



## More evidence for four perfectionism subgroups

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### ABSTRACT

We evaluated the claim that four meaningful perfectionism subgroups could be derived from the High Standards (HS) and Discrepancy (Disc) scales of the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R) test, and that each subgroup would rate their anxiety, depression, stress and learning beliefs differently. One-hundred-and-five 17-year-old students completed the APS-R, the Depression, Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS), and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). Cluster analysis of HS and Disc scale responses yielded four subgroups (high HS/low Disc, high HS/high Disc, low HS/high Disc, low HS/low Disc), which were related to DASS and MSLQ measures. The low HS/high Disc subgroup claimed to use self-regulation less often than the high HS/low Disc and high HS/high Disc subgroups; and the high Disc subgroups exhibited higher depression ratings than the high HS/low Disc subgroup. These findings support a four-subgroup account of perfectionism. We suggest that the low HS/high Disc subgroup may deny their perfectionistic tendencies—a tendency often associated with psychological disorders.

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### 1. Introduction

Over 30 years ago Hamachek (1978) challenged the negative, one-dimensional concept of perfectionism, and argued for a distinction between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Normal perfectionists set very high standards, but accept they may not be met consistently. Neurotic perfectionists experience discrepant feelings between desired and actual performance, and engage in harsh, critical self-evaluation. Hamachek's distinction is now broadly accepted, and different terms have been used to characterise the two dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., positive and negative, adaptive and maladaptive, healthy and unhealthy) (Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998; Stumpf & Parker, 2000; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995). Although the neurotic dimension is associated with negative behavioural outcomes, and the normal dimension with positive outcomes (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006), the overlap between dimensions, rather than the dimensions themselves, will likely provide insight into the personality attributes of perfectionism.

#### 1.1. Dimensional overlap and perfectionism subgroups

There is disagreement on the number of subgroups derivable from perfectionism tests. Some argue for three subgroups (Rice &

Ashby, 2007; Rice, Ashby, & Gilman, 2011), while others argue for four (Boone, Soenens, Braet, & Goossens, 2010; Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007). Rice and colleagues (Rice & Ashby, 2007; Rice et al., 2011) argued for three subgroups on the basis of the Discrepancy (Disc) and High Standards (HS) subscales of the APS-R (APS-R; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). Rice and Ashby, for example, used cluster analysis and identified three subgroups of perfectionists in a sample of university students: adaptive perfectionists (high HS/low Disc), maladaptive perfectionists (high HS/high Disc) and non-perfectionists (low HS/low Disc). Depression, life satisfaction and GPA scores differed for each subgroup. Maladaptive perfectionists were considered to be at higher risk of depression and to be less satisfied with life than both adaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists. Maladaptive perfectionists reported lower GPA scores than adaptive perfectionists. Although Rice and Ashby found a fourth cluster in their analysis, they rejected it in favour of a three-cluster solution since it was more consistent with distinctions made about perfectionists in the literature.

Rice et al. (2011) replicated Rice and Ashby's (2007) findings. They identified a four cluster solution in 14-year-olds' responses to the APS-R. The fourth subgroup exhibited a low HS/high Disc response profile. The low HS/high Disc subgroup exhibited a similar pattern of responses to the high HS/high Disc subgroup on measures of locus of control, social stress, depression, sense of inadequacy and self-esteem. However, Rice et al. suggested that the low HS/high Disc should not be considered a perfectionist subgroup since its members did not describe themselves as possessing high standards. Not everyone would agree with this interpretation.

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Wang et al. (2007) suggested the low HS/high Disc subgroup may be considered a perfectionist subgroup in circumstances where perfectionism is externally regulated and individuals strive to meet expectations of others (e.g., parents). They showed that the low HS/high Disc subgroup exhibited lower levels of individual-oriented achievement motivation, depression and trait anxiety, compared to the high HS/high Disc subgroup. Similarly, Boone et al. (2010) suggested that their *pure evaluative concerns* subgroup (based on high school students' responses to a shortened version of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale—FMPS; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990) is a perfectionist subgroup. Similar to the low HS/high Disc APS-R subgroup, individuals in the pure evaluative concerns perfectionist subgroup engaged in negative self-evaluation (i.e., concern over making mistakes and doubts about actions), even though they did not rate themselves as possessing high standards.

