



From perfectionism to academic adjustment: The mediating role of achievement goals

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating role of achievement goals in the differential association of self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) with academic achievement and satisfaction of university students. Results showed that the positive association of SOP with academic achievement was partially mediated by performance-approach goal, whereas mastery-approach goal acted as full mediator in the positive relation between SOP and academic satisfaction. Furthermore, the negative link between SPP and academic achievement was partially mediated by performance-approach goal, whereas mastery-approach goal acted as a partial mediator in the negative relation between SPP and academic satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

People can pursue perfectionistic standards for themselves (i.e., self-oriented perfectionism) and because of the pressure exerted by significant others (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism). On the one hand, there is now clear evidence that socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) relates to several indicators of emotional distress such as depression and reduced life satisfaction (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Studies also found that SPP negatively relates to subjective and objective indicators of achievement, notably in the academic domain but also in the pursuit of personal goals (e.g., Blankstein & Winkworth, 2004; Campbell & Di Paula, 2002; Powers, Koestner, & Topciu, 2005). On the other hand, the status of self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) remains equivocal. A copious literature in the achievement domain indicates that SOP facilitates the realization of optimal achievement while promoting psychological adjustment (e.g., Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Miquelon, Vallerand, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005; Powers et al., 2005; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). However, studies failed to replicate the good outcomes of SOP, thus raising questions about the robustness of the proposed healthy/adaptive/positive conceptualization of this personality disposition.

There is sufficient evidence that SOP and SPP are differentially associated with both achievement and psychological adjustment. However, researchers paid scant attention to the mediating vari-

ables that could explain the differential outcomes of SOP and SPP. On the basis of the dual process model of Slade and Owens (1998) and recent revisions proposed by Flett and Hewitt (2006), this study examined whether achievement goals mediate the differential associations of SOP and SPP with two indicators of academic adjustment (i.e., achievement and satisfaction). Although significantly correlated, these two outcomes are distinctively associated with achievement goals. In the perfectionism literature, research has generally studied either achievement or satisfaction but their simultaneous examination is warranted given the potential for a paradoxical effect of perfectionism whereby it facilitates achievement while thwarting emotional adjustment (Flett & Hewitt, 2005).

1.1. Perfectionism and achievement goals

Achievement goals are mental representations of an object that a person is committed to approach or to avoid (Elliot & Niesta, 2009). Achievement goals stem from the motive to attain success (approach goals) and the motive to avoid failure (avoidance goals). These goals can take various forms depending on whether people strive to master the requirements of a situation (*mastery-approach goals*), avoid making mistakes (*mastery-avoidance goals*), outperform competitors (*performance-approach goals*), or avoid demonstrating incompetence by not performing poorly relative to others (*performance-avoidance goals*).¹ In mastery-approach goals, the student is focused on attaining task-based competence by

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¹ This study did not measure mastery-avoidance goals because this achievement goal is not measured in the instrument used in the current study.

mastering, learning, and understanding the material as much as possible. In performance-approach goals, the student is centered on attaining normative-based competence by performing better than other students. Accordingly, different types of achievement goals are known to play a differential role in the promotion of interest/satisfaction and achievement outcomes. This contemporary formulation of achievement goal theory, known as the specialized goal pattern hypothesis (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002), proposes that (1) mastery-approach goals should relate to task interest and adaptive self-regulation but not to performance, (2) performance-approach goals should relate to achievement-related outcomes but not to interest and effective self-regulation, and (3) performance-avoidance should negatively relate to both achievement and emotional adjustment. Several studies provided support for this specialized goal pattern in educational psychology (e.g., Senko, Durik, & Harackiewicz, 2008), thus highlighting the importance of measuring both satisfaction and achievement to gain a precise understanding of the role of achievement goals in academic adjustment.

The dual process model of Slade and Owens (1998) provides a rationale for the possible associations between perfectionism and achievement goals. A student with high levels of SPP is primarily driven by the need to avoid failure, which is the underlying motive associated with performance-avoidance goals and, to a secondary extent, to performance-approach goals (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Furthermore, the pressure from significant others should predispose this student to seek the realization of external and normative criteria of success rather than self-referenced definitions of competence. The literature supported these contentions with studies revealing that SPP positively correlates with both types of performance goals (i.e., approach and avoidance) while being either negatively or non-significantly associated with mastery-approach goals (e.g., Stoeber, Stoll, Pescheck, & Otto, 2008; Stoeber, Stoll, Salmi, & Tiikkaja, 2009; Van Yperen, 2006).

