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Cognitive-affective mediators of perfectionism and college student adjustment

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Abstract

We tested models of perceived stress and categorical thinking as mediators and also moderators of the association between perfectionism and psychological well-being. Results based on a large sample ($N = 364$) of college students revealed significant associations between perfectionism and the cognitive-affective variables, and between perfectionism and the academic, social, and psychological adjustment variables. Each of the cognitive-affective variables also was significantly associated with the adjustment indicators, but the mediator models were only partially supported, and none of the moderator models were supported. The results are discussed in terms of other literature on the adaptive-maladaptive conceptualization of perfectionism. Findings suggest promising points of intervention to ease the effects of maladaptive perfectionism or enhance the attributes of adaptive perfectionism.

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Keywords: Perfectionism; Perceived stress; Categorical thinking; Cognitive-affective; College students; Adjustment

1. Introduction

There is growing recognition that perfectionism (a) is a multidimensional construct (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001), (b) can be operationalized and

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understood as dimensional or categorical (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998), and, although controversial, (c) may involve relatively adaptive aspects as well as clearly maladaptive aspects (Chang, 2003; Rice et al., 1998). The characteristics of maladaptive perfectionists typically include self-evaluations that are excessively self-critical and emphasize personal shortcomings in living up to high standards for performance. Adaptive perfectionists also emphasize high personal standards and desires to excel in performance to meet such standards, yet these standards are experienced as motivational, and perceived failures to meet standards are tolerated and do not irreparably wound self-esteem (Hamachek, 1978). Rice, Bair, Castro, Cohen, and Hood (2003) revealed distinctions between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. In short, maladaptive perfectionists simultaneously view themselves as being responsible for reaching their goals and achieving their standards, yet do not expect that their efforts are likely to bring about the outcomes they desire. In contrast, adaptive perfectionists are less likely to distort, and more likely to see themselves as hardworking and self-efficacious.

Less is known about adaptive perfectionists but existing research supports that adaptive perfectionists, when compared with maladaptive or non-perfectionists, have higher self-esteem, more self-confidence, perceive they are doing well academically, and in general evidence better emotional adjustment (Brown et al., 1999; Rice & Slaney, 2002). The academic achievement of maladaptive perfectionists may come with serious emotional costs; although they may be academically on par with other students (Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004; Rice & Dellwo, 2002), these perfectionists may distort perceptions of their performance, misinterpret performance-related feedback, and feel considerably inadequate compared to other students (Rice et al., 2003). Perhaps consistent with this finding is research by Mann (2004) who found that socially prescribed perfectionism was significantly correlated with social maladjustment but self-oriented perfectionism was not significantly associated with academic, social, or emotional college adjustment.

1.1. Cognitive-affective mediation

Recent research has aimed at understanding the mechanisms through which perfectionism may operate to yield various adjustment outcomes. These are worthy efforts for conceptual and basic empirical reasons and may also shed light on viable means of intervening with perfectionists to enhance or ameliorate their adjustment. The general model in much of this research is that perfectionism activates certain cognitive and affective self-regulation strategies, and that these means of self-regulation yield relatively better or worse adjustment consequences.

In this study, we selected and tested two mediators conceptually or empirically linked to perfectionism (i.e., perceived stress and categorical thinking). Perceived stress was derived from a model proposed initially by Hewitt, Flett, and Ediger (1996) and later more fully developed by Flett and Hewitt (2002). Mischel and Ayduk (2004) also situate stress in self-regulatory roles. Among other things, Flett and Hewitt suggested that perfectionistic behavior could generate, perpetuate, or enhance stress, which presumably would then be linked to aversive outcomes. In samples of older and younger adults, Chang (2000) found stress to fully mediate the prediction of life satisfaction. However, both direct and mediated effects were found to be substantial in models where perfectionism and stress predicted worry and negative affect. Thus, the current

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