism.

# Method

## **Participants**

Two samples were recruited: a sample of university students (Sample 1) and a sample of Internet users (Sample 2). Sample 2 was recruited to have a more representative and more diverse sample compared to university student samples who are usually more uniform (e.g., regarding age, family status, and education) than Internet samples (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). All procedures were approved by the ethical committee of the first author's department.

Participants of Sample 1 were recruited at the first author's university from the Department of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme (RPS) website or from a desk in the entrance hall of the college. N = 109 students (14 male, 95 female) participated and completed all measures. Participants, indicating their age in years, were on average 21.1 years old (SD = 5.7 years, range = 18-60 years; two participants failed to indicate their age). Participants recruited via the RPS received course credits as compensation for participating, and participants recruited at the desk received a chocolate bar.

Sample 2. Participants of Sample 2 were recruited via the Internet where the study was announced as an survey on "Personal Standards in Early, Middle, and Later Adulthood" posted on six Internet websites (GreyPath, Hanover College Psychological Research on the Web, Lab-United, Online Psychology Research UK, Social Psychology Network Online Studies, and Web Experimental Psychology Lab). N=289 Internet users (79 male, 210 female) participated, completed all measures, and showed a unique Internet Protocol (IP) address or—if they showed the same IP address as another user—showed unique answers to the questionnaire's demographic questions (see Gosling et al., 2004, for details). Participants indicated their age on an 8-point scale measuring age in decades from "below 20 years" to "80+ years." Seventy-five participants (26%) indicated to be below 20 years, 133 (46%) to be 20-29 years, 38 (13%) 30-39 years, 27 (9%) 40-49 years, 11 (4%) 50-59 years, 3 (1%) 60-69 years, and 2 (1%) 70-79 years old. None indicated to be "80 years or older." Participants received no compensation for participating.

#### Measures

Perfectionism. To measure self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, Sample 1 completed the respective scales of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004) in full length: self-oriented perfectionism (15 items; e.g., "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself") and socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items; e.g., "People

expect nothing less than perfection of me"). Items were answered on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Because Internet studies need to present a shorter protocol to prevent drop out, Sample 2 completed shortened versions of the two scales with 8 items each (self-oriented perfectionism: items 8, 14, 15, 17, 20, 23, 28, 40; socially prescribed perfectionism: items 5, 13, 18, 21, 33, 35, 39, 44). Moreover, because reverse-worded items are prone to misresponse (Swain, Weathers, & Niedrich, 2008), all reverse-worded items (e.g., "Others will like me even if I don't excel at everything") were rephrased in the direction of the scale (e.g., "Others will like me only if I excel at everything"). Moreover, a shorter answer scale was used, namely a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." In both samples, self-oriented perfectionism (Sample 1: Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .90; Sample 2:  $\alpha$  = .88) and socially prescribed perfectionism scores (Sample 1:  $\alpha$  = .79; Sample 2:  $\alpha$  = .88) showed satisfactory reliability.

Satisfaction with life. To measure satisfaction with life, both samples completed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) which comprises five items asking participants about their life (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life"). Items were answered on a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (Sample 1:  $\alpha$  = .85; Sample 2:  $\alpha$  = .85).

Domains of perfectionism. To measure what domains participants were perfectionistic in, both samples were presented the 22 domains of life from the domains scale of the English version of the PQ (Rhéaume et al., 1994). This scale was chosen because it is the only available measure of domains of perfectionism. However, we made two small additions: we added the term "DIY" (do it yourself) to the category "Repairs (home handyman)" for participants not familiar with "home

handyman," and we added a "Other" to have a category for any other domain not listed in the PQ (see Table 2). The instructions read:

In this section, you will find a list of different areas in which people may be perfectionistic. If there are any areas in which you tend to be perfectionistic, please tick the respective box. If the area in which you are perfectionistic is not on the list, please tick "Other." If you are not perfectionistic in any area, please tick "None."

Answers were coded as 1 = ``yes'' (box ticked) and 0 = ``no'' (box not ticked). Following Coles et al. (2003), an overall domains of perfectionism score was computed by summing the yes answers across the 23 domains (including "Other"). In Sample 1, the mean score was 5.77 (SD = 3.13, range = 0-14); and in Sample 2, it was 5.58 (SD = 4.28, range = 0-20) indicating that the average participant was perfectionistic in 5-6 domains of life. In Sample 1, only 4 participants ticked "None" (4%); and in Sample 2, only 24 participants (8%).

