



## Perfectionism and stuttering: Findings of an online survey



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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* Using a multi-dimensional measure of perfectionism: the Frost Multi-dimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS: Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), this study investigates: (a) whether adults who stutter (AWS) display more perfectionistic attitudes and beliefs than those who do not stutter, and (b) whether, in AWS, more perfectionistic attitudes and beliefs are associated with greater self-reported difficulty communicating verbally and speaking fluently.

*Method:* In the first analysis, FMPS responses from 81 AWS and 81 matched, normally-fluent controls were analyzed using logistic regression to investigate the relative contributions of four FMPS perfectionism-subscale self-ratings to the likelihood of being in the AWS group. In the subsequent analyses, data from the 81 AWS were analyzed using linear multiple regression to determine which FMPS subscale self-ratings best predicted their Communication-Difficulty and Fluency-Difficulty scores.

*Results:* Both the likelihood of being a member of the AWS group, and also the magnitude of the AWS group's Communication-Difficulty and Fluency-Difficulty scores, were positively part-correlated to respondents' Concern over Mistakes-Doubts about Actions (CMD) subscale self-ratings but negatively part-correlated to their Personal Standards (PS) subscale self-ratings.

*Conclusions:* The FMPS profiles of respondents who stutter suggest that, as a group, they are not abnormally perfectionistic overall, but may be (or perceive themselves to be) abnormally error-prone. Also, AWS who are more concerned about their errors and uncertain of their actions experience more difficulty communicating verbally and speaking fluently.

*Educational Objectives:* After reading this article, participants will be able to: (a) describe the findings of previous research investigating the role of perfectionism in stuttering and psychopathologies; (b) discuss why a multidimensional assessment of perfectionism is important in relation to stuttering; (c) discuss ways in which data from perfectionism assessments can contribute to the planning of therapy for adults who stutter.

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## 1. Introduction

The possibility of a link between perfectionism and stuttering has been hypothesized by a number of researchers over the years (Amster, 1995; Amster & Klein, 2007, 2008; Brocklehurst, Lickley, & Corley, 2013; Froeschels, 1948; Johnson, 1946; Starkweather, 2002; Van Riper, 1973).

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Despite the recurrence of such ideas in the stuttering literature, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted into the actual relationship between perfectionism and stuttering, and there is currently no reliable data to indicate whether stutterers and non-stutterers differ in any of the standards of (speech or non-speech) performance that they aspire to. The present study constitutes our attempt to provide some such data.

For the study, we use a multi-dimensional measure of perfectionism, the Frost Multi-dimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). This allows us to investigate the ways in which different dimensions of perfectionism may be associated with persistent stuttering in adults. In particular it allows us to explore whether, in AWS, the experience of difficulty communicating verbally and, more specifically, difficulty speaking fluently in everyday situations may be associated with raised levels of (domain-general) perfectionism. The study design is cross-sectional and, as such, does not investigate possible causal relations between perfectionism and stuttering. We begin with an introduction to the concept of perfectionism. We then review key literature concerning associations between stuttering and perfectionism. Following this we present the analysis of the survey data acquired in the current study. The first analysis compares the FMPS data from 81 AWS and an individually matched control group of Adults who do not stutter (AWNS). Subsequent analyses investigate relationships between the FMPS profiles of the 81 AWS and their self-rated communication and fluency difficulty scores. All three analyses indicate that some, but not all, dimensions of perfectionism are associated with stuttering.

### 1.1. The nature of perfectionism

Although there is no universally agreed definition of perfectionism, there is nevertheless general agreement that the setting of high standards is central to the concept (e.g. Burns, 1980; Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost et al., 1990; Hollender, 1965). Perfectionism is also frequently associated with high levels of concern over mistakes (e.g. Beck, 1976; Burns, 1980; Frost et al., 1990) and with hypervigilance (Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002), although these are neither necessary nor sufficient criteria.

In some circles, for example in the world of performing arts, perfectionism is regarded in a positive light and associated with outstanding achievements. However, from the perspective of psychopathology, it has tended, at least until recently, to be regarded as an undesirable and debilitating trait (e.g. Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984), associated with dysfunctional thinking styles (Beck, 1976), and a tendency to consistently overestimate how well an action has to be performed in order for it to fulfill its intended purpose. Such views reflect Hollender's (1965, p. 94) definition of perfectionism as "demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation" although, as Hollender himself pointed out, this definition is problematic unless there is a consensus regarding what standards really are required by the situation.

#### 1.1.1. Dimensions of perfectionism

Early conceptualizations of perfectionism (e.g. Hollender, 1965) tended to be unidimensional in nature, describing it as a personality trait. More recently, it has come to be considered as a multi-dimensional construct, involving a network of beliefs, attitudes, ideals and expectations (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This more recent trend has led to the development of two multidimensional scales: the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990), and the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS-HF; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), which are now the two predominant measures of perfectionism used in research and clinical practice (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011).

A notable result of this trend towards multidimensional conceptualizations of perfectionism and the use of multidimensional scales in research has been the steady accumulation of evidence supporting the view, originally proposed by Hamachek (1978), that the factors or dimensions underlying perfectionism fall into two distinct categories: *positive*, characterized by positive strivings and maintained primarily by positive reinforcement, and *negative*, characterized by the desire to avoid negative outcomes or evaluations (Enns & Cox, 1999; e.g. Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Slaney, Ashby, & Trippi, 1995; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995, see also Stöber & Otto, 2006 for a recent review of such evidence). The distinction between positive and negative dimensions of perfectionism is clearly reflected in the six FMPS subscales, three of which are "positive" (Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, and Organization), and three of which are "negative" (Concern over Mistakes, Parental Criticism, and Doubts about Actions). The current study makes use of the FMPS which is described in more detail in Section 1.3.1 of this article.

#### 1.1.2. Error evaluation and monitoring

Central to perfectionism is the desire to achieve a perfect or near-perfect state or performance. However, whether such a desire is likely to be fulfilled depends, amongst other things, upon the judgments that an individual makes regarding what constitutes a perfect state or performance. Such value judgments are by their nature, categorical and, when made in reference to situations or performances, frequently involve drawing a line where, objectively speaking, no line exists. Thus, central to perfectionism is the concept of an "error" or "mistake", and again, the point at which an individual judges a performance or state of affairs to be adequate or "good enough" is dependent on the way in which errors or mistakes are evaluated. Hewitt and Flett (1991) point out that an individual may draw the line in different places depending on whether the priority, when performing an action, is to achieve one's own personal goals or to gain the approval or acceptance of others. Individuals may also draw the line differently with respect to their own performance and the performance of others.

Perfectionism is frequently associated with high levels of monitoring for errors (Hewitt et al., 2003; Shafran et al., 2002), and neural responses associated with domain-general action monitoring (error-related negativity and error positivity) have

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