The relationships between perfectionism and aggression among adolescents

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relations between perfectionism and aggression in a sample of 445 high school students. The Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992) were used for data collection. The sub dimensions of the APS-R were high standards, order (adaptive perfectionism), and discrepancy (maladaptive perfectionism). The sub dimensions of the BPAQ were anger, physical aggression, hostility and verbal aggression. As hypothesized, the regression analyses revealed that, discrepancy was the positive predictor of anger, physical aggression and hostility while order was the negative predictor of anger, physical and verbal aggression. As predicted, high standards were found to be the negative predictor of hostility. However, unexpectedly, high standards were found to be the positive predictor of verbal aggression.

Keywords: Maladaptive perfectionism; adaptive perfectionism; aggression; adolescence; high school.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is described as ‘striving for flawlessness’ (Flett & Hewitt, 2002) and the negative correlates and consequences of perfectionism have been emphasized by researchers (Benk, 2006; Dinç, 2006; Erözkan, 2005; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblat, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Hewitt, Flett & Ediger, 1996; Oral, 1999; Yorulmaz, 2002). Conversely, some authors (e.g., Adler, 1956) believed that having high personal standards was necessary for positive mental health. Many researchers argue that perfectionism must be considered as a multidimensional, rather than unidimensional, construct and a distinction must be made between neurotic perfectionism, which is maladaptive and normal perfectionism, which is adaptive (Frost et al., 1990; Hamachek, 1978; Kirdök & Akbaş, 2005). According to Hamachek, normal perfectionism allows for the setting of realistic goals and feelings of satisfaction when these goals are achieved. Neurotic perfectionism, on the other hand, involves the setting of unrealistically high standards and the inability to accept mistakes. The neurotic aspect of perfectionism may be driven by the fear of failure, rather than the desire to achieve, and may lead to negative feelings about oneself due to the inability to achieve true perfection (Mitzman, Slade, & Dewey, 1994).

The results of research have supported the multidimensional conceptualization of perfectionism. For example, adaptive perfectionism has been found to be related to positive affect (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2002; Terry-Short, Glynn Owens, Slade & Dewey, 1995). Conversely, maladaptive perfectionism has been found to be related to negative affectivity, such as anxiety and depression (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Blatt, Zuroff, Quinlan, & Pilkonis, 1996; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt, Caelian, Flett, Sherry, Collins & Flynn, 2002).

The Multi-dimensional Perfectionism Scales (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990 and HMPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) were adapted to Turkish culture (Dinç, 2001; Özbay & Taşdemir, 2003; Kirdök & Akbaş, 2005). The associations between perfectionism and other personality variables such as self-concept (Bencik, 2006; Taşdemir, 2003); problem solving skills, locus of control, test anxiety and, self-efficacy in gifted adolescents (Taşdemir; 2003); locus of control in candidate teachers (Cırıcı, 2003); helpless explanatory styles (Selişik, 2003) were the focus of research in Turkey. Although the last years have seen an interest in
perfectionism in Turkish literature, there is little empirical research into the possible associations between adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism and other personality variables. Özgüngör (2003) found that the organizational dimension of perfectionism (adaptive perfectionism) is related to the learning style of the student goal orientation while concern over mistakes and parental criticism (maladaptive perfectionism) are related to performance avoidance that is highly predictive of the students’ unwanted academic behavior. Gençöz and Dinç (2006) argue that undergraduates whose high standards for themselves and/or for others, experiencing negative life achievement-related life events may be crucial for the potential symptoms of depression. To my knowledge there is not a study examining the associations between adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism perfectionism and aggression on Turkish adolescents.

Likewise, the relations between perfectionism and the conceptually related terms to aggression such as hostility and anger have seldom been the focus of empirical studies in Western literature. Frost et al. (1990) found relations between hostility and some maladaptive aspects of perfectionism such as concern over mistakes and doubts about action. Hewitt and Flett (1991) found moderate correlations between anger and socially prescribed perfectionism (feeling that others place unreasonable standards of one’s behavior; maladaptive) but weak correlations between anger and self oriented perfectionism (setting high goals for oneself; adaptive). However, the results of Saboonchi and Lundh (2003) showed that trait anger was associated with self oriented perfectionism, rather than socially prescribed perfectionism. Therefore, it can be argued that little is known how perfectionism is related to aggression.

