



## Perfectionism and social goals: What do perfectionists want to achieve in social situations?

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### ABSTRACT

With a sample of 367 college students, the current study examined how two dimensions of perfectionism (PS: personal standards and COM: concern over mistakes) are related to social achievement goals and social content goals. COM was linked to less desirable types of social goals (e.g., social demonstration-approach, social demonstration-avoid, popularity, and dominance goals) and had null relations with adaptive social goals (e.g., social development, intimacy, and nurturance goals). In contrast, PS was related to adaptive social goals (e.g., social development, nurturance, intimacy, and leadership goals) and had no relation with maladaptive social goals (e.g., dominance goals). Despite all these benefits, PS was also positively related to social demonstration-avoid goals, which have been consistently linked to psychological ill-being and negative social outcomes.

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### 1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality disposition, which encompasses the tendency to strive for perfection, intolerance for errors and mistakes, and evaluating oneself in an overly critical manner (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Different research programs have used various definitions and measures. However, various scales have shown statistical overlap and have formed two distinct factors if subjected to a factor analysis simultaneously. Self-oriented perfectionism, personal standards, and organization (i.e., perfectionistic strivings) tended to cluster together and socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism (i.e., perfectionistic concerns) tended to form a separate factor (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). To summarize, perfectionistic strivings are characterized by high standards but do not involve an overly critical evaluation of the self, whereas perfectionistic concerns involve hypersensitivity to externally imposed high standards and criticism (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006 for a review).

Perfectionistic concerns have consistently been linked to maladjustment. However, perfectionistic strivings have not shown such deleterious effects and have often related to desirable outcomes (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). These associations with desirable

outcomes have prompted some researchers to argue that perfectionistic strivings may be beneficial, leading to terms such as adaptive, positive, or healthy perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). However, not all researchers agree with the notion that a sub-type of perfectionism can be adaptive (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Thus, we began our paper with an agnostic position regarding this debate but used the terms, perfectionistic strivings vs. perfectionistic concerns, when reviewing studies using different measures of perfectionism for brevity's sake.

Given that perfectionism involves striving for extremely high standards, perfectionism researchers have often examined goals in relation to perfectionism. The current study directs this line of inquiry into the social domain. Compared to the academic or sport related domain, little attention has been paid to social goals. However, social goals have been acknowledged as important for a wide array of outcomes such as academic adjustment, social adjustment, and psychological wellbeing (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008).

The present research extends the current literature on perfectionism in important ways. First, perfectionism research has examined interpersonal relationship outcomes and social anxiety (Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001; Gilman, Adams, & Nounopoulos, 2011; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2005; Shumaker & Rodebaugh, 2009). But we do not know the motivation underlying such social outcomes. Given that goals, by definition, initiate, energize, and direct behavior (Elliot, 2005), social goals may help explain certain associations between perfectionism and social outcomes. Second, various types of social goals have been examined in relation

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to psychological well-being and academic and social adjustment (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2007; Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). As a result, the nature and consequences of social goals have been identified. Accordingly, the current investigation is likely to contribute to the current debate on whether some aspects of perfectionism can be adaptive (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

### 1.1. Perfectionism and goal pursuits

Perfectionistic strivings seem to be related to high investment and making progress toward goals, flexibility in adjusting goals when necessary, and disengaging from unattainable goals and pursuing new alternative goals, and the eventual attainment of goals. In contrast, perfectionistic concerns may hamper such self-regulatory processes related to goal pursuits (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; O'Connor & Forgan, 2007; Powers, Koestner, Zuroff, Milyavskaya, & Gorin, 2011). The evidence is inconclusive in terms of the relationships between perfectionistic strivings and goal related satisfaction (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Slade & Owens, 1998). Although goal progress has often been examined for self-chosen goals (e.g., losing weight) involving concrete standards (e.g., going to the gym three times a week), some researchers have examined perfectionism in relation to approach vs. avoidance motivational tendencies. Perfectionistic strivings involve approach tendencies, leading to pursuit of goals appetitive in nature (i.e., pursuing positive outcomes), while perfectionistic concerns involve avoidance tendencies, leading to pursuit of goals aversive in nature (i.e., avoiding negative outcomes) (Slade & Owens, 1998). Individuals with high perfectionistic strivings and those with high perfectionistic concerns tend to be driven by a desire for success and a fear of failure, respectively. In support of such a postulation, perfectionistic concerns were linked to the behavioral inhibition system that controls aversive motivation (O'Connor & Forgan, 2007).

