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Trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation in personality pathology

Simon B. Sherry ^a, Paul L. Hewitt ^{b,*}, Gordon L. Flett ^c,
Dayna L. Lee-Baggley ^b, Peter A. Hall ^d

^a *Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada, S7N 5A5*

^b *Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z4*

^c *Department of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada, M3J 1P3*

^d *Department of Kinesiology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo,
ON, Canada, N2L 3G1*

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Abstract

Perfectionism is a vulnerability factor for distress that is considered either a form of personality pathology (PP) per se or an associated feature of PP. This study investigated trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and PP using two large samples and two leading models of PP (see APA, 1994; Livesley, Jackson, & Schroeder, 1992). Perceiving perfectionistic demands from others, promoting a perfect image to others, and concealing perceived imperfections from others were positively correlated with most forms of PP. In contrast, demanding perfection of oneself and demanding perfection from others were largely, but not entirely, unrelated to PP. Results also suggested that perfectionism dimensions provide unique information compared to each other and to the Big Five. For some domains of PP (e.g., Cluster C), perfectionism dimensions may operate as a central factor that drives core elements of the pathology. For other domains of PP (e.g., dissocial behavior), perfectionism may function as a peripheral feature that reinforces aspects of the pathology.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 822 5827.

E-mail address: phewitt@psych.ubc.ca (P.L. Hewitt).

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1. Introduction

Theory and evidence suggest that perfectionism and PP commonly co-occur and that perfectionistic behavior may contribute to the development and the sequelae of PP. Bruch (1981), for example, argued that perfectionism and paralyzing dependency typify anorexic women and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 1994) noted perfectionism's importance to Obsessive–Compulsive Personality Disorder.

Perfectionism and PP also converge in that both involve an extreme, inflexible orientation toward the world that is accompanied by relational discord, occupational problems, and moderate heritability. Perfectionism and PP are also associated with the onset and the maintenance of psychopathology and the creation of treatment difficulties (see Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Millon, Davis, & Millon, 2000 for reviews). Overall, both perfectionism and PP seem to involve an enduring and a life-impairing pattern of thinking, behaving, perceiving, and relating.

Despite widespread discussion of the link between perfectionism and PP, research on this topic is scarce. This study begins to fill this void by examining the perfectionism–PP relation. Although several useful perfectionism models exist (e.g., Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003), Hewitt and Flett's multidimensional model (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003) was adopted in this study. This model involves multiple processes (e.g., trait vs. self-presentational) and perspectives (e.g., personal vs. interpersonal) and includes a focus on interpersonal dynamics and public presentations of an unrealistically perfect false self.

1.1. A multidimensional perfectionism model

Hewitt and Flett (1991) conceptualized *trait perfectionism* as three separate and stable dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism or SOP (i.e., demanding perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism or OOP (i.e., demanding perfection of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism or SPP (i.e., perceiving that others are demanding perfection of oneself). Trait perfectionism thus distinguishes the source and the direction of perfectionistic expectations. Hewitt et al. (2003) also conceptualized *perfectionistic self-presentation* as three distinct, stable interpersonal dimensions: perfectionistic self-promotion (i.e., proactively promoting a perfect image), nondisclosure of imperfection (i.e., concern over verbal disclosures of imperfection), and nondisplay of imperfection (i.e., concern over behavioral displays of imperfection). An excessive need to appear perfect in the eyes of others is thus central to perfectionistic self-presentation.

Although perfectionism dimensions (i.e., trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation) overlap, they are, nonetheless, conceptually and empirically distinct. Whereas trait perfectionism focuses on motives and dispositions related to attaining perfection, perfectionistic self-presentation focuses on the expression of one's supposed perfection to others. In other words, trait perfectionism represents what perfectionism *is* and perfectionistic self-presentation represents what perfectionism *does* (Allport, 1937; Hewitt et al., 2003). Empirical studies also suggest that perfectionism dimensions are distinct and operate as unique vulnerabilities for various adjustment

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