Although hostility and anger are conceptually related to aggression, these terms are not synonymously used in research related to aggression. One of the most frequently used instruments for assessment of the dimensions of aggression was developed using factor analytic methods by Bush and Perry (1992). The final version of the Bush-Perry Aggression Questionnaire consists of four dimensions: Physical and verbal aggression representing the behavioral component, anger the affective component and hostility the cognitive component (Collani & Werner, 2005).

The fore-mentioned studies examining the associations between perfectionism and anger and/or hostility were carried using the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scales. Although the factor analyses studies of these scales supported the higher order two-factor structure, labeled adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, Slaney et al., (2001) argue that the essential nature of the maladaptive factor is harder to distinguish and it is based on assumed causes, or the resultant effects of being perfectionistic rather than a definition of perfectionism itself. Thus, these authors developed the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R) which meets the following criteria: (a) It should clearly specify the variables that define perfectionism as discriminated from variables that are seen as causal or the effects of being perfectionistic; (b) it should pay close attention to the empirically supported negative and positive aspects of perfectionism; (c) it should be related to ideas about perfectionism as exemplified in the dictionary definitions; and (d) it should be empirically sound. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses yielded a three-factor measure of perfectionism specifically, high standards, order, and discrepancy (Slaney et al., 2001). Construct validity studies also showed that high standards and order were adaptive forms of perfectionism while discrepancy was the maladaptive form of perfectionism.

Although the view that perfectionism underlies a variety of psychological problems has been challenged, majority of the researchers continue to focus on the maladaptive dimension of perfectionism (Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2002). There is lack of empirical research exploring the relations of adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism (using APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) to aggression in high school adolescents.

The aim of the present study, was to examine the relations between adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism and aggression among Turkish high school adolescents using APS-R and Bush-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. In the present study, it was hypothesized that dimensions of perfectionism (discrepancy, high standards and order) would be related to aggression: (a) Discrepancy (maladaptive perfectionism) would be the positive predictor of dimensions of aggression, namely anger, physical aggression, verbal aggression and hostility (b) High standards (adaptive perfectionism) would be the negative predictor of dimensions of aggression, namely anger, physical aggression, verbal aggression and hostility (c) Order (adaptive perfectionism) would be the negative predictor of dimensions of aggression, namely anger, physical aggression, verbal aggression and hostility.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were all ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade pupils of randomly selected Anatolian High School. There were 205 females and 240 males, 133 ninth graders, 164 tenth graders, and 148 eleventh graders. The students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years.

2.2. Procedure

Groups of students completed the questionnaires during a class period under the supervision of the school psychological counselor. In order to standardize the procedures, the questionnaires were administered to all participants in the following order: the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) and Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). The participants also answered the questions regarding their sex, grade level and age. The permission for the participation of the students was obtained from the provincial directorate of national education and the school principle. There was a guarantee of confidentiality in relation to parents, teachers, and fellow students. The students participated voluntarily.
2.3. Instruments

Perfectionism was measured by using a Turkish version of the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001), which consists of 23 items. Participants respond to the items using a five point Likert scale (ranging from 1= “strongly disagree” to 5= “strongly agree”). The APS-R has three factors: The high standards factor, order factor and discrepancy factor. There are 7 items indicating the high standards factor (e.g., “If you don’t expect much out of yourself you will never succeed”) and, “I expect the best from myself,” and 12 items indicating the discrepancy factor (e.g., “Doing my best never seems to be enough.” and “I am never satisfied with my accomplishments.”) and 4 items indicating the order factor (e.g., “Neatness is important to me.” and “I am an orderly person.”). The scale was translated from English into Turkish by the researcher, and the Turkish version was back-translated into English by a colleague with a Ph. D. degree in English Language Teaching. Small dissimilarities between the original scale and the back-translated version were resolved by the researcher and the back-translator. A principle-axis factor analysis revealed three factors with eigen values (5.77, 4.59 and 3.04), accounting for 58.28 of the total variance. It was concluded that the underlying factor structure of the original scale was supported. Alpha reliabilities for the total scale, high standards factor, order factor, and discrepancy factor are .88, .90, .89, and .88 respectively in the present study. It was concluded that the Turkish version of the scale had sufficient reliability and construct validity (Ongen, in press).

