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Achievement motivation and attributional style as mediators between perfectionism and subjective well-being in Chinese university students



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ABSTRACT

This study examined both the mediation effects of achievement motivation and attributional style on the relationship between perfectionism and subjective well-being in a sample of Chinese university students. Four hundred ninety-three participants with an age range of 18–24 (206 males and 287 females) completed the Hewitt and Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS), the Achievement Motivation Scale (AMS), the Multidimensional–Multiattributional Causality Scale (MMCS) and the General Well-Being Schedule (GWB). Correlation analysis indicated that perfectionism was positively correlated with subjective well-being. Structural equation modeling exhibited the partial mediation effects of attributional style and achievement motivation on the relationship between perfectionism and subjective well-being. Moreover, a multi-group analysis indicated that the mediation model was not moderated by gender. These findings contribute to the complex nature of the association between perfectionism and subjective well-being. This study's implications for future research and limitations of the present findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Early studies suggested that the most fundamental purpose of human existence is to adapt to the living environment continually in a better manner. The pursuit of perfection is an intrinsic motivation to promote the change and development of human beings, and the motivation to pursue perfection is inherent (Adler, Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). In subsequent studies, perfectionism was defined as a personality trait of striving to complete tasks with high standards and critical self-assessment tendencies (Hollender, 1965; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Establishing high standards is a naturally positive personal behavior, but studies have demonstrated that perfectionism also has a negative impact on individuals, which is specifically reflected in excessively harsh self-assessment and self-imposed high standards in the process of pursuing personal perfection, even if such standards cannot be met and eventually have negative consequences, rather than being waived (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Horney, 1950; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

So, the impact of perfectionism on individuals can also be positive or negative. Thus in recent years, researchers have divided perfectionism into adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive

perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionists are featured by the following qualities: setting high and precise task standards, keeping living and working order and fully considering all the details. All these are qualities conducive to individual development, and are even necessary for some work, such as doctors and scientists, etc. Therefore, from the Self Determination Theory (SDT) based perspective, adaptive perfectionism must have a positive effect on individual well-being. Because SDT believes that people are positive organisms that have the potential innate psychological growth and development, they tend to engage in activities they are interested in and that are beneficial to the development of individual abilities, while well-being is one of the ultimate forms of individual psychological development and potential realization (David, Charles, Carlos, & Thomas, 2006; David, David, Krik, 2006; David, Kirk, David, Sandra, & Denise, 2006; Jay, Robert, & Jams, 2012). Meanwhile, adaptive perfectionists can get pleasure from the hard work, and regard pressure as a challenge rather than a threat. And they are able to make an assessment of the practical problems encountered in accordance with their own advantages and disadvantages, and thus develop appropriate coping strategies. Adaptive perfectionists are able to focus on what they are dealing with and treat them in relaxed and cautious attitudes. Therefore, adaptive perfectionism can, to a certain extent, play an important role in maintaining a good sense of well-being for individuals (David, Charles, et al., 2006; David, David, et al., 2006; David, Kirk et al., 2006).

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Maladaptive perfectionism refers to the tendency of unduly high standards that individuals pursue in fear of failure and disappointment. Maladaptive perfectionists believe it will be not enough no matter how many efforts have been made, and any work can and should be able to be well done, so they can never get satisfaction from hard working. Compared to the relaxed and cautious attitude of adaptive perfectionists towards their work, maladaptive perfectionists are nervous and hesitant about their work. Maladaptive perfectionists are even more susceptible to failure and more prone to self-criticism. They tend to set unduly high and unrealistic objectives, and cannot make appropriate adjustments in line with changes in the reality. The purpose of maladaptive perfectionists to go after objectives is to enhance self-worth. Once failed, they would negate self-worth, and resort to strong self-criticism. Thus, maladaptive perfectionism may produce a negative impact on the well-being of individuals (David, Charles, et al., 2006; David, David, et al., 2006; David, Kirk et al., 2006).

1.1. Perfectionism and subjective well-being

Perfectionism has been proven to be significantly correlated with subjective well-being (Frost et al., 1993; Joachim & Franziska, 2009). Studies indicate that perfectionists focus on the regularity of life and place an emphasis on handling affairs in an accurate and orderly manner. These studies indicate a higher level of subjective well-being (Rice & Dellwo, 2001). However, studies have suggested that perfectionists sometimes may over-worry about making mistakes and become undecided, thus affecting subjective well-being (Chang & Rand, 2000). Consequently, there are complex links between perfectionism and subjective well-being, and a large number of further studies are required to probe into the specific contents of such links.

