



The relations between perfectionism and achievement goals

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to provide empirical support for the notion that adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists fundamentally differ in their reported achievement goals and that their differential profiles manifest in varying academically-related outcomes. College students ($N = 180$) enrolled in a military institution responded to the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, achievement goal measures from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales, and two subscales measuring academic functioning. As expected, adaptive perfectionists endorsed a preference for mastery goals along with an advantageous profile of academic functioning. Although maladaptive perfectionists endorsed comparable mastery goals to the adaptive group, they also reported heightened performance goals and a poorer profile of academic functioning. These results suggest that any positive effects that could otherwise be associated with a mastery orientation are negated when the perfectionist concurrently espouses a performance orientation and harbors concerns related to the self. The implications for these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The pressure experienced by today's American youth is great, especially within the context of our education system where success has become increasingly defined by competitive results or peer-referenced standards (Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998). Rather than engaging in academic endeavors for the sake of broadening one's knowledge base (i.e., learning) or cultivating one's functional skills, students seem increasingly focused on the competitive markers they perceive as indicative of success, such as grades and standardized test scores (Harackiewicz et al., 1998; Shim & Ryan, 2005). Indeed, for many students, casting an air of exceptionality and superiority over others is paramount to satisfactorily developing one's skill set or simply being "good enough."

Two noteworthy psychological constructs seem to be implicated in the idea that students approach academically-related endeavors with different mindsets. Namely, perfectionism and achievement goal orientation have become instrumental frameworks for understanding how students meet their imposed demands and, more globally, how they interpret and respond to their environment (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Hamachek, 1978). Both constructs have been linked with different cognitive styles, behavioral patterns, and affective manifestations as a function of one's perfectionist tendencies or the motivational sources that underline his/her behavior. Yet, despite their apparent overlap, a review of their respective literature bases suggests that perfectionism and

achievement goal orientation have been studied relatively independently of each other.

Perfectionism is regarded as a central concept in understanding individual differences across numerous domains of functioning, primarily due to its emergence as a multidimensional construct composed of both positive and negative features. Whereas early literature focused primarily on the "destructiveness" of perfectionism (Blatt, 1995) and characterized the perfectionist as disposed to a life of inevitable distress and misery, contemporary research has provided a firm foundation to suggest perfectionism also conveys benefits for the individual (e.g., Gilman & Ashby, 2003; LoCicero, Ashby, & Kern, 2000; Rice & Lapsley, 2001).

Hamachek's (1978) seminal account of "normal" versus "neurotic" perfectionism constitutes an important theoretical underpinning upon which contemporary researchers have investigated the multidimensional perspective. Hamachek noted normal perfectionists strive for excellence and are capable of deriving pleasure from their accomplishments. Furthermore, they are adaptable under circumstances in which they fall short of their goals. Comparatively, neurotic perfectionists similarly set high standards for themselves, yet they are incapable of experiencing satisfaction from their efforts or accomplishments because they are seemingly never good enough. Thus, neurotic perfectionists essentially rob themselves of any opportunity to experience satisfaction or positive feelings about themselves.

Recent methodological approaches stemming directly from Hamachek's work have empirically supported the multidimensional perspective. Assessment tools such as the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990) have been designed to measure the purported positive (e.g., high

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personal standards) and negative (e.g., concerns over mistakes) dimensions of perfectionism. Research employing cluster analysis (e.g., Parker, 1997; Rice & Lapsley, 2001) has also supported the premise that perfectionism exists in multiple forms. In these “typology” studies, two clusters of perfectionists (along with a third “non-perfectionist” group) have typically emerged.

“Adaptive” perfectionism is typically marked by high personal standards and a preference for organization, coinciding with an absence of ill feelings when one’s standards go unmet. This profile has consistently shown advantageous outcomes including healthier overall psychological adjustment (e.g., Parker, 1997) and enhanced self-confidence, academically (Rice & Mizradeh, 2000). “Maladaptive” perfectionists also hold high personal standards, yet report harboring concerns about making mistakes and experiencing doubts about their ability to meet self-imposed standards. This profile has typically engendered poorer outcomes, including mood disturbances (e.g., Huprich, Porcerelli, Keaschuk, Binienda, & Engle, 2008), anxiety (e.g., Shafran & Mansell, 2001), and interpersonal difficulties (e.g., Chang, 2000).

