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Perfectionism

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Title of Entry

Perfectionism.

Synonyms

Not applicable.

Definition

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by a striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations and beliefs that others expect perfection.

Introduction

Whereas clinical psychology regards perfectionism as a personality disposition associated with psychopathology and mental health problems, research in personality and individual differences found perfectionism to be a multidimensional disposition that has adaptive and maladaptive aspects. The present entry presents an overview of the two-factor model of perfectionism—differentiating perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns as two superordinate dimensions of multidimensional perfectionism—and of how the two factors show different relations with motivation and performance. Furthermore, the entry introduces other-oriented perfectionism as a “dark” form of perfectionism separate from perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concern. The entry concludes with a discussion of open questions and directions for future research.

Main Text**The Two-Factor Model of Perfectionism**

Perfectionism is an important personality disposition that pervades all areas of life, particularly work and educational activities (school, university), but may also affect one’s physical appearance and interpersonal relationships (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Early psychological conceptions regarded perfectionism as one-dimensional. In the 1990s, however, researchers showed that perfectionism is better conceptualized as a multidimensional disposition (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Moreover, when comparing different conceptions of multidimensional perfectionism, researchers found that two factors representing superordinate dimensions needed to be differentiated: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Perfectionistic strivings (also called personal standards perfectionism) capture aspects of perfectionism reflecting perfectionistic personal standards and a self-oriented striving for perfection. In comparison, perfectionistic concerns (also called evaluative concerns perfectionism) capture aspects of perfectionism reflecting concerns over mistakes, doubts about actions, fears of others' negative evaluations if not perfect, and feelings of discrepancy between one's expectations and performance. The importance of differentiating perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns lies in the fact that the two dimensions show different, sometimes opposite, relations with personality characteristics and indicators of psychological adjustment and maladjustment. Perfectionistic concerns consistently show positive relations with characteristics, processes, and outcomes that are considered undesirable or maladaptive (e.g., neuroticism, avoidant coping, negative affect). In contrast, perfectionistic strivings often show positive relations with characteristics, processes, and outcomes that are considered desirable or adaptive (e.g., conscientiousness, active coping, positive affect). This is in particular the case when the overlap between perfectionistic striving and perfectionistic concerns is controlled statistically so the unique relations of the two superordinate dimensions can be examined (R. W. Hill, Huelsman, & Araujo, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Indicators of Perfectionistic Strivings and Concerns

There are various measures of multidimensional perfectionism, and each has different dimensions which can be confusing for anyone without a detailed knowledge of the literature. The three measures that are most widely used are the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990), the Hewitt-Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), and the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). All three contain subscales that are indicators of perfectionistic strivings and concerns. The FMPS contains six subscales capturing personal standards, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, parental criticism, and organization. Personal standards are an indicator of perfectionistic strivings, and concern over mistakes (sometimes combined with doubts about actions) is an indicator of perfectionistic concerns. The other subscales capture other aspects of perfectionism—parental expectations and parental criticism capture developmental antecedents of perfectionism (Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2013) and organization captures an order factor separate from perfectionistic strivings and

perfectionistic concerns (Kim, Chen, MacCann, Carlo, & Kleitman, 2015)—and should not be used as indicators of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. The HF-MPS contains three subscales capturing self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are personally important. Other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. And socially prescribed perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Self-oriented perfectionism is an indicator of perfectionistic strivings, and socially prescribed perfectionism an indicator of perfectionistic concerns. Other-oriented perfectionism presents a separate dimension with unique features (as detailed further below) and should not be used as an indicator of perfectionistic strivings. The APS-R also contains three subscales: high standards, discrepancy, and order. High standards capture perfectionistic personal standards, discrepancy captures negative feelings of incongruity between one's expectations and performance, and order captures a preference for order and neatness. High standards are an indicator of perfectionistic strivings, and discrepancy is an indicator of perfectionistic concerns. Order, however, should not be used as an indicator of perfectionistic strivings because, like FMPS organization, it captures a separate order factor. (For further multidimensional measures of perfectionism and information about which of their subscales are indicators of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, see Stoeber & Damian, 2016.) Even though the indicators each have specific aspects, it is helpful to regard personal standards, socially prescribed perfectionism, and high standards as indicators of perfectionistic strivings and concerns over mistakes, socially prescribed perfectionism, and discrepancy as indicators of perfectionistic concerns to understand the often complex perfectionism literature, particularly as the indicators show very similar patterns of relations with desirable/adaptive versus undesirable/maladaptive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., A. P. Hill & Curran, in press; Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012).

