



Correlates with perfectionism and the utility of a dual process model

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Abstract

Previous research regarding perfectionism points toward many of its negative correlates. Other research has suggested support for the notion that perfection is related to both positive and negative aspects. In this study, we utilize the *dual process model* explicated by Slade and Owens (1998) that indicates an essential distinction between positive (adaptive) and negative (maladaptive) perfectionism. According to this model, positive and negative perfectionists may exhibit the same or similar behavior *prima facie*, but their latent motivations and corresponding affective states and cognitive processes are different. Correlates with positive and negative perfectionism were investigated. Negative perfectionism was found to correlate with emotional suppression as a coping mechanism, maximization, cognitive dysfunctions, depression, and regret. Positive perfectionism was found to correlate with life-satisfaction and maximization, but not with cognitive dysfunctions, depression, and regret, among other maladaptive characteristics. We argue these results (1) provide indicative evidence for the dual process model, and thus contend it will be useful for interpreting perfectionism in the future, and (2) raise important implications regarding the nature of the distinction between positive and negative perfectionism as well as between perfectionism and maximization.

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1. Introduction

Is perfectionism entirely indicative of maladjustment? Is it possible for an individual to be a perfectionist while avoiding the negative characteristics normally associated with perfectionism? Could it be the case that perfectionism is even a desirable personality characteristic? An abundance of previous research points toward its negative correlates. For instance, it was found that perfectionism positively correlates with neuroticism (Flett, Hewitt, & Dyck, 1989), depression (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 1993), and personality disorders (Hewitt, Flett, & Turnbull-Donovan, 1992). Perfectionism has also been found to positively correlate with suicide potential and ideation (Hamilton & Schweitzer, 2000; Hewitt et al., 1992), procrastination (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, & Koledin, 1992), anxiety (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & O'Brien, 1991), and interpersonal problems (Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997), among other maladaptive and undesirable characteristics.

However, other research has indicated positive or adaptive aspects related to perfectionism. For example, Ashby and Rice (2002) demonstrate that adaptive perfectionism positively correlates with self-esteem, whereas maladaptive perfectionism negatively correlates with it. Other research such as that by Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, and Neuberg (1993), Rice, Ashby, and Slaney (1998) Cox, Enns, and Clara (2002) supports the plausibility that there are positive and negative dimensions of perfectionism, yet the construct is negative overall. In addition, and notably consistent with Hamachek (1978), research by Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, and Dewey (1995) demonstrates there may be a group of perfectionists who avoid most of the negative aspects normally associated with perfectionism. This implies that more than merely the relationship between perfectionism and both positive and negative factors; namely, it may be the case that one form of perfectionism is robustly positive and adaptable.

Slade and Owens (1998) explicate a *dual process model*, providing theoretical clarity regarding how positive perfectionism may indeed manifest empirically. Their model claims that although the behavior of positive and negative perfectionists may appear to be the same from an objective perspective, it is based on underlying functional differences. These differences reflect the distinction Skinner (1968) makes between positive and negative reinforcement. Whereas a history of positive reinforcement sustains pursuit of perfection for positive perfectionists, Slade and Owens argue, a history of negative reinforcement prompts it for negative perfectionists. Positive perfectionists attain rewards such as approval, personal success, and heightened self-esteem. Accordingly, positive perfectionists tend to set realistic rather than unreachable standards. Negative perfectionists, on the other hand, seeking to avoid or escape mediocrity or personal failure, tend to set unrealistically high standards.

Slade and Owens contend that these functional differences are concomitant with different underlying cognitive processes and emotional states. They claim positive perfectionists pursue perfection with an emphasis on achieving success rather than avoiding failure, and therefore, it is likely that they are more optimistic about achieving potential success in the future; that is, they are able to remain secure emotionally in light of failure, tending to believe success may occur at any moment. Negative perfectionists, whose emphasis on the other hand is mainly to avoid failure, are characterized by a fear of the future, for they believe it is likely that failure is just around the corner.

Flett and Hewitt (2006) acknowledge the potential utility of the dual process model to guide research while challenging the utility of a distinction between positive and negative perfectionism.

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