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Perfectionism and workaholism in employees: The role of work motivation

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ABSTRACT

Even though it has been over 20 years since Spence and Robbins (1992) first showed perfectionism and workaholism to be closely related, the relationship between perfectionism and workaholism is still under-researched. In particular, it has remained unclear why perfectionism is linked to workaholism. Using data from 131 employees, this study—examining self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism—investigated whether intrinsic–extrinsic work motivation could explain the positive relationship between perfectionism and workaholism. Whereas socially prescribed perfectionism was unrelated to workaholism, self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive correlation with workaholism. Furthermore autonomous (integrated and identified regulation) and controlled (introjected and external regulation) work motivation showed positive correlations. However, when all predictors were entered in a regression analysis, only self-oriented perfectionism, identified regulation, and introjected regulation positively predicted workaholism. In addition, a mediation analysis showed that identified and introjected regulation fully mediated the effect of self-oriented perfectionism on workaholism. The findings suggest that high levels of work motivation explain why many self-oriented perfectionists are workaholic.

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1. Introduction

Workaholism has been described as an uncontrollable need to work incessantly and is characterized by working excessively and compulsively (Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008). Workaholism is not merely enthusiasm to work, but is a negative characteristic that can have detrimental consequences for an individual's emotional, social, and physical well-being (e.g., Burke, 2000). Previous research has shown that workaholism is linked to individual differences in perfectionism and work motivation. However, no study so far has investigated what role work motivation plays in the perfectionism–workaholism relationship.

1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior and fear of negative evaluations by others (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionism comes in different forms and is best conceptualized as a multidimensional disposition (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). Regarding multidimensional conceptualizations of perfectionism, one of the most influential and widely researched models is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism. With the recognition that perfectionism has personal and social aspects, the model differentiates three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism is characterized by setting exceedingly high standards for oneself and comprises beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism captures individual differences in holding perfectionistic standards for others. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism comprises beliefs that others have high standards for oneself and that acceptance by others is conditional on fulfilling these standards (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004). Because other-oriented perfectionism is not regarded a core dimension of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006) and we aimed to investigate the role of employees' work motivation for themselves (not for others), other-oriented perfectionism was not further regarded in this study.

1.2. Perfectionism and workaholism

Perfectionism has long been closely linked to workaholism (e.g., Spence & Robbins, 1992). Yet, there are surprisingly few empirical studies that have examined the perfectionism–workaholism link. Spence and Robbins (1992) examined a large sample of social

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workers and included perfectionism in their assessment battery of scales aimed to differentiate workaholism (being driven to work) from healthy aspects of work (work involvement, enjoyment of work). They found that perfectionism showed positive correlations with all three aspects of work, but particularly with being driven to work. Whereas the correlations with work involvement and enjoyment of work ranged in the .30s, the correlations with being driven to work ranged in the .60s. Furthermore Clark, Lelchook, and Taylor (2010) examined perfectionism and workaholism in student employees working part-time, and found compulsion to work to show a positive correlation with discrepancy, a dimension of perfectionism capturing perfectionists' feelings that their achievements fall short of their expectations (Slaney et al., 2001). Finally, Taris, van Beek, and Schaufeli (2010) examined perfectionism, workaholism, and burnout in higher-level employees working in retail, and found workaholism to show positive correlations with both perfectionist personal standards and perfectionist concern over mistakes. Moreover, mediation analyses indicated that workaholism mediated the relationship between perfectionism (concern over mistakes) and burnout (exhaustion) suggesting that workaholism is partly responsible for the relationship between perfectionism and burnout. What may be responsible for the relationship between perfectionism and workaholism, however, has not yet been investigated.

