



On the development of perfectionism in adolescence: Perceived parental expectations predict longitudinal increases in socially prescribed perfectionism [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is regarded a key period when individual differences in perfectionism develop. Yet, so far only a few longitudinal studies have investigated the development of perfectionism in adolescents. Using a longitudinal correlational design with 381 adolescents aged 15–19 years, the present study investigated whether perceived parental expectations and criticism predicted longitudinal increases in self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism over 7–9 months. Results showed that perceived parental expectations predicted longitudinal increases in socially prescribed perfectionism: Adolescents who perceived that their parents had high expectations of them at Time 1, showed increased socially prescribed perfectionism from Time 1 to Time 2 compared to adolescents who did not perceive their parents having such high expectations. No such effect was found for self-oriented perfectionism. The findings provide supportive evidence for the social expectations model of the development of perfectionism regarding socially prescribed perfectionism, but not self-oriented perfectionism. Implications of this finding for the understanding of the development of perfectionism and future studies are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality characteristic that entails striving for flawlessness, setting exceedingly high standards, and making overly critical evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionism comes in different forms and has different dimensions and aspects (Enns & Cox, 2002). Two models of perfectionism have dominated the literature on perfectionism in the past two decades: Frost et al.'s (1990) and Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model. Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model considers personal and interpersonal aspects of perfectionism and differentiates three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Frost et al.'s (1990) model also considers personal and interpersonal aspects, but differentiates six aspects of perfectionism: personal standards,

organization, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism.

Regarding the two models, it is important to note that in research on perfectionism in adolescence, the great majority of studies following Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model only regard self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., having perfectionistic expectations of oneself) and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., having the perception that others have perfectionistic expectations of oneself that one must fulfill). This is because the Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (Flett, Hewitt, Boucher, Davidson, & Munro, 2000), a widely-used scale to measure perfectionism in children and adolescents, only measures self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, but not other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., having perfectionistic expectations of others). Furthermore, recent theory and research suggests that two aspects of Frost et al.'s (1990) model—parental expectations and parental criticism—should be regarded as developmental antecedents of perfectionism rather than aspects of perfectionism itself (e.g., Rice, Lopez, & Vergara, 2005; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Therefore, the present research focused on self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism and examined parental expectations and parental criticism as potential developmental antecedents of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism.

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1.1. The development of perfectionism

In the literature on perfectionism, a number of different models are discussed aiming to explain how perfectionism develops, but all agree that childhood and adolescence are key periods for the development of perfectionism and that parents play a pivotal role (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002; Gilman & Ashby, 2006; Stoeber & Childs, 2011). One model discussed in this literature is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). According to this model, children and adolescents develop perfectionism by observing and imitating their parents' perfectionism, by being constantly exposed to their parents' perfectionistic beliefs and behaviors, or by idealizing their parents and trying to be as perfect as they are. Other models are the social reactions and the anxious-rearing model (see Flett et al., 2002, for details). In addition, certain parenting styles (e.g., harsh and controlling parenting) are hypothesized to represent a risk factor for children and adolescents to develop maladaptive forms of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, & Singer, 1995; Kawamura, Frost, & Harmatz, 2002; Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2005; Soenens et al., 2008; for reviews, see Flett et al., 2002, and Stoeber & Childs, 2011).

Another important model aiming to explain how perfectionism develops is the social expectations model (Flett et al., 2002). According to this model, perfectionism emerges as a consequence of contingent parental approval associated with parental expectations and criticism. Children whose parents have high expectations and criticize their children when they fail to meet their high expectations are at risk for developing perfectionism, through the internalization of these expectations and the associated negative self-evaluation. The fact that self-consciousness and awareness of social standards increase in adolescence makes it a period of elevated susceptibility to others' achievement expectations.

