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Perfectionism in young musicians: Relations with motivation, effort, achievement, and distress

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Abstract

Many musicians experience anxiety and distress when performing, which has been related to perfectionism. Recent findings, however, show that only some facets of perfectionism are associated with anxiety and distress, whereas other facets are associated with positive characteristics and outcomes such as motivation and achievement. To investigate how different facets of perfectionism are related to motivation, effort, achievement, and distress in musicians, 146 young musicians completed measures of perfectionism (striving for perfection, negative reactions to imperfection, and perceived pressure to be perfect), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, effort, achievement, and distress. Results showed that striving for perfection was associated with intrinsic motivation (intrinsic/identified reasons), higher effort, and higher achievement. Whereas perceived pressure from music teachers was also associated with intrinsic motivation (identified reasons only), negative reactions to imperfection were associated with extrinsic motivation and higher distress. The findings demonstrate that perfectionism in musicians has both positive and negative sides. While negative reactions to imperfection are clearly unhealthy, striving for perfection may be regarded as a healthy pursuit of excellence.

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Music, perhaps more than any other artistic pursuit, demands a high level of perfection from those hopeful of being successful in it. Every aspect of music is directly related to a search for perfection (Dews & Williams, 1989, p. 46).

1. Introduction

Watching talented and skilled musicians perform, many concert goers would imagine that it must be a wonderful experience to be a musician performing in front of an attentive and appreciative audience. However, while they may be aware of the enormous amount of work, motivation, and dedication that is required to become a skilled and versatile musician, few will be aware of the distress that can be associated with being an aspiring musician. Not only do many musicians suffer from performance anxiety (Fehm & Schmidt, 2006), but the constant pressure of musical lessons, practice, recitals, and performance may also lead to somatic complaints and emotional fatigue in young musicians (Dews & Williams, 1989; Shoup, 1995). However, the degree to which musicians experience performance anxiety and other forms of distress may vary depending on their personality characteristics (Rae & McCambridge, 2004). One personality characteristic that has been suggested to contribute to musicians' performance anxiety and distress is perfectionism (Dews & Williams, 1989; Kenny, Davis, & Oates, 2004; Mor, Day, Flett, & Hewitt, 1995). Yet, studies with non-musicians have shown that perfectionism may also be associated with positive characteristics and outcomes such as motivation, effort, and achievement (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007). Still, research on perfectionism in musicians so far has focused mostly on the negative aspects of perfectionism. Consequently, the aim of the present research was to investigate what role positive and negative aspects of perfectionism play for motivation, effort, achievement, and distress in young musicians.

Perfectionism is characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting of excessively high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Moreover, perfectionists often put great importance on the evaluation of others (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Consequently, perfectionists may perceive great pressure to excel because they feel that they have to live up to their own high standards, and to those of others. Thus, it comes as no surprise that perfectionism has been associated with higher levels of anxiety and distress (see Flett & Hewitt, 2002 for a review).

Perfectionism is multidimensional and multifaceted (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, research has shown that two major dimensions of perfectionism can be differentiated: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The dimension of perfectionistic strivings comprises those facets of perfectionism that may be considered normal, healthy, or adaptive—such as striving for perfection, self-oriented perfectionism, and high personal standards—and has shown associations with positive characteristics and outcomes (particularly, when overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled for). In contrast, the dimension of perfectionistic concerns comprises those facets of perfectionism that are considered neurotic, unhealthy, or maladaptive—such as concern over mis-

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