



## Family patterns of perfectionism: An examination of elite junior athletes and their parents

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of the present study was to investigate the origins of self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented perfectionism in elite junior athletes. This was achieved by examining the relationships between parents' and athletes' multidimensional perfectionistic tendencies and testing two models of perfectionism development: the social learning and social expectations models.

**Methods:** Two samples of junior athletes and their parents (Sample 1,  $n = 302$ ; Sample 2,  $n = 259$ ) completed a self-report version of Hewitt and Flett's (2004) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Athletes also completed a second version of this scale, which captured their perceptions of parents' perfectionism.

**Results:** Regression analyses revealed that athletes' self-oriented perfectionism was predicted by parents' self-oriented perfectionism, athletes' other-oriented perfectionism was predicted by parents' other-oriented perfectionism, and athletes' socially prescribed perfectionism was predicted by parents' socially prescribed and other-oriented perfectionism. Regression analyses also revealed that athletes' perceptions of their parents' perfectionism, but not parents' self-reported perfectionism, emerged as a significant predictor of athletes' own perfectionism. Finally, moderation analyses revealed that the intergenerational transmission of perfectionism between parents and their athletic child was not limited to same-sex, parent–child dyads.

**Conclusions:** Based on the results, it appears the development of perfectionism dimensions in athletes can be explained by social learning and social expectations pathways, depending on what dimension of perfectionism is being examined. The findings highlight the complex nature of perfectionism development in elite junior sport.

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The sociocultural milieu exerts a considerable influence over children and is central to shaping their psychological development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Inherent within this social environment are significant others, and for children, the most important influence emanates from their parents (Horn & Horn, 2007). The investigation of parent–child interactions is especially relevant to the study of junior sport, where the experience of young athletes is shaped, in part, by their caregivers (Horn & Horn, 2007). This is because parents are highly involved in youth sport, and are an immediate source of performance-related expectations and feedback for junior performers (Anshel & Eom, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). While many parents exert a positive influence over their athletic child (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006), other parents contribute to a constellation of personality characteristics

in their athletic child that are less than desirable. One such personality characteristic that is highly influenced by parent–child interactions is perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002).

Perfectionism has been defined as a personality characteristic that includes the compulsive pursuit of exceedingly high standards combined with overly critical appraisals and pervasive evaluative concerns (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Currently, various conceptualisations of perfectionism dominant the literature as researchers attempt to reveal the nature of this construct. One of the most popular multidimensional approaches was forwarded by Hewitt and Flett (1991) who proposed three perfectionism dimensions. The first, self-oriented perfectionism, is characterised by stringent self-evaluations and the belief that self-worth is contingent upon exceedingly high personal standards. Socially prescribed perfectionism, the second dimension, involves the belief that approval is conditional upon meeting the unrealistic demands of significant others. The final

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dimension, other-oriented perfectionism, is characterised by the belief that significant others should attain perfection and a critical response when others fail to achieve desired standards. Hewitt and Flett's dimensions have been extensively researched in the general psychology literature (see Flett & Hewitt, 2002, for a review), and sport psychologists have recently adopted this approach when examining the motivational outcomes associated with athletes' perfectionism (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2009; Hall, Hill, Appleton, & Kozub, 2009; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008). Yet despite mounting evidence surrounding perfectionism in sport, little is known about the origins of self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented perfectionism in athletes. The present study is a first step towards addressing this issue.

It is known from the general psychology literature that the family climate is one of the most salient socioenvironmental dimension influencing a child's development. This is because parents are consistently accessible and have a lasting influence (Horn & Horn, 2007). Consistent with this perspective, Flett and colleagues (Flett et al., 2002) developed a conceptual model of perfectionism development that suggests a child's proclivity towards perfectionism is determined by a range of parental factors. Highlighting the multifaceted nature of parental influence, Flett et al.'s model purports that a parent's goals and practises, personality characteristics, and the style of parenting contribute to a number of alternative pathways that underpin the development of perfectionism.