1.3. The role of motivation

One potential candidate to explain why perfectionism is positively related to workaholism may be motivation because perfectionists have been shown to be highly motivated, and motivation has been shown to predict workaholism. In this, intrinsic–extrinsic motivation may play an important role, as findings from a recent study investigating work motivation and workaholism show (van Beek, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2011). The study investigated intrinsic–extrinsic work motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005) following Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT). SDT postulates different types of motivation rank-ordered on a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation. Distinguishing intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation from amotivation, SDT further differentiates four regulatory forms of extrinsic motivation of increasing externality (and decreasing internality), namely: identified regulation (characterized by personal importance and conscious valuing of reasons for work), integrated regulation (characterized by congruence and awareness of reasons and goals being in synthesis with the self), introjected regulation (characterized by self-control and ego-involvement and by being motivated by internal rewards and punishments), and external regulation (characterized by compliance and being driven by external rewards and punishments). Furthermore, SDT holds that intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation constitute types of motivation that represent autonomous motivation, whereas introjected and external regulation represent controlled motivation. Van Beek et al.'s (2011) study found workaholism in employees to show positive correlations with identified, introjected, and external regulation and a negative correlation with intrinsic motivation suggesting that both autonomous (identified) and controlled (introjected, external) work motivation play a role in workaholism.

1.4. This study

Van Beek et al.'s (2011) findings suggesting that autonomous and controlled motivation may contribute to workaholism are important in this context, because perfectionism has been closely linked to autonomous and controlled motivation. Particularly self-oriented perfectionism has shown positive correlations with all types of motivation postulated by SDT (except for amotivation with which it has shown negative correlations), indicating that self-oriented perfectionists are highly motivated across the autonomous-controlled motivation spectrum (Appleton & Hill, 2012; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009; Van Yperen, 2006). In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism has shown positive correlations mainly with controlled motivation (introjected and external regulation) and amotivation, indicating that socially prescribed perfectionists are predominantly motivated by internal and external rewards and punishments, or not motivated at all. So far however no study has investigated what role intrinsic–extrinsic motivation plays in the relationship of perfectionism and workaholism and whether intrinsic–extrinsic work motivation in employees can explain the link between perfectionism and workaholism.

Against this background, the aim of this study was to provide a first investigation of the relationships between perfectionism, work motivation, and workaholism examining self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism and the six types of work motivation postulated by SDT. Regarding perfectionism and workaholism, previous studies found workaholism to be related to self-oriented aspects of perfectionism such as personal standards, concern over mistakes, and discrepancy (Clark et al., 2010; Spence & Robbins, 1992; Taris et al., 2010). Moreover, when discussing differences between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, Hewitt and Flett (2004) described self-oriented perfectionists as "workaholic," but not socially prescribed perfectionists (see also Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Hence we expected self-oriented perfectionism but not socially prescribed perfectionism to show a positive correlation with workaholism. Moreover, in line with previous findings (e.g., Appleton & Hill, 2012; Stoeber et al., 2009), we expected self-oriented perfectionism to show positive correlations with all types of intrinsic–extrinsic motivation (except amotivation) whereas we expected socially prescribed perfectionism to show positive correlations only with controlled motivation. Moreover, following van Beek et al.'s (2011) findings, we expected identified, introjected, and external regulation to show positive correlations with workaholism. Finally, in line with Appleton and Hill's (2012) findings that motivation mediated the perfectionism–burnout relationship, we expected work motivation to be a mediator of the perfectionism–workaholism relationship, but had no clear expectations which types of motivation would mediate the relationship. Hence, the respective regression and mediation analyses were mostly exploratory.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two samples of employees were invited to participate in this study. First, employees from a British company providing professional services for caravan owners were invited through the company's secretary. Second, students from the University of Kent working part-time were invited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme (RPS). Invitees who agreed to participate were directed to the School's secure Qualtrics® website where they completed all measures online. In return for participation, service employees entered a raffle for £50 (~US $80) and students received RPS credits. The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee and followed the British Psychological Society's (2009) code of ethics and conduct.

Overall, 133 employees completed the questionnaire: 63 service employees (11 male, 52 female) and 70 student employees (11 male, 59 female). To ensure that service employees would not feel they could be identified (e.g., by matching their gender and age against the company's records), all participants indicated their

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