



Testing a 2 × 2 model of dispositional perfectionism

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ABSTRACT

This study proposed a new theoretical framework, the 2 × 2 model of perfectionism, positing that within-person combinations of evaluative concerns (ECP) and personal standards perfectionism (PSP) are the key features needed to differentiate four subtypes of perfectionism: Non-perfectionism, pure personal standards perfectionism, pure evaluative concerns perfectionism, and mixed perfectionism. Results of a study with a sample of 397 undergraduate students supported the four hypotheses of this model. The four subtypes of perfectionism were differently associated with indicators of internalization (academic self-determination), general adjustment and maladjustment (positive affect and negative affect), and domain-specific adjustment (academic satisfaction). Also, the subtypes of perfectionism were differentially associated with academic goal progress measured after four weeks.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition that represents both the tendency to strive towards perfection and to evaluate the self in a critical manner (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Several facets of perfectionism can be regrouped in two broader dimensions that can be distinguished on the basis of their origin (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and cognitive manifestations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). On the one hand, *evaluative concerns perfectionism* (ECP) entails a socially prescribed tendency to perceive that others are exerting pressure to be perfect, combined with a propensity to evaluate oneself harshly and to doubt one's capacity to progress towards elevated standards. On the other hand, *personal standards perfectionism* (PSP) represents the self-oriented tendency to set highly demanding standards and to conscientiously strive for their attainment.

Dispositional perfectionism remains highly controversial with allegations regarding both its benefits (e.g., Stoeber & Otto, 2006) and costs (e.g., Blatt, 1995; Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Despite a relative consensus regarding the multidimensional nature of perfectionism, research has yet to fully investigate how ECP and PSP are differentially organized within each individual. This study outlined the tenets of a new theoretical model, *the 2 × 2 model of dispositional perfectionism*. This model posits that the interaction between

the core dimensions of perfectionism (ECP and PSP) rather than the dimensions themselves is the key feature needed to fully differentiate four subtypes of perfectionism. This study aimed to provide empirical evidence for the interaction between ECP and PSP in the prediction of motivational processes and adjustment outcomes.

1.1. Towards a 2 × 2 model of dispositional perfectionism

Theory and research have mainly focused on the outcomes associated with core dimensions of perfectionism rather than examining how these dimensions are differentially organized within each individual. However, some researchers have recognized that PSP and ECP are common dimensions that coexist to a varying degree in all individuals (e.g., Hamachek, 1978). Empirical studies have reported moderate correlations between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2006) and between ECP and PSP (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). This study proposed a model to move theory and research beyond the main/unique effects of ECP and PSP to focus on their interactive effects. The 2 × 2 model of dispositional perfectionism builds on a dimensional approach while proposing that the within-person combinations of the ECP and PSP dimensions rather than the dimensions themselves should constitute the meaningful unit of analysis to differentiate the outcomes of distinct subtypes of perfectionism.

This overarching postulate is not entirely new in the literature on perfectionism. Recently, Stoeber and Otto (2006) proposed a group-based framework differentiating three subtypes of perfectionism: Healthy, unhealthy, and non-perfectionism. Despite its

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theoretical contributions, this *tripartite framework* would benefit from some conceptual clarifications. First, labelling the subtypes of perfectionism as inherently healthy or unhealthy might prevent researchers from theorizing and examining moderators likely to increase or decrease their specific vulnerabilities. Second, the tripartite model regroups non-perfectionism (low ECP/low PSP) and pure ECP (high ECP/low PSP) under a single subtype of non-perfectionism. In contrast, the 2×2 model proposes that these two subtypes are etiologically and functionally distinct. The non-perfectionism should relate to more positive outcomes compared to a subtype of pure ECP which should associate to the most debilitating outcomes. Third, the tripartite model defines unhealthy perfectionism as the within-person coexistence of high ECP and high PSP. As displayed in Fig. 1, the 2×2 model considers this mixed profile of perfectionism as relatively more adaptive than a subtype of pure ECP (high ECP/low PSP) and as relatively less adaptive than a subtype of pure PSP (low ECP/high ECP).

1.2. Four subtypes of dispositional perfectionism and specific hypotheses

1.2.1. Quadrant I: non-perfectionism

The 2×2 model proposes that *non-perfectionism* should be circumscribed to individuals with coexisting low levels of ECP and PSP. These individuals are not personally oriented towards perfectionistic strivings (low PSP), and they do not perceive that significant others are putting pressure on them to pursue perfectionistic standards (low ECP).

