



## The relation of behavioral inhibition and perceived parenting to maladaptive perfectionism in college students

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### ABSTRACT

Maladaptive perfectionism has the potential to undermine physical and psychological health (Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001). The current investigation focused on the characteristics that put individuals at risk of maladaptive perfectionism. We investigated the relation of parenting (autonomy granting, warmth, and supervision) and personality (BIS/BAS) to maladaptive perfectionism among college students. Findings indicate that BIS was positively related to maladaptive perfectionism and parental autonomy granting was negatively related to maladaptive perfectionism. Interestingly, we observed an interaction such that among individuals with high BIS, maladaptive perfectionism was predicted by BIS ( $\beta = .26$ ) and autonomy granting ( $\beta = -.26$ ). By contrast, for individuals with low BIS, maladaptive perfectionism was predicted only by parental autonomy granting ( $\beta = -.42$ ). Findings indicate the importance of investigating broad models that include both personality and family factors as predictors of perfectionism.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Maladaptive perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multi-faceted characteristic with the potential to impact behavior across the lifespan. Individuals who are high in perfectionism tend to set high standards and are concerned with their mistakes and the possibility of failure. Perfectionism is complex and has both positive and negative correlates. For example, correlates of perfectionism include psychological distress (Aldea & Rice, 2006), depression (Kawamura, Hunt, Frost, & DiBartolo, 2001; Powers, Zuroff, & Topciu, 2003; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, & Harvey, 2003), health and alcohol use (Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007), academic persistence (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007), anxiety (Wu & Wei, 2008), worry (Chang et al., 2007), conscientiousness (Enns & Cox, 2002), and grade point average (Kawamura, Frost, & Harmatz, 2002).

Because of the multi-faceted nature of perfectionism, researchers have argued that it is important to differentiate between the more adaptive (striving) and more maladaptive (performance fears) forms of perfectionism (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Stoeber's (1998) analysis of the Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate

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(1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale suggests that concerns over mistakes and doubts about actions subscales reflect maladaptive perfectionism. Yoon and Lau (2008) found that this measure of maladaptive perfectionism was correlated with depression. In an investigation that combined doubts about actions, concerns over mistakes, and socially prescribed perfectionism as a measure of maladaptive perfectionism, Enns et al. (2001) found correlations with neuroticism, depression, and hopelessness.

Because of the potential of maladaptive perfectionism to undermine psychological health, it is important to understand the characteristics that put individuals at-risk of developing maladaptive perfectionism. Researchers have frequently focused either on individual (personality) factors or family factors as predictors of maladaptive perfectionism. Specifically, parenting practices have been identified as risk factors for the development of maladaptive perfectionism (e.g., Clark & Coker, 2009; Kawamura et al., 2002).

#### 1.1.1. Maladaptive perfectionism and parenting

Early work in parenting by Baumrind (1989) conceptualized parenting as varying along the dimensions of warmth and demandingness (the practice of making age-appropriate maturity demands) resulting in authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent parenting styles. Based on Baumrind's work, numerous investigators have found that the combined warmth and demandingness portrayed in authoritative parenting is associated with a number of positive outcomes (Bednar & Fisher, 2003; Hickman & Crossland, 2004; Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer,

2005; Kim & Chung, 2003). Because of the positive correlates of authoritative parenting, research has attempted to “unpack” authoritative parenting into its component parts (e.g., Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), suggesting that it reflects three dimensions – autonomy granting, warmth/responsiveness, and behavioral supervision. In the Steinberg approach, parental warmth is characterized by responsiveness and involvement. Behavioral supervision is characterized by parental monitoring and limit setting. Autonomy granting is characterized by the extent to which parents employ non-coercive discipline, allow individual expression, and personal decision making.

Maladaptive perfectionism is theorized to arise from families that do not grant autonomy and instead engage in controlling behaviors where personal expression and individual decision making are squelched (Enns & Cox, 2002). Parental approval is based on meeting the high expectations of parents. When these expectations are not met, guilt may follow. Children may respond to these pressures by adopting the high, unrealistic standards of their parents and experience great concern over meeting those standards. This hypothesis has been supported by a number of researchers who have found that maladaptive perfectionism tends to be higher among students who perceive that their parents are low in autonomy granting (or high in controlling behavior) (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002; Keeney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2005; Randolph & Dykman, 1998). Soenens et al. (2008) reported that parents' use of psychological control was related to increases in maladaptive perfectionism in their adolescent children, particularly boys. In a study that included the constructs hypothesized to underlie authoritative parenting, Soenens et al. (2005) found that psychological control was positively related to maladaptive perfectionism, warmth/responsiveness was negatively related to maladaptive perfectionism and behavioral supervision was not related to maladaptive perfectionism.