#### Results

# Perfectionism

First, we inspected the correlations of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism with the overall domains of perfectionism score (see Table 1). As expected (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), both forms of perfectionism correlated with the number of domains in which participants reported being perfectionistic. Self-oriented perfectionism, however, showed a higher correlation than socially prescribed perfectionism (cf. Table 1). Moreover, when partial correlations were computed controlling for the correlation between the two forms of perfectionism, self-oriented perfectionism retained its significant positive correlations (Sample 1: pr = .43, p < .001; Sample 2: pr = .44, p < .001) whereas socially prescribed perfectionism ceased to show significant correlations with the overall domain score (Sample 1: pr = .18, ns; Sample 2: pr = .04, ns).

Next, we inspected the 22 individual domains computing relative frequencies (percentages) and ranks for all domains (see Table 2). Overall, student and Internet samples showed considerable agreement. In both samples, the domain in which participants were most often perfectionistic was work, corroborating Slaney and Ashby's (1996) finding that work is the most prevalent domain affected by perfectionism. Moreover, the Spearman rank correlation between the ranks in the student sample and those in the Internet sample for the 22 domains (excluding the equivocal category "Other") was rho = .78 indicating overall high agreement with respect to what domains people were likely to be perfectionistic in. After work, the most prevalent domains across samples were studies (ranking 3rd in the student sample and 2nd in the Internet sample), bodily hygiene (ranking 2nd and 4th), spelling (7th and 3rd), and presentation of documents (6th and 5th). Nonetheless, there were some marked differences between the samples. For example, social relationships ranked 5th in the student sample, but only 12th in the Internet sample; and time management ranked 6th in the Internet sample, but only 14th in the student sample—indicating that the relative importance of perfectionism in some domains of life may show considerable differences between samples.

Next, we inspected how self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism were correlated with being perfectionistic in the different domains (see Table 2). Focusing on the partial correlations, self-oriented perfectionism in the student sample showed positive correlations with being perfectionistic in work, studies, presentation of documents, correspondence/mail, oral presentation, and orderliness whereas socially prescribed perfectionism showed a positive correlation only with being perfectionistic in physical appearance. In the Internet sample, which was the larger and thus statistically more powerful sample, self-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with nearly all domains—except bodily hygiene, way of speaking, leisure activities, sports, and repairs. In contrast, socially-prescribed perfectionism showed significant

positive correlations only with being perfectionistic in way of speaking, leisure activities, and repairs. Thus, results mirrored the findings with the overall score: in most domains, being perfectionistic was correlated with self-oriented perfectionism, whereas only few correlations with socially prescribed perfectionism emerged, suggesting that perfectionism in most domains of life is internally motivated.

# Gender and Age

Gender (coded as 1 = female, 0 = male) showed no significant correlations with the overall domains of perfectionism score in both samples (see Table 1). Moreover, there was no agreement between the two samples in any of the individual domains. In the student sample, women were less often perfectionistic in spelling (r = -.29, p < .01), way of speaking (r = -.24), and investments/purchases (r = -.22, both p < .05) than men. Note, however, that the student sample contained only few males (14 of 109 participants) so the findings need to be regarded with caution. In the Internet sample, women were more often perfectionistic in spelling (r = .14), hygiene (r = .12), dress (r = .13), orderliness (r = .14, all p < .05), and time management (r = .18, p < .01). Moreover, as expected from Slaney and Ashby (1996), women were more often perfectionistic in domestic chores (r = .16, p < .01).

Whereas age showed the expected negative correlation with self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism in the Internet sample (cf. Landa & Bybee, 2007), it showed no significant correlations with the overall domains of perfectionism score in either sample (see Table 1). However, when individual domains were regarded, age was positively correlated with being perfectionistic in children's education in both samples (Student sample: r = .19; Internet sample: r = .12, both p < .05). Moreover, in the Internet sample, age was positively correlated with being perfectionistic in presentation of documents (r = .13, p < .05) and negatively with

being perfectionistic in social relationships (r = -.13), romantic relationships (r = -.13, both p < .05), and sports (r = -.21, p < .001).

