



Domain-specificity in perfectionism: Variations across domains of life

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism has been assessed in relation to salient or narrow domains within specific populations, yet little is understood across broader domains of life. The aim was to assess positive perfectionism (PP) and negative perfectionism (NP) in five broad domains; university/work, relationships, physical activity, domestic environment and appearance and to determine any gender differences within domains. One hundred and forty four university students (females $n = 101$; males $n = 43$) completed a modified perfectionism measure for each domain. Correlations within and between domains for PP and NP ranged from low to moderate with differential patterns by gender, supporting more domain specificity and less of a universal trait. Repeated measures ANOVAs revealed that, overall, PP and NP in the university/work domain was significantly higher than all other domains. Females reported greater PP in the university domain compared to other domains, and more PP in the relationship, domestic environment and appearance domains as compared to the physical activity domain. In contrast, males reported significantly higher PP in the physical activity domain. Females reported significantly higher NP in the university and appearance domains, while males had similar NP across all domains. These findings present a more complex picture of perfectionism with implications for domain-specificity in perfectionistic behavior.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism has been characterized as the setting of unrealistically high standards, exhibiting of perfectionistic concerns and tendencies to be overly critical of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionistic individuals tend to place extreme value of their self-worth on achievement of these standards. Perfectionism is often viewed as a global construct, assuming that detrimental effects would impact upon an individual globally across situational contexts. Furthermore, perfectionism has also been considered as a maladaptive, extreme version of conscientiousness (Samuel & Widiger, 2008), where the beneficial effects of perfectionism at certain points become detrimental and hence a matter of degree (Le et al., 2011). Alternatively, other research suggests a dual nature of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995) with two dimensions being distinguished. Although falling under various labels, one form (adaptive/positive perfectionism) can be represented as perfectionistic strivings encompassing high personal standards and striving for perfection. The other dimension (maladaptive/negative

perfectionism) includes perfectionistic concerns, concerns over mistakes and failure to meet one's own and others' expectations. This distinction and differential patterns of relationships between the two dimensions parallels current literature (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009).

However, levels of perfectionistic behaviors may also differ in degree and intensity (Hamachek, 1978), and potentially across different contexts or domains. The concept of domain specificity has been highlighted in clinical populations, where clinical perfectionism has been argued to influence only those particular domains relevant to maintaining clinical disorders (Shafran & Mansell, 2001). Within non-clinical populations, attempts have been made to resolve the viability of domain as opposed to global perfectionism, focusing on variations in situational contexts. Comparisons of perfectionistic thinking across problem-solving and interpersonal contexts revealed weak associations between contexts and poor cross-situational stability (Saboonchi & Lundh, 1999), while perfectionism in career mothers within the work domain was greater than perfectionism at home (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998). Both studies suggest perfectionism impacts on relevant domains of life, and as such may be detrimental to psychological health.

Extending this contextual idea, recent work suggests perfectionism has differential effects across domains depending upon the population studied. For instance, domain-specific perfectionistic tendencies within academically gifted adolescents (i.e.,

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perfectionism, competence, task value and contingent self-worth) were greater only in the school rather than sport domain (McArdle, 2010). However, perfectionism was measured as a total score, and individual subscales of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Frost et al., 1990) were not assessed, restricting the understanding of types of perfectionism within and across domains. Similarly, Dunn, Gotwals, and Causgrove Dunn (2005) examined two domains, academic and sport, in a very specific domain-defined population. University student athletes exhibited higher perfectionistic tendencies in the sport rather than academic domain, and male athletes had significantly higher self-oriented and other-oriented sport perfectionism (Dunn et al., 2005). In these studies, findings appear dependent upon only two domains considered important and assumed most relevant within the target population (i.e., lack of comparison across groups of individuals and lack of comparison of dimensions of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006)). Consequently, generalizability may be limited and this restriction of domains may exclude other important domains that may be relevant.

