



Perfectionism, mattering, and depression: A mediational analysis

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ABSTRACT

While past research has examined the association between perfectionism and low self-esteem, research has not explored the possible link between perfectionism and feelings of not mattering to others. The mattering construct and feelings of insignificance to others are relevant to an understanding of interpersonal pressures to be perfect. In the current study, a sample of 246 university students completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale, the Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory, and Scales tapping mattering and depressive symptoms. Correlational analyses confirmed that negative appraisals of mattering were associated with elevated levels of depressive symptoms, socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation. Additional analyses found that mattering was a partial mediator of the link between interpersonal perfectionism and depression. Our analyses suggest that certain perfectionistic students may be particularly at risk as a result of the association between low perceived mattering and chronic interpersonal pressures to be perfect.

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1. Introduction

Research has established that perfectionism plays a vital contributing role in the vulnerability to and the persistence of depression (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Kawamura, Hunt, Frost, & DiBartolo, 2001). Other research indicates that distressed perfectionists are less responsive to treatment than people with lower levels of perfectionism, and longer interventions are needed to achieve positive outcomes (see Blatt & Zuroff, 2002). Given the links with such important outcomes, researchers have sought to identify factors that influence this relation. One mechanism that has not been considered thus far is the importance of perceived mattering – that is, feeling that one has social significance and makes a difference in the lives of others. Accordingly, the current study explored the associations among trait dimensions of perfectionism, perceived mattering, and depression in university students.

While perfectionism is believed to reflect feelings of inferiority and negative feelings about the self, this may not always be the case. Classic self-regulation models (e.g., Kanfer & Hagerman, 1981) distinguish between the pursuit of impossible standards and the self-evaluative reactions to the attainment or non-attainment of these standards. Indeed, while most perfectionists

are neurotic perfectionists with low self-esteem, narcissistic perfectionists would have an inflated sense of themselves and their perceived significance to others (see Sorotzkin, 1985).

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined mattering as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension.” (as cited in Taylor & Turner, 2001). This sense of being significant and important to other people should be instrumental as a key protective resource that should help buffer life stressors and setbacks. Taylor and Turner (2001) described the four sources of feeling that one matters as: (1) dependence (i.e., obligations arising from social bonds and the perception that one’s actions toward others will have an effect on them); (2) importance (i.e., the perception that we are of interest and concern to others); (3) attention (i.e., perceiving one’s actions as being noticed and acknowledged by important others); and (4) ego-extension (i.e., the perception that one could bring about joy or disappointment through personal successes or failures).

It is not very surprising that mattering is conceptualized as essential to overall well-being. Several researchers have found that among adults, a stronger perceived sense of mattering predicts less depression and greater self-esteem (e.g., Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Marshall, 2001; Schieman & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Turner, 2001). Mattering has been shown to come about from social exchanges (Schieman & Taylor, 2001) with previous studies finding associations between forms of social integration and mattering (e.g., Bakan, 1966; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These studies reflect the premise that well-being is related fundamentally to rewarding social relationships (Taylor & Turner, 2001).

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1.1. Dimensions of perfectionism and the social disconnection model

To our knowledge, no study thus far has investigated the possibility that perfectionists are particularly vulnerable to depression and associated feelings of distress as a result of feeling that they do not matter to others. How can a focus on mattering contribute to our understanding of perfectionism? Perfectionism has been conceptualized as a highly interpersonal construct with implications for problems in interpersonal relationships (see Habke & Flynn, 2002). The need to matter should be particularly pertinent for perfectionists with a heightened sense of interpersonal sensitivity. Accordingly, perfectionism was conceptualized and assessed in the current study according to the model outlined by Hewitt and Flett (1991). Several perfectionism measures were included to broadly evaluate possible links between mattering and perfectionism but with a particular emphasis on how perfectionism dimensions that reflect interpersonal needs and sensitivity (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation) would be linked with negative perceptions of mattering.