Aggression was measured by using a Turkish version of the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992), which consists of 29 items. The participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1=“this is a very bad description of me” to 5=“this is a very good description of me”. The BPAQ has four factors: Anger, Physical Aggression, Hostility and Verbal Aggression. There are 9 items indicating anger factor (e.g., “I have trouble controlling my temper” and, “Sometimes I fly off the handle for no good reason.”) and 10 items indicating the physical aggression factor (e.g., “Given enough provocation I may hit another person.” and “If I have to resort to violence to protect my rights, I will.”) and 7 items indicating the hostility factor (e.g., “I am suspicious of overly friendly strangers.” and “I am sometimes eaten up with jealousy.”) and three items indicating the verbal aggression factor (e.g., “I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them”, and “When people annoy me I may tell them what I think of them.”). The Turkish adaptation study of the scale was conducted following same steps for the present study. A principle-axis factor analysis revealed four factors with eigen values (7.27, 2.32, 1.89 and 1.74), accounting for 45.59 of the total variance. It was concluded that the underlying factor structure of the original scale was supported. Alpha reliabilities for the total scale, anger, physical aggression, hostility and verbal aggression factor, are .88, .83, .83, 73 and .73 respectively in the present study. It was concluded that the Turkish version of the scale had sufficient reliability and construct validity.

3. Results

I conducted four separate multiple regression analyses for the whole sample using the high standards subscale, the order subscale and the discrepancy subscale scores of the APS-R as independent variables and the BPAQ subscale scores (the anger, the physical aggression, the hostility and the verbal aggression subscales) as the dependent variables.

The descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables included in the study are presented in Table 1. The zero order correlations among discrepancy and all dimensions of aggression; anger, physical aggression, hostility and verbal aggression are positive and significant. The zero order correlations among order and anger, physical and verbal aggression are negative and significant while high standards are only positively and significantly correlated to verbal aggression. The results of the multiple regression analyses testing the effects of discrepancy, order and high standards on dimensions of aggression are given in Table 2. As reported in Table 2, standardized beta coefficients showed that discrepancy was statistically significant positive predictor of aggression accept for the verbal aggression. Discrepancy scores explained 37% of the variance for anger, 37% of the variance for physical aggression and, 52% of the variance for hostility. On the other hand, standardized beta coefficients showed that order was statistically significant negative predictor of aggression accept for hostility. Order scores explained 21% of the variance for anger, 24% of the variance for physical aggression and 20% of the variance for verbal aggression. Standardized beta coefficients showed that high standards were the negative predictor of hostility but positive predictor of verbal aggression. High standards explained 11% of the variance for hostility and 19% of the variance for verbal aggression.

<p>|Table 1 Correlations and Descriptive Statistics |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Anger</td>
<td>21.40</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Physical Aggression</td>
<td>23.43</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hostility</td>
<td>17.06</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>10.43</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Discrepancy</td>
<td>30.58</td>
<td>9.94</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. High Standards</td>
<td>24.66</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Order</td>
<td>11.82</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. N=445
P<.01, one tailed
This study was designed to investigate the relations between adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism and aggression among 445 Turkish high school students. It was hypothesized that maladaptive perfectionism namely, discrepancy would predict all dimensions of aggression. The correlations between discrepancy and anger, physical aggression and hostility are moderate and as hypothesized, discrepancy was found to be a positive predictor of aggression in most aggression dimensions except for the verbal aggression. The assumptions of some theories of anger can be given as the possible explanation of this finding. Cognitive theories of anger (Stein & Levine, 1990) assume that aggression occurs as the result of the frustration that is experienced when a desired goal cannot be attained or a desired performance cannot be accomplished even though the individual firmly believes that it can be. The central and defining negative aspect of perfectionism, discrepancy is defined as the perceived difference between the standards one has for oneself and one’s actual performance. In fact, it was observed that, the predictive value of discrepancy is stronger for the cognitive component of aggression namely, hostility than for other dimensions of aggression.