Relations with Motivation and Performance

Because there are reviews of how perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns relate to clinically relevant characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., Lo & Abbott, 2013), this entry focuses on two aspects of human behavior that have relevance for normal everyday function: motivation and performance. Motivation is a key aspect of human behavior (Weiner, 1992), and

when regarding perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, the main aspect is achievement motivation. According to traditional approaches, achievement motivation is investigated by examining achievement motives, that is, stable individual differences in learned, affectively charged anticipatory responses to achievement situations that energize and direct people's behaviors. Research on achievement motivation differentiates between two basic motives: hope of success (motivating people to achieve success) and fear of failure (motivating people to avoid failure). Perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns show different relations with the two motives. Studies examining student and athlete samples found that perfectionistic strivings show positive relations with hope of success (and sometimes negative relations with fear of failure). In contrast, perfectionistic concerns show positive relations with fear of failure (see Stoeber, 2011, for a review).

Going beyond traditional approaches, contemporary approaches to achievement motivation focus on achievement goal orientations and investigate differences in why individuals are motivated to achieve (Elliot, 1997). Research on achievement goal orientation has introduced a number of important differentiations (e.g., ego vs. task goals, mastery vs. performance goals), but for perfectionism research the most important differentiation is that between approach goals and avoidance goals. Approach goals reflect the motivation to demonstrate normative competence (e.g., striving to do better than others) and to achieve absolute or intrapersonal competence (e.g., striving to master a task). In contrast, avoidance goals reflect the motivation to avoid demonstrating normative incompetence (e.g., striving to avoid doing worse than others) and experiencing absolute or intrapersonal incompetence (e.g., striving to avoid doing worse than one has done previously). Studies examining student and athlete samples found that perfectionistic strivings mainly show positive relations with approach goals, particularly when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled statistically. In contrast, perfectionistic concerns mainly show positive relations with avoidance goals (see again Stoeber, 2011). According to the dual process theory of perfectionism (Slade & Owens, 1998), approach and avoidance is an important distinction for understanding differences between positive aspects and negative aspects of perfectionism because positive aspects (such as those contained in perfectionistic strivings) are suggested to drive approach behaviors whereas negative aspects (such as those contained in perfectionistic concerns) drive avoidance behaviors. Taken together, the findings from research on

perfectionism and achievement motivation largely confirm this view. Perfectionistic strivings are predominantly associated with approach-oriented aspects of achievement motivation (hope of success, approach goals) whereas perfectionistic concerns are predominantly associated with avoidance-oriented aspects (fear of failure, avoidance goals).

But are the differences in achievement motivation that perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns show also reflected in performance differences? They are, but mainly for perfectionistic strivings. Most studies on perfectionism and performance have focused on how perfectionism is related to students' exam performance, grades, and grade point average (GPA). The overwhelming majority of the studies shows that perfectionistic strivings are positively associated with academic performance: Students with higher levels of perfectionistic strivings show higher exam performance, higher individual grades, and a higher GPA than students with lower levels of perfectionistic strivings. In contrast, the relations of perfectionistic concerns with academic performance are less clear. Most studies did not find significant negative correlations of perfectionistic concerns with academic performance, but some studies found small negative correlations. However, the majority of these findings are from studies that used APS-R discrepancy as an indicator of perfectionistic concerns. Consequently, the findings of perfectionistic concerns' negative associations with academic performance may be specific to negative feelings of incongruity between one's perfectionistic expectations and actual performance and may not generalize to other indicators of perfectionistic concerns (see Stoeber, 2011, 2012, for reviews).

Fewer studies have investigated perfectionism and performance outside academic settings, but the general pattern of findings is the same. Perfectionistic strivings usually show positive relations with indicators of performance whereas perfectionistic concerns usually do not show any negative relations. Examples range from performance in simple laboratory tasks (Stroop color naming task, letter detection task), to performance in aptitude tests (reasoning, work samples), to sports performance (basketball training, triathlon competitions) and performance in music competitions (see again Stoeber, 2011, 2012). Consequently, it is safe to assume that the positive relations that perfectionistic strivings show with performance are not restricted to academic performance, but generalize to other indicators of individual performance and areas that go beyond educational settings, and they can be observed in the lab and in the field.

