



# Role of motivation in the relation between perfectionism and academic burnout in Korean students



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relations among perfectionistic traits, motivation types, and academic burnout in Korean adolescents. A total of 283 students responded to the survey. The results indicated that there are significant mediation effects of motivation variables on the relation between perfectionistic traits and academic burnout symptoms. Specifically, intrinsic motivation partially mediated the relation between self-oriented perfectionism and burnout. That is, self-oriented perfectionism was positively related to greater levels of intrinsic motivation, and in turn, greater intrinsic motivation was negatively related to academic burnout. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation fully mediated the relation between socially prescribed perfectionism and burnout. In other words, socially prescribed perfectionism was positively related to greater levels of extrinsic motivation, and in turn, greater extrinsic motivation was positively related to academic burnout. Practical implications for educators are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Middle and high school students in South Korea carry a heavy burden of exceeding pressure due to the cultural expectations of high academic achievement (Lee et al., 2010). In Korea, it is commonly perceived that the successful future and higher social status in life is determined primarily by entering a prestigious university (Yang, Kim, Patel, & Lee, 2005). This fosters excessive competition among students and their parents, which results in students' experiencing severe academic stress (Lee et al., 2010). It is no surprise that academic stress is one of the strongest stressors for Korean students (Hwang, 2006; Lee & Kim, 1996), and consequently, these students may experience symptoms of academic burnout.

Burnout syndrome was initially used to indicate chronic work stress among certain service providers (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Three syndromes of burnout were identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981): emotional exhaustion referring to loss of energy and physical or emotional depletion; depersonalization or cynicism indicating lack of empathy; and reduced personal accomplishment meaning a sense of incompetence. This concept of burnout has expanded over time, and currently is used not only in other job settings, but also among students (Bakker, Demerouti, &

Schaufeli, 2002; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996). Academic burnout consists of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic inefficacy that are experienced by students in academic settings due to chronic stress (Schaufeli, Martez, Marques-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of energy due to academic demands; cynicism indicates apathetic and disinterested attitude toward given tasks; and inefficacy implies being incapable of producing desirable academic achievements (Shin, Puig, Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2011).

A number of studies have identified the psychological variables that lead to academic burnout with perfectionism being one of them. Perfectionism is a personality trait that has been recognized as a multidimensional construct (Miquelon, Vallerand, Cardinal, & Grouzet, 2005). Hewitt and Flett (1991) distinguished the dimensions of perfectionism into three: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Simply put, self-oriented perfectionism can be described as setting high expectations and goals for oneself, whereas other-oriented perfectionism involves expecting others to be perfect and constantly evaluating them (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The third dimension, socially prescribed perfectionism, is related to striving to meet the expectations that are prescribed by significant others as well as trying to avoid their disapproval (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Among these three dimensions, only self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism are considered in this research because these two indicate perfectionistic

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expectations on an individual rather than on others (Chang & Rand, 2000; Miquelon et al., 2005).

There are numerous studies that conceptually distinguish adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism: adaptive perfectionism has association with striving for achievement and positive affect, whereas maladaptive perfectionism is related to concerns regarding evaluation and negative affect (Chang, Watkins, & Banks, 2004; Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002; Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). According to Klibert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, and Saito (2005), self-oriented perfectionism is viewed as more adaptive because it is positively associated with adaptive constructs such as self-control and achievement motivation, while socially prescribed perfectionism is more maladaptive with relation to constructs such as depression, anxiety, shame, and guilt. Other studies also indicate that socially prescribed perfectionism results in negative psychological adjustments because the expectations imposed by significant others are perceived as excessive or uncontrollable (Chang & Rand, 2000; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Miquelon et al., 2005). On the other hand, self-oriented perfectionism does not always lead to negative consequences. Although self-oriented perfectionism can be associated with self-criticism and self-blame (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), there is evidence that it results in positive psychological adjustments (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Dynin, 1994; Frost et al., 1993; Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach, 1997; Mills & Blankstein, 2000). Thus, self-oriented perfectionism is considered a more adaptive perfectionism while socially prescribed perfectionism is considered maladaptive (Klibert et al., 2005; Miquelon et al., 2005).