Satisfaction With Life

In both samples, socially prescribed perfectionism showed a significant negative correlation with satisfaction with life corroborating previous findings that negative forms of perfectionism are associated with lower subjective well-being (e.g., Mitchelson & Burns, 1998). In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism and the overall score of domains of perfectionism showed no significant correlations with satisfaction with life (see Table 1). When inspecting the individual domains, no domain showed significant correlations with satisfaction with life in the student sample. In the Internet sample, however, two domains showed significant positive correlations with satisfaction with life: Being perfectionistic in sports (r = .13) and being perfectionistic in time management (r = .14, both p < .05) were both associated with higher satisfaction with life.

# Discussion

Using two samples (a sample of university students and a sample of Internet users), the present research investigated the prevalence with which people are perfectionistic in 22 domains of life, what the most prevalent domains of perfectionism were, and how being perfectionistic in different domains related to perfectionism, gender, age, and satisfaction with life. Across the two samples, there were three converging findings. First, work and studies were the domains in which most people were perfectionistic, as was expected from Slaney and Ashby (1996). Unexpectedly, bodily hygiene was a domain that ranked high in both samples. This is a new and surprising finding because bodily hygiene is a domain that perfectionism research has not yet explored. Moreover, being perfectionistic in bodily hygiene did not show any correlations with self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionism suggesting that these two forms of perfectionism do not capture an important domain of life where many people are perfectionistic.

Second, as the correlations between perfectionism and the overall domains of perfectionism score demonstrated, higher levels of perfectionism were associated with being perfectionist in a greater number of domains. Whereas this does not confirm Flett and Hewitt's (2002) claim that extreme perfectionists want to be perfect in all aspects of their lives, the finding shows that most perfectionists are perfectionistic in multiple domains—and the greater their perfectionism, the more domains people report being perfectionistic in. Moreover, the present study found that it was self-oriented perfectionism, and not socially prescribed perfectionism, that showed consistent and unique correlations with the overall number of domains of perfectionism and with most of the individual domains. This finding indicates that, in most domains, being perfectionistic was internally motivated, not externally motivated. Third, being perfectionistic, overall and in individual domains, was largely independent of gender and age (except that older participants were more often perfectionistic in children's education). Moreover, being perfectionistic in a greater number of domains was not related to lower satisfaction with life. On the contrary, being perfectionistic in sports and time management was associated with higher satisfaction of life in the Internet sample, suggesting that being perfectionistic in these domains may tap positive aspects of perfectionism (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

The present findings have some limitations. First, the student sample contained only few males. Whereas this reflects the predominance of female students in and around psychology departments, future studies should aim for student samples with more males to have greater statistical power for investigating whether students show gender differences in the domains of life affected by perfectionism. Second, the present study focused on Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model investigating how self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism were related to being perfectionistic across and within different domains of life. Consequently, future studies should consider other models and use other multidimensional

measures of perfectionism (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) to further our knowledge on how different forms, dimensions, and aspects of perfectionism are related to different domains of perfectionism. Finally, regarding subjective well-being, the present research included only a global measure of satisfaction with life. Because being perfectionistic in specific domains may not affect global satisfaction, but satisfaction in specific domains of life, future studies on domains of perfectionism may profit from including multidimensional measures of satisfaction with life (see Gilman et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, the present findings have important implications for the understanding of perfectionism and its assessment. First, the findings indicate that certain domains are more likely to be associated with perfectionism than others, with work and studies being the domains most often associated with perfectionism. Moreover, whereas work and studies were the predominant domains in the present samples, this may be different in other samples who have more specific interests such as athletes who are mainly interested in their sport (Dunn et al., 2005).

Consequently, researchers interested in perfectionism in specific domains of life may profit from using domain-specific measures of perfectionism (e.g., Dunn et al., 2006) or adapting instructions and items to capture perfectionism in the targeted domain (e.g., Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Some extreme perfectionists may strive to be perfect in all domains of life, but most perfectionists have specific domains where they are perfectionistic—and other domains where they are not.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The model differentiates a third form, other-oriented perfectionism. Because its status within perfectionism theory is unclear (Enns & Cox, 2002), it was disregarded in the present research.