The first pathway identified by Flett et al. (2002) describes the child's tendency to imitate their caregiver's perfectionism. It seems almost intuitive that when continually exposed to perfectionistic parents, children model their mother and/or father and develop similar tendencies. This contention is central to a social learning explanation of perfectionism development (Flett et al., 2002). Social learning also takes place when the child idealises their parent and wants to imitate their seemingly perfect caregiver (Flett et al., 2002). In addition to social learning, Flett et al.'s (2002) conceptual model proposes that parental expectations are central to the roots of perfectionism. This second explanation is consistent with historical descriptions of perfectionism development and is summarised by a social expectations pathway. Missildine (1963) originally theorised about social expectations and perfectionism, suggesting that parents of perfectionistic children are reluctant to reward the efforts of their offspring. Rather than recognise their child's self-improvement, the parent constantly demands heightened performance standards and reserves positive feedback for occasions when their expectations are fulfilled. Reacting to their parents' unrealistic demands, children display an array of characteristics that resemble perfectionism. That is, because imperfection portends something ominous, the child strives towards excessively high performance standards as they seek to attain the approval of their parents. The child also belittles their own accomplishments as they feel they have never quite fulfilled parental expectations (Frost, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991).

A similar analysis of perfectionism development has been provided by Burns (1980) and Sorotzkin (1998). Both Burns and Sorotzkin suggested that parents of perfectionistic children tend to be disappointed and nonapproving when the child makes a mistake and consequently reserve their approval for superior performance. In this way, the child fears performance errors and failure becomes something to avoid. Moreover, the child learns that being perfect and avoiding mistakes are integral to escaping the unbearable feeling of being a disappointment to their parents (Sorotzkin, 1998), and that super-human effort and grandiose achievements underpin the successful attainment of parental acceptance (Greenspon, 2000). Burns proposed that once this form of critical self-evaluation and intense achievement striving is established, it becomes self-perpetuating and results in perfectionism.

A recent qualitative study by Speirs Neumeister, Williams, and Cross (2009) yielded extensive evidence to support both the social learning and social expectations pathways of perfectionism development in a sample of gifted high school children. However, a number of studies (Flynn, Hewitt, Flett, & Caelian, 2001; Speirs Neumeister, 2004; Vieth & Trull, 1999) that have simultaneously tested the social learning and social expectations pathways suggest that different avenues may lead to the development of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism in children (Flett et al., 2002; Speirs Neumeister, 2004). In terms of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism, research supports a social learning pathway underpinning these forms of perfectionism. This is because children's scores on self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism are related to similar perfectionism dimensions in their parents (Flynn et al., 2001; Speirs Neumeister, 2004; Vieth & Trull, 1999). In contrast, a recent qualitative study by Speirs Neumeister suggests a social expectations pathway offers greater predictive power in accounting for the development of socially prescribed perfectionism.

Based on the available evidence, it is expected that a social learning pathway will also explain the development of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism in junior athletes. Specifically, it is hypothesised that parents' self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism scores will significantly predict corresponding perfectionism dimensions in their athletic child. Conversely, a social expectations pathway is hypothesised to explain the development of athletes' socially prescribed perfectionism. In the current study, this latter proposal was tested by examining the relationship between parents' other-oriented perfectionism and athletes' socially prescribed perfectionism.

In addition to examining the differential pathways that underpin the development of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism, Flett et al.'s (2002) outlined a number of influential factors in the genesis of perfectionism. The first concerned the importance of measuring parents' self-reported characteristics and children's perceptions of parental beliefs and behaviours when examining the origins of perfectionism. According to Flett and colleagues, both parental report and children's perceptions contribute to the development of the latter's perfectionism. However, the parenting literature provides an alternative argument. Eccles' (1993) expectancy-value model, for example, proposes that a child's goals, general self-schema, and personality characteristics are directly influenced by their appraisals of the socialisers' beliefs and behaviours, rather than reality itself (Eccles, 1993). In line with Eccles' model, research on parent-child interactions in sport (e.g., Duda & Hom, 1993; Ebbeck & Becker, 1994; Givvin, 2001) has supported the dominant role of perceptions of parental characteristics in the development of athletes' personality dispositions. Therefore, consistent with Eccles' model, an athlete's interpretation of their parent's perfectionism were hypothesised to predict athletes' self-reported perfectionism in the current study, rather than parent's self-reported perfectionism.

A second factor emphasised by the conceptual model of perfectionism development (Flett et al., 2002) concerns the relative influence of each parent, with two competing hypotheses emerging from the literature. The primary-caregiver hypothesis (Frost et al., 1991) suggests mothers are responsible for the development of children's perfectionism. Typically, it is the mother who retains child-rearing responsibilities; during their formative years children receive greater exposure to the personality characteristics and parenting styles of their maternal caregiver than their father's (Vieth & Trull, 1999). As a result, children acquire perfectionism in response to maternal beliefs and behaviours, perfectionistic tendencies, high expectations and conditional acceptance (Frost et al., 1991). The primary-caregiver hypothesis has received

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