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Personality and Individual Differences 34 (2003) 1447–1451

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Perfectionism levels in African-American and Caucasian adolescents

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Received 17 August 2001; received in revised form 11 February 2002; accepted 27 April 2002

Abstract

Previous studies have indicated that perfectionism levels are higher among African-American females than among Caucasians. However, this conclusion has been reached largely from studies of adult populations. The present study of adolescents assesses whether this difference is found in all aspects of perfectionism, and whether it applies equally to males and females. The Multi-dimensional Perfectionism Scale was completed by 387 high school students (15–19 years). African-American males and females had greater levels of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism than their Caucasian peers, but there was no difference in the perception of external pressures to perform well. Possible reasons for this pattern are discussed, with an emphasis on the possibility that African-American adolescents perceive a need to overcorrect their performance as a result of their perceived status in their broader society.

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Keywords: Perfectionism; Ethnic group; African-American; Caucasian

Despite a large literature on the role of perfectionism as a facet of personality and individual differences (e.g. Shafran & Mansell, 2001), little is known about differences in this construct across gender and ethnic groups. As part of a broader study of eating pathology, Wassenaar, Le Grange, Winship, and Lachenicht (2000) found that black South African female university students had significantly higher levels of perfectionism than their white counterparts. Striegel-Moore, Schreiber, Lo, Crawford, Obarzanek, and Rodin (2000) reached a similar conclusion in a study of young females in the USA. However, these studies are limited in their generalizability, particularly because they were carried out exclusively on females. They also treat perfectionism as

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a unitary construct, despite considerable evidence that this is an inadequate conceptualization (e.g. Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991; Shafran & Mansell, 2001).

One study, conducted in a population of college students in the midwestern USA, has indicated the importance of attending to both ethnicity and gender in understanding different aspects of perfectionism (Nilsson, Paul, Lupini, & Tatem, 1999). African-Americans (and in particular African-American females) had relatively high scores on the Other-oriented perfectionism scale of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The authors suggest that this finding supports the model of Oyserman, Gant, & Ager (1995), where collectiveness may encourage the individual to achieve as part of the group in order to protect the individual self. Thus, being more group-oriented, African-Americans would be more critical of others in the group (high levels of other-oriented perfectionism), due to being concerned that others' failures will reflect negatively on themselves.

The generalizability of this conclusion is limited by the finding that personality traits and the roles of social and environmental factors are subject to change with age (Hoffmann, 1989; McIlveen & Gross, 1999; Stein, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986). The roles of individualism and collectiveness might change over time, which would mean that the ethnic differences shown by previous studies might not be true in other age groups. Few studies have explored perfectionism in normal adolescents (e.g. Kottman & Ashby, 2000), and no studies, to our knowledge, have indicated ethnic and gender variations in this age group. Therefore, the present study of adolescents (living in a US city and surrounding suburbs) aims to extend the findings of Nilsson et al. (1999) among a younger age group. It will determine levels of different forms of perfectionism among male and female adolescents of different ethnic groups (Caucasian and African-Americans)

1. Method

1.2. Participants

All participants were students at schools in the school district, and surrounding suburbs, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. These subjects were drawn from 'magnet', private and public schools in the Philadelphia area. Due to the diversity of the schools and pupils, this population is representative of the Philadelphia adolescent population. Where required by the School Board, consent to participate was given by the participants' parents. All students who met the age criteria (15–19 years of age) were asked to take part, but it was indicated to the students that participation was on a voluntary basis. In a classroom setting, supervised by a teacher, participants filled out an anonymous questionnaire. Of the 700 students who were asked to participate, 430 responded. All participants were asked to indicate their age and gender, as well as their ethnic origin. Those who reported belonging to other ethnic groups than African-American and Caucasian were not included in the analysis, due to the small sample size ($N=43$), leaving 387 subjects. They included 209 females (mean age = 16.6 years, $SD=0.78$) and 178 males (mean age = 16.6 years, $SD=0.78$). Of the females, 107 were African-American and 102 were Caucasian. Of the males, 95 were African-American and 83 Caucasian. A two-way ANOVA (gender \times ethnic group) showed that there was no significant difference in ages between genders ($F=0.01$, *NS*) or

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