1.2. Perfectionism, achievement motivation, attributional style and subjective well-being

Meanwhile, similar to perfectionism, achievement motivation and attributional style have also been demonstrated to be closely linked with subjective well-being. Numerous studies have shown that there is a high correlation between achievement motivation and subjective well-being, and high achievement motivation plays an important part in improving subjective well-being (Cassidy, 1988; Joachim & Anna, 2007). Individuals with high achievement motivation show a strong demand for self-realization in life and experience a higher sense of subjective well-being in the process of self-realization (Miquelon & Vallerand, 2006; Janice, Michael, & James, 2009). Similarly, studies have demonstrated that there is also a high correlation between attributional style and subjective well-being. Depression may be generated if people believe life events are beyond their control, thereby reducing their subjective well-being (Anthony, Winefield, & Shirley, 1987; Diana, 2002). Likewise, the subjective well-being of life is enhanced if an individual attributes the occurrence of positive events to himself and believes positive results will occur again for his sake (Helen & Adrian, 2003; Judith, Philip, David, & Graham, 2009). Therefore, regardless of positive results or negative results, individuals who tend to attribute to internal causes will show a higher sense of subjective well-being. In previous studies, perfectionism, achievement motivation and attributional style have, respectively been proven to be closely linked with subjective well-being, but the specific mechanisms of interaction remain unclear. Thus, further studies are required for deeper exploration.

1.3. The current study

The aim of this study is to test the concurrent mediation effects of attributional style and achievement motivation on the relationship between perfectionism and subject well-being through structural equation modeling (SEM). Based on the preceding rationale and the available literature that has shown the relationships of perfectionism with subjective well-being (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Joachim & Franziska, 2009), of achievement motivation with subjective well-being (Joachim & Anna, 2007; Janice et al., 2009), and of attributional style with subjective well-being (Anthony et al., 1987; Judith et al., 2009), it was predicted in this study that achievement motivation and attributional style might act as a mediator on the impact of perfectionism on subjective well-being. Furthermore, previous research has shown that a multi-mediator model may be more meaningful than a single-mediator model because it may indicate the relative significance of these mediators. For instance, it was found that only maladaptive coping might directly mediate between perfectionism and psychological distress, although the mediating effects of maladaptive coping and self-esteem have been examined separately in the previous literature (Park, Heppner, & Lee, 2010). Conversely, a major limitation in the previous literature is that most of the research was conducted in Western countries. Testing the mediation models in an Asian culture would provide significant evidence of external validity. Therefore, based on the previous studies, we proposed a hypothesized model concerning the mediator role of achievement motivation and attributional style in the relationship between perfectionism and subjective well-being, as presented in Fig. 1.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were 493 university students (206 males and 287 females) from four universities in Xi'an, a mid-sized city in the middle of China. The age range was 18–24 (mean age = 21.03 years, standard deviation = 1.17 years).

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The current study utilized the Hewitt and Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS) to assessed perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Labrecque, Stephenson, Boivin, & Marchand, 1998). The HMPS is a 45-item questionnaire that usually generates scores based on three factors of perfectionism, as follows: self-oriented

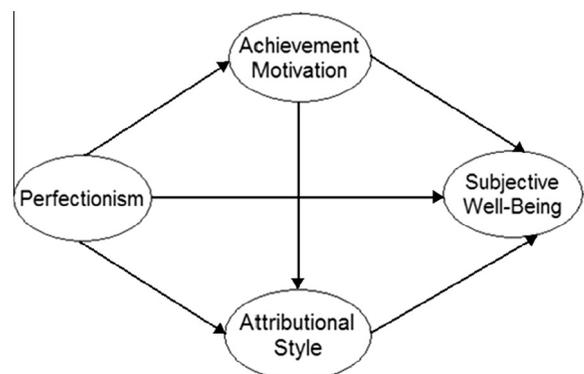


Fig. 1. The hypothesized model concerning the mediator role of achievement motivation and attributional style in the relationship of perfectionism with subjective well-being.

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