The relationships between parental conditional regard and adolescents’ self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism

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A B S T R A C T
Studies show that the development of perfectionism in adolescence is associated with psychologically controlling parenting. The current study extends research in this area by examining the relationship between a specific aspect of psychologically controlling parenting, parental conditional regard, and two dimensions of perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism and narcissistic perfectionism. Three hundred and sixteen adolescents (M age = 15.69 years, s = 1.23) completed a standardised questionnaire. Structural equation modelling revealed that both self-critical perfectionism and narcissistic perfectionism were positively predicted by parental conditional regard. Our findings are the first to suggest that parent socialization characterised by guilt inducement and love withdrawal may be common to the development of these two distinct dimensions of perfectionism.

1. Introduction

Research suggests that perfectionism is associated with a range of psychological and social difficulties among adolescents (Shafran & Mansell, 2001). This includes substantial evidence that perfectionism is associated with burnout, depression, and suicide ideation (e.g., Hill & Curran, 2016; O’Connor, 2007; Smith et al., 2016). While the possible outcomes of perfectionism are well-studied, much less research has examined its development. Models focused on explaining the origins of perfectionism have placed heavy emphasis on parental socialization and, in particular, controlling parent behaviors (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002). In the current study, we extend research in this area by examining the relationship between perceptions of psychologically controlling parenting and self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism.

1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality trait that entails a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluation (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionism is multidimensional and has been examined using different models and measures. It has been studied using individual models and their constituent sub-dimensions (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), as well as using combinations of multiple models to create higher-order dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998). Research adopting these approaches has illustrated the benefits of a multidimensional perspective with dimensions of perfectionism often associated with different (sometimes opposing) correlates, processes, and outcomes (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). As a consequence of a multidimensional perspective, we now have a better appreciation of the many guises perfectionism can take, as well as related issues such as the differences between intrapersonal (imposed on the self) and interpersonal (directed towards others, perceived to originate from others, or displayed for the benefit of others) dimensions of perfectionism.

Self-critical perfectionism is an intrapersonal dimension of perfectionism that continues to receive attention. According to Dunkley, Zuroff, and Blankstein (2003), self-critical perfectionism entails harsh self-scrutiny, overly critical self-evaluation, concern of others’ criticism, and an inability to derive satisfaction from success. The construct is based on the self-criticism element of the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (Blatt, D’Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976), which taps into introjected sources of depression (i.e., guilt and shame). Research consistently shows that self-critical perfectionism exhibits positive relationships with anxiety and depression in adolescents and adults (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Furthermore, longitudinal studies with college students reveal that self-critical perfectionism predicts increases in depressive symptoms over several years (e.g., Dunkley, Sanislow, Griño, & McGlashan, 2009; Mandel, Dunkley, & Moroz, 2015). Overall, self-
critical perfectionism is an especially debilitating dimension of perfectionism.

Researchers have also recently begun to examine narcissistic perfectionism. Narcissistic perfectionism is an interpersonal dimension of perfectionism that encapsulates an outward projection of perfection reflected by expressions of grandiosity, entitlement, and lofty expectations of others in the service of promoting an idealized self-image (Nealis, Sherry, Sherry, Stewart, & Macneil, 2015). There are thought to be few benefits of this dimension of perfectionism, and it is particularly debilitating in a social context because it promotes a sense that life is a collection of struggles for dominance, provoking conflict and aggression against perceived rejection or insult. In support of this theorising, recent work by Nealis and colleagues (Nealis, Sherry, Lee-Bagley, Stewart, & Macneil, 2016; Nealis et al., 2015) has found that narcissistic perfectionism positively predicts interpersonal conflict, denigration, and anger even after controlling for other dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., self-critical perfectionism; Nealis et al., 2015, Nealis et al., 2016). Like self-critical perfectionism, then, narcissistic perfectionism is debilitating. However, unlike self-critical perfectionism, its consequences are predominantly interpersonal.

