



Interactive effect of perfectionism dimensions on depressive symptoms: A reply to Gaudreau and Thompson (2010)

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ABSTRACT

Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) provided a 2×2 model of perfectionism that focuses on the interactive effect of two dimensions of perfectionism – personal standards perfectionism (PSP) and evaluative concerns perfectionism (ECP) – and distinguishes four sub-types of perfectionism. They evidenced an interactive effect of PSP and ECP on general negative affect, i.e., the effect of ECP is reduced when PSP is high. They also hypothesized a similar effect on a measure of psychopathology. We respond to Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) by testing this interactive effect on depressive symptoms. Analyses of data from a student sample ($N = 338$) failed to evidence an interactive effect of PSP and ECP on depressive symptoms. ECP was positively associated with depressive symptoms while a mild negative correlation between PSP and depression was observed. Although our results do not fully support Gaudreau and Thompson's 2×2 model, they suggest that some of the sub-types they proposed are relevant for predicting depressive symptoms.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, perfectionism has been predominantly conceptualized as a multidimensional personality trait (e.g., Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003, but see also Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). From the different facets identified across studies, two core dimensions emerge (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). On the one hand, the positive strivings dimension (also called, perfectionistic strivings, Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Personal standards perfectionism, Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010) is viewed as a self-oriented motivation to set and strive for high standards (Frost et al. 1993; Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010) and on the other hand, the maladaptive evaluation concerns dimension (also called, perfectionistic concerns, Stoeber & Otto, 2006, evaluative concerns perfectionism, Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010) is a struggle for perfection, perceived as imposed by others, accompanied by self-criticism and doubts about one's capacity to achieve (Frost et al. 1993; Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). A wealth of studies examined the positive and negative outcomes of each dimension according to a dimensional or a group-based approach (for a review, see Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Stoeber and Otto (2006)

proposed a conceptual framework that combined both approaches (See Fig. 1, left panel). They represent the two dimensions of perfectionism (perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns) as two orthogonal dimensions that can be combined to distinguish three groups of perfectionists: healthy perfectionists (high in perfectionistic strivings and low in perfectionistic concerns), unhealthy perfectionists (high in both dimensions) and non-perfectionist (low in perfectionistic strivings). In spite of its heuristic value, this framework entails some limitations. Firstly, the two dimensions are not perfectly independent and their inter-correlations can be high (e.g., $r = .45$, Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; $r = .58$, Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). Second, the non-perfectionist group gathers under the same label two subgroups of individuals who are both low on perfectionistic strivings but differ on the perfectionist concerns dimension. Yet, this latter dimension is widely associated with negative outcomes. Therefore, such a distinction can lead to different conclusions in a group-based approach that prematurely considered both profiles as control. The first limitation had been addressed by statistically controlling for the other dimensions when examining the correlation between one dimension and a negative or positive outcome. If this strategy is statistically elegant, it does not take into account the potential interactive effects of both dimensions on positive as well as negative outcomes.

Recently, Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) proposed a 2×2 model of perfectionism that focuses on the interactive effect of

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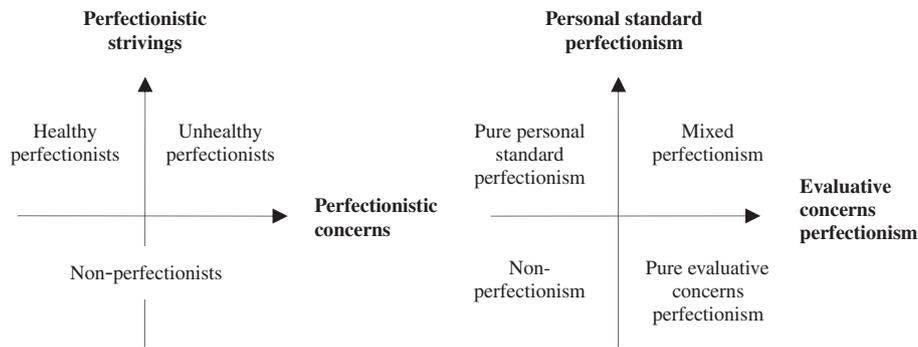


Fig. 1. Stoeber and Otto's model of perfectionism (left panel, adapted from Stoeber & Otto, 2006) and Gaudreau and Thompson's 2×2 model of perfectionism (right panel, adapted from Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).