The central and defining positive/adaptive aspects of perfectionism are order and high standards. It was hypothesized that order and high standards would be the negative predictors of anger, physical aggression, hostility and verbal aggression. As hypothesized, order was found to be the negative predictor of anger, physical aggression and verbal aggression but it did not predict hostility. As hypothesized, high standards were found to be the negative predictor of hostility. However, high standards neither positively nor negatively predicted anger or physical aggression. This finding is not consistent with Saboonchi and Lundh’s study (2003) that unexpectedly associates self-oriented perfectionism (setting high standards for oneself) with anger. However, unexpectedly high standards were found to be positive predictor of verbal aggression. One possible explanation of this finding may be that the adolescents, on whom there is much pressure to succeed, may develop exaggerated high standards giving rise to verbal aggression. Another possibility explanation is that the verbal aggression scale involves items that do not represent verbal aggression in the Turkish culture. Rather, they are an accepted method for adolescents to openly express their disagreements in the Turkish culture (e.g., “I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them.”)

The findings of this study offer the first empirical evidence of the relationship between adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism and aggression among Turkish adolescents. It suggests that the maladaptive form of perfectionism namely, discrepancy increases aggression while one of the adaptive dimension of perfectionism namely, order decreases it. These results support the contention that maladaptive perfectionism may generate aggression while having high standards and being organized or orderly are not necessarily negative qualities and are not associated with aggression. As a result it can be argued that the results of this study challenge the notion that perfectionism is invariably maladaptive and partially support the notion of emotionally positive aspect of perfectionism.

Table 2 Multiple regression analyses for the Discrepancy, High Standards and Order predicting Aggression dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Discrepancy</th>
<th>High Standards</th>
<th>Order</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=445

* $p< .05$.

**$p< .01$.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer the first empirical evidence of the relationships between adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism and aggression among Turkish adolescents. It suggests that the maladaptive form of perfectionism namely, discrepancy increases aggression while one of the adaptive dimension of perfectionism namely, order decreases it. These results support the contention that maladaptive perfectionism may generate aggression while having high standards and being organized or orderly are not necessarily negative qualities and are not associated with aggression. As a result it can be argued that the results of this study challenge the notion that perfectionism is invariably maladaptive and partially support the notion of emotionally positive aspect of perfectionism.

5. Conclusion

Additional studies are necessary to verify the present findings but the results suggest some implications for the educators, adolescents, and parents. In order to help educators, adolescents, and parents recognize the two distinct dimensions of perfectionism, school counselors should consider how high school adolescents can express the adaptive and the maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism in the school setting. It must be remembered that there is need for a cautious examination of adolescents to determine which of the aspects of perfectionism are in force. When the message of discrepancy is emphasized, not living up to their standards may result in aggression in adolescents. On the other hand, if the adolescent demonstrates the positive aspect of perfectionism, especially order, the suggestion is to encourage the adolescent to continue in this pattern of behavior. If the adolescent demonstrates some aspects of both adaptive and maladaptive, the counselor can help the adolescent move toward more realistically assessing his or her ability to live up to his or her standards. It must also be remembered that both of these dimensions occur on a continuum from mild to severe. Even the potentially adaptive behaviors can become negative when taken to extremes. As long as high standards do not become unrealistic and failures to meet standards do not result in harsh self-criticism, it can be argued that these factors will not cause a problem for the adolescent but will result in lowered hostility—rational argumentation in the cognitive component of aggression.
References


