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Perfectionism and statistics anxiety

Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie^{a,*}, Christine E. Daley^b

^aDepartment of Educational Leadership, College of Education, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698, USA

^bMuscogee County Schools, Columbus, GA 31906, USA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between perfectionism and statistics anxiety, using a multivariate approach. Participants were 107 students enrolled in graduate-level research methodology courses. A canonical correlation analysis revealed that graduate students who hold unrealistic standards for significant others (i.e. other-oriented perfectionists) and those who maintain a perceived need to attain standards and expectations prescribed by significant others (i.e. socially-prescribed perfectionists) tend to have higher levels of statistics anxiety associated with *interpretation anxiety*, *test and class anxiety*, *computational self-concept* and *fear of asking for help*. The implications of these findings are discussed. Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism has been defined as the tendency to set and to pursue unrealistically high goals and standards for oneself across many domains (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a,b). According to Hamachek (1978), there are two types of perfectionists: normal perfectionists and neurotic perfectionists. Whereas normal perfectionists set and pursue high standards for themselves, allowing latitude for mistakes, neurotic perfectionists set and pursue high standards without permitting any leeway for error. Indeed, rarely do neurotic perfectionists feel that a task has been accomplished satisfactorily. Thus, although perfectionism in many cases is recognized as having a positive effect on adjustment or achievement (i.e. normal perfectionism), more often, it is viewed as a neurotic disposition (Weisinger & Lobsenz, 1981; Pacht, 1984; Flett, Hewitt, & Dyck, 1989). As such, for the purpose of this study, the term *perfectionists* hereafter will refer to neurotic perfectionists.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-912-333-5924; Fax: +1-912-247-8326; e-mail: tonwuegb@valdosta.edu

Perfectionists often are preoccupied with flaws in their own performance (Hollender, 1965) and tend to exaggerate negative outcomes in a self-punitive manner (Burns, 1980; Barrow & Moore, 1983). For these individuals, even minor flaws in their performance are likely to result in the perception that their standards have not been met. This, in turn, increases the frequency with which failure is experienced and subsequently decreases levels of self-esteem (Hewitt & Dyck, 1986). Thus, perfectionists typically are driven more by a fear of failure than by a need for achievement (Hamachek, 1978; Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984).

According to Pacht (1984), perfectionism is a prevalent and debilitating phenomenon. Indeed, research indicates that perfectionists are susceptible to negative affective states, including guilt, feelings of failure, low self-esteem and procrastination (Pacht, 1984; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Sorotzkin, 1985), and are vulnerable to more severe forms of psychopathology, such as depression, alcoholism, anorexia nervosa, erectile dysfunction, atypical facial pain, coronary heart disease and compulsive personality disorder (Burns & Beck, 1978; Hamachek, 1978; American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Burns, 1980; Quadland, 1980; Smith & Brehm, 1981; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Cooper, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1985; Hewitt & Dyck, 1986; Hewitt & Flett, 1990; Ferrari, 1992).

According to Hewitt and Flett (1991b), most research in the area of perfectionism has been limited by a tendency to define the construct from a unidimensional cognitive perspective. However, recently, perfectionism has been described as a multidimensional phenomenon, comprising both personal and social elements. Specifically, Hewitt and Flett (1991a) have identified three dimensions of the perfectionistic personality style, namely: self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism.

Apparently, self-oriented perfectionists tend to set and to pursue rigid and unrealistically high standards for themselves, and to undertake stringent self-appraisal in an attempt to attain perfectionism and to avoid failure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a, 1991b). Other-oriented perfectionists hold unrealistic standards for significant others, place importance on other individuals being perfect and evaluate exactingly others' behavior. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that significant others (e.g. friends, family, professors and classmates) hold unrealistic standards for them, rigorously evaluate them, and pressure them to be perfect.

All three types of perfectionistic individuals are inclined to attend selectively to and to over-generalize failure. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991a), the major difference among them is not the specific behavior pattern, but the object to whom the perfectionistic standard is directed (i.e. self-oriented vs. other-oriented) or to whom the perfectionistic standard is attributed (i.e. socially prescribed perfectionism).

Unfortunately, much of the empirical research in the area of perfectionism in college populations has involved undergraduate students. That is, very few studies exist in which graduate students have been the focus of attention. Yet research suggests (Onwuegbuzie, 1997) that perfectionism is rife within this population. Indeed, it is likely that graduate students, in general, exhibit higher levels of perfectionism than do undergraduates. Thus, it would appear that studying perfectionism at the graduate level would provide important additional insight into the role of its various dimensions in educational settings.

One area involving graduate students which recently has been investigated pertains to statistics anxiety. Statistics anxiety has been defined as an anxiety which occurs as a result of encountering statistics in any form and at any level (Onwuegbuzie, DaRos, & Ryan, 1997), and which appears

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