In addition, it has been suggested that different forms and dimensions of perfectionism emerge through different mechanisms (Flett et al., 2002). In particular, it has been suggested that self-oriented perfectionism develops through a social learning mechanism whereas socially prescribed perfectionism develops through a social expectations mechanism. A number of qualitative and quantitative studies have provided preliminary evidence to this effect (e.g., Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2010; Speirs Neumeister, 2004; Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2009; Vieth & Trull, 1999). For example, Speirs Neumeister and colleagues, conducting qualitative retrospective studies with gifted college students (Speirs Neumeister, 2004) and gifted high school students (Speirs Neumeister et al., 2009), found supporting evidence in the interviews conducted with the students that self-oriented perfectionism emerged through modeling of parental perfectionism whereas socially prescribed perfectionism emerged through high parental expectations. Appleton et al. (2010), conducting a quantitative cross-sectional study with adolescent athletes, found that adolescents' self-oriented perfectionism was predicted by parents' self-oriented perfectionism, suggesting a social learning mechanism for the development of self-oriented perfectionism. Conversely, adolescents' socially prescribed perfectionism was predicted by parents' socially prescribed perfectionism and parents' other-oriented perfectionism, suggesting a social expectations mechanism for the development of socially prescribed perfectionism in addition to a social learning mechanism.

1.2. Open questions

However, the evidence is not conclusive and not consistent, and there are a number of studies suggesting that parental expectations play a role in the development of both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism. For example, in a retrospective study with university students, Enns, Cox, and Clara (2002) em-

ployed structural equation modeling with latent variables and found that perceived perfectionistic parenting (conceptualized as a latent variable combining high parental expectations for the child with high expectations parents had for themselves as parents) predicted both adaptive (combining self-oriented perfectionism with personal standards, organization, and other-oriented perfectionism) and maladaptive (combining socially prescribed perfectionism with concern over mistakes and doubts about actions) perfectionism. In contrast, perceived harsh parenting (combining parental criticism with over-control, lack of care, and high expectations) only predicted maladaptive perfectionism, but not adaptive perfectionism. Further inconclusive evidence comes from a number of studies that investigated forms and dimensions of perfectionism closely related to self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, namely personal standards (which are closely related to self-oriented perfectionism) and concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and feelings of discrepancy between expectations and actual achievements (which are closely related to socially prescribed perfectionism; e.g., Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Hewitt & Flett, 2004). For example, McArdle and Duda (2004) found that the group of adolescents who perceived high parental expectations and criticism (in combination with other parental environment factors) had higher levels of concern over mistakes and doubts about actions. In a subsequent cross-sectional study with adolescent athletes, McArdle and Duda (2008) found that concern over mistakes and doubts about actions were positively predicted by perceived parental expectations and criticism. In contrast, personal standards were predicted by perceived parental expectations only. Hence, what role parental expectations and criticism play in the differential development of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism is still an open question.

Moreover, the empirical evidence so far is largely restricted to cross-sectional studies. To our knowledge, the only longitudinal study regarding parental influences on the development of perfectionism in adolescents focused on parental control (Soenens et al., 2008). All other studies were cross-sectional and often retrospective (e.g., university students remembering their parents' rearing style) which is problematic because such retrospections may reflect how people feel about themselves at the time the study is conducted instead of reflecting how they felt about their parents at the time (e.g., Halverson, 1988). Moreover, these studies examined university students, late adolescents at the threshold to young adulthood, or special samples of adolescents (e.g., academically talented adolescents, adolescent athletes), meaning that their findings may not generalize to other adolescents (for reviews, see Flett et al., 2002, and Stoeber & Childs, 2011).

1.3. The present study

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to investigate the development of perfectionism in a large sample of adolescents using a longitudinal design with two time points spaced 7–9 months apart. To address the question whether the social expectations model may explain the development of perfectionism in adolescence, the study focused on the influence of perceived parental expectations and criticism on self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism in adolescents. Perceived parental expectations represent individuals' subjective beliefs that their parents set high achievement standards for them. Conversely, perceived parental criticism represents subjective beliefs that failing to meet their parents' high standards will lead to negative consequences such as disappointment and disapproval (Frost et al., 1990). Although the few longitudinal studies that have investigated perfectionism in adolescents (Herman, Wang, Trotter, Reinke, & Jalongo, in press; Soenens et al., 2008; Stoeber, Otto, &

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