Some prior research has adopted the achievement goal theory perspective. Achievement goals can be distinguished according to the orientation to competence (mastery goals focusing on *developing* competence vs. performance goals focusing on *demonstrating* competence) and the valence of potential outcomes (*approaching* positive outcomes vs. *avoiding* negative outcomes). Among these resulting four different types of achievement goals (mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, performance-avoidance goals; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), a fear of failure predicts all goals except mastery-approach goals while a desire for success is related to two approach (mastery-approach and performance-approach) goals. In prior studies, perfectionistic strivings predicted mastery-approach and performance-approach goals while perfectionistic concerns were related to performance-avoidance goals (Speirs Neumeister & Finch, 2006). However, an association between perfectionistic concerns and performance-approach goals (Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010) and similar levels of mastery-approach goals for individuals characterized by high perfectionistic strivings vs. high perfectionistic concerns (Hanchon, 2010) have been reported. Taken together, in the academic domain, perfectionistic concerns tend to be associated with less adaptive motivational profiles as compared to perfectionistic strivings.

### 1.2. Perfectionism and social goal pursuits

To examine the relationships between perfectionism and social motivation, we adopted two approaches to social goals. First, the social content goal approach examines specific outcomes that students like to achieve from social relations. We examined five content goals drawn from Jarvinen and Nicholls (1996): nurturance, intimacy, leadership, popularity, and dominance. In general, intimacy and nurturance goals were linked to social satisfaction and

peer ratings of popularity (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Popularity goals were related to social satisfaction and peer ratings of popularity but also linked to negative attitudes about school and disengagement (Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997). Dominance goals were mostly related to low social satisfaction and low peer ratings of popularity (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996) as well as maladaptive forms of engagement and low achievement (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Kiefer & Ryan, 2008). Even though both dominance and leadership goals emanate from a power motive, leadership goals are a more positive manifestation. Leadership goals were not examined in prior research but may yield positive outcomes related to leadership qualities such as prosocial behavior.

The second approach involves the achievement goal theory perspective applied to the social domain. While social content goals represent the outcomes that students want to achieve in social contexts, social achievement goals represent an overarching purpose for engagement. Three types of goals mirroring academic achievement goals (mastery goals and performance-approach and -avoidance goals) have been proposed (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008): *Social development goals* involve reasons for “developing” social competence such as improving social relationships and social skills; *social demonstration-approach goals* represent the goals of “demonstrating” superior social competence, typically by garnering positive feedback from others and gaining social prestige; and *social demonstration-avoid goals* represent the goals of “concealing” inferior social competence, typically by avoiding negative judgments from others (Ryan & Shim, 2006).

Research has shown that social development goals related to many positive outcomes while social demonstration-avoid goals consistently related to maladjustment (e.g., perceptions of social relationships, loneliness, social worry, fear of negative evaluations, depression when faced with interpersonal stress, and anxious solitary behavior). Social demonstration-approach goals related to heightened social-efficacy, peer ratings of popularity, but also positively related to aggression (Elliot et al., 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008).

Given that the current study is the first empirical investigation, there is no available data for hypotheses regarding the relationships between perfectionism and social goals. However, individuals with perfectionistic strivings may also strive for excellence in their social relationships (Flett et al., 2001), leading to the adoption of social development and social demonstration-approach goals. In contrast, given the sensitivity to others' evaluations inherent in perfectionistic concerns, we expected that perfectionistic concerns would be related to high social demonstration-approach and avoid goals (Slade & Owens, 1998; Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010). Perfectionistic concerns have been associated with undesirable social behaviors (Flett et al., 2001; Gilman et al., 2011; Ommundsen et al., 2005). Thus, we expected that perfectionistic strivings would be related to more positive social content goals such as intimacy, nurturance, and leadership goals while perfectionistic concerns would be related to less desirable social content goals such as popularity and dominance goals.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Three hundred and sixty seven college students in a university in the Midwestern region of the United States participated for course credit. The sample was predominantly European American (95%). The mean age of participants was 21.56 years old and 78.5% were female. They were freshman (32%), junior (13%), sophomore (30%), and senior (25%) students enrolled in various Educational Psychology courses.

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