personal standard perfectionism (PSP) and evaluative concerns perfectionism (ECP). This model is displayed in Fig. 1 (right panel). This model allows one to distinguish four sub-types of perfectionism, reflecting “within-person combinations of the ECP and PSP dimensions” (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010, p. 532): the non-perfectionism sub-type (combination of low ECP and low PSP), the pure¹ personal standard perfectionism sub-type (combination of low ECP and high PSP), the pure evaluation concerns perfectionism sub-type (combination of high ECP and low PSP) and the mixed perfectionism sub-type (combination of high ECP and high PSP). Note that the major difference with Stoeber and Otto's model (2006) comes from the distinction, within individuals low in PSP, between individuals with non-perfectionism and individuals with pure evaluation concern perfectionism.

Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) found principal effects of PSP and ECP and an interaction between both on psychological adjustment and maladjustment. Indeed, PSP was associated with higher psychological adjustment (i.e., academic self-determination, academic life-satisfaction, general positive affect) and lower psychological maladjustment (i.e., general negative affect) whatever the level of ECP was. Whereas ECP perfectionism was only associated with higher psychological maladjustment when PSP was low and associated with lower psychological adjustment whatever the level of PSP was. In other words, PSP would contribute to diminish the negative impact of ECP. According to Gaudreau and Thompson's typology, the most adjusted sub-type is the pure PSP and the less adjusted sub-type is the pure ECP.

One of the limitations of the study, underlined by the authors themselves, was that they used the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) as maladjustment indicator. The PANAS is a questionnaire designed to assess positive and negative affective states through adjectives (e.g., for positive states: alert, determined, inspired; for negative states: afraid, guilty, hostile). If the negative affect scale “represents a general dimension of subjective distress” (Gaudreau, Sanchez, & Blondin, 2006, p. 240), it is not designed to specifically measure psychopathological symptoms. The present study aims to address this limitation by testing this 2×2 model on a measure of depressive symptoms, a more robust indicator of maladjustment. The choice of this indicator was guided by the wealth of studies on the association between perfectionism and depression (for a review see Shafran & Mansell, 2002). However, none of these studies, to our knowledge, examine the interactive effect of PSP and ECP beyond the unique effects of each dimension.

Investigating the interactive effect of perfectionism dimensions and identifying sub-types of perfectionism related to depressive symptoms are particularly important to better understand the personality determinants of depression and to provide intervention strategies that target the right dimension(s) in the right direction. For instance, Gaudreau and Thompson's results (2010) speak in favour of interventions aiming at diminishing ECP dimension and increasing PSP dimension to alleviate maladjustment.

According to Gaudreau and Thompson's model, we predicted an interaction between PSP and ECP in predicting depressive symptoms. Particularly, we predicted that (1) pure PSP and non-perfectionism are similarly associated with depression; (2) pure ECP is more related to depression compared to mixed perfectionism and (3) pure ECP is more related to depression compared to non-perfectionism; (4) mixed perfectionism is associated with more depression compared to pure PSP.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred and thirty-eight students (66.7% females) participated to the study on a voluntary basis without any compensation. Their mean age was 21.40 ($SD = 3.52$). This convenience sample was composed of students enrolled in a nurse school (41.7%) and in various programs at French universities and Grandes Ecoles (58.3%). Participants were approached in libraries and in student meetings. Students who accepted to participate received a booklet with basic information about the study and the three questionnaires: the French versions of the Hewitt and Flett's multidimensional perfectionism scale (HMPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), the Frost's multidimensional perfectionism scale (FMPS; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990) and the Beck depression inventory, second edition (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). Participants were told that their responses would be entirely confidential and completely anonymous and that they are free to stop at any point without having to give a reason. After filling in the questionnaires, participants gave them back to the experimenter who debriefed them.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The multidimensional perfectionism scale (HMPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Labrecque, Stephenson, Boivin, & Marchand, 1998) and the multidimensional perfectionism scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990; French version: Bouvard et al., 2000) are two widely used questionnaires assessing multidimensional perfectionism. However, Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) did not use the original

¹ Note that “pure”, in Gaudreau and Thompson's (2010) terminology, refers to a sub-type of perfectionism characterizing individuals with coexisting high level of one dimension and low level of the other dimension.

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