The low HS/high Disc profile may seem paradoxical. On the one hand individuals do not rate themselves as possessing high standards (rate themselves low on the HS scale); and on the other, indicate they do not meet their own high standards (rate themselves high on the Disc scale). The Disc items focus on a failure to meet high standards (e.g., "I rarely live up to my high standards"), or standards that are too high relative to ability (e.g., "I am not satisfied even when I have done my best"). Insofar as low HS/high Disc individuals are perfectionists, it is possible that they may deny their perfectionism. Denial is often considered a conscious or unconscious omission of behaviours or internal experiences (Vitousek, Daly, & Heiser, 1991). Moreover, consciousness of one's psychological state may be considered a narrow definition of insight (Vandereycken, 2006). Researchers interested in psychological disorders (e.g., eating disorders) suggest some individuals deny possessing their disorders and related tendencies (e.g., perfectionism) (Couturier & Lock, 2006; Vandereycken, 2006). In other words, it is possible that the low HS/high Disc subgroup may have relatively little insight into their perfectionism. Insight about perfectionism may be related to other aspects of self-assessment (e.g., metacognitive beliefs).

### 1.2. Insight and metacognitive beliefs

Some researchers suggest that metacognitive beliefs are a crucial aspect of adolescent psychosocial adjustment (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009; Lerner, Theokas, & Bobek, 2005). Metacognition is often defined in terms of beliefs about cognition (i.e., views about how to plan, monitor and self-regulate behaviours in learning contexts, which may or may not be related to behaviour) (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Metacognitive beliefs about learning are thought to be well-honed by mid-adolescence (16- to 18-years) because of extensive educational experiences. (Indeed, it is estimated that adolescents in their final years of high school spend an average of 60 to 70 h a week in education-related activities.) This claim assumes that all students acquire similar insights from their educational experiences and ipso facto acquire similar metacognitive beliefs; however this might not be the case. Adolescents' insights into their learning needs (i.e., metacognitive beliefs) may be regarded as an index of their insight more generally. Of interest in the present context is whether metacognitive beliefs about learning are related to adolescent perfectionism.

### 1.3. The adolescent group

Research on the relationship between psychopathology and perfectionism in adolescence is important for at least three reasons. First, perfectionism and its sequelae tend to be manifest in mid- to late-adolescence (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002). Second, many psychopathologies emerge in the adolescent

period and may recur throughout life. Third, given that perfectionism is linked to some adolescent psychopathologies (e.g., eating disorders), a more complete understanding of it may provide insight into these disorders.

### 1.4. Research aims and hypotheses

We are interested in whether four perfectionism subgroups can be identified from an analysis of 17-year-olds' ratings of HS and Disc items on the APS-R, and whether differences in psychopathology (stress, anxiety, and depression) and metacognitive beliefs about learning are associated with these subgroups.

Employing Rice and colleagues' (Rice & Ashby, 2007; Rice et al., 2011) analytic procedures, we expect cluster analysis to reveal four subgroups: (1) high HS/low Disc (adaptive perfectionists; AP); (2) high HS/high Disc (high standards maladaptive perfectionists; HSMP); (3) low HS/low Disc (non-perfectionists; NP), and; (4) low HS/high Disc (low standards maladaptive perfectionists; LSMP).

We expect that the high Disc subgroups will rate themselves as possessing more stress, anxiety and depression than the low Disc subgroups. Overall, the AP subgroup is expected to exhibit the least psychopathology, followed by the HSMP subgroup, and lastly, the LSMP subgroup. Insofar as adolescents' insight into their perfectionism is indexed by insight into their learning needs (measured by their metacognitive beliefs about learning strategies), it is anticipated the AP and HSMP subgroups will rate themselves as possessing better self-assessed metacognitive beliefs about learning than the LSMP subgroup. In other words, the AP and HSMP subgroups are expected to have better insight into their perfectionism than the LSMP subgroup.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

One-hundred-and-five final year high school students (43 male, 62 female:  $M = 17.40$  years,  $SD = .39$ ) participated. They attended schools in a middle class suburb of an Australian city. The participation rate was 95%. The research was approved by, and conducted in accordance with, the authors' University's Human Ethics Committee.

Students completed three questionnaires in small groups in a large classroom, and were seated so they could not confer with each other. Questionnaires took 25 min to complete.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Perfectionism

The Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) is a 23-item self-report scale designed to measure internally-regulated perfectionism. Participants respond to questions on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, and 7 = Strongly agree). The APS-R consists of three subscales: High Standards (7 items; e.g., "I set very high standards for myself"), Order (4 items; e.g., "I like things to be organised and disciplined"), and Discrepancy (12 items; e.g., "My best just never seems to be good enough for me"). Studies suggest that the HS and Order scales are associated with positive aspects of perfectionism, while the Disc scale captures negative aspects of perfectionism (Rice & Slaney, 2002; Rice et al., 1998; Slaney et al., 2001). Principal-components factor analyses support the three subscales (Slaney et al., 2001). The reliability and validity of the APS-R is acceptable. Internal consistency coefficients range from .85 to .92 (Slaney et al., 2001). Concurrent validity has been demonstrated through significant correlations

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