Table 1

Domains of Perfectionism: Correlations with Perfectionism and Satisfaction with Life

	Correlation									
Samples and variables	1	2	3	4	5					
Student sample ( $N = 109$ )										
1. Domains of perfectionism										
2. Gender	02									
3. Age <sup>a</sup>	10	05								
4. Self-oriented perfectionism	.53***	.13	.00							
5. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.38***	.09	.01	.46***						
6. Satisfaction with life	07	10	23*	.05	20*					
Internet sample ( $N = 289$ )										
1. Domains of perfectionism										
2. Gender	.11									
3. Age	06	02								
4. Self-oriented perfectionism	.47***	03	14*							
5. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.17***	06	15*	.30***						
6. Satisfaction with life	.08	.04	.02	.02	33***					

*Note.* Domains of perfectionism = number of domains participants reported being perfectionistic in (sum of "yes" answers across the 23 domains including "Other"; see Table 2). Gender was coded as 1 = female, 0 = male.

 $<sup>^{</sup>a}n = 107.$ 

<sup>\*</sup>p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, two-tailed.

Table 2

Domains of Perfectionism: Percentage of Participants Being Perfectionistic and Correlations with Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP) and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism (SPP)

	Student sample ( $N = 109$ )							Internet sample ( $N = 289$ )						
Domain <sup>a</sup>	#	%	SOP r	SPP r	SOP pr	SPP pr	#	0/0	SOP r	SPP r	SOP pr	SPP pr		
Work	1	58	.54***	.31**	.47***	.08	1	53	.48***	.13*	.46***	01		
Bodily hygiene	2	54	.03	01	.03	02	4	36	.12*	.03	.11	01		
Studies	3	43	.58***	.26**	.54***	.02	2	41	.42***	.11	.41***	02		
Physical appearance	4	40	.15	.24*	.05	.19*	8	27	.23***	.11	.21***	.04		
Social relationships	5	38	.07	.08	.04	.05	12	22	.20***	.15**	.16**	.10		
Presentation of documents	6	37	.49***	.22*	.45***	02	5	34	.27***	.04	.27***	05		
Spelling	7	36	.14	.16	.07	.11	3	37	.17**	01	.18**	07		
Dress	8	33	.10	.19*	.01	.16	9	26	.25***	.12*	.22***	.05		
Way of speaking	9	28	.14	.15	.08	.10	7	30	.13*	.21***	.07	.18**		
Romantic relationships	9	28	.09	.04	.09	01	11	23	.24***	.13*	.21***	.07		
Eating habits	11	25	.09	.14	.02	.13	20	13	.29***	.12*	.26***	.03		
Health	12	23	01	.04	03	.05	16	19	.23***	.11	.21***	.04		
Domestic chores (cleanliness)	13	18	01	06	.02	07	10	24	.17**	03	.19**	09		
Time management (punctuality)	14	17	.14	.12	.09	.07	6	33	.21***	01	.22***	07		
Correspondence/mail	14	17	.34***	.26**	.25**	.13	18	15	.16**	.05	.15*	.00		

(Table 2 continued)												
Leisure activities	16	17	.10	.09	.08	.04	14	21	.14*	.15*	.10	.12*
Oral presentation	16	17	.28**	.20*	.22*	.08	15	21	.25***	.02	.25***	06
Sports	16	17	.10	.11	.05	.07	17	18	.10	.08	.08	.05
Investments/purchases	19	11	.14	.07	.12	.01	19	14	.19**	.04	.19**	02
Orderliness	20	6	.20*	.01	.22*	<b>1</b> 0	12	22	.24***	01	.25***	09
Children's education	20	6	.10	.12	.05	.09	21	11	.14*	.02	.15*	03
Repairs (home handyman, DIY)	22	3	05	14	.02	13	22	7	.04	.13*	.00	.12*
Other		5	.08	.04	.07	.00		11	.02	.09	.00	.09

Note. r = bivariate correlation, pr = partial correlation (SOP controlling for SPP, SPP controlling for SOP). # = rank (percent ascending; excluding "Other"). % = percent of participants answering "yes" to the question whether they were perfectionistic in this domain.

aDIY = do it yourself; Other = any other domain.

<sup>\*</sup>p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, two-tailed.