A recent study including several domains found that individuals with higher perfectionism report being perfectionistic in a greater number of domains, along with their perfectionism being internally motivated (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). However, the domain-specific perfectionism measure covers 22 domains, with interpretation becoming complex and difficult to generalize when examining the relevance of associations (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Hence, multiple narrow domains could be collapsed into a high-order structure to simplify interpretation of domain-specificity. In a qualitative study, Slaney and Ashby (1996) investigated what domains of perfectionists' lives were most affected by perfectionism, where 12 domains, as opposed to 22, emerged. Almost all participants reported perfectionism affecting their professional or academic work, while over half reported effects on relationships, housework and cleaning and some reported effects on parenting, recreational activities and appearance. Further to these broader domains, approximately half of women reported perfectionistic behavior relating to housework/cleaning (i.e., domestic environment), as opposed to considerably fewer men in their sample (Slaney & Ashby, 1996), indicating that gender and gender-specific behaviors may actively influence expression of perfectionism within particular domains. Following Slaney and Ashby's (1996) findings as an example of higher order domain structure, consolidation into key domains such as professional/academic work, relationships, domestic environment, physical activity and appearance may improve interpretation, ease of application, and ability to distinguish key domains between men and women.

None of these studies has considered the possibility that perfectionism, and in particular two dimensions of positive and negative, may vary across domains of an individual's life. Terry-Short et al.'s (1995) study only examined positive perfectionism (PP) and negative perfectionism (NP) in a global sense within different groups. Individuals with varying levels of commitment across different contexts may exhibit higher maladaptive/negative perfectionism across some domains (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009) or across all domains (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). As such, an individual may report more NP relating to work or education, yet more PP with participation in physical activity. For instance, university students may demonstrate higher PP in their university studies due to the relevance and importance of high realistic goals in relation to successful completion of a degree. Hence, university students may be considered an important group where the two dimensions of perfectionism may potentially play an active role. This raises the idea that, based on the reinforcement of behaviors, thoughts and beliefs, positive (healthy) and negative (unhealthy) perfectionism potentially may evolve in different directions. Thus, both positive and negative perfectionism may coexist at different levels within

different and relevant domains. On the other hand, perfectionism (both positive and negative) may be fairly constant across domains. Given the speculative nature of this 'domain specificity' concept, it is not clear the extent to which we may be able to characterize and distinguish individuals based on levels of perfectionism (either NP or PP) within or across broad domains.

Thus, the main aim was to determine if PP and NP differed across domains in university students. Furthermore, as it has been suggested that men and women have different experiences of perfectionism in different domains (Slaney & Ashby, 1996), a second aim was to explore if perfectionism differed by gender within domains. The present study, therefore, considered five broad domains or areas of life in men and women, in the hope of clarifying the global or domain specific nature of perfectionism, with domains encompassing university/work, relationships (interpersonal aspect), physical activity/sport, domestic environment and appearance. In relation to possible differences across domains, it was hypothesized that university students would report higher perfectionism in the 'university studies/work' domain than any other domain. Further *a priori* hypotheses were not proposed, specifically in relation to type of perfectionism and gender differences, as this was to be explored through the analysis.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 144 university students (females $n = 101$; males $n = 43$) from undergraduate psychology university courses (student athletes were excluded). The M_{age} for females was 20.08 ($SD = \pm 4.23$) and for males was 21.49 ($SD = \pm 4.67$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Domains

Five domains or areas of life were assessed; university/work, relationships, physical activity, domestic environment and appearance. Domains covered broad areas or aspects of an individual's life, as perfectionism may potentially influence one domain more than another. Perfectionism scores were determined in each domain and for each gender.

2.2.2. Positive and negative perfectionism

A shortened form of the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale (PANPS; Terry-Short et al., 1995) was used to assess positive and negative perfectionism in each of the five domains. Factor and discriminant validity has been demonstrated in the original PANPS (Terry-Short et al., 1995), while acceptable internal factor structure has been reported in university students (Chan & Owens, 2006; Haase, Prapavessis, & Owens, 1999). A shortened measure was deemed necessary due to the specificity of some original items and length of the original measure (time required for a 200-item measure – 40 items \times 5 domains). Although a short version of PANPS is available for athletes (Haase, Prapavessis, & Owens, 2002), no such shortened version exists for non-athlete populations. Even if the short version was used, 19 items over 5 domains would demand substantial completion time and increased participant burden. Hence, items from the original 40-item PANPS were selected based on ability of each item to apply to each of the five domains.

The reduced PANPS (PANPS-13) is a 13-item self-report measure where participants respond to six positive perfectionism (PP) items and seven negative perfectionism (NP) items on a 5-point Likert type scale with anchors of *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Numerical values are summed to produce a PP

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