1.2. Development of perfectionism

Given the potentially damaging effects of self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism, an important goal for researchers is to understand how they develop. In prioritizing the study of perfectionism’s outcomes, though, its origins have received comparatively less attention (Appleton & Curran, 2016). When explaining the possible origins of perfectionism theorists have emphasized parent socialization (Flett et al., 2002). Aligned with seminal descriptions of perfectionism development (e.g., Hollender, 1965; Missildine, 1963), four parental pathways have been described by Flett et al. (2002). The social expectations pathway suggests that excessive demands from parents foster perfectionism as a coping mechanism to the rejection and shame of failing. The social learning pathway posits that parents are conduits of perfectionism, passing their own perfectionistic traits to their offspring through social learning. The social reaction pathway purports that perfectionism develops in the service of harsh, punitive, and abusive parent socialization yielding a desire to strive for perfection to avoid parental disapproval. The anxious rearing pathway hypothesizes that anxious parents rear perfectionistic children because they utilize over-controlling socialization to reduce the likelihood that their child will make a mistake.

The social expectations pathway within Flett et al.’s (2002) model of perfectionism development emphasises a particular form of parent psychological control, namely conditional regard. Parental conditional regard is an intrusive interpersonal style that is used to manipulate self-conscious affect (e.g., guilt and shame) with the aim of eliciting desired behavior (Barber, 1996). It works by connecting children’s perceptions of self-worth with the attainment of parent expectations (Rogers, 1951). An emphasis on meeting parental expectations for self-worth affirmation has several implications for the development of perfectionism. Notably, parental conditional regard teaches children that their abilities, utility, and self-worth are limited to the extent to which their actions, behaviors, and performances live up to parental standards. Moreover, it promotes a sense that children’s own standards are irrelevant, superseded instead by those of the parent. Accordingly, children adopt extremely high standards, and strive for perfection, to both gain parental approval and avoid the guilt and shame that follow love-withdrawal (Hamachek, 1978).

We suggest that self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism have a common origin in parental conditional regard. For self-critical perfectionism, the harsh self-evaluative tendencies that characterize the trait are a direct result of an internalization of self-worth contingencies that follow parent love-withdrawal. While perfection is initially pursued in service of parental approval, perceptions of conditional self-worth come to be adopted as a way in which children view themselves generally, as opposed to how they view themselves in relation to their parents. Hollender (1965) alluded to this possibility when he argued that it was the pursuit of parental acceptance, internalised and carried into adulthood, which underpinned perfectionism. Turning to narcissistic perfectionism, in addition to emerging via the internalization of parental regard, we consider it to develop when individuals come to view narcissistic behavior as a means of obtaining parent approval. Others have similarly suggested that self-aggrandizement can stem from a desire to gain parental affection, especially when affection is not forthcoming (Assor & Tal, 2012). This is also evident for other aspects of perfectionism where hiding imperfections and actively promoting an image of perfection are associated with narcissistic acts (Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003).

To date, no research has examined the relationship between parental conditional regard and adolescents’ self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism. However, there is indirect evidence that supports the proposed relationships. Research consistently links forms of parent psychological control with the development of self-criticism in adolescents (e.g., Koestner, Zuroff, & Powers, 1991; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). Likewise, a number of studies have documented positive relationships between parent psychological control and narcissistic tendencies in adolescents (e.g., Assor & Tal, 2012; Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006). More direct evidence is also provided by research linking various forms of parent psychological control to dimensions of perfectionism. The work of Soenens and colleagues (e.g., Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005; Soenens et al., 2008) is particularly noteworthy here. Together, this research offers support for our suggestion that self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism have a common origin in parental conditional regard.

1.3. The present study

The aim of the current study was to examine the relationship between parental conditional regard and adolescents’ self-critical and narcissistic perfectionism. Based on the theoretical and empirical evidence presented above, we hypothesised that parental conditional regard would positively predict both dimensions of perfectionism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred and forty-five (234 males, 107 females, 4 undisclosed gender; M age = 15.68 years, s = 1.24) adolescents were recruited from community sport settings. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was provided by the research ethics committee of a British University and parental consent was sought for participation. A paper and pencil questionnaire was given to the participants, which took 15 min to complete.

3. Instruments

3.1. Parental conditional regard

Perceived parental conditional regard was measured using the 6-item Parental Conditional Regard Scale (PCRS; Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). This instrument assesses the degree to which individuals perceive their mother (3-items) and father (3-items) to be conditionally regarding (e.g., “I often feel that I will lose much of my mother/father’s affection if I do poorly in my sport”). Sport was added when items mentioned specific domains/contexts so to capture parental behaviors in an appropriate and meaningful context for the sample. The scale is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 ‘strongly agree’ and participants were asked to report on their mothers and fathers separately. This instrument has psychometric support in previous research with adolescents (Assor et al., 2004).
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