1.2.2. Quadrant II: pure personal standards perfectionism

This subtype characterizes individuals with coexisting high PSP and low ECP. These individuals hold perfectionistic standards that derive uniquely from the self (high PSP). This subtype is at the heart of the debate about the healthy or unhealthy nature of perfectionism. Therefore, three competing hypotheses are proposed, each representing a distinct viewpoint regarding the adaptive/maladaptive/neutral role of PSP.

Hypothesis 1a. A subtype of pure PSP is associated with better psychological adjustment compared to non-perfectionism. Corroboration of this hypothesis would support the healthy nature of PSP (e.g., Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Hypothesis 1b. This subtype of perfectionism is associated with poorer psychological adjustment compared to non-perfectionism. Corroboration of this hypothesis would support the unhealthy nature of PSP (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2006).

Hypothesis 1c. These two subtypes of perfectionism do not significantly differ in terms of psychological adjustment. Corroboration of this hypothesis would support the neutral role of PSP (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004).

1.2.3. Quadrant III: pure evaluative concerns perfectionism

This subtype is categorized by individuals with coexisting high ECP and low PSP rather than being categorized as non-perfectionists as per the tripartite model of Stoeber and Otto (2006). These individuals pursue perfectionistic standards deriving from perceived external pressure (high ECP) without personally valuing or internalizing these standards (low ECP). This subtype represents a form of *non-internalized or externally regulated perfectionism* in which the values, goals, and motives of the person are mostly derived from pressure exerted by the social environment. Perceived external pressure in the form of contingent rewards (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999) and controlling social interactions (Reeve & Jang, 2006) has been identified as a risk factor for maladjustment.

Hypothesis 2. Hence, a subtype of pure ECP, which was not clearly delineated in the tripartite model of Stoeber and Otto (2006), should relate to the most negative outcomes compared to the other subtypes of perfectionism.

1.2.4. Quadrant IV: mixed perfectionism

Individuals with coexisting high levels of both ECP and PSP are characterized as *mixed perfectionists* rather than being categorized as the unhealthy subtype of perfectionism as per the tripartite model (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In this subtype, the person perceives pressure from significant others to strive towards perfection. At the same time, however, the individual personally adheres to these perfectionistic standards. This subtype represents a form of *partially internalized perfectionism* in which the perceived external contingencies are cohabiting in relative harmony with personal values, standards, and priorities. Research on human motivation indicates that increased internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and person-environment congruence (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) positively relate to a myriad of psychological outcomes. Therefore, the 2×2 model differs from the tripartite model by proposing two novel and theoretically-driven hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3. A subtype of mixed perfectionism should be associated with better psychological adjustment and higher levels of internalization compared to a subtype of pure ECP.

Hypothesis 4. Yet, a subtype of mixed perfectionism should be associated with lower levels of internalization and worst psychological adjustment compared to a subtype of pure PSP.

1.3. This study

This study aimed at providing evidence for the four hypotheses of the 2×2 model of perfectionism using distinct, yet complementary, external criteria. *Academic self-determination* was used as an indicator of internalization in which higher scores represent tendencies to perform academic behaviors for reasons closely aligned

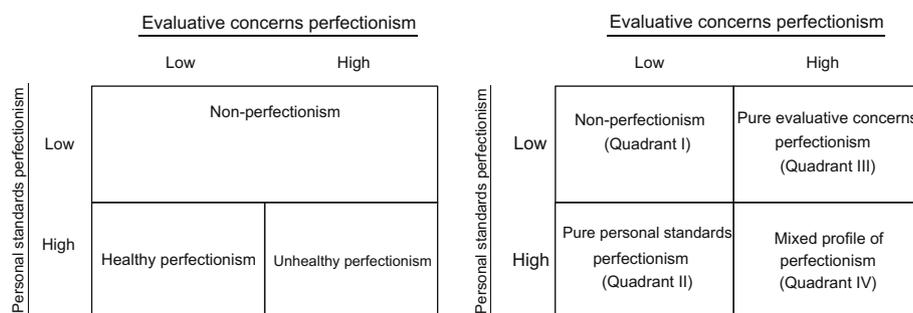


Fig. 1. Comparison of the tripartite model (left) and the 2×2 model of perfectionism (right).

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