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# Understanding affluent adolescent adjustment: The interplay of parental perfectionism, perceived parental pressure, and organized activity involvement

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## ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study examined relations between affluent adolescent adjustment and culturally salient factors within parent–child relationship and extracurricular domain. Bootstrapping techniques evaluated mediated effects among parental perfectionism, perceived parental pressure, intensity of organized activity (OA) involvement, and adolescent adjustment (i.e., depressive and anxiety symptoms, life satisfaction) within a sample of 10th graders and their parents ( $n = 88$  parent–child pairs) from four high schools in affluent communities. Findings indicated that adolescents with more perfectionistic parents perceived more parental pressure and experienced poorer adjustment. Results also demonstrated that affluent adolescents who perceived more parental pressure were more intensely involved in OAs, but that higher OA intensity was linked to better adjustment. Findings highlight the importance of considering parental perfectionism when understanding adolescent behaviors and psychological outcomes, confirm the negative direct effects of parental pressure on adjustment, and corroborate prior research dispelling that highly intense OA involvement is linked to adolescent maladjustment.

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Considerable efforts have been made to understand the risk and protective factors affecting adjustment in both middle-class and economically disadvantaged youth. In contrast, far less is known about the influences on psychosocial outcomes among adolescents from affluent communities. Fifteen years ago, Luthar and colleagues began examining the consequences for youth raised in the “culture of affluence” (Cashman & Twaite, 2009; Luthar, 2003) after discovering that high-SES youth experienced significantly more anxiety and marginally higher levels of depressive symptoms than their low-SES counterparts (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). Surprisingly, despite a recent shift towards positive psychology, proximal influences on positive outcomes such as life satisfaction among affluent youth are not understood.

Existing theory and research suggest that certain contextual factors particularly the unrelenting pressure to compete and achieve, are unique to and prominent within the culture of affluence, and impact parents and youth alike (Luthar & Sexton, 2004; Warner, 2006). Luthar (2003), Luthar and Barkin (2012), and Luthar and Becker (2002) identify the parent–child

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relationship as central to understanding affluent adolescent adjustment. They have focused specifically on adolescent perceptions of parental influences, and identified parental pressure and parental alienation/isolation as contributing to their maladjustment (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b). However, researchers have not explored how parental individual characteristics (i.e., perfectionism) may set the stage for their adolescent child's perceptions of parenting behaviors (i.e., perceived parental pressure) and behaviors/choices (i.e., organized activity involvement), which together may impact affluent adolescent psychological adjustment (i.e., depressive and anxiety symptoms, and life satisfaction).

### Parental perfectionism and adolescent adjustment

Although studies have identified links between parental perfectionism and adjustment difficulties in their offspring (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Randolph & Dykman, 1998), no known research has focused specifically on affluent parents and adolescents. This study extends the literature by considering the degree to which parents from affluent communities endorse two domains of perfectionism: socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) and other-oriented perfectionism (OOP) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). SPP is a preoccupation with evaluations from others and encompasses the belief that others hold unrealistic expectations that must be met while OOP involves demanding that others meet one's own exaggerated and unrealistic perfectionistic standards (Blatt, 1995; Lundh, 2004). Prior research has found, for example, that parental SPP is directly linked to psychological difficulties, specifically depressive symptoms, in their children (Randolph & Dykman, 1998). No studies, however, have investigated the influence of parental OOP on adolescent adjustment or identified links between SPP and OOP and adolescent anxiety symptoms and life satisfaction. The current study proposes that proximal factors, specifically adolescents' perception of parental pressure and intensity of organized activity (OA) involvement, serve as the mechanisms by which parental perfectionism is associated with affluent adolescent adjustment.

### Mediators of the association between parental perfectionism and adolescent adjustment

#### *Perceived parental pressure*

Research has demonstrated strong links between perceptions of parental pressure and maladjustment in affluent youth (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b). Surprisingly, few studies have examined how parental perfectionism impacts adolescents' perception of parental pressure and no studies have assessed this link within the culture of affluence. Research on individual characteristics of perfectionists, however, suggests that adolescents perceive pressure from perfectionistic parents. Perfectionists often engage in critical self-evaluations and scrutiny, and then demand others to meet their unrealistic standards (Soenens et al., 2005). In fact, parents exhibiting high levels of SPP are perceived by their children as critical and unsupportive, while those with high levels OOP are perceived as controlling (Randolph & Dykman, 1998; Wintre & Sugar, 2000). Perceptions of parental criticism and expectations, key components of parental pressure (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009), are also related to psychological difficulties among youth (Biran & Reese, 2007; Oishi & Sullivan, 2005; Renshaw, 2008). As such, the current study hypothesized that perceived parental pressure mediates the association between parental perfectionism and adolescent adjustment (Parental perfectionism → Perceived parental pressure → Adolescent adjustment; see Fig. 1).

#### *OA intensity*

Children of perfectionistic parents may also be vulnerable to extreme involvement in OAs. OAs are defined as school- or community-based, structured, adult-supervised, constructive, voluntary activities that take place during after-school-hours (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). OA intensity, or the average number of hours/week that adolescents spend in OAs, is a commonly studied index of OA involvement (Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010). Research identifies incremental benefits of OA intensity (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney, 2000; Randall & Bohnert, 2012). However, when considering OA involvement in affluent communities, some posit that youth are exposed to an "after-school pressure cooker" (Gilbert, 1999; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000), overbooking their schedules to build their resumes (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006).

Although no research has examined the direct link between parental perfectionism and OA intensity, studies consistently document the association between parenting practices and adolescents' decision to participate in and maintain involvement (e.g., Bohnert, Martin, & Garber, 2007; Eccles et al., 1983; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000). Drawing from the over-scheduling hypothesis (see Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006), this study explored whether affluent youth with perfectionistic parents may be over-involved in activities, resulting in stress-related, negative outcomes (i.e., more internalizing symptoms, lower levels of life satisfaction). Of note, empirical evidence regarding over-scheduling is mixed. Some studies highlight diminishing returns or threshold effects OA intensity increases (i.e., Marsh & Kleitman, 2002) while others demonstrated, for example, that the association between OA participation and positive adjustment was stronger as OA intensity increased, even among youth participating in 20+ hours/week (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Thus, the current study hypothesized that OA intensity would mediate the relation between parental perfectionism and adolescent adjustment (Parental perfectionism → OA intensity → Adolescent adjustment; see Fig. 1).

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