In contrast, students with high levels of SOP are predominantly driven by the need to attain success (Slade & Owens, 1998), which is the underlying motive associated with approach goals. Accordingly, these students should seek both the realization of their potential as well as the attainment of high achievement relative to others. This contention has received support with studies showing positive association between SOP and both mastery-approach and performance-approach goals (e.g., Stoeber et al., 2008; Stoeber, Stoll, et al., 2009; Van Yperen, 2006). Flett and Hewitt (2006, p. 481) argued against this explanation by claiming that SOP is “associated jointly with both a desire for success and a fear of failure”. Some empirical support was provided for this claim given that SOP positively correlates with approach achievement goals (i.e., mastery and performance) and, to a lesser extent, to performance-avoidance goals (e.g., Kaye, Conroy, & Fifer, 2008; Stoeber, Stoll, et al., 2009; Van Yperen, 2006). However, SOP was positively associated with a variable representing the extent to which individuals are adopting performance-approach goals to a greater extent than performance-avoidance goals (Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009). This predominant pattern of performance-approach goals was found to mediate the relation between SOP and sport performance with two samples of tri-athletes, thus providing support for the dual process model of perfectionism (Stoeber, Uphill, et al., 2009).

1.2. This study

This study integrates the specialized goal pattern hypothesis and the dual process model of perfectionism to examine the mediating role of achievement goals in the differential association of SOP and SPP with academic achievement and satisfaction of university students.

1.2.1. Hypotheses for SOP

SOP should positively relate to both academic achievement and satisfaction as well as to mastery-approach and performance-approach goals, and to a weaker extent, to performance-avoidance goals. Moreover, people with high levels of SOP should predominantly adopt approach rather than avoidance goals (Stoeber, Uphill, et al., 2009). Consistent with literature on achievement goals, performance-approach goals should positively relate to academic achievement, therefore mediating the relation between SOP and achievement (*mediation hypothesis 1*). In contrast, mastery-approach goals should positively relate to academic satisfaction, therefore mediating the relation between SOP and academic satisfaction (*mediation hypothesis 2*).

1.2.2. Hypotheses for SPP

SPP should negatively relate to both academic achievement and satisfaction. This dimension of perfectionism should negatively relate with mastery goals and positively relate with performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. Performance-approach goals should mediate the relationship between SPP and achievement (*mediation hypothesis 3*) whereas mastery goals should mediate the negative relation between SPP and academic satisfaction (*mediation hypothesis 4*).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Of the initial sample of 336 students, 138 did not complete the Time 2 questionnaire, yielding a retention rate of 59%. The final sample consisted of 198 students, which were predominantly women (86%). The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 37 years old ($M = 19.18$, $SD = 2.46$). Students were enrolled in a variety of programs of study, including psychology ($n = 63$), health sciences ($n = 36$), biomedical sciences ($n = 29$), social sciences ($n = 23$), and various other programs ($n = 47$). The final sample included first (56.3%), second (26.1%), third (9.5%), and fourth year students (8%).

2.2. Procedure

Online questionnaires were administered at two times. In late-September or early October, participants were asked to answer the first questionnaire, comprising both perfectionism and achievement goals measures. In late-October, a few days after having completed their mid-term exams, participants completed a second online questionnaire, in which the measures of academic satisfaction and performance were included.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Perfectionism

A short form (Cox et al., 2002) of the *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale* (MPS) of Hewitt and Flett (1991) was used to measure perfectionism. This scale comprises five items capturing SOP (e.g., “One of my goals is to be perfect in everything I do”) and SPP (e.g., “My family expects me to be perfect”). This 10-item version was considered as valid as the original, considering the strong correlations ($r_s > .85$) with the original version demonstrated in a recent validation study (Cox et al., 2002). Items were rated using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*totally agree*). The internal consistency of SOP ($\alpha = .84$) and SPP ($\alpha = .85$) was acceptable in this sample.

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