A link between interpersonal perfectionism and low mattering would be in keeping with the perfectionism social disconnection model (see Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006). This model is based on the premise that a distancing from the social environment caused by interpersonal dimensions of perfectionism contributes to depressive symptoms. In response to growing evidence for interpersonal conflict as a consequence of perfectionism, Sherry, Law, Hewitt, Flett, and Besser (2008) investigated the role of conflicted interpersonal relationships in influencing depressive symptoms. Their study found support for the perfectionism social disconnection model, showing that interpersonal perfectionism is associated with low perceived social support and low perceived social support acts as a mediator in the interpersonal perfectionism–depression link. Our current emphasis on perfectionism and mattering seems quite relevant to a social disconnection perspective in that perfectionists who need attention and value approval will be prone to depression after having determined, rightly or wrongly, that they are disconnected and do not matter to other people. The specific predictions derived from the perfectionism social disconnection model account for our focus on mattering as it relates to interpersonal perfectionism *per se* rather than related constructs such as self-esteem. This emphasis reflects the model's emphasis on the distress that ensues when perfectionists feel disconnected and perceive that they do not matter to other people.

1.2. Goals and hypotheses of the current study

The initial goal of this study was to examine how various measures and associated conceptualizations of perfectionism relate to perceived mattering. As noted earlier, several perfectionism measures were included in the current study, including measures of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and perfectionistic thoughts. The three trait perfectionism dimensions assessed were self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., unrealistic standards imposed on oneself); other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., the demand for others to be perfect); and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., the perception that others demand perfection from us) (see Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionistic self-presentation is an expressive feature of perfectionism that involves the need to appear perfect (i.e., perfectionistic self-promotion) and conceal mistakes (i.e., the need to avoid displaying and disclosing imperfections to others) (see Hewitt et al., 2003). Finally, perfectionism also involves automatic and intrusive thoughts revolving around perfectionistic themes (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Work on perfectionistic automatic thoughts indicates that these thoughts predict unique variance in indices of distress that is not

accounted for by existing trait measures of perfectionism (Flett et al., 1998).

In addition to examining the link between perfectionism and mattering, an overarching goal of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of mattering to significant others in the link between perfectionism and depression. This follows generally from research indicating that self-esteem mediates the link between perfectionism and depression (Preusser, Rice, & Ashby, 1994; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998) and low conditional self-acceptance is a partial mediator of the link between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression (Flett, Besser, Davis, & Hewitt, 2003). As can be seen in Fig. 1, we expected perfectionism to be associated negatively with depression and that this association would be partially mediated by mattering, such that greater perfectionism would be associated with reduced levels of mattering, which, in turn would be associated with greater depression. This possibility is consistent with research that indicates that perceived social support mediates the link between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression, and represents a unique contribution as no study to date has conceptualized the perfectionism–depression link as related to the construct of mattering.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 246 first year university students at York University (91 men, 155 women). The mean age of the participants was 20.3 years ($SD = 3.7$) who volunteered for a study examining transition to university and collegiate health. Each student received course credit in their introductory psychology class for participation. Information on cultural background was not obtained in accordance with provincial policy. Study measures administered all showed good internal consistency with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.73 to 0.93 (see Table 1). Study measure descriptions follow.

2.2. Measures

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The MPS is a 45-item measure tapping self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “One of my goals is to be perfect in everything I do”), other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “I have high expectations for the people who are important to me”), and socially prescribed perfectionism (e.g., “My family expects me to be perfect”). Extensive evidence attests to this instrument's psychometric properties (Hewitt & Flett, 2004; Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991).

The Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003). The PSPS is a 27-item questionnaire that measures perfectionistic self-promotion (e.g., “I always try to present a picture of perfection”), non-display of imperfection (e.g., “I will do almost everything to cover up a mistake.”), and non-disclosure of imperfection (e.g., “I should always keep my problems to myself.”). The PSPS subscales have shown strong test–retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity (Hewitt et al., 2003)

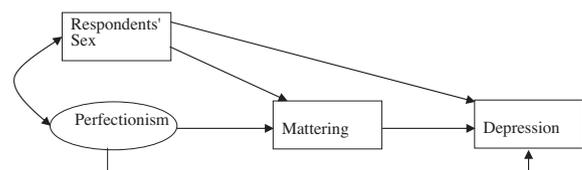


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of perfectionism, mattering, and depression.

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