Perfectionistic Strivings: Some Caveats

Because perfectionistic strivings often show positive relations with desirable/adaptive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (or negative relations with undesirable/maladaptive characteristics, processes, and outcomes) even when their overlap with perfectionistic concerns is not controlled statistically, it is tempting to regard perfectionistic strivings as adaptive, positive, healthy, or functional. There are, however, some caveats. First, perfectionistic strivings typically show sizeable positive correlations with perfectionistic concerns, meaning that most people who are high in perfectionistic strivings have elevated levels of perfectionistic concerns, and perfectionistic concerns have shown consistent positive relations with undesirable/maladaptive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (and negative relations with desirable/adaptive characteristics, processes, and outcomes). Second, perfectionistic strivings may show positive relations with undesirable/maladaptive characteristics even when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled statistically (e.g., Gotwals et al., 2012). Furthermore, perfectionistic strivings have been associated with inefficiency. People high in perfectionistic strivings may take longer to complete a task than people low in perfectionistic strivings without showing a better task performance (Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). In addition, perfectionistic strivings have been associated with workaholism. People high in perfectionistic strivings may work more excessively and compulsively than people low in perfectionistic strivings because they have internalized a ruthless work ethic and find it difficult not to work (Stoeber & Damian, 2016). Therefore one should not assume that perfectionistic strivings are always adaptive (and hence should avoid labels like “adaptive perfectionism”), but instead regard the adaptiveness of perfectionistic strivings as an empirical question and examine when they are adaptive and for whom (cf. Gaudreau, 2013).

Beyond the Two-Factor Model: Other-Oriented Perfectionism

Furthermore, it is important to note that there are dimensions of perfectionism that are not captured by the two-factor model of perfectionism. A prime example is other-oriented perfectionism. People high in other-oriented perfectionism do not expect perfection of themselves, but expect others to be perfect—and are highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations. Even though other-oriented perfectionism was first described over 25 years ago (Hewitt & Flett, 1990) and has shown a profile of relations different from perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991; R. W. Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach,

1997), other-oriented perfectionism was long assumed to be just another aspect of perfectionistic strivings (Frost et al., 1993). Recently, however, there has been a reinvigorated interest in other-oriented perfectionism as an important dimension of perfectionism in its own right, separate from perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (see Stoeber, 2014, for a review). Moreover, research investigating how other-oriented perfectionism differs from other forms of perfectionism found other-oriented perfectionism to show a unique profile of relations with personality traits, social goals, social value orientations, and other individual differences (Stoeber, 2014, 2015). As regards personality traits, other-oriented perfectionism was found to be unrelated to conscientiousness and neuroticism, but instead showed negative relations with agreeableness, indicating that people high in other-oriented perfectionism show elevated levels of social antagonism. Furthermore, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with all three of the dark triad personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. As regards social goals and social value orientations, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with dominance goals and negative relations with prosocial goals. Moreover, in a resource distribution task, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with individualistic and competitive value orientations, and a negative relation with prosocial value orientations. Finally, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with aggressive humor and self-interest, and a lack of other-interest. Consequently, other-oriented perfectionism appears to be a “dark” form of perfectionism associated with narcissistic and antisocial traits (Stoeber, 2014; see also Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015).

Open Questions

Whereas perfectionism research has made tremendous progress in the past 25 years since the emergence of multidimensional models of perfectionism, there are two big questions where we are still lacking satisfactory answers. One question is how perfectionism develops. Twin studies suggest that individual differences in perfectionism are partly inherited with heritability estimates ranging from 23 to 54% depending on what dimensions of perfectionism are regarded (Iranzo-Tatay et al., 2015). These heritability estimates leave plenty of room for environmental factors (or interactions with environmental factors) to play a key role in the development of perfectionism, such as parental rearing styles and social modeling (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002). Studies with adolescents have shown that parental psychological control and perceived parental

expectations to be perfect predict increases in perfectionistic concerns, but what environmental factors may predict increases in perfectionistic strivings is still unknown (cf. Stoeber, Edbrooke-Childs, & Damian, in press). The other big question concerns the longitudinal consequences of perfectionism. Most studies investigating the longitudinal consequences of perfectionism found perfectionistic concerns to predict increases in psychological maladjustment over time, but—except for one study showing perfectionistic strivings to predict longitudinal decreases in athlete burnout (Madigan, Stoeber, & Passfield, 2015)—the longitudinal consequences of perfectionistic strivings, and whether they are adaptive or maladaptive, are still unknown. Perfectionism is a prevalent personality disposition that may affect all areas of people’s life and how they feel about themselves and others. We know, however, much more about the correlates of perfectionism than about the antecedents and consequences. Consequently, future research on perfectionism needs to focus on longitudinal studies examining the development of perfectionism in children and adolescents and longitudinal studies examining short-term and long-term consequences of perfectionism to ensure we make further progress in our understanding of what perfectionism is, what perfectionism does, and where perfectionism comes from.

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