Applying this dichotomy in academic settings, self-oriented perfectionism is closely related to academic engagement, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism to academic burnout (Jo & Lee, 2010). While maladaptive perfectionism may cause students to set unrealistic goals and force themselves to perform in an exceedingly competitive manner, thus eventually leading to academic burnout (Shim, 1995), adaptive perfectionism can facilitate motivation and increase the level of performance (Jo & Lee, 2010). However, not much research has been conducted on how and by which path perfectionistic traits influence academic burnout; moreover, it would be important to consider other psychological variables that function as mediators.

In this article, motivation is considered as another key factor in understanding the relation between perfectionistic traits and academic burnout. According to the self-determination theory, motivation can largely be divided into intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to the inherent tendency to venture into the world for one's own enjoyment, whereas amotivation indicates one's unwillingness to act. Extrinsic motivation is the act of attaining separable outcomes based on social pressure and norms; it consists of different degrees of self-determination and autonomy, ranging from external regulation to introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, in this study, only the extreme ends of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation types were considered because the four types of motivation, namely intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external, are highly correlated (e.g., Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009).

Theoretically, and by definition, self-oriented perfectionism is associated with intrinsic motivation and socially prescribed perfectionism with extrinsic motivation (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Miquelon et al., 2005; Stoeber et al., 2009). However, there is not much research on the relation between the types of perfectionism and intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Miquelon et al. (2005) found that self-oriented perfectionism was related to intrinsic and internalized reasons for studying, and this result was supported by Stoeber et al. (2009). Socially prescribed perfectionism, on the

other hand, was found to be positively related with extrinsic motivation to study (Miquelon et al., 2005; Stoeber et al., 2009).

The aim of the current study is to examine the relations between the two different dimensions of perfectionistic traits, that is, self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism, and academic burnout which embrace exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Next, the mediating role of two motivation types, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, on the relations between the two different dimensions of perfectionistic traits and academic burnout were examined. As aforementioned, the relation between perfectionism and academic burnout has been shown in different studies (e.g., Jo & Lee, 2010). Also, there are studies showing relations between motivation and burnout (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005). However, few studies have been conducted to explain how perfectionistic traits influence academic burnout. It is hypothesized that intrinsic motivation would mediate the negative relation between self-oriented perfectionism and academic burnout, whereas extrinsic motivation would mediate the positive relation between socially prescribed perfectionism and academic burnout.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

This study focuses on examining the mediation effects of motivation types on the relation between perfectionism and academic burnout. Participants were freshmen in high school (10th graders) and their mean age was 16. A total of 283 students responded to the survey, with 49% male ( $n = 139$ ) and 51% female ( $n = 144$ ). Participants reported the types of schools they attended: 252 (89.0%) stated attending public high school, 18 (6.4%) vocational high school, 2 (0.1%) art, music, and athletic high school, 3 (0.1%) special-purpose high school, and 8 (0.3%) students answered etc. (e.g., science-focused school, autonomous private high school). The participants who completed the questionnaire were given a small gift (e.g., chocolate).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Academic burnout

The Korean version of the MBI-SS (Shin et al., 2011) was used in order to assess the participants' academic burnout levels. The MBI-SS consists of 3 dimensions of academic burnout: emotional exhaustion (EE), cynicism (CY) and academic inefficacy (AI). There are 15 self-report questions that are divided into three sub-factors: emotional exhaustion (e.g. "I feel emotionally drained by my studies", "Studying or attending a class is really a strain for me"), cynicism (e.g. "I have become less enthusiastic about my studies", "I have become more cynical about the potential usefulness of my studies"), and efficacy (e.g. "During class I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done", "I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies"). Academic efficacy was measured and reversed-coded to be used in the final analysis as academic inefficacy. Responses to each item are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). According to Shin et al. (2011), Cronbach's alphas for the MBI-SS are .86 for emotional exhaustion, .82 for cynicism and .82 for academic inefficacy. In this study, Cronbach's alphas were .88, .83, .81 and .88 for exhaustion, cynicism, academic inefficacy, and total items respectively.

#### 2.2.2. Perfectionism

Hewitt and Flett (1991) developed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) in order to measure perfectionism. In

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