### 1.1.2. Maladaptive perfectionism and temperament/personality

In addition to parenting variables, it is interesting to note that maladaptive perfectionism is related to a number of personality variables, including anxiety-related measures (Juster et al., 1996). Gray and McNaughton's revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; See Corr (2008) for a summary of the original and revised RST) conceptualized personality as linked to the Fight-Flight-Freeze System (FFFS) which reflects fear and avoidance in response to negative stimuli, the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) which reflects approach to positive stimuli, and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) which reflects anxiety and risk assessment in response to goal-conflict (e.g., approach-approach, approach-avoidance). Research using the Carver and White (1994) BIS/BAS scales indicates a positive relation of the BIS scale with maladaptive perfectionism (Chang et al., 2007; O'Connor & Forgan, 2007; Randles, Flett, Nash, McGregor, & Hewitt, 2010). Although the Carver and White BIS scale reflects punishment sensitivity, including both the FFFS as well as the BIS (e.g., Beck, Smits, Claes, Vandereycken, & Bijttebier, 2009; Heym, Ferguson, & Lawrence, 2008), the findings suggest the importance of individual differences in punishment sensitivity as a predictor of maladaptive perfectionism.

### 1.1.3. Aims and hypotheses

To better understand the role of personality and parenting in predicting maladaptive perfectionism, it is important to understand the relative contributions and potential interactions of these variables to the prediction of maladaptive perfectionism. Therefore, in the current study, we examined the relation of punishment and reinforcement sensitivity and parenting (autonomy granting, warmth, supervision) to maladaptive perfectionism. We predicted

that punishment sensitivity as measured by BIS would be positively related to maladaptive perfectionism and parental autonomy granting would be negatively related to maladaptive perfectionism. Additionally, we tested the interaction of punishment sensitivity and autonomy granting to determine if the relation of parenting to maladaptive perfectionism differed as a function of punishment sensitivity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a regional university in the southeast US. Introductory psychology students participated in research as an option for course credit. Data were gathered on-line through a departmental research participant pool. We restricted data analysis to participants under the age of 21 years. Therefore, age of participants ranged from 16 to 20 ( $M = 19.8$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ). Of the 399 participants, 68% (272) were Caucasian, 15% (59) were African American, 9.5% (38) were Asian American, and 7.5% (30) reported other or did not indicate their race. Sixty-eight percent of the participants reported that they were female. Sixty-four percent of the participants reported that they lived with both of their parents during their senior year in high school. The remainder of the students reported that they lived with their mother (24%), father (5%), or other adult (7%). At the time of data collection, 49% of the participants reporting still living with their parent(s).

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants provided informed consent before completing the measures and those under the age of 19 years also provided parental consent. Participants completed a number of questionnaires on-line through the university-sponsored website. The current study focused on three measures: Maladaptive perfectionism (Doubts about Actions and Concern over Mistakes subscales from Frost et al., 1990), Behavioral Inhibition and Behavioral Activation (Carver & White, 1994), and the parenting measure (Steinberg et al., 1992). Participants also provided demographic information. Students were instructed (by the written instructions on the questionnaires) to reflect back to their senior year in high school and respond to the parenting questionnaire based on their experiences with the parent(s) they lived with during that time. All other questions were to be answered about their current state.

### 2.3. Measures

The parenting measure (Steinberg et al., 1992) was a 26-item measure composed of three subscales: parental warmth, supervision, and autonomy granting. The warmth subscale consisted of 9 items and had acceptable internal consistency in this sample ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Warmth items addressed the extent to which the adolescent perceived his or her parents as loving, responsive, and involved (e.g., “I could count on my parents to help me out if I had some kind of problem”). The psychological autonomy granting subscale consisted of 9 items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and addressed the extent to which parents respected the child and encouraged individuality (e.g., “My parents let me make my own plans for the things I wanted to do”). The warmth and autonomy granting items were reported on a 4-point rating scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The supervision subscale consisted of 8 items ( $\alpha = .71$ ) and focused on supervision and limit setting. The scale differed for the supervision items with 2 items addressing how late one can stay out on an 8-point rating scale and 6 items addressing how

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