Evidence to support the notion that perfectionism is multidimensional and manifests in divergent outcomes is abundant. Yet, research geared toward identifying potential underlying sources that are implicated in the emergence of these differential profiles is sparse. An important consideration in Hamachek’s (1978) conceptualizations of normal and neurotic perfectionists reflected their varying orientations toward achievement-related tasks. For instance, normal perfectionists reportedly “approach tasks with a confident desire for mastery and expectation for improvement” (Dixon, Lapsley, & Hanchon, 2004, p. 96). Conversely, Hamachek described neurotic perfectionists as prone to task avoidance, including worries about perceived deficiencies and feelings of self-doubt before engaging in the task.

Hamachek further noted that the heterogeneity between normal and neurotic perfectionism is “not only a difference in a style for working, but also a difference in a style for thinking about the work to be done” (p. 28). This suggests that in addition to observable differences in task-related behavior or perceived outcomes, fundamental differences should be evident in the manner by which groups of perfectionists orient themselves *prior to* engaging in an achievement-related task. An important question to consider, then, is what underlying structures or processes influence and help to explain how these divergent patterns in cognition and behavior emerge?

Achievement goal theory represents an intriguing and potentially insightful avenue toward clarifying how differences between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism arise. According to Ames (1992), an achievement goal represents “an integrated pattern of beliefs, attributions, and affect that produces the intentions of behavior and that is represented by different ways of approaching, engaging in, and responding to achievement-type activities” (p. 261). Thus, within the context of achievement-related activities, differences are evident in individuals’ perspectives entering into the task, including the goals they establish and pursue. In turn, these initial differences in goal orientation result in varying patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Recent research has focused on three distinct achievement goal orientations including mastery, performance approach, and performance avoidance goals. Mastery-oriented individuals are commonly “self” focused and seek to enhance their competencies without regard for their status relative to others. Mastery goals have been associated with an ability to actively focus on the task at hand along with a host of positive outcomes for the individual (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986). In contrast, performance goals are marked by a social normative element, whereby success is defined by evaluating one’s result relative to his/her peers or by exceeding

a socially accepted criterion (Elliot & Church, 1997). However, a divergence in the manner by which performance-oriented individuals evaluate their performances is evident. Specifically, whereas the performance approach orientation is associated with the desire to demonstrate one’s abilities to others, performance avoidance involves operating out of fear of appearing incompetent. Hence, individuals who espouse the performance approach orientation behave such that the likelihood they will experience success increases, while avoidance-oriented individuals operate in a manner that decreases the likelihood they will experience failure (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). Performance avoid goals have consistently been associated with a host of negative psychological and educational outcomes (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 1998). In contrast, previous studies have suggested performance approach goals may convey benefits for the individual, especially in the context of achievement-related strivings (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996).

The conceptual alignment of achievement goal theory with the multidimensional features of perfectionism seems to hold promise in allowing us to understand the underlying motivational sources that may presuppose perfectionists’ overt behavioral patterns in the context of achievement-related tasks. However, despite their similarities, research that links these explanatory constructs is lacking. Previous studies have focused on specific subsets of the population such as “Honors” students (e.g., Speirs-Neumeister & Finch, 2006) or narrower contexts such as athletic competition (e.g., Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009). Others have investigated the intra/interpersonal aspects of perfectionism using Hewitt and Flett’s Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) in relation to general achievement motivation (e.g., Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Miquelon, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005).

The current study sought to provide empirical support for previous assertions (e.g., Hamachek, 1978) that fundamental differences exist with respect to adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists’ goal orientations in the context of achievement strivings. Toward this end, a “typical” college student sample was examined using a measure of perfectionism that was developed to identify its adaptive and maladaptive features rather than its intra/interpersonal dimensions. This study also incorporated measures that are theoretically grounded in achievement goal theory rather than examining the construct of achievement motivation along a continuum. Finally, scales tapping academic efficacy and academic problems were included as “achievement-related indicators” to discern differences between the perfectionism groups in their perceptions of academic functioning.

Based on theoretical considerations and prior research findings, it was expected that adaptive perfectionists would be more likely than maladaptive perfectionists to espouse a mastery goal orientation and exhibit an advantageous profile of academic functioning. Moreover, given the adaptive nature that has previously been ascribed to performance approach goals, as well as evidence of a positive association between mastery and performance approach goals (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 1998), it was expected that adaptive perfectionists would also endorse higher performance approach goals. Maladaptive perfectionists were hypothesized as most likely to endorse a preference for performance avoidance goals and a poorer profile of academic functioning.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A sample of 157 males and 23 females ($N = 180$) attending a military college in the southeast consented to participate. Caucasians represented a majority of the sample’s racial-ethnic makeup ($N = 154, 85.6\%$). Ten students declared themselves as

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